

„[Depression] makes me completely incapable of doing things. When I’m at my worst I can barely drag myself out of bed. My concentration is affected, I can’t hold everyday conversations or complete everyday tasks. Even getting dressed feels like a challenge” (patient suffering from depression; after Slaby et al., 2003). Such a profound sense of inability and powerlessness, which often leaves individuals almost entirely unable to act, is a common experience for people suffering from mood disorders (e.g. Adler, 2012; Békés, 2011). Similarly, in the experience of non-depressed individuals low mood and lack of activity or action propensity are linked (e.g. Rucker & Petty, 2004; Snyder et al., 2000).

Sadness-related symptoms such as loss of motivation and interest in activities are corresponding with lack or loss of agency. The concept of agency as a psychological dimension refers to the capacity to attempt to achieve one’s goals, to plan and execute one’s actions (Bandura, 2001). It is one of the two most important aspects of social cognition and is especially crucial for self-esteem (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Recent research has offered compelling evidence for the reliability of linguistic agency in reflecting agency-related phenomena. It means that some words signalised more agency than others. Specifically, the linguistic agency has two aspects: semantic and grammatical. Semantic agency manifest as explicit referential mentions (e.g., “action”, “doing”, “winner”, Pietraszkiewicz et al., 2019). Grammatical agency manifests through syntax (Formanowicz et al., 2017) and is based on the premise that verbs are the prototypical linguistic vehicles of action (Vigliocco et al., 2011). For instance, the phrases “to act” and “action” are likely to be seen as expressing a similar level of agency on a semantic grid; however, the former may be seen as more agentic than the latter due to its grammatical form (a verb vs. a noun). Obviously, grammatical and semantic agency are interrelated, which has been demonstrated based on an archival evaluation of 13,915 English words: verbs are perceived as having more agentic meaning than another word category (here: adjectives, Formanowicz et al., 2021). Semantic and grammatical manifestations of agency proved diagnostic in domains such as perception of others (e.g. Pietraszkiewicz et al., 2019), behavioral activation (Weingarten et al., 2016) and message effectiveness (Formanowicz et al., 2021).

Since the linguistic agency has the proven propensity to map agency-related phenomena, the aim of proposed research will be to investigate how this linguistic propensity is linked to mood. I propose a systematic multimethod and multilanguage investigation employing social network analysis, correlational research and experiments in order to pursue the goal of establishing the link between mood and agency signalised by language. Specifically, I will study this based on messages posted in social media (Twitter and Reddit) as well as by asking individuals to write short messages in questionnaires studies. In the final stage of my project I will investigate whether by change of language we can change somebody’s mood.

Results of this project will fill important gaps in existing research in several fields including persuasion, impact of social media or automatized mood detection. It might also inform applied research and serve as a basis for further studies on clinical samples. They can be used to formulate recommendations for practitioners helping individuals struggling with mood disorders and help developing new language-based tools for psychoeducation about emotional regulation. Finally it can help improve early suicidal risk detection tools as well as tools detecting early signs of depressions in social media.