

Agency in Language and Self-Esteem: Correlational and Experimental Studies Based on Social Media Communication, Self-Description, Free Thought Recording, and Social Messaging.

Be careful what you say to yourself, as you might be listening – this maxim, attributed to Alfred Korzybski, a Polish-American philosopher, carries significant weight according to psycholinguistic research. It suggests that what we say not only reflects but can also shape our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. This premise underlies the popular social trend promoted by self-help literature bestsellers, commonly known as self-affirmations. Proponents of this method claim that repeating statements that predict one's success or emphasize positive traits can have a beneficial impact on life outcomes, translating into actual success, better coping mechanisms, and a more positive self-view.

The popularity of self-affirmations may stem from growing societal needs, such as seeking ways to cope with emotional challenges during a global mental health crisis. At the same time, few studies have investigated the effectiveness of this method, and those that have report mixed results. In some cases, self-affirmations proved not only ineffective but even detrimental to the wellbeing of individuals experiencing depressive symptoms—precisely those who are most in need of effective methods to strengthen a positive self-image. Moreover, prior research has lacked a systematic focus on the content and form of self-affirmations, limiting the possibility of drawing conclusions that could inform practical recommendations. The research proposed in this project addresses this issue in a systematic way, grounded in established psychological knowledge about agency, language, and self-esteem.

Agency is a dimension describing the ability to set goals, plan, and carry out actions. Studies conducted in various languages and contexts have shown that this dimension is reflected in language – some words signal higher levels of agency than others. This is conveyed through both the meaning of words (i.e., semantics) and their grammatical structure. Semantic agency is evident in explicit referential content; for example, words like *action* or *winner* denote a high level of agency. Grammatical agency, on the other hand, is linked to specific linguistic structures and is commonly operationalized via the use of verbs – the part of speech typically associated with activity and movement. Both forms of agency in language are interconnected, as shown by analyses of large-scale databases containing word evaluations. These studies revealed that, on average, verbs in such databases are rated as conveying higher levels of agency than other grammatical forms such as nouns and adjectives. Other research has shown that semantic and grammatical agency reliably mirror the agency dimension in contexts such as perceiving others, self-perception, persuasion, and even motor activation associated with word processing. In parallel, new studies continue to identify additional potential markers of linguistic agency – for example, a preference for active over passive verb forms. The first goal of our research is to integrate existing knowledge on linguistic markers of agency—both well-established and emerging – into a coherent framework that maps each marker onto specific components of agency. In the next stage, the resulting set of indicators will be used to empirically test the relationship between linguistic agency and self-esteem.

So far, studies on agency in language (both semantic and grammatical) have not linked it to self-esteem. This is a critical gap, as research on sense of agency clearly shows that it is closely related to self-esteem. It is therefore reasonable to expect that agentic language will also be associated with self-esteem. In the first line of our research, we will examine whether individuals with low self-esteem spontaneously use less agentic language by analyzing their social media posts, brief self-descriptions, and free-thought recordings. In the second line, we will investigate how encouraging participants to use more agentic language – such as through self-affirmation-like statements – may affect their self-esteem in experimental settings.

Both lines of inquiry have important implications. Demonstrating that encouraging the use of agentic language effectively boosts self-esteem – even in groups with particularly low self-esteem, which is associated with a risk of depression – could provide valuable insights for developing self-help, preventive and therapeutic programs, as well as strategies aimed at promoting mental health. On the other hand, showing that agentic language serves as a reliable indicator of self-esteem could enable its use in algorithmic identification of individuals at risk of mental health crises on social media. In practice, this could facilitate quicker outreach to those in need of support. This is particularly relevant for adolescents, who often use social media platforms to discuss their mental states. Furthermore, this new indicator could be utilized in screening processes and scientific research, including large-scale studies in social media contexts.