

# Decoding the Language of Brain Decoding

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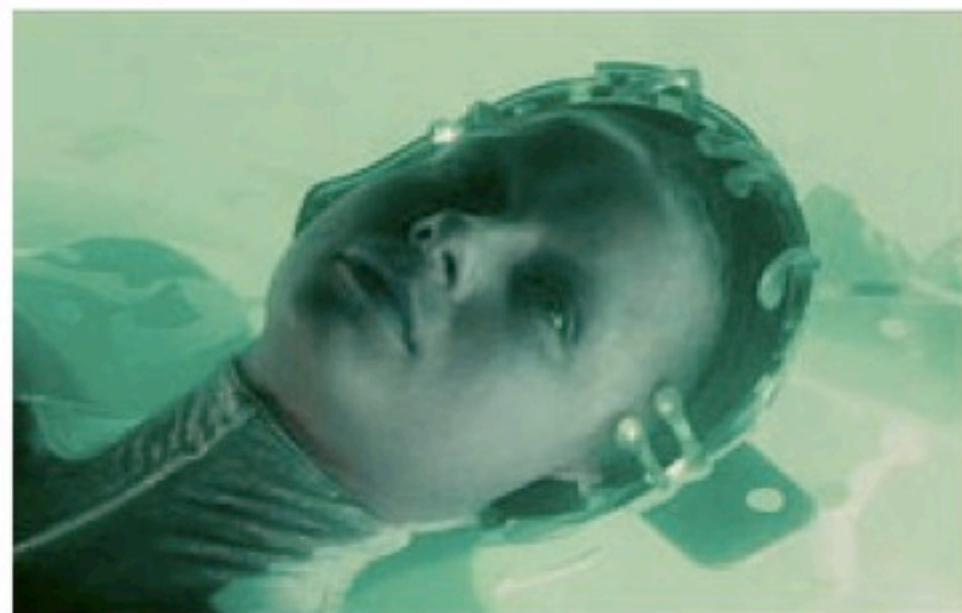
METHOD: Verbal Data Analysis

SAMPLE: 10 popular news articles - 545 coded clausal segments.

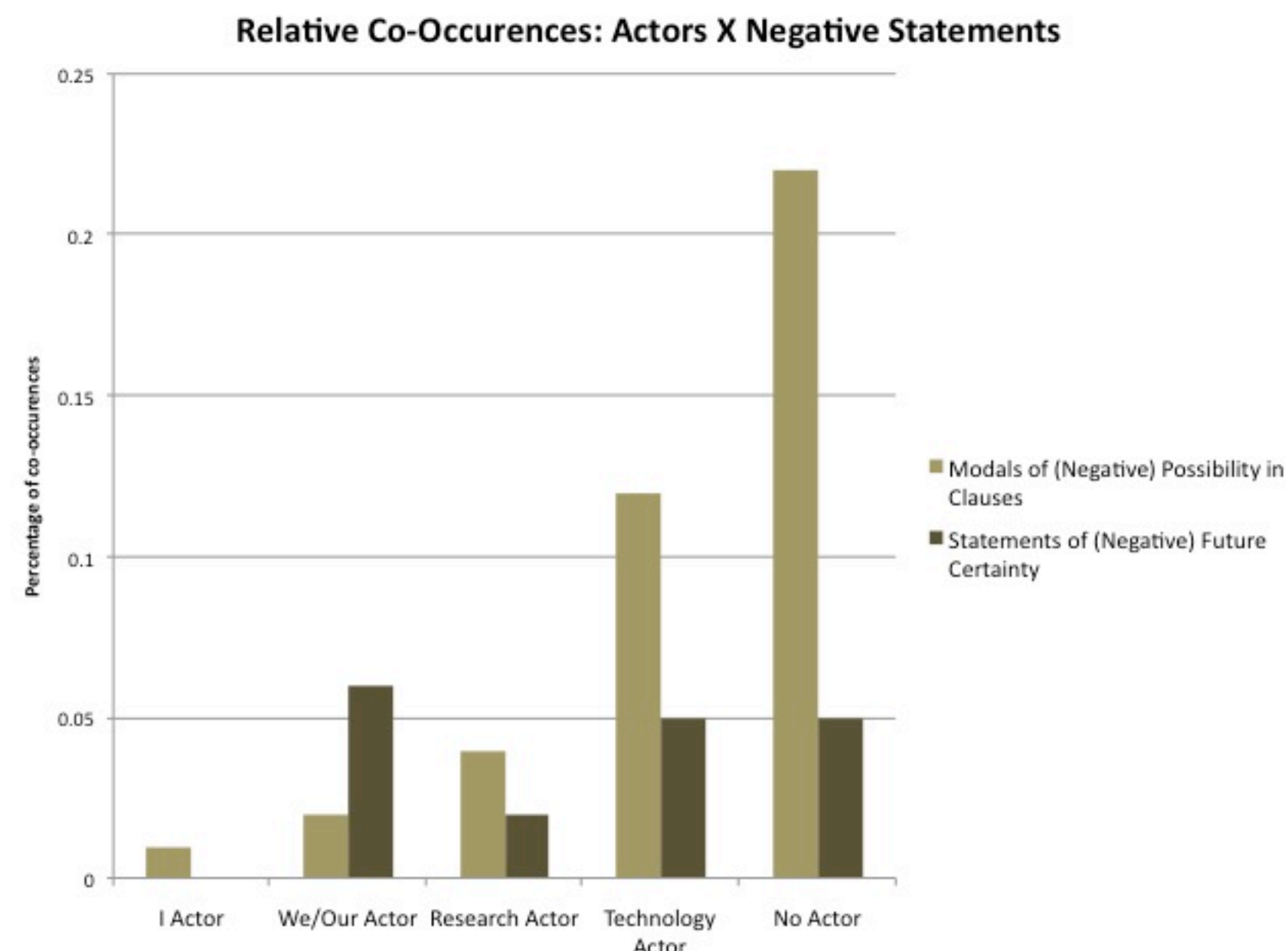
Articles:  
BBC Technology News  
The Guardian  
The AP  
Technology Review  
Wired  
Slate  
Health Jockey  
Popular Mechanics  
National Geographic



Thesis: The language of popular news articles displays a pattern of distancing researchers from the negative implications of fMRI “brain prediction” research.



Finding #1: When negative statements about the future of this research are mentioned, the actor in the clause is much more likely to be absent or to be a technology than to be any other form of actor.



## “Brain scan can ‘read your mind’”

“If machines can read your mind when you want them to, they also can when you don’t.”

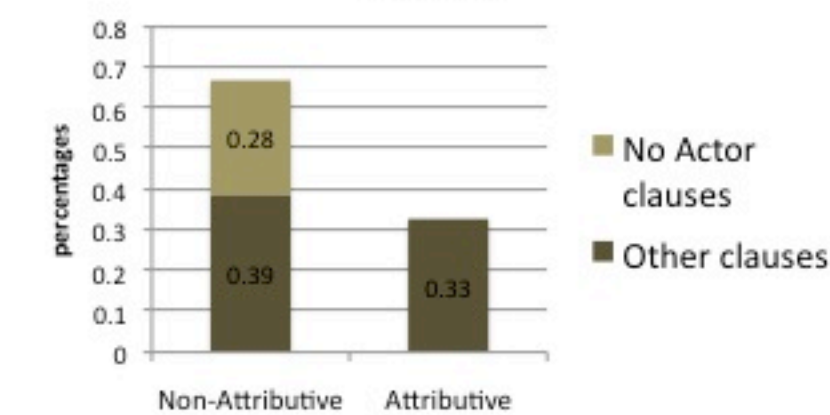
“Like it or not, the new brain science is here, and the world inside our heads is never again going to be completely private.”

“Soon the technology could go even further, pulling back the curtain guarding our most private selves.”

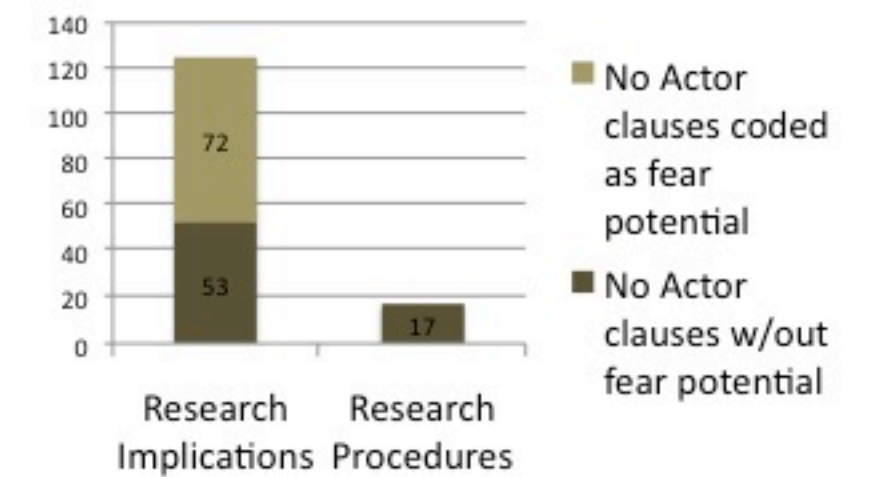
Research Question: How is fMRI “brain prediction” research being communicated to the general public?

Finding #2: Both news writers and scientists use no actor clauses to discuss research implications; many of those clauses have the potential to induce fear in the reader.

Relative Frequencies: When scientists are quoted in the articles



Absolute Frequencies: Types of No Actor Clauses



“The concept of keeping your thoughts private could be profoundly altered in the future.”

“Such techniques will develop.”

“It is possible that decoding brain activity could have serious ethical and privacy implications...”

Conclusion: Directing attention on the technology promotes a narrative of technological determinism but also allows researchers to craft identifications with the audience. However, is it enough to say technologies are “exposing” or “reading” people’s minds?