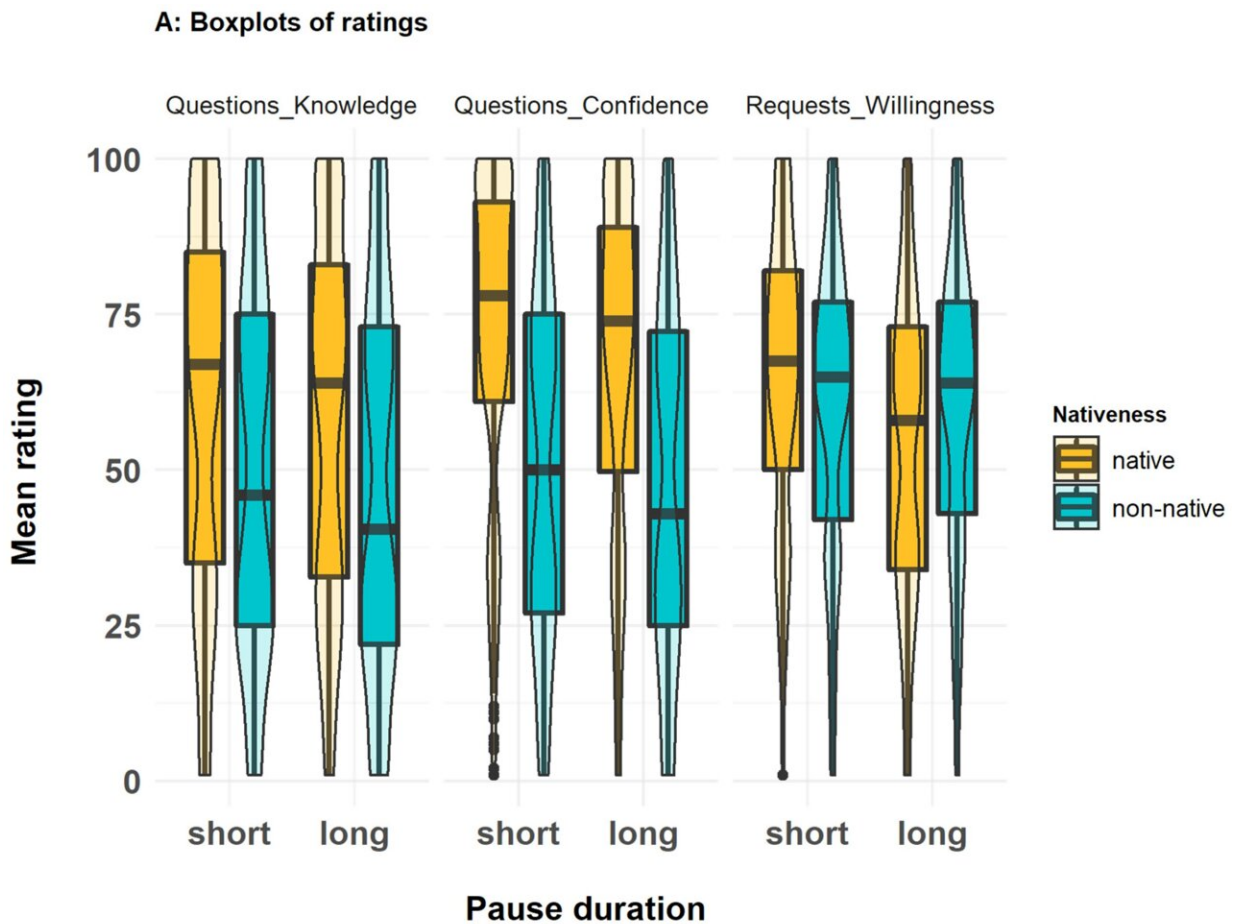


Length of speech pauses signals speakers' willingness to do others a favor, finds study

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Ratings of the perceived knowledge and confidence of speakers answering knowledge questions, and of the perceived willingness of speakers to comply with requests. Answers were given either by native or non-native speakers and were preceded by either a short (200 ms) or long (1200 ms) pause. Ratings range from 0 (not knowledgeable/confident/willing at all) to 100 (very knowledgeable/confident/willing). (A): Boxes depict medians and quartiles,

whiskers depict minimum and maximum values, and black dots depict outliers. Violin shapes around the boxes depict the distribution of the ratings. The width of the violin shapes at a given y coordinate corresponds to the number of ratings in this region. Note that, when evaluating the speakers' knowledge, confidence and willingness, participants used the full range of the rating scale. Credit: *Languages* (2023). DOI: 10.3390/languages8010026

When we ask others to do us a favor, we often judge their helpfulness by the length of the pauses before their answers. Researchers led by Theresa Matzinger from the University of Vienna have now been able to show that these pauses are rated differently for native and non-native speakers—but not for all topics. The results of the study now appear in a special issue on the topic of speech pauses in the journal *Languages*.

A long pause before a response to a request is interpreted by many people as a sign of a lack of [willingness](#) to help. Researchers at the University of Vienna and the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń investigated whether this effect only occurs with responses from [native speakers](#) or also with those from non-native speakers.

The team led by Theresa Matzinger played about 100 short conversations to 100 Polish participants, in which the length of the pauses before the answers were either 0.2 or 1.2 seconds long. In addition, the responses were given either by native speakers of Polish or by Chinese learners of Polish who spoke Polish with a distinct accent. After listening to each conversation, study participants had to rate how willing they perceived the respondents to be to fulfill the request.

Longer pauses mean less willingness to do someone a favor—but only among native speakers

For native speakers, the expected effect was found: a longer pause before an answer was interpreted as a lower willingness to comply with the request. Non-native speakers, on the other hand, were seen as equally willing, regardless of how long the pause before their answers was.

"Our results suggest that listeners include in their judgments of others' willingness to help how difficult speakers find it to express themselves. Thus, they do not see long pauses in non-native speakers as low willingness to help, but as a challenge for those speakers to formulate the answer in a [foreign language](#). Therefore, they are more tolerant of longer pauses when they come from non-native speakers," explains Matzinger, who is currently a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of English Studies at the University of Vienna.

Answers to requests are evaluated differently than knowledge questions

In a further step, the scientists tested how different pause lengths before [answers](#) to knowledge questions—such as the question about the first vegetable grown in space—are interpreted. Here, longer pauses were interpreted in both native speakers and [non-native speakers](#) as an indication of lower knowledge and lower confidence with regard to the correctness of the answer.

According to Matzinger, one of the reasons might be that "Knowledge questions have less social relevance than requests. Knowledge questions can only be used to assess how competent someone is as a cooperation partner, but requests can be used to find out whether the person will actually cooperate."

In subsequent studies, the scientists want to clarify whether this effect is independent of the languages spoken and now want to conduct tests with

speakers of other languages and accents.

More information: Theresa Matzinger et al, Pause Length and Differences in Cognitive State Attribution in Native and Non-Native Speakers, *Languages* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/languages8010026](https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8010026)

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