



*Nightline*, in the audience Q&A (<http://bit.ly/1PQqk6s>), Chopra defines consciousness as “a superposition of possibilities,” to which physicist Leonard Mlodinow replies: “I know what each of those words mean. I still don't think I know...”

Chopra's definition of consciousness certainly sounds like pseudo-profundity, but I have since gotten to know him and can assure readers that he doesn't create such phrases to intentionally obscure meaning. He believes that quantum physics explains consciousness, so invoking terms from that field makes sense in his mind, even though to those not so inclined, much of what he says sounds like, well, BS.

These are examples of what cognitive psychologist Dan Sperber meant when he wrote in “The Guru Effect,” a 2010 article in the *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*: “All too often, what readers do is judge profound what they have failed to grasp.” To find out if some people are more or less inclined to accept BS as legit based on their ability (or lack thereof) to grasp language (or lack thereof), Pennycook et al. began by distinguishing two types of thinking: one, intuitive—rapid and automatic cognition—and, two, reflective—slower and effortful cognition. Type 1 thinking makes us vulnerable to BS because it takes time and effort to think (and say), “I know what each of those words mean. I still don't think I know...” Pennycook and his team tested the hypothesis that higher intelligence and a superior analytical cognitive style (analyticity) leads to a greater capacity to detect and reject pretentious BS. Employing standard measures of intelligence (for example, the Wordsum test) and analyticity (for example, the Cognitive Reflection Test), the psychologists presented subjects with a number of meaningless statements produced by the New Age Bullshit Generator (<http://sebpearce.com/bullshit>), such as “We are in the midst of a self-aware blossoming of being that will align us with the nexus itself” and “Today, science tells us that the essence of nature is joy.”

In four studies on more than 800 subjects, the authors found that the higher the intelligence and analyticity of subjects, the less likely they were to rate such statements as profound. Conversely, and revealingly, they concluded that those most receptive to pseudo-profound BS are also more prone to “conspiratorial ideation, are more likely to hold religious and paranormal beliefs, and are more likely to endorse complementary and alternative medicine.” Apropos of one of this column's skeptical leitmotifs, detecting BS, according to the authors, “is not merely a matter of indiscriminate skepticism but rather a discernment of deceptive vagueness in otherwise impressive sounding claims.”

Skepticism should never be indiscriminate and should always be discerning of a claim's verisimilitude based on evidence and logic, regardless of language. But language matters, so it is incumbent on us all to transduce our neuro-phonemic excitatory action potentials

into laconic phonological resonances unencumbered by extraneous and obfuscating utterances. And that's no BS.