

Prof. Dr. Dr. Friedemann Pulvermüller

*** 18.04.1960 † 11.10.2025**

The Institute for German and Dutch Languages and Literatures deeply mourns the loss of Professor Dr. Dr. Friedemann Pulvermüller, an extraordinary scientist, mentor, colleague, and friend, who passed away unexpectedly on October 11th, 2025. His loss leaves an immeasurable void both here and in the wider world of cognitive neuroscience and linguistics, where his interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to research, teaching and academic development set new standards of excellence

Friedemann Pulvermüller was one of the most influential figures in the neuroscience of language and linguistics, building bridges between the humanities and the natural sciences in unprecedented ways. His work shaped our understanding of how words, symbols, and thought are instantiated in the human brain. Through his development of a neurobiological model of language processing grounded in Hebbian cell assembly theory, he revealed that meaning is not stored in an abstract system, but distributed across networks that unite perception, action, and language. By combining neuroimaging, neuropsychology, and computational modelling with linguistic theory, Friedemann Pulvermüller laid the groundwork for identifying the neural correlates of a wide range of linguistic phenomena, especially highlighting action-related mechanisms as a foundation for symbolic understanding and human communication. By translating his theoretical models and empirical findings into practice, he innovated one of the most widely applied therapies for language rehabilitation after brain injury, which continues to be used internationally in the treatment of aphasia.

Friedemann Pulvermüller studied biology and linguistics at the University of Tübingen and received his PhD in linguistics in 1989, followed by a second doctorate in psychology from the University of Konstanz in 1999. He held postdoctoral positions at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics in Tübingen and the Department of Linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles. For 11 years, he served as Program Leader in the Cognitive Neuroscience of Language and Head of the MEG Laboratory at the Medical Research Council's Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit in Cambridge. He also held honorary doctorates and professorships at several institutions, including the University of Helsinki, the University of Málaga, and Bangor University.

Since 2011, Friedemann Pulvermüller served as Professor of Neuroscience of Language and Pragmatics at the Institut für Deutsche und Niederländische Philologie, Freie Universität Berlin. As head of the Brain Language Laboratory, his innovative and integrative approach to science and interdisciplinary work consistently set new standards in the fields of neuroscience, semantics, and pragmatics, earning him recognition throughout the international community. His vision extended into the interdisciplinary Excellence Cluster "Matters of Activity" at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Einstein Center for Neurosciences Berlin, and the Berlin School of Mind and Brain, where he made outstanding contributions through cross-disciplinary collaboration and dedicated teaching as a faculty member. His research led to influential national and international collaborations and was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), the Medical Research Council (MRC), and, most recently, by the European Research Council (ERC) for his project "Material Constraints of Human Cognition (MatCo)".

Friedemann Pulvermüller was a scientist of extraordinary vision and passion, qualities he pursued relentlessly. He was bold in his ideas and daring in their realization, always driven by the conviction that the great questions about language, mind, and brain must be addressed both empirically and

conceptually. As a mentor, Friedemann Pulvermüller was both demanding and profoundly supportive. He welcomed international researchers who sought him out for his reputation with the same openness and warmth he showed to curious students, shaping their scientific insight while guiding them to become independent neuroscientists themselves. His door was always open, his feedback precise and incisive, and his belief in people's potential unwavering.

With his exceptional intellect, unwavering dedication to science, and generous spirit, Friedemann Pulvermüller will be remembered not only as a pioneering scientist but also as a gifted teacher, inspiring mentor, and colleague. His legacy will live on through the work of his students and collaborators, and all those whose lives he touched through his extraordinary contributions. He shared with Douglas Adams the rare conviction that curiosity and laughter are both essential tools for understanding the universe — and for finding our place within it.

(Luigi Grisoni, Tally McCormick Miller and Rosario Tomasello)