

Early Perception of Prosody is Language Specific

Sónia Frota

Universidade de Lisboa

Infants' early sensitivity to the prosodic properties of speech is well documented, and has supported the view that infants are equipped with an input processing mechanism initially tuned to prosodic information. Moreover, prosody has been suggested to bootstrap the learning of language. The precocious sensitivity to prosody and its potential to facilitate language acquisition seem quite general and independent of language experience. However, recent research has shown that the early development of prosody appears to be crucially shaped by the ambient language. If infants' perception of prosody is guided by the native language, it is fundamental to determine which input prosodic patterns/cues are attended to early on in development and may thus provide useful information to scaffold language learning.

Infants may utilize the prosodic property of stress to begin developing the ability to segment the speech signal into words and phrases, and for word categorization. Intonation patterns, in turn, typically convey phrase level meanings, such as sentence type or focus, while also contributing to speech chunking. I will present findings from a series of speech perception experiments using eye gaze paradigms, focusing on the perception of stress and intonation patterns during the first year of life. In particular, the perception abilities of monolingual healthy European Portuguese-learning infants are examined and compared to those of infants learning other languages. The results suggest precocious perception abilities for prosody that are language specific. This finding calls to more attention to be given to language particular prosodic correlates of linguistic contrasts and categories, challenging our current understanding of early language development and the role played by prosody across languages.