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Perception of intonation in German infants: Language-specific processes?

Experience with language already starts before birth, with the rhythmic and prosodic properties of speech being preserved. Accordingly, the unborn child prosodically tunes in to her native language, showing language-specific preferences and rhythm-based discrimination abilities from the first day(s) of life (e.g., Moon et al. 1993; Nazzi et al. 1998). Prosody continues to play an essential role for language acquisition (cf. Prieto & Esteve-Gibert, 2018). In this talk, I will present two studies on German infants' perception of intonation within the first year of life that suggest language-specific processes in the development of intonation. (1) Using the switch-procedure, we studied how native-language experience with the prosodic marking of illocution type modulates the ability to discriminate intonational contrasts (falls vs. rises). Contrary to Portuguese and Basque infants (Frota et al. 2014; Sundara et al. 2015) – where intonation is the sole means to illocution-type distinction – but similar to English infants (Sundara et al., 2015) – where illocution type is marked morpho-syntactically – German infants did not discriminate Portuguese falling vs. rising contours (Czeke et al., 2019). Hence, the extent of morpho-syntactic cues to question-marking in the native language might determine infants' ability to discriminate contours. (2) Using the head-turn-preference procedure, we studied the effect of pitch accent type (whether or not an f₀ peak is aligned with the stressed syllable) on German infants' perception of stress and hence their ability to extract trochees from speech: Infants only interpreted the stressed syllable as stressed when it coincided with an f₀ peak (Zahner et al. 2016a) – mirroring the salience of high-pitched syllables or, more language-specifically, the high occurrence frequency of high-pitched stressed syllables in German infant-directed speech (Zahner et al. 2016b).

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