

INFANT-DIRECTED SPEECH: TAILOR-MADE FOR LEARNING?

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Infants' language acquisition can be described as the result of the interplay between the characteristics of the input provided to the child, and the cognitive biases that inform the learning procedure the child brings to the task. In other words, it is widely believed that the richer the input, the simpler the task required of the infant learner. In this scenario, an appropriate description of the input is absolutely mandatory, as it can help us decide whether certain theories of infant cognition are implausible because they are doomed to failure when given realistic input.

It is likely that all children are exposed to two types of speech: infant-directed speech (IDS) and adult-directed speech (ADS). The two types are not equivalent, since laboratory studies show that children attend more to the former, and they might even learn better from it. Moreover, corpora descriptions suggest that certain features of IDS (i.e., the ways in which IDS and ADS differ) may be cross-culturally widespread, or even universal. If children attend more to IDS and learn better from it, and parents of many cultures modify their speech in similar ways when addressing their child, might it follow that *IDS is actually tailored by caregivers specifically to promote language acquisition?*

This fascinating question has garnered much interest, and an equal amount of controversy, over the last 50 years. Empirical answers have attempted to (a) describe differences between IDS and ADS, and (b) tie these differences to learning outcomes in actual or modeled children. This war has been fought on several terrains, with most research in the 1970s-1990s focusing on syntax, morphology, and semantic development. The last 20 years have seen a strong resurgence of interest on the proposal that IDS characteristics are selected for learnability considerations specifically in the field of phonology, and to a lesser extent protolexical development.

This emergent literature is relevant to a broad range of researchers working on language acquisition for three reasons. First, an interest in how children move from the surface acoustics to abstract phonological units forces us to ponder what learnability actually means: What are the objects of learning, what are the goals of learning, and what is "easier" in this context? Second, it quickly becomes evident that theoretical responses to the three "what" questions have crucial effects on how empirical proofs are sought, and in their stead, on the validity of answers that are found. Finally, the empirical results themselves reveal a complex panorama, strongly suggesting that the learning task is not solved *by the caregiver for the child at all linguistic levels at once*. In other words, evidence both for and against a tailor-made view of IDS can be found, depending on whether one looks at one level or another.

In sum, this review illustrates the usefulness of looking at real input to think about plausible theories of language acquisition, and strongly suggests that the only way out of a theoretical deadlock involves adopting a holistic, multi-level approach to infant language acquisition.

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