RHYTHM CUES AND LANGUAGE DISCRIMINATION IN INFANCY: A REVIEW
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In the speech perception domain, one of the first abilities that can be observed in very young infants is a language discrimination capacity. After habituation to a set of utterances from a specific language, newborns show dishabituation behaviour when presented with utterances that belong to a language from a different rhythm class, that is, a language with notable differences in its general prosodic (rhythm and intonation) characteristics (Ramus, 2002; Ramus et al., 1999). Behavioural data from infant studies confirm that early language discrimination abilities are initially restricted to languages that differ in these gross prosodic properties (Mehler et al., 1988; Nazzi et al. 1998). Through continued exposure to the ambient language infants around 2 months of age begin to establish a primary level of representation of the sound pattern of the native language (Christophe & Morton, 1998). By 4 to 5 months of age they eventually succeed at differentiating languages that belong to the same rhythmic class (Bosch & Sebastián-Gallés, 1997; Nazzi et al, 2000). Although a definitive explanation for the gains in language discrimination abilities observed in the first months of life is still lacking, it was suggested that they are probably related to the infants’ having access to more subtle prosodic cues in the pairs of languages to be contrasted. However, frequency and distributional information regarding segments in the language can also offer relevant cues for language discrimination, as languages also differ in their segmental inventories and infants’ ability to track statistical information in the speech signal is present very early on. In this talk, data on infants’ abilities to discriminate between dialects that share rhythm properties but differ in vowel repertoires (such as Eastern vs. Western Catalan) will be presented and contrasted with more recent data revealing an unexpected late discrimination for languages that differ in rhythm properties, but share a common five-vowel system (such as Spanish and Basque). The role of variables related to the procedures and the material used to test infants’ language discrimination abilities will also be considered in interpreting the experimental evidence.

References


