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Input matters: Speed of word recognition in 2-year-olds exposed to multiple accents



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ABSTRACT

Although studies investigating language abilities in young children exposed to more than one language have become common, there is still surprisingly little research examining language development in children exposed to more than one accent. Here, we report two looking-while-listening experiments examining the impact of routine home exposure to multiple accents on 2-year-olds' word recognition abilities. In Experiment 1, we found that monolingual English-learning 24-month-olds who routinely receive exposure to both Canadian English and a non-native variant of English are less efficient in their recognition of familiar words spoken in Canadian English than monolingual English-learning 24-month-olds who hear only Canadian English at home. In Experiment 2, we found that by 34 months of age all children recognize words equally quickly regardless of their accent exposure at home. We conclude that monolingual toddlers in some locations may form a less homogeneous population than past work has assumed, a factor that should be considered when drawing generalizations about language development across different populations.

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Introduction

During recent years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of studies examining language acquisition in bilingual infants (e.g., Curtin, Byers-Heinlein, & Werker, 2011; Fennell & Byers-Heinlein,

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2014; Kovács & Mehler, 2009; Sebastian-Galles, Albareda-Castellot, Weikum, & Werker, 2012; Werker & Byers-Heinlein, 2008). This increase has been in large part due to a growing awareness that most children learn language in a multilingual setting and that this has implications for theories of language acquisition. At the same time, language researchers have also become increasingly interested in how children cope with novel accents in the lab, in part for the same reason that there has been an increase in work with bilinguals (e.g., Cristia et al., 2012; Mulak, Best, Tyler, Kitamura, & Irwin, 2013; Schmale, Seidl, & Cristia, 2015; van Heugten & Johnson, 2014; White & Aslin, 2011). Surprisingly, however, there has been very little work examining language development in children exposed to more than one accent in their daily lives. The little work that does exist has focused on children exposed to one or two closely related regional variants of the same language (e.g., Floccia, Delle Luche, Durrant, Butler, & Goslin, 2012; van der Feest & Johnson, 2016). Here, we explored the impact of language input on early child development by asking how exposure to both a native and non-native variant of the native language affects monolingual children's language-processing skills (i.e., we compared word recognition abilities in monolingual children who receive only first-language [L1] input with word recognition in children who receive a substantial portion of their language input from a second-language [L2] speaker). Our findings suggest that the degree of accent variation children experience in their day-to-day environment is an important factor in shaping their word recognition performance in the lab.

Numerous laboratory studies have demonstrated that young infants initially have difficulties in coping with unfamiliar regional accents (i.e., native variants of a language spoken in different regions of the world such as Australian or British English). At 9 months of age, infants trained on word forms in a familiar American English accent readily recognize those words at test when they are produced in the same accent but fail to recognize those same words when they are produced in an unfamiliar Canadian English accent (Schmale, Cristia, Seidl, & Johnson, 2010). At 15 months, American children readily recognize lists of familiar words spoken in an American English accent but struggle to recognize those same words spoken in Jamaican English (Best, Tyler, Gooding, Orlando, & Quann, 2009; see, however, van Heugten & Johnson, 2014). At 20 months, Canadian English-learning children look to labeled target objects in an eye-tracking study when the labels are produced in Canadian English but fail to look to the targets when they are produced in Australian English (van Heugten, Krieger, & Johnson, 2015; see, however, Mulak et al., 2013). Children's difficulties with unfamiliar accents continue beyond infancy and toddlerhood. Even 4- to 7-year-olds still struggle to understand unfamiliar regional accents (Nathan, Wells, & Donlan, 1998; Newton & Ridgway, 2016).

A growing body of literature has also documented children's difficulties in processing non-native accents (i.e., variants of a language spoken by L2 learners such as Spanish- or Polish-accented English). Not surprisingly, research suggests that children notice non-native accents more readily than regional accents (Floccia, Butler, Girard, & Goslin, 2009; Wagner, Clopper, & Pate, 2014) and also have more difficulty in understanding L2 speech than unfamiliar regional accents (Bent, 2014). Children's difficulties with non-native accents, much like their difficulties with regional accents, are evident during infancy. At 5 months of age, monolingual English-learning infants confuse Spanish-accented English with Spanish (Paquette-Smith & Johnson, 2015). At 9 months, infants trained on words in a familiar American accent readily recognize those words when they are produced at test in the same accent but fail to recognize those same words when they are produced in Spanish-accented English (Schmale & Seidl, 2009). Monolingual English-learning 17-month-olds learn minimal pair labels only if they are produced by a native English speaker (not if they are produced by a French-English bilingual with a subtle accent; Fennell & Byers-Heinlein, 2014). And 2-year-old English learners struggle to learn new words when they are spoken in a Spanish accent (Schmale, Hollich, & Seidl, 2011; see, however, Schmale, Cristia, & Seidl, 2012).

Importantly for the current study, despite all of the laboratory evidence that children have difficulty in coping with both regional and non-native accents that are unfamiliar, we are aware of only three published studies specifically aimed at understanding how multi-accent exposure at home affects early language development in monolingual children, and all three of these studies examined word recognition in children exposed to one versus two regional (as opposed to non-native) variants of the native language.

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