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Fathers' repetition of words is coupled with children's vocabularies



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ABSTRACT

Differences in vocabulary size among children can be explained in part by differences in parents' language input, but features of caregivers' input can be more or less beneficial depending on children's language abilities. The current study focused on a specific feature of infant-directed speech: parents' repetition of words across utterances. Although previous work with infants showed a positive relation between repetition and children's vocabulary, we predicted that this would not be the case later in development. Instead, parents may use less repetition as their children become increasingly proficient language learners. In the current study, we examined the extent to which low-income fathers of 24-month-olds ($N = 41$) repeat words to their children using three indices: type-token ratio, automated repetition index, and partial repetition of open-class words. The same finding emerged across all measures of repetition: Fathers whose children had larger vocabularies at 24 months repeated words *less* often, suggesting a developmental coupling of fathers' input and children's language proficiency.

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Introduction

Individual differences in young children's vocabulary sizes can be explained in part by differences in parents' language input, yet the extent to which various features of input promote vocabulary growth also depends on children's language abilities. The current study focused on one particular feature of caregivers' speech shown to relate to children's word-learning abilities: the repetition of words across utterances. Repetition in caregivers' speech has been shown to be beneficial for vocabulary growth in young children (Newman, Rowe, & Ratner, 2016), yet the amount of repetition in caregivers' speech declines over the course of early development (e.g., Kaye, 1980; McRoberts, McDonough, & Lakusta, 2009). Moreover, older infants pay less attention to speech characterized by repetition (Segal & Newman, 2015), so it is likely that repetition becomes an incrementally less helpful or necessary cue over the course of children's language development. That is, parents may repeat words less frequently as their children's knowledge of language increases. Conversely, if children have less developed language skills, then parents may continue to repeat words frequently.

Here, we addressed the hypothesis that parents' use of repetition is associated with their children's language skills. Whereas research adopting a social interactionist perspective on language learning highlights the important role of parents' input in children's language development (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), transactional developmental models emphasize the role of children in shaping their own input (e.g., Sameroff & Chandler, 1975). We examined both of these perspectives to investigate the coupling of parents' language input and children's language skills at 24 months of age. Specifically, we examined whether low-income fathers use less repetition when their children have larger vocabularies compared with fathers whose children have smaller vocabularies.

Repetition in infant-directed speech

Repetitions and partial repetitions of words and phrases are commonly occurring features of caregivers' input to children¹ (e.g., Newport, Gleitman, & Gleitman, 1977; Snow, 1972), and they relate to young children's vocabulary growth. The ratio of word types to word tokens (type-token ratio or TTR) in mothers' speech to their 7-month-olds has been found to predict children's later vocabulary knowledge at 24 months (Newman et al., 2016). Recent research has suggested that the time course of repetition may also be important and, in particular, that repetition of words across successive sentences promotes young children's learning. Analyses of language corpora have shown that up to 58% of caregivers' utterances share at least one word with a neighboring utterance (Onnis, Waterfall, & Edelman, 2008). Below is an example of this type of partial repetition across child-directed utterances (where a mother is speaking to her 1-year-old daughter) retrieved from the Providence corpus of the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) database (MacWhinney, 2000):

Mother: Bear needs a hat, will daddy's yellow hat fit?

Mother: No, the yellow hat is too big.

Mother: See the hat?

This type of partial repetition has been shown to directly promote adults' word segmentation in an artificial language task (Onnis et al., 2008), and caregivers' partial repetition of multiword constituents across utterances predicts children's later production of those constituents (as cited in Brodsky, Waterfall, & Edelman, 2007). Moreover, the repetition of object labels in successive sentences (vs. distribution of object labels over time) facilitates 2-year-olds' novel word learning in a laboratory context (Schwab & Lew-Williams, 2016).

¹ Whereas repetition is a common feature of caregivers' input in American English, notably, parents' speech to their children differs across cultures (e.g., Shneidman & Goldin-Meadow, 2012). However, note that repetition also seems to be an important feature in speech to children in other languages, such as Tzeltal and Japanese (Brown, 1998; Fernald & Morikawa, 1993).

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