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Funding Source: School of Health Professions Undergraduate Research Mentorship Program

Do young children recognize the sound system of their native language?

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Children must learn the phonological rules of their language (what sounds are allowable). For example, a word cannot begin with [zw] in English, but it can in German (e.g., zwiebel). English-speaking adults all know that zwiebel would not be a permissible word in English, but it is unclear when young language-users become aware of these rules. This study taught monolingual English-learning children words that did or did not adhere to the rules of English phonology to assess when children become sensitive to their native phonology. Twenty-eight children came to the laboratory every two months from twelve to thirty months of age. They were taught six novel words for objects and six novel words for actions. Half of each type of word conformed to English phonological rules and half violated them. The experimenter taught the object names by showing children each object and labeling it six times (e.g., See my wug!). The experimenter then demonstrated an action using the object and labeled the action six times (e.g., I can svit it!). Following presentation of the novel words, children were shown each object and action and asked for their labels. These sessions were videotaped, and the experimenter phonetically transcribed how children produced each word. Two analyses will be presented. First, I will compare the age at which children learn words that conform to native phonology with words that violate native phonology to see if children learn words that conform to their native phonology more quickly. Second, I will examine the accuracy of word production to determine whether children make more errors on words that contain non-native phonology and if the errors cause those words to conform to English rules. The results of this study will contribute to our understanding of when children learn the phonology of their native language.