Processing of Morphological Variations in Toddlers

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Abstract

We investigated infants’ knowledge of morphological variations using a split-screen procedure. French-learning 24-month-olds were familiarized with a scene of different fish moving over a bubble, followed by another scene showing the fish moving under the bubble. Infants heard “Il a bréché (it did bréché; ‘bréché’-pseudo-verb)” during one scene, and “il a pas bréché (it did not bréché)” during the other. During the test phase each trial presented the two scenes side by side. In the baseline test trial, infants heard “il a bréché”. In two other test trials, they heard “il brèche (morphological variant of bréché; the stem vowels of the two variants are in morphophonemic alternation)”, and “il bréchit” (unrelated, phonological neighbor of bréché) respectively. The children who mapped the pseudo-verb form bréché with the correct scene during the baseline test trial preferred the opposite scene while hearing bréchit, suggesting that they correctly interpreted bréchit as having different meaning than bréché. Their response to brèche, a morphological variant of bréché, was however ambiguous, suggesting that infants have not quite learned that bréché and brèche belong to the same morphological paradigm. Nevertheless, they appeared to consider that brèche was closer to bréché than bréchit was, although brèche is in fact phonologically more different from bréché than bréchit is to bréché. Therefore, phonological similarity cannot explain these results. Rather, the results show emerging knowledge of morphological paradigms including morphophonemic alternations. These results are the first to demonstrate infants’ early representation of morphological variations during word learning.