

Not just babbling

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Baby language is more than just nonsense to Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council grantee Janet Werker. Her research shows infants listen to the words being spoken to them and look for patterns – sounds that are repeated over and over again – to learn how to speak. Now, she is using this research to help children who are developmentally delayed in language.

Her groundbreaking research, which was established during the 1980s but continues today, has earned Werker a fellowship in the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). She will receive the honour at a special ceremony during the AAAS annual conference, held this year in San Francisco from Feb. 15 to 19.

"I feel privileged to earn this fellowship because being nominated by your peers – especially international peers – is the best recognition of the quality of your work," says Werker, a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia. "It's amazing to me that people still use my fundamental research today, and gratifying that they find the more recent work valuable as well."

A 1984 study she published in *Infant Behavior & Development* showed infants of eight months living in English-speaking environments can easily distinguish sounds that are not present in that language, such as the Hindu "da," which is slightly different from the English "da." However, by 10 months the distinction all but vanishes.

Werker and her colleagues then did further research to understand the

learning mechanisms that make this change possible, and the link between how infants place speech sounds into categories and the words they learn later on. This work has appeared in prestigious journals such as Nature.

The tests with children are only minutes long, and always in the presence of a parent. She does the tests using procedures such as training the children to look at a certain image when a sound is made, or suck on a pacifier in response to a sound of a certain type, behaviours children are able to do long before they can speak. In some studies, she also tracks infant eye movements, or records changes in the brain.

"This research is enjoyable and I have been fortunate to be able to do it for a long time. None of this would have been possible without the hard work of my graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. I hope this honour will allow me to give similar recognition to people I feel deserve praise for their research."

Source: Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council

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