

Infants raised in bilingual environments can distinguish unfamiliar languages: research

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Infants raised in households where Spanish and Catalan are spoken can discriminate between English and French just by watching people speak, even though they have never been exposed to these new languages before, according to University of British Columbia psychologist Janet Werker.

Presented today at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, Werker's latest findings provide further evidence that exposure to two native languages contributes to the development of perceptual sensitivity that extends beyond their mother tongues.

Werker has previously shown that bilingual infants can discern different native languages at four, six and eight months after birth. While monolingual babies have the ability to discern two languages at four and six months, they can no longer do so at eight months.

In Werker's latest study with Prof. Núria Sebastián-Gallés from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, infants of four and six months were shown silent videos of talking faces speaking English and French. They found that babies growing up bilingual with Spanish and Catalan – a Romance language spoken in Andorra and Catalonia – were able to distinguish between English and French simply through facial cues, even though they had never before seen speakers of either language.

"The fact that this perceptual vigilance extends even to two unfamiliar

languages suggests that it's not just the characteristics of the native languages that bilingual infants have learned about, but that they appear to have also developed a more general perceptual vigilance," says Werker, Canada Research Chair in Psychology and director of UBC's Infant Studies Centre.

"These findings, together with our previous work on newborn infants, provide even stronger evidence that human [infants](#) are equally prepared to grow up bilingual as they are monolingual," Werker adds. "The task of language separation is something they are prepared to do from birth – with [bilinguals](#) increasingly adept over time."

Provided by University of British Columbia

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