

Bilingual babies know their grammar by 7 months

February 14 2013

Babies as young as seven months can distinguish between, and begin to learn, two languages with vastly different grammatical structures, according to new research from the University of British Columbia and Université Paris Descartes.

Published today in the journal *Nature Communications* and presented at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Boston, the study shows that infants in bilingual environments use pitch and duration cues to discriminate between languages – such as English and Japanese – with opposite word orders.

In English, a function word comes before a content word (the dog, his hat, with friends, for example) and the duration of the content word is longer, while in Japanese or Hindi, the order is reversed, and the pitch of the content word higher.

"By as early as seven months, babies are sensitive to these differences and use these as cues to tell the languages apart," says UBC psychologist Janet Werker, co-author of the study.

Previous research by Werker and Judit Gervain, a [linguist](#) at the Université Paris Descartes and co-author of the new study, showed that babies use frequency of words in speech to discern their significance.

"For example, in English the words 'the' and 'with' come up a lot more

frequently than other words – they're essentially learning by counting," says Gervain. "But babies growing up [bilingual](#) need more than that, so they develop new strategies that monolingual [babies](#) don't necessarily need to use."

"If you speak two languages at home, don't be afraid, it's not a zero-sum game," says Werker. "Your baby is very equipped to keep these languages separate and they do so in remarkable ways."

Provided by University of British Columbia

Citation: Bilingual babies know their grammar by 7 months (2013, February 14) retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-02-bilingual-babies-grammar-months.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--