

# How can babies be better learners of a language than grown-ups? Evidence from Japanese infants

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## **Abstract**

The goal of our research is to identify processes by which infants with no prior linguistic knowledge and limited cognitive skills acquire the ability to understand and manipulate highly complex language systems in a short time and without explicit instruction. To date, the majority of studies have been done with English and a few additional European languages, with little attention paid to whether relevant features are language-specific or apply broadly across typologically different languages.

The talk will present results from studies with Japanese infants (and those comparing Japanese with other languages), on the acquisition of segmental contrasts, emergence of phonological grammar, as well as the role of infant-directed speech in language acquisition, which challenges or complements previous findings. The coronal stop /t/, for example, occurs more frequently than labial /p/ or dorsal /k/ in English, Dutch, and many other European languages. This has led to a hypothesis that coronal articulation, being especially easy to hear and produce, is a default position. Yet, this hypothesis cannot be distinguished from a mere frequency effect unless it is tested in comparison to languages such as Japanese where /t/ occurs less frequently than /p/ or /k/. Our research with Japanese infants allows us to discount the frequency effect and strongly supports the main hypothesis, by showing similar abilities to Dutch infants at discriminating /t/ from /p/ at a young age.

The talk will discuss results from these and related studies, highlighting the unique opportunities that Japanese language properties provide to disentangle fundamental questions pertaining to acquisition.