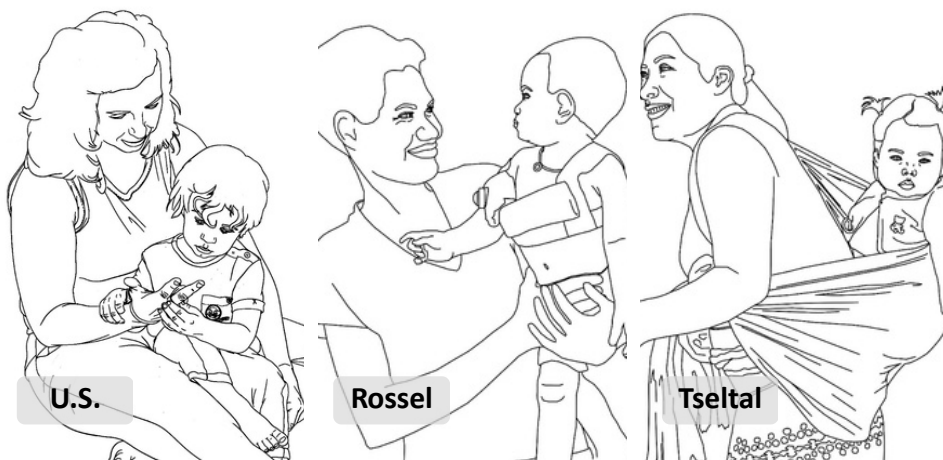


CHILD LANGUAGE NEWSLETTER

CHATTER LAB | UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

DO BABIES AROUND THE WORLD PREFER “BABY TALK”?



Do you have a special way to talk to your baby? You might have heard of “baby talk,” “motherese,” or “parentese” before. Our scientific label for it is “infant-directed speech.” Infant-directed speech is a distinct style of talking to babies and young children. It is not specific to the U.S.—infant-directed speech has been found in languages spoken all over the world. So what is it? Infant-directed speech tends to have more of a sing-song melody, a slower pace, and simpler words and expressions compared to adult-directed speech. Many language scientists think that these features of infant-directed speech are effective in attracting infants’ attention to language, and so might even be helpful for language learning. For example, one study used data from more than 2,000 monolingual babies from 16 different countries to show that, across multiple cultural groups, infants choose to listen longer to infant-directed speech compared to adult-directed speech.¹

1. The ManyBabies Consortium (2020). Quantifying sources of variability in infancy research using the infant-directed-speech preference. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*, 3(1), 24–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2515245919900809>

WANT TO
PARTICIPATE IN A
PAID STUDY?



We are currently running an in-person eye-tracking study for 8-13 months and 2-5 year olds!

Email us at
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participate or get more
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Where does this preference for infant-directed speech come from? One idea is that the acoustic features of infant-directed speech more closely resemble the infants' own vocalizations. Since infants are learning to produce the sounds of their language, vocalizations that sound like their own may catch their attention as a potentially informative source of feedback. That is, infants may be particularly interested in hearing sounds that could help them produce speech-like babble and words using their own (infant-sized) vocal anatomy. If so, we can make another prediction: infants will enjoy listening to the speech of other infants and young children, "other-infant speech."

To test this prediction, we first need an experimental paradigm that can be used cross-culturally to study what kinds of speech infants prefer to listen to. Inspired by the study cited above, we played infants in our study different clips of speech spoken by either adults or young children. While the clips were playing aloud, infants looked at a colorful checkerboard image on a screen. Whenever they lost interest, which was quantified by looking away from the screen for two seconds, the audio stopped playing. This is what we call an "infant-controlled" measure; the infant gets to pick how long they listen to a sound. With this kind of experiment, we interpret longer infant looking times as indicating higher interest in the sounds they're hearing. We can then compare how long they listened to different types of sounds. In our case, we compared how long they wanted to listen to infant-directed speech (produced by adults), adult-directed speech (produced by adults), and other-infant speech (produced by young children, usually directed to an adult).

Using this framework, we tested U.S. babies in Chicago, Mayan babies in Southern Mexico, and Papuan babies on Rossel Island in Papua New Guinea to answer the following questions. First, did we see the usual preference for infant-directed speech over adult-directed speech? We did for the U.S. babies, but not for the Mayan and Papuan babies. That's a surprise, because researchers have long assumed that preference for infant-directed speech is universal to babies around the world. Second, did we see that babies like other-infant speech as much as infant-directed speech? U.S. and Mayan babies actually preferred other-infant speech to infant-directed speech from ages 10 months up; and Papuan babies showed the opposite pattern by 12 months. These preliminary results show us that infants' preference for infant-directed speech may relate to a more general preference for speech produced by young voices (or speech that sounds like it). These results also show us that upbringing may matter in shaping children's preferences—there is no universal pattern, so instead, preferences probably emerge from infants' experiences in their home environment.

This study was a proof-of-concept experiment. Our aim was to simply test whether our experimental setup could be run comparably in such diverse sites, and to get some preliminary insight into the consistency and variability of preferences across babies from different parts of the world. This type of research is only possible thanks to families like yours, who volunteer their time to help us learn about the development of the human mind. We are deeply grateful for your participation. Our next steps will be to collect more data, using even higher quality audio, across these and further cultural groups. Stay tuned for more!



**Scan to view and listen
to sample speech
stimuli used in the
current study!**



Thank you for your participation!

You and your child's contributions to our work make the research possible, and we greatly appreciate your continued support!

Questions?

Contact us at chatterlab@uchicago.edu or give us a call at (773) 702-1216. For more information, visit us at our website (<https://chatterlab.uchicago.edu>)

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