Phonological Knowledge Trumps Salient Local Regularity in 2-year-olds’ Word Learning
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Have 2-year-olds learned that pitch cannot contrast words in English?

MOTIVATION
Pitch in English conveys important information like speaker affect and the question versus statement distinction. But pitch alone cannot differentiate words in English.

Can 2-year-olds successfully disregard highly perceptible pitch regularity in a word-learning task, in accordance with English phonology?

PARTICIPANTS
18 Adults
29 30-month-olds

METHOD
1) LABELING IN STORY
“Where’s the deebo?”
“Where’s the teebo?”
(All subjects)

2) OSTENSIVE LABELING
“Where’s the deebo?”
“Where’s the dahbo?”
(1/2 of subjects)

3) TEST
(1/2 of subjects)

RESULTS
Adults
2-year-olds

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CONCLUSIONS
Adults and 30-month-olds applied native phonology to a word-learning task. Even though the nature of the teaching made pitch a potentially relevant feature of the word, children and adults did not treat a pitch change as relevant to word recognition. In contrast, they treated segmental changes as relevant.

Individual subjects differed in their interpretations of the segmental changes, some showing a potential mutual exclusivity response (Markman, 1989), others not responding to the change.

Future directions: Investigating the developmental trajectory of pitch interpretation in word learning and recognition. Demonstrating that young children know how pitch is used in English, e.g., for expressing emotions and as a cue to lexical stress.

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