

Function word reduction in infant-directed Japanese

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Due to their low information content, function words tend to be both phonologically and phonetically less salient than content words, leading some to hypothesize that infants might use these differences to bootstrap the distinction between the two word types. Swanson, Leonard, and Gandour (1992) show that English-speaking mothers exaggerate durational differences between function and content words when speaking to infants, suggesting that one of the functions of the infant-directed speech style is to help infants acquire this crucial distinction. However, because all of the content words used in their study are stressed monosyllables, and all of the function words unstressed, it is unclear whether the Swanson et al. results represent enhancement of the lexical class distinction, or the phonetic distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables.

We address the question of which distinction mothers are enhancing by examining content and function word durations in Japanese. Because Japanese has no stressed-unstressed distinction, comparing adult-directed and infant-directed Japanese allows us to see how a purely lexical distinction is modified by mothers in infant-directed speech. Using a corpus of recordings of the same speakers addressing both an infant and an adult, we show that although function words are shorter than content words in adult-directed speech, just as in English, this difference becomes *smaller* in infant-directed speech. Whereas English speakers exaggerate the difference between word types when speaking to infants, Japanese speakers do the reverse, de-emphasizing the same distinction. We will argue that these opposing strategies arise due to the two languages' differing rhythmic patterns, suggesting that speakers prioritize rhythm over making the word type distinction salient in infant-directed speech.