

Babies can learn link between language and ethnicity, study suggests

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Babies as young as 11 months old can associate language with ethnicity, UBC research suggests. Credit: Sav Nijeboer / Dr. Janet Werker's Infant Studies Centre

Eleven-month-old infants can learn to associate the language they hear with ethnicity, recent research from the University of British Columbia suggests.

The study, published April 22 by *Developmental Psychobiology*, found that 11-month-old [infants](#) looked more at the faces of people of Asian descent versus those of Caucasian descent when hearing Cantonese versus English—but not when hearing Spanish.

"Our findings suggest that by 11 months, infants are making connections between languages and ethnicities based on the individuals they encounter in their environments. In learning about language, infants are doing more than picking up sounds and sentences—they also learn about the speakers of language," said Lillian May, a psychology lecturer at UBC who was lead author of the study.

The research was done in Vancouver, where approximately nine per cent of the population can

speak Cantonese.

The researchers played English-learning infants of Caucasian ancestry sentences in both English and Cantonese and showed them pictures of people of Caucasian descent, and of Asian descent. When the infants heard Cantonese, they looked more at the Asian faces than when they were hearing English. When they heard English, they looked equally to Asian and Caucasian faces.

"This indicates that they have already learned that in Vancouver, both Caucasians and Asians are likely to speak English, but only Asians are likely to speak Cantonese," noted UBC psychology professor Janet Werker, the study's senior author.

The researchers showed the same pictures to the infants while playing Spanish, to see whether they were inclined to associate any unfamiliar language with any unfamiliar ethnicity. However, in that test the infants looked equally to Asian and Caucasian faces. This suggests young infants pick up on specific language-ethnicity pairings based on the faces and languages they encounter.

"Babies are learning so much about language—even about its social use—long before they produce the first word," said Werker. "The link between speaker characteristics and language is something no one has to teach babies. They learn it all on their own."

The researchers are now probing how babies' ability to link language and ethnicity might help them with [language](#) acquisition.

More information: Lillian May et al, Who can speak that language? Eleven-month-old infants have language-dependent expectations regarding speaker ethnicity, *Developmental Psychobiology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/dev.21851](https://doi.org/10.1002/dev.21851)

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