

# Developmental Changes in Infants' Ability to Cope with Dialect Variation in Word Recognition

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Towards the end of their first year of life, infants' overly specified word representations are thought to give way to more abstract ones, which helps them to better cope with variation not relevant to word identity (e.g., voice and affect). This developmental change may help infants process the ambient language more efficiently, thus enabling rapid gains in vocabulary growth. One particular kind of variability that infants must accommodate is that of dialectal accent, because most children will encounter speakers from different regions and backgrounds. In this study, we explored developmental changes in infants' ability to recognize words in continuous speech by familiarizing them with words spoken by a speaker of their own region (North Midland-American English) or a different region (Southern Ontario Canadian English), and testing them with passages spoken by a speaker of the opposite dialectal accent.

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1 Our results demonstrate that 12- but not 9-month-olds readily recognize words  
2 in the face of dialectal variation.

3  
4 Regionally driven dialectal differences produce phonetic variation that  
5 straddles the boundary between linguistically relevant and linguistically  
6 irrelevant variation. Even for mutually comprehensible dialectal accents,  
7 such as North Midland-American and Southern Ontario Canadian English,  
8 phonetic differences affect the realization of contrasts, which may complicate  
9 word recognition. As a result of the Canadian shift, both /ae/ and /I/ are  
10 lowered and more backed in Southern Ontario Canadian English, compared  
11 with North Midland-American English (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2004). For **2**  
12 example, [ma:p] may be perceived as “map” in this Canadian dialect, but as  
13 “mop” in this American dialect. This may fetter perception for American lis-  
14 teners unfamiliar with the variation introduced by this dialect (e.g., Kraljic,  
15 Samuel, & Brennan, 2008). In fact, phonetic variation as a result of dialectal  
16 accent affects adults’ perception in very complex ways (see Sumner &  
17 Samuel, 2009; for a recent review), and it interferes with children’s word  
18 recognition at age 4 (Nathan, Wells, & Donlan, 1998) and sentence discrimi-  
19 nation at age 5 (Floccia, Butler, Girard, & Goslin, 2009). Dialect variation  
20 may also be problematic for infant learners, who have less language experi-  
21 ence. However, less is known about how such phonetic variation may  
22 impact infant speech perception, particularly word recognition (although,  
23 see Best, Tyler, Gooding, Orlando, & Quann, 2009 for its impact on bud-  
24 ding semantic representations).

25  
26 As infants gain experience with their ambient language, they attune to  
27 phonetic information that is linguistically relevant. Language experience  
28 may also help infants ignore information irrelevant to word identity, such  
29 as variation attributable to gender, affect, and accent (foreign and dialectal).  
30 From an early age, infants exhibit some ability to deal with irrelevant  
31 speaker variability. Two-month-olds detect a syllable change when  
32 produced by multiple speakers (Jusczyk, Pisoni, & Mullenix, 1992) and  
33 6-month-olds discriminate a phonetic contrast between vowels, despite  
34 variability across speaker age and gender (Kuhl, 1979, 1983). Although  
35 infants can cope with linguistically irrelevant variability in sound discrimi-  
36 nation, this ability does not translate to word recognition. Indeed, 7.5-  
37 month-olds fail to recognize a word when spoken by two speakers with  
38 dissimilar voices (e.g., male vs. female; Houston & Jusczyk, 2000) and the  
39 same word spoken in different affective states (e.g., happy vs. neutral;  
40 Singh, Morgan, & White, 2004). It is not until 10.5 months that infants  
41 ignore irrelevant gender and affect variability in word recognition (Hous-  
42 ton & Jusczyk, 2000; Singh et al., 2004). **3**

1 Surprisingly little is known, however, about whether infants can  
2 accommodate the linguistically irrelevant variation introduced by dialectal  
3 accent when recognizing words in fluent speech. Although infants as  
4 young as 5–7 months of age can discriminate different dialectal accents  
5 (Kitamura, Panneton, Deihl, & Notley, 2006; Nazzi, Jusczyk, & Johnson,  
6 2000), it is unknown how the aspects that differ across accents impact  
7 word recognition. One exception is Schmale and Seidl (2009), where 9-  
8 and 13-month-olds were tested on their ability to generalize words from  
9 a native speaker of infants' ambient dialectal accent (North Midland-  
10 American English) to a foreign-accented speaker (Spanish-accented  
11 English). Results showed that, although the 13-month-olds recognized  
12 words across these accents, 9-month-olds failed. The authors suggest that  
13 one explanation for this developmental pattern may relate to an increase  
14 in the flexibility of infants' word representations, with older infants being  
15 better able to ignore linguistically irrelevant variation introduced by different  
16 accents. For example, Spanish-accented speakers tend to use different  
17 cues to signal stress contrasts, show more overlap in vocalic  
18 categories, and demonstrate shorter voice onset time (VOT) in stop consonants  
19 (Jongman & Wade, 2007; Shah, 2004; Steinlen, 2005). In fact,  
20 there were many linguistically irrelevant subphonemic and suprasegmental  
21 differences between the Spanish-accented and American speakers  
22 (Schmale & Seidl, 2009). Thus, it is possible that 9-month-olds failed  
23 because the differences between the accents were substantial. This is  
24 plausible, given that younger infants are worse at “harder” word recognition  
25 tasks, as it has been shown for vowel-initial words (Mattys & Jusczyk, 2001;  
26 Seidl & Johnson, 2008), iambic words (Jusczyk, Houston, & Newsome, 1999;  
27 Nazzi, Dille, Jusczyk, Shattuck-Hufnagel, & Jusczyk, 2005), and words in nonsalient  
28 prosodic positions (Seidl & Johnson, 2006).  
29

30 Thus, it was unclear which differences were responsible for the 9-month-olds'  
31 difficulty. For example, Spanish-accented English deviates from North  
32 Midland-American English by way of subphonemic and suprasegmental  
33 (sentence and word) differences. Here, instead, we examine developmental  
34 changes in infants' word recognition abilities across two regional accents  
35 that differ minimally: North Midland-American English (infants' ambient  
36 dialect) and Southern Ontario Canadian English (Labov et al., 2004). These  
37 dialectal accents should differ only in vowel implementation, as no reports  
38 have been made of differences at the consonantal or suprasegmental level  
39 (Clarke, Elms, & Youssef, 1995; Labov et al., 2004; Wells, 1982). Investigat- **4**  
40 ing the impact of vowel variation on word recognition provides insight into  
41 the relative specificity of early word representations in responding to irrelevant  
42 phonetic information.

## EXPERIMENT

Both 9- and 12-month-olds were familiarized with words spoken in isolation, and subsequently tested with passages that either contained the familiar words or not, as spoken by a speaker of a different dialectal accent. If infants recognized the familiar words in the passages during test, despite the speaker (and dialectal accent) change, they should exhibit a preference for passages containing the familiar words (e.g., Jusczyk & Aslin, 1995).

## Methods

*Participants*

A total of twenty-four 9-month-olds ( $M = 9.01$ ; 8.52–9.44; 11 women) and twenty-four 12-month-olds ( $M = 12.14$ ; 11.58–12.76; 13 women) raised in the Midwest participated. Fifteen additional infants were excluded (11 owing to fussing, of which 2 were 12-month-olds; 1 as a result of parental interference; 1 because of prematurity; and 2 owing to foreign language exposure). After data were collected, parents of participants were invited to report both spouses' dialect, and 33 responded. No parent had a Canadian accent, and all but one (English) had an American accent; there was only one case in which a child had both parents from non-Midwestern origins.

*Procedure*

In this version of the Headdturn Preference Procedure (Jusczyk & Aslin, 1995), the infant is seated on a caregiver's lap in the middle of a room, which has a green light in front and red lights on the sides. Each trial begins with the green light flashing. Once the infant orients to it, it extinguishes and one of the sidelights begins to flash. When the infant orients toward the sidelight, speech plays from the speakers hidden behind it, and continues playing until the infant orients away for more than 2 sec. When this happens, the sidelight extinguishes and the front light begins flashing, in preparation for the next trial. If the infant reorients in less than 2 sec the trial continues, but time spent looking away is not counted. A computer program randomly specifies the activation of the sidelights and the stimuli presentation. Both the caregiver and experimenter (who monitor the headdturns through an opening in the front) are blind to the stimuli the infant hears.

## Design

Following Jusczyk et al. (1999) and Schmale and Seidl (2009), infants were familiarized with 14 different repetitions of each of two target words (either *kingdom* and *hamlet*, for half the infants; or *candle* and *raptor*, for the other half) until they accumulated 30 sec of looking time to each word, and were then tested with three blocks of four trials. During test trials, a six-sentence passage was presented, for a total of six repetitions of each target word. To control for a possible speaker or dialect preference, half of the infants were familiarized by the American speaker and tested by the Canadian speaker. The other half heard the speakers in the opposite order. Infants were randomly, equally assigned to one of two conditions (familiarized with *kingdom/hamlet* or *candle/raptor*) and one of two familiarization orders (familiarized by American or Canadian speaker). All infants were tested on the same passages.

## Stimuli

Two speakers were selected from a sample of five North Midland-American speakers and five Southern Ontario Canadian speakers (all women) because they had the greatest voice similarity of all pairs, established by listener ratings following Houston (2000) and Schmale and Seidl (2009). The American speaker was also used in Schmale and Seidl (Experiments 1–3). Further, the speakers' voices used in this work differed much less than the two same-dialect speakers used in Experiment 1 of Schmale and Seidl (2009).<sup>1</sup> Because 9-month-olds successfully recognized words in their work, voice dissimilarity is unlikely to prevent recognition here.

Recordings of American speakers were conducted in a double-walled sound-attenuated booth with an Audio-Technica 100HE Hypercardioid dynamic microphone. Recordings of Canadian speakers were conducted in a double-walled IAC booth with an Edirol wave recorder. Stimuli were

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<sup>1</sup>Adult listener similarity ratings were carried out using both natural and sinewave speech. Sinewave speech annuls voice differences leaving only accent characteristics (Krentz & Corina, 2008; Remez, Fellowes, & Rubin, 1997; Remez, Van Dyk, Fellowes, & Rubin, 1998). Thus, by subtracting the sinewave (accent-based) similarity ratings from the natural similarity ratings, speakers with the most similar voices (beyond accent) were chosen through multidimensional scaling (Houston, 2000; Houston & Jusczyk, 2000; Wannemacher, 1995; see also Sheffert, Pisoni, Fellowes, & Remez, 2002). In Experiment 1 of Schmale and Seidl (2009), 9-month-olds successfully recognized words across female talkers with highly dissimilar voices (i.e., large change in the mean-squared distances in sinewave and natural speech, 11.03 in natural speech, and 6.08 in natural speech). The talkers used in this work had more similar voices, as indicated by a much smaller change in the mean-squared distances in sinewave and natural speech (1.39 in natural speech and 1.26 in sinewave speech).

digitized at 44.1 kHz, normalized to ~70 dB, and all target words and passages were equated in duration. The average duration of the American speaker's stimuli was 17.94 sec for target word lists (range: 16.53–19.41 sec) and 19.81 sec for passages (18.31–20.59 sec). The average duration of the Canadian speaker's stimuli was 17.33 sec for target word lists (16.85–17.80 sec) and 20.24 sec for passages (18.77–21.53 sec).

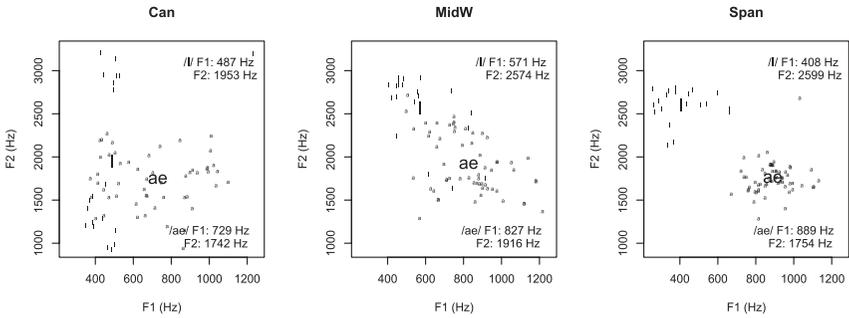
An important consideration is how the speakers used in this work compare with those in the cross-accent experiments of Schmale and Seidl (2009). As noted earlier, the 9-month-olds' failure to recognize words across a native and a Spanish-accented speaker in Schmale and Seidl may have been owing to the accents varying on several suprasegmental and subphonemic dimensions. In contrast, the speakers used here were predicted to deviate primarily on vowel implementation. Thus, an examination of acoustic and perceptual differences between these speakers increases our understanding of the type of variation present in these stimuli, and may shed light on the causes of the 9-month-olds' failure in previous work.

Acoustic measurements and analyses of variance with F1 and F2 in/ae/and/I/as dependent measures and talker (North Midland-American speaker ["MidW"], and either Spanish-accented speaker ("Span") or Southern Ontario Canadian speaker ["Can"]) support the prediction that talkers would differ on vowel implementation, see Figure 1, particularly with respect to the backing of /ae/by the Canadian speaker.<sup>2</sup>

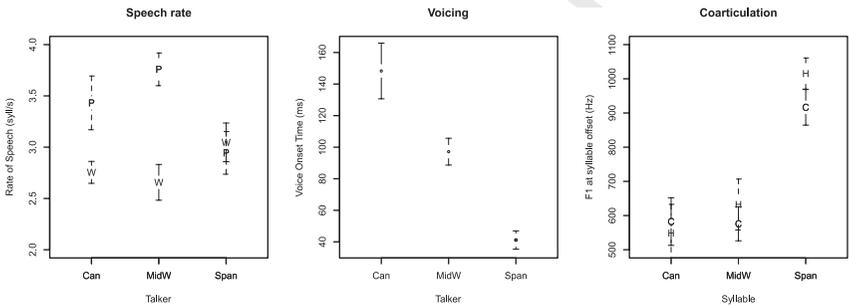
These dialectal accents were chosen because they should diverge minimally, unlike in non-native speech, which should diverge at other levels (including general characteristics, such as fluency, and subphonemic characteristics such as coarticulation). This claim is supported by an investigation of the rate of speech, voicing, and coarticulation of the three speakers, which show that the MidW and Can speakers differ less than the MidW and Span speakers, as evident in Figure 2. First, non-native speakers lack the fluency that characterizes native speakers, which affects global characteristics,

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<sup>2</sup>First and second formant frequencies (F1, F2) were measured at the vowel midpoint of the strong syllable in all target vowels using a Praat script (Boersma & Weenik, 2005; four Can tokens had to be excluded for nonmodal phonation). Can and MidW differ in F1 and F2 for/ae/[F1:  $F(1, 114) = 5.1, p < .03$ ; F2:  $F(1, 106) = 7.1, p < .01$ ], but only in F2 for/I/[F1:  $F(1, 38) = 2.4, p > .12$ ; F2:  $F(1, 34) = 7.88, p < .01$ ]. Span and MidW differ in both correlates for/ae/[F1:  $F(1, 118) = 5.66, p < .02$ ; F2:  $F(1, 118) = 10.18, p < .002$ ]; but only in F1 for/I/[F1:  $F(1, 38) = 12.96, p < .001$ ; F2:  $F(1, 38) = .07$ ]. For the speech rate calculations, the duration of each word or sentence was divided by its number of syllables, including both passages (P) and words in isolation (W). For VOT, the onset of the release of the/k/and the onset of vibration were hand-tagged in all tokens of *kingdom* and *candle*. Finally, coarticulation was assessed through F1 measured at .75 of the duration of /ae/in *hamlet* and *candle*, the two targets that differ in a single feature.



**Figure 1** Vowel differences in /ae/ and /I/, across three speakers (North Midland-American speaker [MidW] in the center, for ease of comparison; Southern Ontario Canadian speaker [Can] on the left, and Spanish-accented speaker [Span] on the right). In each panel, the vowels uttered by the relevant speaker are plotted with /ae/ denoted by “a” and /I/ by “I”. Average F1 and F2 values for each of these two categories are plotted in a larger font, as well as reported within each panel.



**Figure 2** Speech rate (left pane, measured in syllables per second), voicing (middle pane, measured in voice onset time), and coarticulation (right pane) across three speakers (North Midland-American [MidW], Southern Ontario Canadian [Can], and Spanish-accented [Span]).

including speech rate (although individual variation exists; naturally, a comparison with someone who stutters would not reveal this native advantage). For example, Span exhibited a relatively constant speech rate, whereas the native speakers differ less from each other by talking much slower when uttering words in isolation (I) than within passages (P); ANOVAs with rate as outcome and talker (Midwestern and either Canadian or Spanish) and type (passage, isolation) as factors confirm that the interaction talker  $\times$  type is much larger in the MidW-Span comparison [ $F(1, 156) = 32.01$  for MidW-Span; 5.34 for MidW-Can]. As for consonants, Spanish-accented

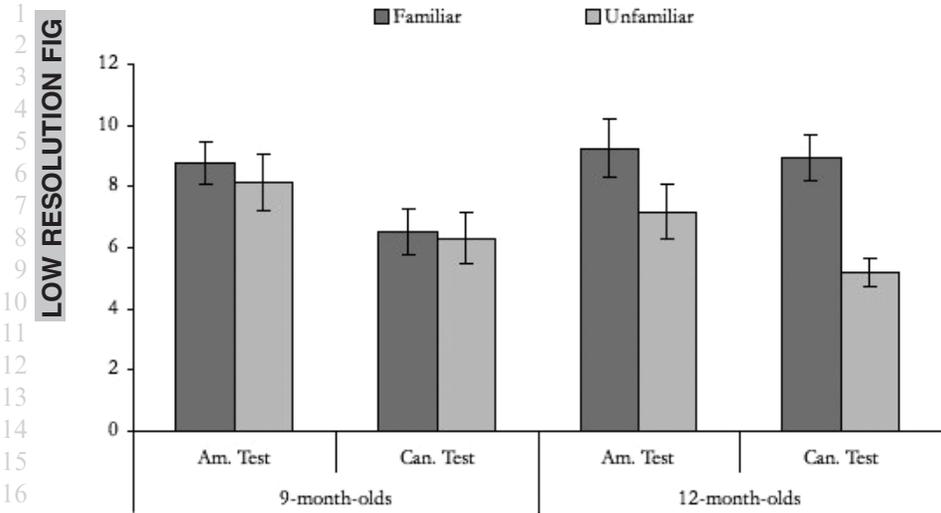
1 speaker produces the /k/ in *candle* and *kingdom* with a much shorter VOT  
 2 than either of the English-speaking speakers, and the VOT differs more  
 3 [ $F(1, 78) = 120.72$ ] than in the comparison among the native talkers  
 4 [ $F(1, 78) = 27.87$ ]. Finally, non-native speakers differ in subphonemic,  
 5 coarticulatory, and allophonic patterns (Speeter Beddor, Harnsberger, &  
 6 Lindemann, 2002) in manners that affect adult listeners' word segmentation  
 7 (Mondini, 2004). This is evident in all vowels; our example compares the  
 8 first formant (F1) location at .75 of the duration of the vowel /ae/ in *hamlet*  
 9 and *candle*. Although there is no effect of word (*hamlet*, *candle*) on F1 for  
 10 the native speakers (both  $p > .19$ ), the Spanish-accented speaker produces  
 11 different F1s depending on the word [ $F(1, 38) = 8.9, p < .005$ ], either  
 12 because these sounds are coarticulated more in Spanish or because the  
 13 slower movements involved in the production of non-native sounds affects  
 14 coarticulation. In addition, findings from a listening experiment provided  
 15 perceptual evidence that stimuli produced by Can and MidW are more similar  
 16 as compared with MidW-Span.<sup>3</sup>

## 18 Results and discussion

20 A repeated-measures ANOVA with average looking time as dependent  
 21 measure, age group (younger, older), condition (*kingdom/hamlet, candle/*  
 22 *raptor*), and order (American test, Canadian test) as factors, and familiarity  
 23 (familiar, unfamiliar) as repeated measures revealed a main effect of famil-  
 24 iarity [ $F(1, 44) = 10.88, p = .002$ ], main effect of order [ $F(1, 44) = 8.41,$   
 25  $p = .005$ ], significant interaction between age group and familiarity  
 26 [ $F(1, 44) = 4.55, p = .04$ ], and no other significant interactions  
 27 [ $F(1, 44) < .18$ ]. Follow-up paired, two-tailed comparisons of looking time  
 28 averaged across blocks revealed that familiar and unfamiliar trials differed  
 29 significantly in the older age group [ $t(1, 23) = 3.77, p = .001$ ], but not in  
 30 the younger group [ $t(1, 23) = 0.88, p = .39$ ], as shown in Figure 3. The  
 31 main effect of order emerges because both groups showed higher looking  
 32 times when tested with the American speaker. As evidenced by the lack of

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34  
 35 <sup>3</sup>A listening experiment was conducted to determine adults' ratings of the speaker(s)  
 36 perceived as most different. In each trial, participants heard three tokens of the same target  
 37 word (ISI = 500 msec), each spoken by a different talker (the two speakers used in this work  
 38 and the Spanish-accented speaker used in the cross-accent generalization experiments in  
 39 Schmale & Seidl, 2009). Participants then responded to which of the three sounded the most dif-  
 40 ferent. Listeners were not explicitly instructed to detect accents, or to rate their strength. Four-  
 41 teen adults responded to a total of 24 different stimuli (four target words *hamlet, candle,*  
 42 *kingdom, raptor*, in six different orders, to counterbalance talker order), each of which was pre-  
 sented three times. Participants rated the target words produced by Span as the most different  
 of the three words 85% of the time, compared with 9% for MidW and 6% for Can.



**Figure 3** Average looking times in seconds by age group, order (speaker in test), and familiarity (error bars represent standard error).

interaction with order and familiarity, the pattern of looking remained the same in both the novel and familiar test trials, and only 12-month-olds showed a significant difference in looking time between passages containing familiar and novel words.

These findings suggest that 12-month-olds successfully recognized words in the face of variation in dialectal accent, as evidenced by the significant preference for test passages containing familiar words. In contrast, 9-month-olds showed no preference, suggesting that dialectal differences were large enough to impede word recognition.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

This work extends the finding that infants are sensitive to dialect differences by showing the functional relevance of this sensitivity for word recognition in 9-month-olds. The 9-month-olds' poor performance could be attributed to their lack of familiarity with dialectal accents, perhaps complicating the representation of words in unfamiliar speech streams. However, this hypothesis could not account for results showing that English-learning 9-month-olds are successful in recognizing words in foreign-accented speech (produced by a single Spanish-accented speaker; Schmale & Seidl, 2009; Experiment 4), a foreign language (Houston, Jusczyk, Kuijpers, Coolen, & Cutler, 2000), and

1 even synthetic speech (Johnson & Tyler, in press; Thiessen & Saffran, 2003).  
2 Instead, it is more likely that 9-month-olds can perform pattern-matching,  
3 but fail because they lack more abstract representations that encompass irrel-  
4 evant phonetic variability.

5 In interpreting these findings, an important consideration is the particular  
6 type of variation responsible for the 9-month-olds' failure. Based on acoustic  
7 and perceptual evidence, the American and Canadian speakers only  
8 appear to deviate markedly on vowel implementation (and not on fluency,  
9 subphonemic, or consonantal dimensions). It is reasonable to conclude that  
10 9-month-olds' failure is because of attention to linguistically irrelevant vowel  
11 variation across dialectal accents. Moreover, this attention to irrelevant  
12 vowel variation may have played an important role in 9-month-olds' inability  
13 to recognize words across accents in Schmale and Seidl (2009). Therefore,  
14 this work provides further evidence for the relative rigidity of infants' early  
15 word representations: words varying slightly in vowel implementation may  
16 escape 9-month-olds' recognition.

17 The developmental change documented for word recognition in the face  
18 of gender and affect variation (Houston & Jusczyk, 2000; Singh et al., 2004)  
19 could be explained through *semantic constancy*, as older infants are more  
20 likely to have accumulated experience hearing an object talked about by  
21 male and female speakers, in different affects. Additionally, *exposure to specific*  
22 *dialectal accents* influences infants' listening preference. After exposure  
23 to American accents, Australian 6-month-olds do not show a preference for  
24 Australian English, whereas American infants *do* show a preference for their  
25 native dialect (Kitamura et al., 2006). In contrast, neither semantic constancy  
26 nor exposure to Canadian accents provides a compelling explanation  
27 for these results. Taken together with the findings of Schmale and Seidl  
28 (2009), an alternative account is that increased language exposure in general  
29 leads to more robust representations, through which infants may accommodate  
30 irrelevant variation.

31 One possibility is that infants' representations become generally laxer  
32 over time, such that even an inexact match activates word representations.  
33 Alternatively, infants do not simply come to accept variation along *any*  
34 dimension, but rather disregard variation along specific dimensions they  
35 have identified as highly variable across speakers. Training studies with  
36 adults (e.g., Lively, Logan, & Pisoni, 1993) and infants (e.g., Rost &  
37 McMurray, 2009) provide indirect evidence for the latter possibility, as  
38 learners come to identify linguistically relevant dimensions through exposure  
39 to more speakers. For example, slight vowel variation could be liable to  
40 being ignored, as vowels are inherently more variable than consonants  
41 across speakers, even within a homogeneous linguistic community. This  
42 possibility is bolstered by research on reduced attention to vowels in word

1 recognition (Cutler, Sebastián-Gallés, Soler-Vilageliu, & van Ooijen, 2000;  
 2 Havy & Nazzi, 2009). Future work investigating the impact of variation in  
 3 consonantal implementation would shed light on this matter.

4 Overall, these results suggest that, by 12 months, children can segment  
 5 words from continuous speech across minimally different dialectal accents.  
 6 Nonetheless, the learning task is not over, as toddlers may still have diffi-  
 7 culty with this type of variation when recognizing or learning lexical items.  
 8 Indeed, a recent article by Best et al. (2009) reports that toddlers do not  
 9 show a preference for high-frequency words spoken in an unfamiliar dialect  
 10 until 19 months, and cross-accent word learning may not be possible until  
 11 30 months (Schmale, Hollich, & Seidl, submitted). Importantly, these find-  
 12 ings underline the importance of piecing together infants' representations  
 13 along different stages of language development (e.g., Werker & Curtin,  
 14 2005).

15 In sum, this work is the first to demonstrate that in word segmentation  
 16 from continuous speech, even minimal, regionally driven vowel variation  
 17 can only be processed by older, more experienced infants. Although future  
 18 research should explore the relative sensitivity of these processing abilities,  
 19 these findings make an important contribution to our understanding of how  
 20 infants learn to equate dissimilar instances of the same word, and approxi-  
 21 mate the abilities of adults in weighting irrelevant phonetic variation. Thus,  
 22 this investigation affords an invaluable opportunity to approach the com-  
 23 plex question of how infants' early word forms are represented.

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