

Abstract

Family socio-economic status predicts infant speech perception

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Prior research attests to disparities in children's vocabularies on account of familial socioeconomic status (SES). The weight of the evidence for this relationship draws from investigations of children's word knowledge after they begin to talk in relation to demographic factors. In the present study, across two experiments, infants' sensitivities to sounds that distinguish words in their language were measured in relation to SES. In a first study, infants were tested on auditory discrimination of native sounds via visual habituation. In a second study, infants were tested on their sensitivity to sounds when learning new words. Family SES contributed unique variance to infants' phonetic sensitivities both in auditory discrimination in the first year of life and in word learning in the second year of life. These studies suggest elemental aspects of word knowledge, specifically, sensitivity to sound contrast that differentiate words, may be associated with variation in SES.