INFANT INTERMODAL SPEECH PERCEPTION IS A LEFT HEMISPHERE FUNCTION

Kristine S. MacKain, Michael Studdert-Kennedy, Susan Spieker, and Daniel Stern

Abstract. Prelinguistic infants recognized structural correspondences in acoustic and optic properties of synchronized, naturally spoken disyllables, but did so only when they were looking to their right side. This suggests that intermodal speech perception is facilitated by rightward orientation of attention and subserved by the left hemisphere.

Five- to six-month-old infants recognized structural correspondences between synchronized acoustic and optic displays of naturally spoken disyllables only when they were looking to their right side. This suggests that intermodal perception of speech is a left hemisphere function with a potential role to play in the infant's learning to speak.

Research on infants' capacities for intermodal perception has demonstrated repeatedly that infants are sensitive to correspondences in the acoustic and optic properties that specify an event (Dodd, 1979; Spelke, 1976, 1979; Spelke & Cortelyon, 1981). Such studies have two alternative interpretations. Infants may prefer a natural pattern of structural correspondence between the optic and acoustic dimensions of an event by which, in speech for example, an opening mouth is correlated with a rise in amplitude and with an upward shift in overall spectral structure, a closing mouth with the reverse. Alternatively, infants may simply prefer a temporal pattern of correspondence by which gross points of change in acoustic and optic structure are synchronized (Spelke, 1979). If infants prefer mere synchrony, we would expect them to be satisfied with any arbitrary pattern of acoustic-optic correspondence: Thus, in speech they might have no preference for syllable amplitude peaks synchronized with an open mouth over syllable amplitude peaks synchronized with a closed mouth. But if infants prefer natural patterns of structural correspondence, we would expect them to look longer at the synchronized video monitor display of a woman producing articulatory patterns that specify the speech they are hearing than at an alternative, synchronized video display of the same woman displaying a different articulatory pattern. We therefore investigated infants' capacity to recognize acoustic-optic correspondences in

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+Also Department of Psychiatry, Cornell Medical College, New York.
++Also Queens College and Graduate Center, City University of New York.

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speech structure when the synchrony between an acoustic and two competing optic displays was maintained.

Our preliminary analyses suggested that when acoustic and optic speech displays specified the same disyllable, intermodal recognition was enhanced if infants were watching the right, rather than the left, video display. Kinsbourne and colleagues (Kinsbourne, 1970, 1974; Lempert & Kinsbourne, 1982) have shown that when adults look to the right (or left) as they complete a task, their performance is facilitated if the task demands are better subserved by the hemisphere contralateral to gaze direction. Such results have been interpreted as evidence that attention, behaviorally manifested by gaze, may selectively activate the hemisphere contralateral to direction of gaze. We therefore expected that upon fuller investigation, only rightward looking would significantly enhance recognition of acoustic-optic correspondences in speech structure.

Eighteen infants, eight males and ten females, 5-6 months of age (mean = 5 months, 25 days) participated in the experiment. We used three pairs of naturally produced consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel (CVCV) disyllables, spoken with equal stress on both syllables: /mama, lulu/, /bebi, zuzi/, and /vava, zuzu/. We enhanced the opportunity to detect acoustic-optic correspondences by making the articulatory dynamics of the contrasting video displays highly discriminable. To prepare the experimental materials, an adult female silently articulated each CVCV in synchrony with either the corresponding or the contrasting spoken disyllables of another adult female. The voice and the articulating face were recorded simultaneously to appear on one side of a 28 x 22 cm video monitor screen. The video recording procedure was then repeated so that the articulating face appeared on the other half of the split video screen, silently articulating the second CVCV in the pair in synchrony with the audio playback of the original disyllable. Deviations in acoustic-optic synchrony were below the adult threshold for detecting asynchronies. The resulting recording of the acoustic signal synchronized with two competing articulatory displays was output to two video monitors.

The infant sat 46 cm from the video monitors on its mother's lap at the open end of a wooden box. The infant viewed a different articulatory display on the split screen of each monitor, one appearing through the right back window of the box, the other through the left. The speech corresponding to one of the two video displays was played at equal loudness from the speakers of both monitors. A camera placed centrally between the monitors filmed the infant's visual responses. The mother looked over the roof of the box and could not see the video displays.

Infants were presented with each of the three CVCV pairs on four trials for a total of 12 trials. Each member of a CVCV pair occurred twice as an audio signal, with its matching video display occurring once on the left video monitor and once on the right. The trials were randomized under the constraint that no two trials with the same video output immediately followed one another. Each trial lasted 20 seconds and consisted of 11 auditory-visual CVCV repetitions. Disyllable durations were about 1100 msec, separated by interstimulus intervals of about 800 msec. Successive trials began without interruption between trials. The experimental session lasted four minutes.
From video recordings of the child's face, independent observers recorded for each trial the duration in seconds of the first fixation to the right and of the first fixation to the left. We preferred first fixation over total fixation time because it is less vulnerable to contamination by factors such as attentional lapse. Interjudge reliability, based on a Pearson product moment correlation coefficient for 41 randomly selected trials, was \( r = .96 \) for left looking time and \( r = .98 \) for right looking time.

The direction of the infants' first looks after trial onset was to the right side on 58% of the total trials (\( N = 216 \)). Table 1 presents mean first fixation times in seconds for acoustic-optic matches and mismatches on right and left sides. The means were taken over six disyllables and summed over 18 infants. It is evident that the longest first fixation times are to matches, particularly on the right side.

First fixation times varied across infants. Therefore, we obtained proportions of first fixation time spent looking at acoustic-optic matches occurring on the right and the left side from each infant for each disyllable. We thus normalized for variability over subjects and disyllables and, at the same time, for any general preference for one side over the other. Proportions were computed by dividing the first fixation time spent looking at a match (right, left, or both sides) by the total first fixation time for that comparison, summed across two trials (see Table 2 for comparisons).

The overall proportion of total (right and left) first fixation time spent looking at matches (mean = .54) rather than mismatches was significant (\( z = 2.64, p < .004 \); this and subsequent tests are Wilcoxon matched pairs signed ranks tests, one-tailed). Table 2 summarizes the remaining results.

On the right side, the proportion of first fixation time spent looking at matches was significantly greater than for mismatches overall (\( z = 2.66, p < .004 \)) and for three of the six disyllables: \( \text{mama}, \text{bebi}, \text{and zuzu} \) (with respective values of \( z = 2.46, p < .007, n = 17, \text{one-tie}; z = 1.94, p < .05, n = 17, \text{one-tie}; z = 2.27, p < .01 \)). Proportions were greater than .50 for all six disyllables. On the left side, the proportion of first fixation time spent looking at matches was not significantly greater than for mismatches overall or on any of the six disyllables. Proportions were greater than .50 for only three of the disyllables.

On the right side, the number of infants who spent more than half of their first fixation time looking at matches versus mismatches was significant, on a binomial test, for two disyllables (\( \text{mama}, 13/18, p < .05; \text{zuzu}, 14/18, p < .02 \)), but no corresponding tests for left-side looking were significant.

In a right-left comparison, the proportion of first fixation time spent looking at acoustic-optic matches was significantly greater on the right side than on the left side overall (\( z = 2.02, p < .02 \)) and for three out of the six disyllables: \( \text{mama}, \text{bebi}, \text{and zuzu} \) (respectively, \( z = 1.87, p < .05; z = 1.68, p < .05; z = 1.96, p < .03 \)). Right side proportions were greater than left for all six disyllables (Table 2).
Table 1

First Fixation Times in Seconds, Averaged Across Six Disyllables, to the Left and Right Video Display When the Display Matched or Mismatched the Audio CVCV. Mean Fixation Times are Summed Across 18 Infants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direction of Gaze</th>
<th>Matches Audio CVCV</th>
<th>Mismatches Audio CVCV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Left</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>67.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Proportion of First Fixation Time, Averaged Over 18 Infants, Spent Looking at Right Matches vs. Right Mismatches, Left Matches vs. Left Mismatches and Right vs. Left Matches on Six Disyllables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion of time spent looking at</th>
<th>bebi</th>
<th>suzi</th>
<th>mama</th>
<th>lulu</th>
<th>vava</th>
<th>zuzu</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right Matches vs. Right Mismatches</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Matches vs. Left Mismatches</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right vs. Left Matches</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One potential source of bias, a preference for an optic articulatory pattern irrespective of the acoustic pattern that accompanied it, might have influenced these results. To check for this, Spearman rank order correlation coefficients were computed for preferences for a video display when the audio signal matched the video display and when it did not match the video display. We computed correlations for right and left sides combined as well as for each side separately. A significant positive correlation would indicate that infants preferred to look at a particular articulatory pattern irrespective of the CVVC to which they were listening. None of the correlations was significant.

In summary, infants looked significantly longer at synchronized video displays of a woman articulating a disyllable synchronized and matched with what they were hearing, than at an alternative display synchronized but not matched with what they were hearing. Their preference was therefore for acoustic-optic correspondences in structure, not for mere synchrony. Moreover, they displayed this preference only when attending to their right side.

These findings demonstrate, first, that infants are sensitive to natural structural correspondences rather than merely temporal ones, between the acoustic and optic properties of articulation. Second, and more important, they indicate mutual facilitation of two left hemisphere functions: rightward orientation of attention (Kinsbourne, 1970, 1974; Lempert & Kinsbourne, 1982) and intermodal speech perception. Taken with the well-known dominance of the left hemisphere in the motor control of speech for adults (Milner, 1974) and in speech perception for both adults (Studdert-Kennedy & Shankweiler, 1970) and infants (Molfese, Freeman, & Palermo, 1975; Best, Hoffman, & Glenville, 1982), these results suggest that the normal infant's capacity to begin reproducing native language speech sounds in prelinguistic babbling (de Boysson-Bardies, Sagart, & Bacri, 1981), may rest on a predisposition of the left hemisphere to recognize sensorimotor connections between the auditory structure of speech and its articulatory source.

REFERENCES


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FOOTNOTE

¹Temporal discrepancies in audio-video speech events must reach 131 msec before they can be detected by adults (Dixon & Spitz, 1980). In our study, temporal discrepancies between corresponding events on any two video displays did not exceed 48 msec. Furthermore, there were no significant differences in seven adults' perceptual judgments of temporal discrepancies between acoustic-optic matches versus mismatches for any of the six disyllables. We assume that infants' sensitivity would not be superior to adults' on this task. The procedures are detailed in MacKain, Studdert-Kennedy, Spieker, and Stern (in press).