When prosody matters!

Emerging word segmentation abilities in European Portuguese learning infants

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Introduction

The word segmentation problem: when and how infants begin to segment word-like forms from the continuous speech stream?

Early word segmentation plays a crucial role in language acquisition (i.e., word learning, syntax)
Introduction

- Segmentation abilities in typically developing infants have been shown to vary across languages (e.g., Mersad at al., 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Monosyllabic</th>
<th>Bisyllabic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trochaic</td>
<td>Iambic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>7.5m</td>
<td>7.5m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.5m</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>7-9m</td>
<td>9m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11m+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish/Catalan</td>
<td>6m</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>7.5m?</td>
<td>16m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

- **Rhythmic properties** of a language (i.e., stress based, syllable based) may be utilised to begin segmenting continuous speech (what the infant relies on)

- Word position may be crucial also due to prosody: Words at **utterance edges/boundaries** easier to segment than those in the middle (Seidl & Johnson, 2006; Johnson et al., 2014)
  - Edge provides particularly **salient cues** e.g. duration and pitch cues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Rhythm</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Edge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Stress-timed</td>
<td>Word</td>
<td>earlier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Stress-timed</td>
<td>Word</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Syllable-timed</td>
<td>Syllable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Present study

- First attempt to study emerging segmentation abilities in European Portuguese (EP) learning infants

- **EP rhythm** displays both stress and syllable timing properties, unlike English or Spanish (Frota & Vigário 2001)

- Also, unlike other languages, EP provides **strong cues** to high prosodic phrase boundaries and **word boundaries**, but not to lower phrase boundaries (Vigário, 2003; Frota 2014)
Aims

- Identify at what point in development segmentation abilities emerge

- Investigate whether **prosody** constrains early word segmentation abilities in EP in comparison with other languages
  - Monosyllabic segmentation earlier/later
  - Effect of **prosodic salience** (prosodic boundaries)
Two studies

EP learning infants’ ability to segment monosyllabic word forms

STUDY 1
5-6 months and 8-9 months

STUDY 2
12 months
## Method

### Participants

- **5-6 months:**
  - 20 infants from monolingual homes in the Lisbon area (11 boys, mean age 6m 3d, range 4m 19d – 7m 11d)
  - 5 infants excluded due to fussiness (1), risk of autism (1), not needed (3)

- **8-9 months:**
  - 20 infants from monolingual homes in the Lisbon area (12 boys, mean age 9m 2d, range 7m 27d – 10m 8d)
  - 0 infants excluded

- **12 months:**
  - 20 infants from monolingual homes in the Lisbon area (10 boys, mean age 12m 2d, range 10m 24d – 13m 19d)
  - 2 infants excluded due to fussiness
Method – Study 1

Materials

- 4 monosyllabic pseudo words
  - Ful, Queu, Pis, Sau
- 2 passages constructed for each word, one for middle and one for end sentences


Procedure: modified version of the Visual Habituation Paradigm (Stager & Werker, 1997; Altvater-Mackensen & Mani, 2013)
Method Study 1

**Familiarisation**
- Alternating trials
- 25 secs accumulated listening time to each

**Passage 1**
- Word 1 – familiar end
- Word 2 – familiar mid
- Word 3 – novel
- Word 4 – novel

**Passage 2**
- Word 1 – familiar end
- Word 2 – familiar mid
- Word 3 – novel
- Word 4 – novel

**Test**

**Block 1**
- Randomised order

**Block 2**
- Randomised order

**Block 3**
- Randomised order

Trials continue until infant looks away for more than 2 consecutive seconds, or the sound file ends.

Segmentation demonstrated by longer looking times to familiar word forms compared with novel.
Results Study 1

5-6 months:
- Significant effect of item status ($F(2,38) = 13.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .41$).
  - end and middle ($t(19) = 3.38, p < .01$)
  - end and distracter ($t(19) = 4.72, p < .001$)
  - middle and distracter ($t(19) = .91, p = .37$).

8-9 months:
- Significant effect of item status ($F(2,38) = 16.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .47$).
  - end and middle ($t(19) = 3.44, p < .01$)
  - end and distracter ($t(19) = 6.71, p < .001$)
  - middle and distracter ($t(19) = 2.12, p < .05$).

Internal collapses lower prosodic boundary with just a word boundary

Only at IP edge

Some development
Method Study 2
Materials

- Same 4 monosyllabic pseudo words
  - Ful, Queu, Pis, Sau

Procedure similar as for younger age groups
  - Only familiarised with words in middle of sentences
Method Study 2
Materials

- Same 4 monosyllabic pseudo words
  - Ful, Queu, Pis, Sau

Non-prominent internal position, with absence of any phrase boundary

Procedure similar as for younger age groups
- Only familiarised with words in middle of sentences

A caixa contém **FUL** vermelho na tampa.
Aquele grande **FUL** branco é da Quica.
Comeram muito **FUL** doce na praia.
Hoje vi um **FUL** castanho mas duro.
O amigo do **FUL** português fugiu.
O outro **FUL** branco foi de mercedes.
Results Study 2

- Significant effect of item status - $F(1,18) = 23.6, p < .001, \eta^2 = .57$

Similar behaviour, segmentation wise, to 5-6 month olds at final IP boundaries (=sentence edge)
Results Study 2

- Significant effect of item status - $F(1,18) = 23.6, p < .001, \eta^2 = .57$

- No significant effect of item status - $F(1,18) = 1.776, p > .1, \eta^2 = .090$
Conclusions

- EP learning infants at **5-6 months** are able to segment continuous speech **only when the word is located at the high prosodic edge** (IP boundary, the end of the sentence)
  - In line with recent findings for English learning infants, but against those for Spanish/Catalan infants showing segmentation at 6 months regardless of prosody

- At **8-9 months**, EP infants start to segment words in the middle of sentences (lower boundaries), but still demonstrate an advantage for words at the end of sentences
Conclusions

- Portuguese 12-month-old infants are able to segment words in sentence medial position, when target word precedes a IP boundary (despite the absence of a pause)
- This shows a sensitivity to prosody in early segmentation, beyond the edge vs. internal position
Prosody constrains the emergence and development of early segmentation in EP, in the first year.
Thanks to all the infants, families and nurseries that have taken part in these studies.

Obrigada!

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Conclusións

- These findings add to our existing knowledge of the emergence of segmentation abilities
  - What cues constrain, or are utilised, during the development of this ability.
- New findings in a prosodically ‘atypical’ language, EP, not previously studied for word segmentation.