



## "Cultural Learners" in the Cradle



### Infants Pay More Attention to Native Speakers of Their Language

10 August 2016

Well before starting to speak, children from a very young age pay higher attention to the information received from native speakers of their language compared to the information received from "foreigners". A new study shows that this behaviour, replicated already at the age of five months, might be the foundation of acquiring culture specific knowledge. The research coordinated by SISSA was published in the *Frontiers in Psychology* magazine.

---

We are "culturally biased" right from the cradle and we tend to prefer information we receive from native speakers of our language, even when this information is not transmitted through verbal speech. Hanna Marno, researcher at the International School for Advanced Studies (SISSA) of Trieste (together with other colleagues among whom Jacques Mehler and Marina Nespor,

professors at SISSA, -that coordinated the study- and Yamil Vidal, SISSA Ph.D. student) has carried out an experiment in which she proved that infants selectively paid attention to the informants they have previously heard speaking their own language.

In a first series of experiments, 12-month-old infants were first familiarized with native speakers of their language and foreign speakers. In a following session, the same infants were presented with short movies where each of the known speakers silently gazed toward unfamiliar objects. The analysis of the looking behaviour showed that infants looked longer at the objects indicated by the native speaker, compared to those indicated by the foreigners. Further experiments have shown that this behaviour was replicated with 5-month-old infants already.

"Recognizing the spoken language of their interlocutors stimulates in children, even at a very early age, the social learning: infants tend to prefer information received from speakers recognized as belonging to their own cultural group. Language is a lead that guides the learning process", Marno, first author of the study, explains. "Though it may seem limiting, children are presented with a huge amount of stimuli, and therefore need strategies to efficiently distribute their attention potential, maximizing thus the learning of relevant inputs. Choosing native speakers of our language is a good way to be able to selectively learn from them the knowledge of our cultural environment".

#### **USEFUL LINKS:**

Original Research Article in Frontiers in Psychology: <http://goo.gl/CCn5l7>

#### **IMAGES:**

Simon Blackley "First meeting"

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/sblackley/9799052565/>

#### **Contacts:**

Press Office:

[pressoffice@sissa.it](mailto:pressoffice@sissa.it)

Tel: (+39) 040 3787644 | (+39) 366-3677586

265 Bonomea Street  
34136 Trieste

More info on SISSA: [www.sissa.it](http://www.sissa.it)