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Declarative and imperative pointing acts by infants can be distinguished by accompanying preverbal vocalisations

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Abstract

Infant points are often accompanied by preverbal vocalisations but little is known about their acoustic properties. In this study we explore the role of point-accompanying preverbal infant vocalisations in expressing intention, declarative or imperative. We test whether the interpretation of these preverbal expressions is independent from the communicative and cultural context by assessing Swiss adult speakers' ability to interpret preverbal point-accompanying vocalisations from Shipibo-Konibo (Peru) children. Results suggest that adults can easily distinguish declarative and imperative preverbal pointing acts by their accompanying vocalisations. We thus show that acoustic properties of these vocalisations contain a rich amount of information which is understood by members of a different culture. This hints towards a larger preverbal repertoire of communicative tools than previously assumed.