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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 42(0)

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Publication Date

2020

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Peer reviewed

Understanding Childrens Productions: Does Experience Play a Role?

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Abstract

Toddlers are notoriously difficult to understand, yet like accented speakers, their productions tend to systematically differ from adult productions. Thus, we hypothesize that listeners with routine exposure to toddlers (perhaps even toddlers themselves) should comprehend toddlers best. Three listener groups were tested on their comprehension of toddlers utterances in an eye-tracking study; forty-eight toddlers (Mage= 33 months), sixteen undergraduates with little experience around children (Mage= 18 years), and sixteen mothers of young children (Mage=38 years). All listeners looked longer to targets than distractors ($p < 0.05$), with mothers and undergraduates target fixations significantly greater than toddlers ($p < 0.001$). Mothers target fixations (78%) did not differ significantly from undergraduates (74%; $p = 0.17$). These preliminary findings suggest a complex picture regarding the role of experience in comprehending toddlers utterances. Clearly, however, toddlers do not outperform adults in understanding toddlers.