

Exploring the language input to infants in a multilingual society in Africa

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Many infants worldwide grow up in bi/multilingual environments, exposed to two or more languages. While research on bilingual language input and its impact on language development has progressed in recent years, most available studies primarily concentrate on infants from the so-called “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) social context. In Africa, a less-WEIRD social context, multilingualism is the norm for many infants, whose language experiences, including the input and input characteristics, may differ from those in Western contexts. Yet, the nature of language input to infants growing up in Africa has rarely been investigated. In this study, we explored the language input of 3 to 12-month-old infants (N = 121) being raised in a bi/multilingual environment in Ghana (Sub-Saharan Africa), a non-Western social context. The study focused on the nature of these infants’ input regarding the number of languages of exposure, input providers, and factors that may influence the number of languages exposed to and the relative amount of input received in each language. Data were collected using both a parental language background questionnaire and diary logbook in Accra, Ghana’s capital. Results revealed consistency between the questionnaire and logbook, indicating the measures’ reliability. Results showed that Ghanaian infants were exposed to between two and six languages, and regularly engaged with two to six regular input providers, and the two were correlated. Regarding the relative amount of input in the languages that most infants were exposed to, namely, Ghanaian English, Akan, Ewe, and Ga, we found that infants receive less direct than indirect input in Ghanaian English, while no such difference was observed for Akan, Ewe, and Ga. Our findings shed light on the language environment and input to African infants raised in multilingual societies. The findings further suggest an impact of social and cultural contexts on infants’ linguistic experience.