

Can Brazilians get it? The perception of European Portuguese statement and question intonation by Brazilian Portuguese-learning infants

Gabriela Braga, Jovana Pejovic, Cátia Severino & Sónia Frota

Center of Linguistics, School of Arts and Humanities, Universidade de Lisboa

This study investigates Brazilian Portuguese-learning infants' perception of the prosodic distinction between statements and yes-no questions in European Portuguese (EP). In Portuguese, unlike in English, the difference between statements and yes-no questions relies only on prosodic features. Although EP and Brazilian Portuguese (BP) present roughly the same syntactic structure for these sentence types, they display different intonational grammars. In both BP and EP, statements show a falling melody at the utterance edge. However, yes-no questions in (standard) EP are characterized by a falling-rising contour, whereas in BP varieties they show either a rising (northeast region), or a rising-falling contour (southern region; Frota et al., 2015). Nine 5-6-month-old (mean age 5.6 months) BP-learning infants (exposure to BP 95-100%) participated in a visual habituation paradigm to test intonation discrimination. Following previous studies (Frota et al., 2014; Sundara et al., 2015), infants were habituated with a string of pseudo-words with bisyllabic sonorant sequences with initial stress, produced by a female EP native speaker in infant-directed-speech. Infants were habituated either to a statement or question intonation pattern. The test phase consisted of two trials: "same" and "switch" (different from habituation). The ongoing BP data was compared with the EP data for same age infants (Frota et al., 2014). A mixed-model analysis revealed a significantly longer looking time to the "switch" than to the "same" trials (intercept= 6.8, "switch" estimate=2.3, $t=2.4$, $p=.01$), wherein EP- and BP-learning infants did not differ. Thus, BP-learning infants can discriminate the EP contrast not present in their variety. These findings add to previous work (Sundara et al., 2015; Czeke et al., 2019), where Basque-learning, but not English- or German-learning infants, discriminated the EP prosodic contrast, suggesting that infants might be more sensitive to differences in statement/question intonation when acquiring languages where prosody alone conveys the sentence type distinction.