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Baby talk words build infants' language skills, study shows

The more baby talk words that infants are exposed to the quicker they grasp language, a study suggests.

Assessments of nine-month-old children suggest that those who hear words such as bunny or choo-choo more frequently are faster at picking up new words between nine and 21 months.

Researchers say these findings suggest some types of baby talk words – more than other words – can help infants develop their vocabulary more quickly.

The team says words that end in 'y' – such as tummy, mummy and doggy – or words that repeat sounds – such as choo-choo and night-night – could help infants identify words in speech.

Linguists at the University of Edinburgh recorded samples of speech addressed to 47 infants learning English.

They checked the speech addressed to each infant for features that characterise baby talk words.

As well as analysing so-called diminutives ending in 'y' and reduplication – which contains repeated syllables – they checked for onomatopoeic words that sound like their meaning, such as woof and splash.

They examined the rate of the infants' language development by measuring the size of the children's vocabulary at nine, 15 and 21 months.

They found that infants who heard a higher proportion of diminutive words and words with repeated syllables developed their language more quickly between nine and 21 months.

They did not find this effect on vocabulary growth for onomatopoeic baby talk words.

Lead researcher Mitsuhiro Ota, of the University of Edinburgh's School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, said: "Our findings suggest that diminutives and reduplication, which are frequently found in baby talk words – across many different languages – can facilitate the early stage of vocabulary development."

The study is published in *Cognitive Science*.

Link to paper: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cogs.12628>. The research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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