

Vocal maturity predicts adult responsiveness in a Tseltal Mayan community

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US caregivers are more responsive to infants' language-like than non-language-like vocalizations (e.g., canonical babble and words > non-canonical babble). These contingent responses draw children in as active conversational contributors, even before they begin to speak, and reflect culturally marked modes of caregiver-infant interaction that are unlikely to be universal. For example, under ethnographic accounts of Mayan language socialization, children are brought into the adult social world first as side participants before gaining rights as ratified interlocutors. In this study, we ask: what features of Tseltal children's early speech drive their recognizability as potential interlocutors? Our findings show that Tseltal adults respond more to children's canonical and lexical vocalizations, relative to non-canonical vocalizations, and become increasingly selective for lexicality over age. These results align with findings from US caregivers, suggesting that, even across diverse childrearing contexts, canonicity and lexicality can serve as key cues to children's readiness to be interlocutors.