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Linguistic Saliency of Motherese for Preverbal Infants

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It is well known that when they address their infants, mothers substantially alter the acoustic characteristics of their speech. This presentation will look at the linguistic benefit of this modified speech, motherese, for infants during their first 9 months of lives. For instance, at age of 3 months, when infants experience either conversational turn taking or random responsiveness of their mothers by motherese, the quality of infant vocalizations changes only when they receive turn-taking stimulation. Around this age, non-speechlike vocalizations are uttered as often as speechlike ones. However, motherese stimulation provided contingent upon infant spontaneous vocal utterances increases the proportion of speechlike vocalizations. In another instance, at age of 6 months, in response to maternal speech with various pitch contours, infants come to alter subsequent their own vocal behaviors and are likely to match pitch contours of the sounds with those of the preceding maternal utterances. On the basis of such vocal flexibility, infants develop the skill of signalling different communicative functions to caregivers.