

# **Distinguishing words from jargon: Is there an influence of maternal education?**

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## **Abstract:**

The purpose of this investigation was to examine a set of criteria used to differentiate lexical items from jargon in early development. Furey (2003) conducted an investigation of the simultaneous development of phonological and lexical skills in twenty-three children from socioeconomically diverse families. Ten of the children were from families where mothers had completed “up to 15” years of education and thirteen of the children were from families where mothers had completed “16 plus” years of education. At 12 months of age, differences were observed in the percentage of vocalizations that had been classified as lexical as a function of maternal education. Each additional year of maternal education represented approximately a two percent increase in the proportion of lexical vocalizations that were produced. However, one of the criteria for differentiating words included maternal glossing. As such, it remained possible that this result was a “methodological artifact”. That is, it is possible that children of mothers with higher education levels produced a greater proportion of lexical vocalizations due to the fact that their mothers were more likely to “gloss” their vocalizations as lexical.

Previous researchers have lamented the difficulty in differentiating words from jargon/babble in the course of early lexical development (cf. Vihman & McCune, 1994). A total of six criteria were employed in order to identify lexical vocalizations. A vocalization was identified as a word if any of the following applied: (1) it represented an exact phonetic match of the adult target; (2) it contained “an adjacent consonant vowel or vowel consonant pair from the adult word target” (Huttenlocher, et al., 1991, p. 239); (3) it was glossed as a word; (4) it was treated as meaningful by the mother; (5) it was an imitation or attempted imitation of the mother’s previous vocalization; or (6) context facilitated its identification as a word. The second author, who was blind to the education level of the mothers, listened to each of the lexical vocalizations to determine which of the six criteria were applicable. Although multiple codes were initially assigned to each item, only the lowest code was retained (e.g., if a word was scored as “2, 3, 5”, only the “2” was retained). Given the wide variability in individual performance leading to categories with few items, the codes were subsequently collapsed into three categories: child behaviors (i.e., codes 1, 2, & 5), maternal behaviors (i.e., codes 3 & 4) and context (i.e., code 6). Excluding the context codes, a total of 3,762 lexical items were included in the present analysis.

The results of this analysis are intriguing. At 12 months, 57% and 47% of the lexical items were identified by maternal behaviors for the “up to 15” and “16 plus” groups, respectively. As such, they do not reflect more glossing behavior by the mothers with “16 plus” years of education. Additional results regarding patterns observed at subsequent visits (i.e., 14, 16, & 18 months) as well as developmental trends for both child and maternal behaviors will be presented.

**References:**

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