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How Should Caregivers Speak? The Role of Parentese in Expectations for Caregiver Speech

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Abstract

Parentese, also known as infant-directed speech, incorporates features such as high-pitched tone, longer duration, and exaggerated vowels. While parentese has been shown to support early language learning in some cultures, little is known about what inferences children make about social relationships from its usage. The current study investigates whether adults and children ages 6-9 infer that a speaker using parentese register occupies a caregiver role to the addressee compared to a speaker using standard speech. Participants listen to auditory interactions in vignettes representing different caregiving relationships (e.g., parent-child, owner-pet) and are asked to identify the relationships. Preliminary results suggest that adults expect the usage of parentese register most with pets and owners, and least expect it with sibling relationships. Our work offers insight into the expectations people hold for caregiver speech, broadening our understanding of how we use language to view caregiving relationships as distinct from other social relationships.

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