Robot learns language through 'conversation' with people

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A robot analogous to a child between 6 and 14 months old can develop rudimentary linguistic skills through interaction with a human participant, as reported June 13 in the open access journal *PLoS ONE*.

By engaging in a few minutes of "conversation" with humans, in which the participants were instructed to speak to the robot as if it were a small child, the robot moved from random syllabic babble to producing some salient wordforms, the names of simple shapes and colors. The participants were not researchers involved in the project, and were asked to use their own words, rather than any prescribed lines.

The researchers, led by Caroline Lyon of the University of Hertfordshire, suggest that this work may be useful for understanding language acquisition in humans. "It is known that infants are sensitive to the frequency of sounds in speech, and these experiments show how this sensitivity can be modelled and contribute to the learning of word forms by a robot."

More information: Lyon C, Nehaniv CL, Saunders J (2012) Interactive Language Learning by Robots: The Transition from Babbling to Word Forms. *PLoS ONE* 7(6): e38236. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0038236

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