

Exposure to accents helps children learn words

September 29 2022



Example trial for the matching object “anvil.” The text in the speech bubble was presented auditorily in German. Credit: *Language Learning* (2022). DOI: 10.1111/lang.12520

If elementary school children are accustomed to many regional and foreign accents because they hear them frequently in their linguistic environment, then it is easier for them to learn new words from other children who speak with unfamiliar accents. This is shown by the research results of Assistant Prof. Dr. Adriana Hanulíková and Helena Levy from the German Department at the University of Freiburg.

"In contrast to previous studies, it is not [bilingual children](#) who necessarily perform better in vocabulary acquisition, but children who are exposed to diverse accents most frequently," explains Hanulíková, assistant professor of language and cognition. For their study, the two linguists developed a novel virtual and game-based design. Their findings recently appeared in the journal *Language Learning*.

Card game Spot It! as the foundation

"Until now, there was a lack of studies on the influence of regional and foreign accents on [children's learning](#) of new words," says Hanulíková. To fill this gap, the researchers had 88 Freiburg children aged seven to eleven play a [computer game](#) based on the popular card game Spot It!, which is known as Dobble in Germany.

In the game, two identical objects on different playing cards have to be discovered and named as quickly as possible. For the study, the children played the game on the computer with virtual peers. They spoke either standard German or German with a Swiss or Hebrew [accent](#). The game included six terms that are usually unknown to children of elementary school age.

Regional accents help

All 88 children who participated in the study were German speakers,

some of them bilingual or multilingual. The researchers also asked how often per week each child hears regional and foreign accents. The evaluation of the experiment showed that the children benefited from long-term experience with different accents: children with this experience found it easier to learn unfamiliar words from other children who spoke unfamiliar accents in this virtual game situation.

This effect occurred especially when children heard both regional and foreign accents in their daily life. Whereas experience with [regional accents](#) alone also predicted learning, children who had experience with foreign accents showed, at least in tendency, similar effects. Bilingualism had no corresponding effect.

Experiment resembles natural learning

Further studies are thus needed to investigate in more detail what type of experience in children's vocabulary acquisition leads to which effects—and how these might differ from the learning of new words by adults, says Hanulíková. The study's newly developed, game-based design is a particularly suitable tool for this purpose, she says.

"The children learn from other children while playing, not from adults, the latter being the focus of almost all studies to date. In addition, children are required to say and use these words in interaction, not to just passively recognize them. In this way, the [experimental design](#) resembles natural learning in everyday life," says Hanulíková.

More information: Helena Levy et al, Spot It and Learn It! Word Learning in Virtual Peer-Group Interactions Using a Novel Paradigm for School-Aged Children, *Language Learning* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/lang.12520](https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12520)

Provided by University of Freiburg

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