Recognition of Word Misarticulations by Preschool Children
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Purpose: When listening to spoken language, children need to differentiate words that are known versus new. In the case of known words, learned information needs to be recalled to comprehend what is being said. In the case of new words, the new information needs to be learned. This task is made challenging because spoken language is variable. One type of variability that children encounter is misarticulated speech. The purpose of this study is to examine how preschool children interpret known words, misarticulated words, and new words.

Methods: Typically developing preschool children age 4- to 5-years participated in a recognition task. Children saw a picture of a known object and a novel object while hearing a spoken word. Spoken words included known words (e.g., leaf), misarticulated words (e.g., weaf or yeaf), and new words (e.g., joog). Misarticulated words further varied in whether the misarticulation was commonly produced by young children (e.g., weaf for leaf) versus rarely produced by young children (e.g., yeaf for leaf). The child's picture selection was recorded for each type of stimulus.

Results: For known words, children selected the known object on 88% of trials. In contrast, for misarticulated words, children selected the known object on 35% of trials. Finally, for new words, children selected the known object on 12% of trials. Turning to the type of misarticulation, children chose the known object on 46% of trials when the misarticulation was common; whereas they chose the known object on only 24% of trials when the misarticulation was rare.

Conclusions: Children readily identify known words as known and new words as new. For misarticulated words, children did not clearly identify the misarticulated words. This suggests that they were willing to consider either interpretation and likely needed additional cues to determine the intended interpretation. Their interpretation was influenced by the likelihood of the misarticulation. Specifically, children were more likely to interpret a common misarticulation as a known word than a rare misarticulation.