When ears collide: Mismatch and phonological development

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Phonological development is the process by which children impose discrete categories on continuous speech dynamics, to learn to produce and perceive thousands of words over the first half dozen years of life. While input is crucially important in acquisition, it is not always the case that the linguistic experience and expectations of the speaker providing the input align with the linguistic experience of the language learner. In this talk, I will provide three very different examples of this phenomenon. The first focuses on the acquisition of the "same" L1 phonological contrast across two languages. In this case, differences in order of acquisition of phonemes and error patterns in the two languages can be explained by the differences in adult native-speaker judgments across the languages. The second example focuses on the acquisition of phoneme contrasts by children with cochlear implants. An analysis of error patterns produced by children with cochlear implants reveals an atypical pattern of development that is highly influenced by the spectral degradation of the input provided by the cochlear implant. Finally, the third example focuses on the impact of dialect mismatch on phonological development after literacy acquisition. Children who speak a "non-mainstream" dialect (such as African American English) at home experience dialect mismatch when they go to school where the Academic Classroom dialect is always aligned instead to a "mainstream" dialect. In order to learn to read and to acquire words from text as well as from speech, children who speak a non-mainstream dialect must learn to map from the phonological categories of their home dialect to those of the other dialect. [Work supported by NIH]