

Why don't babies talk like adults?

Kids go from 'goo-goo' to talkative one step at a time

by Joshua Hartshorne

A recent e-trade advertisement shows a baby speaking directly to the camera: 'Look at this,' he says, 'I'm a free man. I go anywhere I want now.' He describes his stock-buying activities, and then his phone rings. This advertisement proves what comedians have known for years: few things are as funny as a baby who talks like an adult. But it also raises an important question: Why don't young children express themselves clearly like adults?

Many people assume children learn to talk by copying what they hear. In other words, they listen to the words adults use and the situations in which they use them and imitate accordingly. Behaviourism, the scientific approach that dominated American cognitive science for the first half of the 20th century, made exactly this argument.

However, this 'copycat' theory can't explain why toddlers aren't as conversational as adults. After all, you never hear literate adults express themselves in one-word sentences like 'bottle' or 'doggie'. In fact, it's easy for scientists to show that a copycat theory of language acquisition can't explain children's first words. What is hard for them to do is to explain these first words, and how they fit into the language acquisition pattern.

Yes / No / Not Given

- 1 People are extremely amused when they see a baby talk like an adult.
- 2 Behaviourists of the early 20th century argued that children learn to speak by copying adults.
- 3 Children have more conversations with adults than with other children.
- 4 Scientists have found it easy to work out why babies use one-word sentences.