# Everyday language input and production in 1001 children from 6 continents

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This manuscript was compiled on January 20, 2023

**Language is a universal human ability, acquired readily by young children, who otherwise struggle with many basics of survival. And yet, language ability is variable across individuals. Naturalistic and experimental observations suggest that children's linguistic skills vary with factors like socioeconomic status, children's gender, and multilingualism. But which factors really influence children's day-to-day language use? Here we leverage speech technology in a big-data approach to report on a unique cross-cultural and diverse data set: >2,500 day-long, child-centered audio-recordings of 1,001 2- to 48-month-olds from 12 countries spanning 6 continents across urban, farmer-forager, and subsistence-farming contexts. As expected, age and language-relevant clinical risks and diagnoses predicted how much speech (and speech-like vocalization) children produced. Critically, so too did adult talk in children's environments: Children who heard less talk from adults produced less speech. In contrast to previous conclusions based on more limited sampling methods and a different set of language proxies, socioeconomic status, child gender, and multilingualism were not significantly associated with children's productions over the first four years of life. These findings from large-scale naturalistic data advance our understanding of what factors are robust predictors of variability in the language behaviors of young learners in a wide range of everyday contexts.**

infancy | human diversity | language | socioeconomic status | speech

All typically-developing children progress from coos to complex sentences within just a few years. This ability is unmatched by other animals(1) and has led to the proposal that our minds develop language just as our bodies develop lungs: Given language input and time, humans are uniquely able to acquire language without explicit instruction(2). On this view, human's species-universal language abilities develop uniformly, with only incidental effects of individual- or group-level variation. And yet, studies using a variety of proxies for language development find some evidence of such variation in early language skills, with differences reported between girls and boys(3), monolingual and multilingual children(4), as well as those raised in socioeconomically privileged compared to disadvantaged households(5, 6). However interesting, these studies tend to rely on Western-centric samples and methods, and may not reflect spontaneous language use in children's daily lives. Moreover, prior work often stops after only considering individual predictors in a binary way (i.e. do they significantly impact language development or not), while failing to ask the more informative question: *how large is their relative impact*(7), especially in freely-occurring, everyday behavior.

Recent work on mice and whales shows the promise of machine learning for examining everyday animal behavior(8, 9). We leverage advances in wearables and state-of-the-art machine-learning-based speech technology to catalyze a similar breakthrough in language development research. Our dataset is comprised of >40,000 hours of audio from >2,500 days in the lives of 1,001 2- to 48-month-olds from 6 continents and diverse cultural contexts (Figure 1). Within this dataset, we investigated key properties of children's spoken language environments to identify consistency and variation in the *amount* of speech or speech-like vocalization young children produce in their everyday life. Critically, these automatically-extractable "quantity" measures correlate robustly with gold-



### Significance Statement

Harnessing a global sample of >40,000 hours of naturally-occurring speech in young children's home environment, we measured contributors to how much speech 0–4yo's produce. Amount of adult talk, age, and normative development were the sole significant predictors; child gender, socioeconomic status, and multilingualism did not explain how often children vocalized, or how much adult talk they heard. These findings, and the automated speech algorithm validation and evaluation that made findings at this scale possible, open up new conversations regarding early language development to the broader public, including parents, clinicians, educators, and policy makers. The factors explaining variance also inform our understanding of humans' unique capacity for learning, and potentially large-scale applications of machine technology to spontaneous human behavior.

EB, MC, and AC developed the initial conceptualization of the project and recruited corpus owners and co-authors. EB, MC, and AC curated the meta-corpus and meta-data and prepared them for analysis. EB and AC prepared materials for and/or led group decision-making. EB, MS, CR, NRE, AG, MC, LB, PvA, and AC contributed to the decision-making on the analytic approach, including selection of exploratory and confirmatory sets, selection of variables, identification of hypotheses and/or specification of models. AC, EB, and AG drafted the preregistrations. AC, EB, and AG designed and implemented the analyses. EB, CR, NRE, LRH, MK, and LB conducted and synthesized literature reviews on key topics related to the decision-making regarding literature review, hypotheses, and analyses. EB, EM, ICS, CR, LRH, MS, NRE, MK, MC, PvA, and AC provided corpus data and meta-data. See acknowledgments for non-author data contributors. EB, AC, and MS contributed to the initial manuscript draft writing. EB, MK, MC, and AC contributed to visualizations. EB, MC, and AC revised and responded to feedback and informal peer-review. MS, CR, LRH, LB, EB, AC, EM, ICS, and PvA contributed to supplementary materials, Open Science Framework project page and/or other documentation. Note: Other than first and last authors, middle authors are listed in reverse alphabetical order.

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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standard “quality” measures of children’s language skills and knowledge, like vocabulary estimates (SI1D) (6).

We query and compare the effects of two types of factors. First, there are factors with undeniable effects on early language production, namely, child age and language-relevant clinical risks and diagnoses. Second, there are factors that are reported to correlate with variability in early language skills: socioeconomic status (SES), gender, language input quantity, and multilingual background. This suite of factors has never been examined collectively; here we analyze its statistical effects within a dataset large and rich enough to consider these factors simultaneously through the lens of spontaneous language children hear or produce. We aim to benchmark the level of stability and variability found in infants’ and caregivers’ spontaneous language use in their daily lives.

**Table 1. Model results predicting child speech. q-values show FDR-corrected p-values.**

| | $\beta$ | SE | q | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.109 | 0.128 | 0.681 | |
| Child Gender(Male) | 0.026 | 0.051 | 0.852 | |
| SES(<H.S.(1)) | 0.001 | 0.111 | 0.991 | |
| SES(H.S.(2)) | -0.033 | 0.115 | 0.932 | |
| SES(B.A.(4)) | -0.064 | 0.079 | 0.681 | |
| SES(>B.A.(5) | -0.002 | 0.09 | 0.991 | |
| Control | -0.085 | 0.029 | 0.035 | * |
| Norm | -0.22 | 0.087 | 0.036 | * |
| Adult Talk | 0.26 | 0.037 | <.001 | * |
| Age | 0.647 | 0.024 | <.001 | * |
| Mono | 0.045 | 0.095 | 0.852 | |
| Norm × Adult Talk | -0.005 | 0.063 | 0.991 | |
| Norm × Age | -0.217 | 0.051 | <.001 | * |
| Adult Talk × Age | 0.125 | 0.022 | <.001 | * |
| Adult Talk × Mono | 0.092 | 0.072 | 0.45 | |
| Mono × Age | -0.048 | 0.056 | 0.681 | |
| Norm × Adult Talk × Age | 0.019 | 0.043 | 0.852 | |
| Mono × Adult Talk × Age | 0.137 | 0.065 | 0.094 | |

*Note.* SES = child SES based on maternal education (<H.S.(1) = less than high school, H.S.(2) = high school, B.A.(4) = college degree, >B.A.(5) = advanced degree); Control = overlap rate control; Adult Talk = adult vocalization count rate. Betas show deviation from the following baseline levels: Child Gender: female; SES: some university(3); Norm: Norm(ative development); Mono: Mono(lingual).

**Measuring Diverse, Real-life Language Use.** Language skills and knowledge are not directly observable. As a result, all studies use a proxy when estimating them in individual children. These proxies have variable validity and predictive power relative to other measures, both concurrently and predictively, and likely vary in the extent to which they reflect children’s everyday language behavior. For instance, parental report measures are indirect and—especially for receptive knowledge—can be difficult for caretakers to estimate(10), even in relatively homogeneous Western-centric contexts.

Here, we adopt a very different approach. We employed the LENA™ system, which captures what children hear and say across an entire day through small wearable recorders(11); this ecologically-valid sampling method reduces observer effects relative to, e.g., shorter video recordings(12). The LENA™ system uses standardized algorithms that estimate who is speaking when, alongside automated counts of adult and child linguistic vocalizations(6) (SI1C:E). The resulting LENA™ measures correlate with and predict other measures of language skills in children with and without clinical risks or diagnoses, as revealed by manual transcription, clinical instruments, and parent questionnaires(13, 14). We use LENA™’s validated, automated estimates to derive our measures of spontaneous language use: adult talk and child speech (SI1C, 3B). We define **child speech** as the quantity of children’s speech-related vocalizations (e.g., protophones(15), babbles, syllables, words, or sentences, but not laughing or crying) per hour, and **adult talk** as the number of near and clear vocalizations per hour attributed to adults (both as detected by LENA™’s algorithm (Methods)). Assuaging concerns that these measures are merely capturing chattiness or repetition, both have a $\geq .7$ correlation with measures of lexical diversity and language “quality”: our child speech measure correlates with vocabulary in an independent sample, and the adult talk measure correlates with the number of word types from manual transcription in a subset of the data (SI1D).

Capitalizing on this standardized and deidentified numeric output, we solicited LENA™ datasets that researchers had previously collected worldwide (Figure 1), resulting in a dataset reflecting the state of current knowledge in ecologically-valid language samples from children’s daily lives (SI3A). The dataset includes children from wide-ranging socioeconomic status (henceforth ‘SES’) backgrounds, based on maternal education levels spanning from no formal education to advanced degrees (SI2B), across urban, farmer-forager, and subsistence-farming contexts, as well as mono- and multilingual children (i.e. those learning >1 language); see Methods.

Crucially, by including children aged 2 to 48 months, we span a wide range of linguistic skills. We also include children with a variety of diagnoses of language delays and deficits, as well as those at high risks for them (Methods & SI2A). Such children’s language development is by definition *non-normative*. Thus, age and non-normative status provide useful yardsticks for considering the significance and effect size of other child- and family-level factors (SES, child gender, mono- vs. multilingual status, and how much adults talk to and around the child). That is, if a factor (e.g., multilingual status) has an effect far smaller than that of age or non-normative development, it would suggest that individual differences within it are relatively limited in their connection to spontaneous language use. If the effects are comparable in size, it would instead suggest that humans’ language learning capacity (as measured by amount of speech produced spontaneously) is undergirded by substantial and structured individual differences, rather than striking uniformity.

**Predicting Children’s Speech Production.** We employed a hypothesis-testing approach: In a two-step preregistration, we first established exploration and confirmation data subsets (SI3A). We then leveraged the held-out confirmation subset to answer our key question (SI3D, 3E): **What factors predict variation in how much speech young children produce?** At stake in these analyses is *whether* systematic differences in children’s lives have measurable links to their language production, and if so, what the *strength* of these

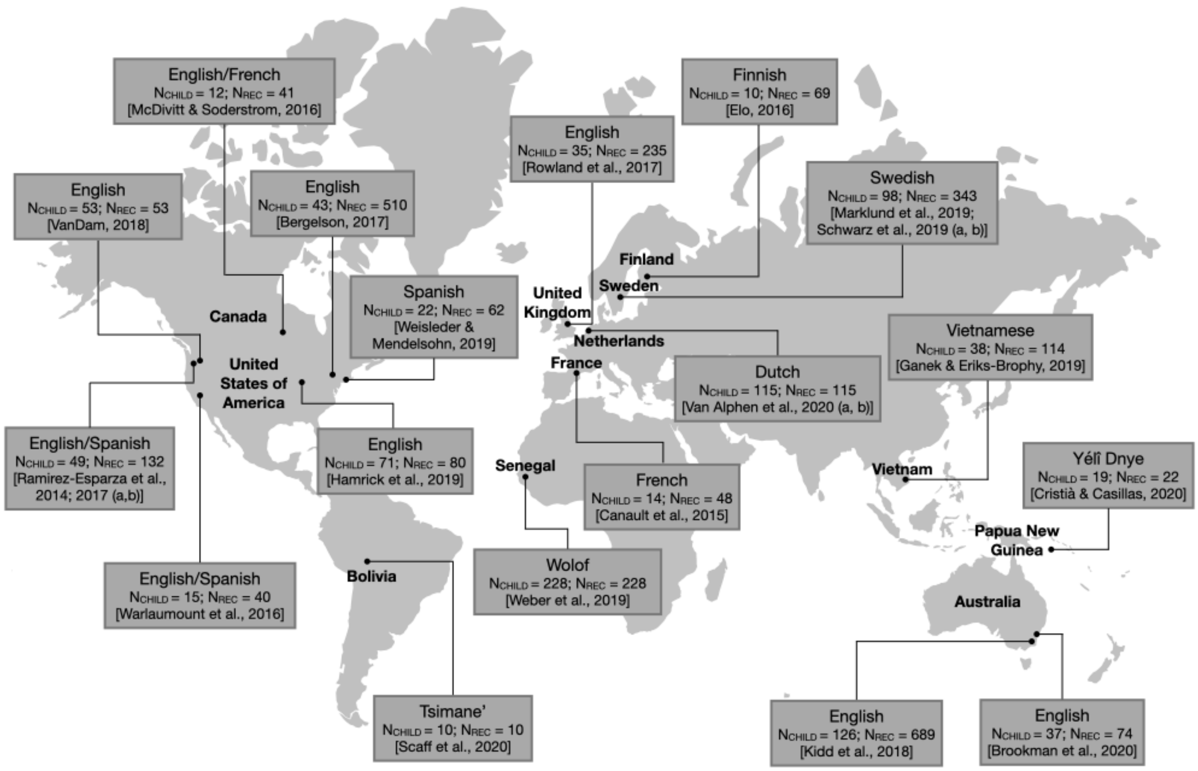


**Fig. 1.** Geographical location, primary language, number of children (Nchild), number of recordings (Nrec) and data citation for each corpus.

relationships is both overall, and in relation to one another.

As expected, we found that older children produced more speech than younger ones (ß=0.65, SE=0.02); and that children with non-normative development produced less speech than children with normative development (ß=-0.22, SE=0.09)*; this effect strengthened with age (ß=-0.22, SE=0.05; Figure 2B, Table 1).

Our results further revealed that young children's speech production correlated with the amount of adult talk they heard (ß=0.26, SE=0.04); this correlation strengthened with age (ß=0.12, SE=0.02). The effect of adult talk is a substantial one. Taking the effects of age and normativity as convenient (but unrelated) gauges for what counts as a considerable effect, we see that the effect size of adult talk is about a third of that for age and similar to that for normativity (adult talk: 0.26; interaction adult talk by age: 0.12; age: 0.65; non-normative development: -0.22; interaction non-normative by age: -0.22; all effect size betas expressed as SDs).

To provide these results in more intuitive units, we fit the same model centering variables without scaling. Children produced 66 more vocalizations per hour with each year of life. For every 100 adult vocalizations per hour, children produced 27 more vocalizations; this effect grew by 16 vocalizations per year. Relative to infants with typical development, those with non-normative development produced 20 fewer vocalizations per hour; this difference grew by 8 vocalizations per year.

Surprisingly, and in contrast to previous results using smaller and less diverse datasets of other language proxies, we found that child gender, SES, and monolingual status did not explain significant variation in child speech. As our raw data figures and model outcome results show, these null effects hold both when considering covariates (as in our model; Table 1) and when considering these variables individually (as in Figure 3; SI3F, 3G, 3H). In our full model controlling for other variables (Table 1), the largest estimate for main effects or interactions involving child gender, SES, and monolingual status was about half of that for normativity, and one-sixth of that for age; none reached thresholds for statistical significance.

While our models are well-powered to estimate associations of child speech with age, normativity, adult talk, gender, SES, and monolingual status, this is predicated upon pooling the data and accounting statistically for corpus- and child-level variance via random effects, as described in Methods. This makes it beyond this paper's scope to analyze language or population/cultural differences in detail, i.e. in a way that might allow the consideration of additional, culture-specific variables (hence their omission in Figs 2–3).

That said, given the possibility that the geographic breadth of our dataset might "wash out" effects that would've been found in a North American sample, we ran our model predicting child speech on the subset of the data from North America (642 daylong recordings from 206 infants in 7 corpora). We essentially replicated the full-sample results: adult talk and age are significant predictors, whereas gender and SES are not. The significant adult talk × age interaction also replicated. The main effect of normativity did not, likely because the age × normative interaction is larger than in the full-sample analysis (see SI3G). We then took out the adult talk variable, to test whether it was absorbing variance that would otherwise be accounted for by SES. This was not the case: Removing the adult talk predictor, SES still does not account for significant

*The normativity estimate is negative because normative development is the baseline.

**Table 2. Model results predicting adult talk (i.e. adult vocalization count rate). q-values show FDR-corrected p-values.**

| | $\beta$ | SE | q |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | -0.1 | 0.16 | 0.778 |
| Child Gender(Male) | 0.174 | 0.148 | 0.547 |
| SES(<H.S.(1)) | 0.239 | 0.173 | 0.547 |
| SES(H.S.(2)) | -0.015 | 0.194 | 0.939 |
| SES(B.A.(4)) | 0.148 | 0.131 | 0.547 |
| SES(>B.A.(5) | 0.098 | 0.15 | 0.778 |
| Control | 0.084 | 0.055 | 0.547 |
| Norm | 0.013 | 0.103 | 0.939 |
| Age | -0.03 | 0.029 | 0.547 |
| Mono | -0.028 | 0.112 | 0.939 |
| Gender(Male) × SES(<H.S.(1)) | -0.375 | 0.196 | 0.547 |
| Gender(Male) × SES(H.S.(2)) | -0.263 | 0.252 | 0.547 |
| Gender(Male) × SES(B.A.(4)) | -0.22 | 0.176 | 0.547 |
| Gender(Male) × SES(>B.A.(5)) | 0.016 | 0.201 | 0.939 |
| Norm × Age | -0.076 | 0.06 | 0.547 |
| Mono × Age | 0.035 | 0.068 | 0.804 |

*Note.* None of the variables in our model predicted adult talk. All abbreviations and baselines as in Table 1.

variance in child speech in our analysis.

Another potential concern is that our conclusions hinge on the use of LENA™'s particular algorithm; they do not. The findings above successfully replicate in the subset of data for which audio was available (11/18 corpora), which was analyzed with a wholly different algorithmic approach, the Voice Type Classifier or VTC (Methods; SI3F).[†]

Finally, we also ran a model predicting adult talk (rather than child speech). The amount of adult talk was not significantly predicted by SES, child age, gender, monolingual or normative status (Table 2, Figure 3E:H; SI3G:H)[‡]. Thus, the relationship we find between adult talk and child speech in the child speech models is not attributable to child- or family-level factors affecting adult talk.

**Speech and Other Early Vocal Behavior.** While our central query concerned variability within early speech production, we conducted a further descriptive analysis examining how much of children's vocalizations were speech or speech-like, as opposed to the two other classes of LENA™-identified vocalizations: crying and vegetative sounds (e.g. burps, hiccups). We examined these vocalization types as a function of age, monolingual status, and normative status. As Figure 2C shows, for children with normative development, the proportion of vocalizations that were speech increased from just over half to the vast majority over 2–48 months. In contrast, the crying proportion fell steeply over the same period, from nearly half of vocalizations to a small fraction of them; the proportion of vegetative sounds was low and constant. Convergent with our speech analyses, monolingual status did not alter these patterns but normative status did: While the same overall patterns held for children with non-normative development, their decrease in crying and increase in speech production with age was less steep (see Figure 2C).

As with more narrowly-defined non-normative populations (e.g. children with Autism (16)), we find clear divergences in language trajectories in our normative vs. non-normative samples. This is notable because (a) our non-normative sample is heterogeneous (SI2A) and (b) as 2–48-month-olds, many children with non-normative classifications here were at risk of (but not yet diagnosed with) language delays or deficits. Automated speech analyses in naturalistic recordings thus hold promise for future research into early diagnostics(17, 18).

**Adult Talk and Spontaneous Child Speech.** Children who heard more adult talk produced dramatically higher rates of spontaneous speech, and this effect increased with age. This result feeds into ongoing theoretical debates regarding the relevance of individual differences(19). Although we cannot infer causality from our correlational data, it is useful to consider possible causal paths that could in principle have led to our results. A correlation between child speech and adult talk is compatible with at least three explanations: (1) Children who produce more speech *elicit* more talk from adults; (2) Language-dense environments *lead* children to produce more speech; or (3) A third variable causes increases in both adult talk and child speech.[§]

Explanation 1 is ruled out by our model predicting adult talk (see Table 2). More specifically, older (vs. younger) children and children with normative (vs. non-normative) development produced more speech, yet we did not find that these variables affected adult talk (Figure 3G). Put otherwise, if children talking more elicited more talk from adults, then we would have expected to see that age and normative status were significant predictors of adult talk. Instead we find that neither these (nor any other variables in our model) predicted the quantity of adult talk.

Explanations 2 and 3 remain plausible, and may be jointly true. Explanation 2 suggests that children's rates of speech production may be promoted by increasing caregiver talk around them, assuming caregiver talk is a viable intervention target(20). However, establishing such a causal chain will require careful consideration of a variety of proximal and ultimate pathways through which child and adult behaviors are shaped. As one example, given that most children here are genetically related to their adult caregivers, we may be observing *covariance* in amount of talk and its linguistic correlates (Explanation 3). Evaluating these alternatives requires evidence from children raised by unrelated caregivers or from genome-wide association studies, as genetic and environmental factors remain challenging to disentangle (21). In this vein, recent work with adopted 15–73-month-olds provides evidence for input effects (maternal utterance length and/or lexical diversity) on adopted children's vocabulary size (measured via caretaker checklist)(22). This work suggests that shared genetics is not the sole contributor to links between (at least these proxies for) caretaker input and child language outcomes. Moreover, shared genetics is just one of the ways in which adult and child behavior may be independently shaped by an unmeasured confounded variable (as per Explanation 3). These explanations can only be definitively teased apart by future work.

**New Insight on Child and Family Factors.** Our main models, figures showing the raw data, and additional analyses (in

[†] VTC too has been robustly validated relative to various gold standard manual measures (SI1E)

[‡] These null results replicated in the North American subset; SI3G

[§] The correlation between child speech and adult talk does not emerge due to differences in activities across recordings; SI4.

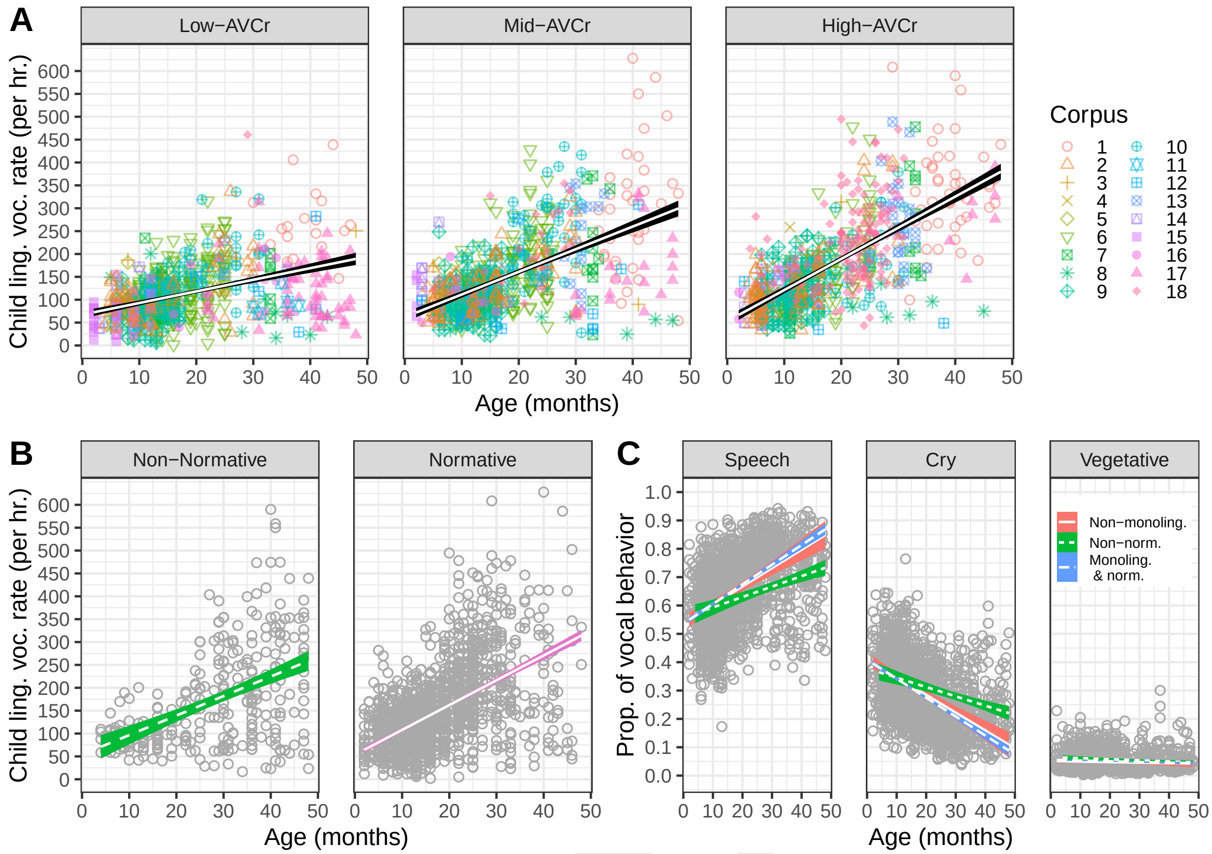


**Fig. 2. Effects of adult talk, child age, and normative development on children's spontaneous speech production**. Points show each daylong recording; lines show linear regression with 95% Confidence Intervals (CI). Child speech is quantified as child linguistic vocalization rate; adult talk as adult vocalization count rate (AVCr). **A**: Child speech by age, split by low/mid/high tertiles of adult talk. Lines depict significant adult talk × age interaction. Color-shape combinations show each unique corpus, numbered to preserve anonymity. **B**: Child speech by age and normative status. Lines depict significant age × normative status interaction. **C**: Proportion of vocal behavior classified as speech, cry, or vegetative, by age. Line type/color indicate monolingual and normative statuses. N.B. Monolingual normative CI (blue) falls fully within that for multilingual children (pink) for all 3 types of vocal behavior, highlighting these groups' equivalent patterns.

the North American subset of the data, as well as using an alternative algorithm) reveal effects of normativity, age, and adult talk but not SES, child gender, or monolingualism. To illustrate the complexities involved in determining causal links between child and family factors and child language skills, we again consider how causal links might manifest, using SES as a central example.

Our findings bear on debates regarding SES-associated academic achievement differences in Western industrialized societies(23, 24). Slower language development has often been attributed to parents from lower-SES backgrounds providing less input to their children (viewed from a middle-class Western-centric perspective(24)), leading to calls for behavioral interventions aiming to increase it. Proponents of such interventions might highlight our correlation between adult talk and child speech; critics might instead underscore our consistently null SES effect (SI3E, 3F, 3G).

A full understanding of how SES may relate to children's language input is complicated for empirical and conceptual reasons, leaving strong conclusions premature. On the empirical side, two recent meta-analyses have investigated SES–input correlations, one focused on LENA™ measures(25), and the other based on human-annotated measures (mostly from short lab recordings) (26). The former finds evidence consistent with a publication bias; correcting this bias statistically nearly halves the association between SES and LENA™'s adult talk measure (r= .19 versus .12). The latter finds a sizeable SES effect when inspecting infant-directed speech (r = .34) and a much smaller one when analyzing overall input quantities (r = .09). Together, these studies suggest that our best estimate of the association between overall input quantities and SES is small (r = .1) and may not be detectable even with a sample as large as ours (where the effect was estimated at $|d| = .06$, or $|r| = .03$, which did not reach the threshold for significance).

On the conceptual side, the effects of input quantity differences may depend on how language skills are measured (27). We speculate that SES effects on language are smaller for naturalistic interactions than for other aspects of language learning, like growing a large vocabulary and parsing complex constructions more common in written text. The latter are likely boosted by parenting practices stereotypical in many Western, higher SES families (e.g., book reading), which in turn may disproportionately influence academic achievement (28). Incidentally, a strength of daylong recordings is that they provide a relatively neutral, rather than Western, high SES-centric measure, as they tap how much children are contributing (via speech) to their community's conversational interactions, not how many rare words and complex constructions they've been taught.

In our view, causal links between parental behavior and chil-

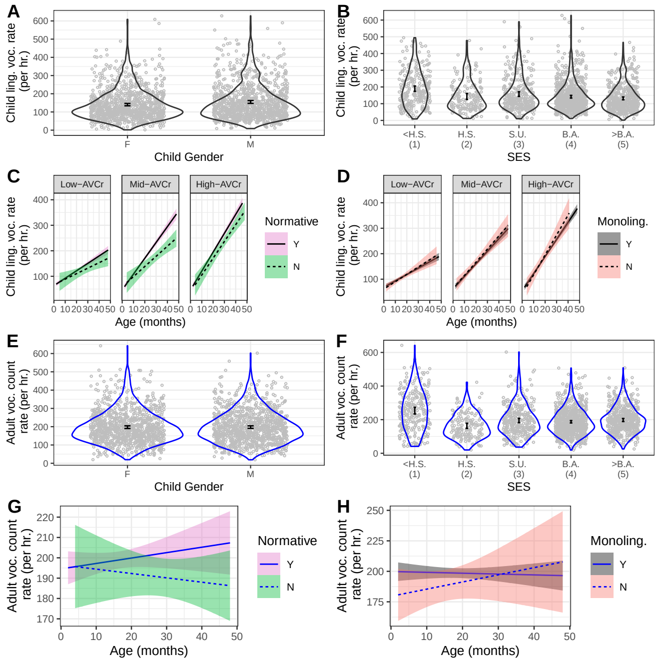


**Fig. 3. Factors that do not predict child speech or adult talk.** Points = individual recordings, jittered horizontally. Lines = linear fit with 95% Confidence Intervals. Error bars = 99% bootstrapped CIs of sample means. Child speech is quantified as child linguistic vocalization rate; adult talk as adult vocalization count rate (AVCr). **A & B**: null effects of child gender(**A**) and socioeconomic status (SES)(**B**) on child speech. **C**: null 3-way effect of normative development × adult talk × age (N.B.: normative × age and adult talk × age are significant; see Fig. 2). **D**: null 3-way effect of age × adult talk × monolingual status. **E** and **F**: null effects of child gender(**E**) and SES(**F**) on adult talk. **G & H**: null effect of normative development(**G**) and monolingual status(**H**) on adult talk. .

dren's outcomes can best be illuminated by randomized control trials. Discovering and leveraging such links to change long-term language outcomes depends on community partnership-based approaches that are informed by the role that structural inequalities play in these outcomes and engage with culturally informed perspectives(29).

Finally, while multilingualism is globally prevalent, its influences on learning and development remain fiercely debated(30), as it is unclear how to measure input and outcomes fairly(31) in a heterogeneous population(32). Here we considered children's language environment and output collapsed across the multiple languages present in their environment. Our results are unambiguous: both within the raw data (Figure 3), and in our models controlling for other covariates (Tables 1, 2), adult talk and children's spontaneous speech did not vary significantly as a function of whether children were monolingual or multilingual. However, it is likely that the answer to whether multilingualism (or for that matter, gender) affects children's language skills is as complicated as the SES link just discussed, with progress awaiting further work.

**Automated Tools and What they Count.** A key benefit of our approach is that we were able to pool and identically process 40,933 hours of independently-collected data (SI3A). Moreover, unlike parental surveys, clinical assessments, lab instruments, or hand-annotated data, current published evidence suggests that the LENA™ algorithm's results do not vary systematically by language (though they do vary somewhat across samples) (13). More relevant here, in analyzing the algorithm's accuracy as a function of samples grouped by language and cultural features, we found no significant differences (Methods, SI1E).

While children's language skills grow dramatically over 2–48 months, our measure of linguistic behavior focuses exclusively on children's rate of linguistic vocalizations (SI3B). These results certainly do not deny effects found on proxies of more narrow-scoped linguistic developments (e.g. vocabulary, processing efficiency, or syntactic complexity), given that some predictors that fail to explain variance here may nonetheless be significant there (5, 33).

The same holds for our measure of adult talk, which is quantitative and holistic; additional research is needed to distinguish child-*directed* from child-*available* speech, with the latter including both child-directed and child-overheard speech. Although some research suggests child-directed speech shows tighter correlations with children's vocabulary than child-overheard or child-available speech do(34, 35), the importance of the latter has not been as fully studied for other types of language knowledge(36); and, as far as we know, this paper is the first to document a significant link for spontaneous, everyday child speech behavior. Therefore, it would be relevant to further investigate the strength of the predictive value of overall adult talk (which was a significant predictor here) versus child-directed talk, in a similarly large and diverse sample as the present one. Unfortunately, automated tools for separating child-directed from overheard speech are not yet sufficiently accurate to make this possible (37).

Whatever measures are employed in the future as proxies of child language production and input, we strongly encourage researchers to consider psychometric properties and ecological validity. The current approach demonstrates measure validity that is comparable to that of other standard infant instruments (SI1D:E). As context, measures used as proxies for infant language and cognitive knowledge are inherently noisier than the best batteries used to assess highly educated adults in Western-centric settings. Notably, even there, reliabilities can fall well below r = 1.¶

Moreover, standardized tests face ecological validity threats, particularly when applied cross-culturally. If our goal is to measure and understand the human mind, we need implementable, culturally sensitive and appropriate ways of measuring human behavior on a large scale. To our knowledge, there are no such measures whose reliability has been examined, driving us to conduct extensive quantification of the reliability of our metrics (SI1D:E). We found that our measures show levels of reliability that are consistent with those already in use for research and clinical purposes in infant populations. For example, the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventory (a parental report instrument used largely as a vocabulary proxy) has been the basis for cross-linguistic, demographic, and clinical research(10, 39–41), and reports a median correlation between itself and laboratory measures of .61(42). Our median accuracy comparing automated and manual annotation for each of our algorithms (LENA™ and VTC) is .74, squarely in line with field standards (SI1E). Indeed, converging evidence across these two wholly separate algorithms regarding overall accuracy of our measure serves to increase confidence in the validity of our results.

¶ For instance, prior work finds test-retest reliabilities as low as r = .6 for certain sections of the widely used Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale among North American English-speaking adults(38).

In sum, rather than eliciting knowledge or caregiver-child interaction in a constrained, potentially biased lab setting, or using checklists in contexts where they make little sense socio-culturally, we measure everyday language use *en masse*. Our measure of early speech production is global, since we simply measure more versus less speech or speech-like production on the part of adults and children as they go about their daily life. And yet, these measures have comparable reliability to other measures of language development commonly used in both research and applied settings (Methods, SI1D:E). Recent work also highlights correlations between the "quantitative" measures we employed and finer-grained, "qualitative" measures of language development, indicating validity with respect to these other measures as well(14)(SI1D). Most importantly, our speech measure merits consideration as one of many possible proxies of language development thanks to its cross-cultural adaptability, observer-free sampling volume, and sheer ecological validity. Indeed, our results raise the possibility that more ecologically-valid lexical, phonetic, or grammatical measures will also reveal stability across factors like SES(43), gender, and multilingualism. Exploring these factors, however, awaits machine-learning developments that can extract such fine-grained linguistic measures from the raw audio collected with child-worn devices.

**Conclusion.** Our analysis of daily life from around the world evinces scientific progress on two fronts. First, by revealing substantial variation in young children's speech, we provide evidence against a monolithic picture of language development. Instead, this work reveals individual variation as *fundamental* to our understanding of this species-wide ability. Second, by tapping into natural speech interactions at unprecedented scale and diversity, we are able to move beyond prior work by simultaneously considering the interlocking factors that affect speech production over early development. Our results reveal not only the expected correlations with age and clinical factors, but also substantial associations with adult talk. All other factors paled in comparison with these three, our null SES effect being of particular noteworthiness. These findings open exciting avenues for both theoretical research and potential applications, including the prospect of behavioral interventions to harness adult talk in the context of speech and language diagnoses. Small-scale experimental and observational research has been fundamental to our understanding of language, development, and the human mind. Machine learning (like that in speech technology) promises to extend our scientific reach by exploding the range of spontaneous interactions we are able to capture and analyze. Just as recent technological innovations have opened new vistas in understanding the vocalizations of mice and whales (8, 9), so too does speech technology have the potential to reveal how everyday human communication gives rise to language learning in children around the world.

## Methods

All code used to generate our analysis and the manuscript is available at https://osf.io/9v2m5/?view_only=50df17fcf0844145ae692c35b78c6b08.

***Data Discovery and Integration.*** We took steps to counter a prevalent bias for normative American data (SI3A). Included data were independently collected by 18 stewards (44–65). We note that while our corpora covered a much greater variety of participants than prior work, it would not be appropriate to interpret our samples as comprehensively representative of the country or language community from which they are drawn.

Socioeconomic status and normative development were streamlined for cross-corpus consistency (SI2A, 2B, SI3A, Figure S3A.1). For socioeconomic status we use maternal education, a reliable proxy for SES in previous research on language development(66, 67). Maternal education was available across all datasets, and could be converted into a 5-point maternal education scale with levels corresponding to less than high school degree, high school degree or equivalent, some college/vocational/associate degree level training, university/college degree, and advanced degree (SI2B; Table S2B.1).

For non-normative development, data stewards had tagged a wide variety of infant or familial characteristics as potentially non-normative. We confirmed that the classification was backed up by extant literature (SI2A). Infants ultimately classified as having non-normative development in the present sample include those who met one or more of the following criteria: preterm birth (<37 weeks); diagnosed speech or language delay; global developmental delay; low birth weight (<2500g when specified); hearing loss, hearing aids or cochlear implants; familial risk of Autism Spectrum Disorder, specific language impairment and/or dyslexia; other relevant genetic syndromes. Notably, our child vocalization rate measure is not a standardized normed clinical evaluation, and thus non-normative status may not necessarily translate to behavior that falls >1 standard deviations below the norm in these naturalistic recordings.

***Analysis Details.*** We first randomly partitioned the data within each corpus such that 35% of monolingual, normative children were placed in an exploration set (N children = 264; N recordings = 850), and all others in a confirmation set (N children = 737; N recordings = 2025) (SI3A). The exploration set was used to study the psychometric properties of potential language input and output variables (SI3B), resulting in the selection of the output variable referred to as **child speech** above, and CVCr (Child Vocalization Count rate) in analysis and supplementary files (SI3B, Table S3B.1); and the input variable referred to as **adult talk** above, and AVCr (Adult Vocalization Count rate) in analysis and supplementary files (SI3B, Table S3B.2). Note that this includes both child-directed and child-available speech.

In addition, we used the exploration set to check the robustness of results to variation in random effect structure, and explored diverse model structures using mixed models in R's lme4 package(68), checking whether the addition of effects or interactions explained additional variance (SI3C). This led us to (a) include overlap rate as a covariate (see Figure S3C.1), to control for the fact that in noisy environments, more child speech and adult talk within the same recordings may be labeled as "overlap" by LENA (and thus not attributed to either speaker type) and (b) to not include random slopes for any of the predictors (notably including gender and SES; see SI3H for additional checks).

***Evaluation against human annotations.*** To assess these measures' validity, we evaluated them against human annotations (see SI1D:E for further information). The median correlation of human to algorithm performance for the algorithms is >.7, i.e. comparable reliability to established developmental clinical and research instruments(69–71). As far as we know, the present multi-cultural validation exceeds those from prior research instruments. For example, the Ages and Stages Questionnaire(72) is a standard instrument used at well-child visits in the U.S. It is also recommended by the World Bank as one of the most popular tools to measure child development, used in at least 20 countries(73). And yet, a recent systematic review(71) reports only 6 reliability analyses (averaging, e.g. .7 for internal consistency at 24mo.). Relative to this, our validation effort containing estimates for 14/18 corpora and finding strong validity is notable. Finally, one may wonder whether the LENA™ algorithm performs less well for languages and cultures that diverge from its training set, which was English-learning children growing up in an urban/suburban U.S. setting. Although we observe considerable corpus variation, this variation is not attributable to whether children were learning English or growing up in an urban setting, as assessed by Welch's t-tests, for either our child speech measure (CVCr; English versus non-English medians 0.785 vs. 0.71, $t(6.04)$ = -0.5, $p = 0.637$; urban versus rural medians 0.77 vs. 0.71, $t(8.11)$ = -0.46, $p = 0.661$), or for our adult talk measure (AVCr; English versus non-English medians 0.75 vs. 0.74, $t(7.91) = 0.42$, $p = 0.686$; urban versus rural medians 0.75 vs. 0.74, $t(3.07)$ = -0.23, $p = 0.835$). Instead, our results suggest that corpus variation more likely reflects how the human annotation was done rather than how well the algorithm worked, since the corpora with lower reliabilities were also those in which the human annotation was more coarse-grained (see SI1E).

***Additional algorithm.*** To make sure that key conclusions were robust to methodological details, we reanalyzed the subset of the data for which audio recordings could be retrieved with a newer, open-source alternative to LENA™: the Voice Type Classifier (VTC)(74). Like the LENA™ algorithm, VTC returns an estimation of child and adult vocalization counts. A total of 1065 audio files from 11 corpora were available for this reanalysis (SI3F).

The VTC algorithm employs a completely different approach than the proprietary algorithm developed by LENA™, including the use of neural networks running directly from the audio (rather than from MFCC features). VTC allows multiple talker classes to be activated at the same time, whereas in the LENA™ algorithm overlap between talkers (or between a talker and noise) is tagged as "Overlap," which is not counted towards children's input or output. VTC also differs from LENA™ in its training set. While LENA™ was trained entirely on data from North American, monolingual English-learning, urban children, VTC was developed using the combination of various corpora of children residing in urban or rural settings and learning one or more of several languages (including the tonal language Minn, French, Ju|'hoan, Tsimane,' English, and several others, in rough order of quantity of data). Further information on accuracy is provided in SI1E; both algorithms render similar accuracy when compared to human annotation as noted above.

***Models.*** We used linear mixed regressions (Gaussian family), and established model structure from the exploration data (SI3C). Hypotheses were derived from exploratory models and systematic reviews of literature on monolingualism and normativity (SI3D). The model predicting the rate of children's linguistic vocalizations (i.e. child speech) was: $child\_gender + SES + child\_normative * AVCr * age + child\_monolingual * AVCr * age + overlap + (1 + overlap + AVCr|corpus) + (1|corpus : child\_id)$. The model predicting the rate of adult linguistic vocalizations (i.e. adult talk) was: $child\_gender + SES + child\_normative * age + child\_monolingual * age + overlap + (1 + overlap|corpus) + (1|corpus : child\_id)$. Full model details and a link to model diagnostics are provided in SI3E. We report estimates (standardized, which serve as effect sizes), standard errors of the estimates, and q-values (FDR-corrected p-values); see Tables 1 and 2.

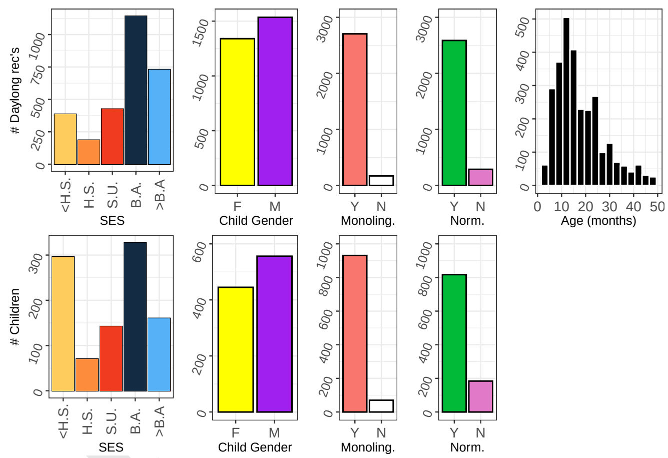


**Fig. 4. Sample demographics**. Number of daylong recordings (top row) and children (bottom row) in the full dataset across demographic variables. For socioeconomic status (SES), <H.S. = less than high school degree, H.S. = high school degree, S.U. = some university, B.A. = bachelor's degree, >B.A. = advanced degree. For child gender, F = female, M = male. For monolingual status (monoling.), Y = monolingual, N = not monolingual. For normative development (norm.), Y = normative, N = non-normative.

***Participants.*** Table 3 lists participant characteristics noting both (1) the exploration/confirmation split (SI3A), and (2) that some children provided multiple recordings. We excluded 2/850 recordings from 1/264 children from the exploration set and 8/2025 recordings from 5/737 children in the confirmation set from our models because data regarding their maternal education was missing. For **child gender**, there were slightly more boys than girls. This was in part because corpora with children with non-normative development also include children with normative development matched in gender, leading to an over-representation of boys since more boys than girls have non-normative development. See Table 3 and Figure 4 for specific numbers and visualized distributions.

***Language Background.*** The languages represented in these data covered many languages and language families. Using classifications from Glottolog(75), we report that our 18 corpora feature 10 primary languages (Dutch, English, Finnish, French, Spanish, Swedish, Tsimane', Vietnamese, Wolof, Yélî Dnye) from 5 distinct language families and one isolate (Atlantic-Congo, Austroasiatic, Indo-European, Mosetén-Chimané, Uralic, Yélî-isolate); see Figure 1. Based on corpus metadata provided by each data steward, the recorded children were also exposed to an additional 33 languages (Arabic, ASL, Berber, Cantonese, Croatian, Danish, Farsi, Frisian, German, Greek, Hindi, Hungarian, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Macedonian, Malay, Malayalam, Mandarin, Norwegian, Papiamento,

**Table 3. Number of children and recordings by demographic variables, split by exploration and confirmation subsets.**

| | | Exploration Subset | | Confirmation Subset | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variables | Levels | Children | Recs. | Children | Recs. |
| Gender | Boys | 156 | 516 | 398 | 1016 |
| | Girls | 107 | 332 | 334 | 1001 |
| Normativity | Normative | 263 | 848 | 550 | 1731 |
| | Non-normative | 0 | 0 | 182 | 286 |
| Lingualism | Monolingual | 263 | 848 | 662 | 1847 |
| | Multilingual | 0 | 0 | 70 | 170 |
| SES | <H.S. (1) | 94 | 120 | 202 | 265 |
| | H.S. (2) | 10 | 26 | 60 | 159 |
| | S.U. (3) | 27 | 116 | 115 | 309 |
| | B.A. (4) | 86 | 355 | 241 | 786 |
| | >B.A. (5) | 46 | 231 | 114 | 498 |
| Total N | | 263 | 848 | 732 | 2017 |

*Note.* Children = # of children; Recs. = # of daylong recordings. In SES, <H.S. = children whose mothers have (the equivalent of) less than a high school degree; H.S. = high school degree; S.U. = some university; B.A. = bachelor's degree; >B.A. = more than a bachelor's degree. Multilingual children, children with non-normative development, and 65% of all other children were reserved for the confirmation subset. N.B. the 6 children with missing data for maternal education are omitted from this table.

Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Sahaptin, Slovenian, Solomon-Islands Pidgin, Thai, Turkish, Yoruba), which add 11 further language families (Afro-Asiatic, Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Deaf Sign Languages—LSFic, Dravidian, Japonic, Koreanic, Sahaptian, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, Turkic) and bolster data from three families already represented by the primary languages (Atlantic-Congo, Indo-European, and Uralic).

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.** We thank Adriana Weisleder, Ann Weber, Camila Scaff, Karmen McDivitt, Evan Kidd, Bridgette Kelleher, Hillary Ganek, Anne Fernald, Hanna Elo, Samantha Durrant, Yatma Diop, John Bunce, and Sarp Uner for organizing and/or sharing their data with us. The authors acknowledge the following funding sources: ANR-17-CE28-0007 LangAge, ANR-16-DATA-0004 ACLEW, ANR-14-CE30-0003 MechELex, ANR-17-EURE-0017 (AC); J. S. McDonnell Foundation (AC); NEH HJ-253479-17 (EB); NIH DP5-OD019812 (EB); NSF BCS-1844710 (EB), NSF SBE-0354453 (NRE); ESRC ES/L008955/1 (CR); SSHRC 435-2015-0628, 869-2016-0003 (MS); NSERC 501769-2016-RGPDD (MS); Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research 275-89-033 (MC); NIMH K23MH111955; NIDCDD F31DC018219 (LH); MAW 2011.0070 (ICS, EM); MAW 2013.0056 (ICS, EM); Marie Sklodowska-Curie Individual Fellowships European Program 798908 (MK); ARC CE140100041 (Evan Kidd).


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