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CONTEXTUAL VARIABILITY AND INFANTS' PERCEPTION OF TONAL CATEGORIES

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This paper reviews some of the major findings in infants' perception of phonetic categories, including consonants, vowels and lexical tones. We discuss empirical evidence suggesting a development from language general to language specific perception of phonetic categories. We focus on the problem of variability, especially the type of variability resulting from phonetic contexts. We then present results demonstrating that the ability to filter out contextual variability is a gradual learning process, unlike certain other perceptual abilities that are available at the initial state. The findings of this study will be discussed in the context of the mechanisms of early language development.

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