How do Moms Know How to Modify their Speech for Infants?
Language specific ways of Infant-Directed Speech in Japanese

It has long been known that when adults speak to infants and young children, they modify their speech, using higher pitch, exaggerated intonation, and shorter, slower phasing. Infants prefer to listen to such modified speech, sometimes called Infant Directed Speech (IDS). Although many IDS characteristics are assumed to be universal, and it is often argued that the IDS characteristics play facilitative role for language acquisition, it is still not well understood how adults would know how to modify their speech when talking to infants, and whether or not the IDS actually help infants’ language acquisition.

To investigate this, it is useful to understand how the language-specific properties of a given language manifest itself in IDS. In this talk, we present results from an on-going project at The Laboratory for Language Development at RIKEN BSI to examine the role of infant-directed speech in Japanese, combining three types of methods: 1) detailed analysis of Japanese IDS speech including segmental, lexical, and intonational phrasing; 2) infants’ responsiveness to IDS in their own languages and those of foreign languages; and 3) an fMRI study of IDS to examine the role of IDS to mothers. Results from these studies show that although the overall properties of IDS may be universal -- e.g., “exaggerated prosody” -- the specific ways to achieve it may differ from language to language, and infants and mothers are tuned in to the specific cues of IDS in their own language. Three distinct ways IDS may be modified from ADS, and their roles in language acquisition are discussed.
Short Bio

Reiko Mazuka
Laboratory for Language Development &
Department of Psychology & Neuroscience, Duke University

Dr. Mazuka received her MA in Psychology from Nagoya University, MSc in Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh, and a PhD in developmental psychology from Cornell University. Before joining RIKEN BSI, she was a faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University. Her research interest is in psycholinguistics and language acquisition, with specific interests on the consequences of learning systematically different languages, e.g., Japanese vs. Japanese, on linguistic and cognitive domains. At Riken BSI, the focus of the research is the acquisition of Japanese prosody, which is almost unique among worlds’ languages. In particular, the development of mora-timed rhythm and its related phonological phenomena are studied using behavioral as well as electrophysiological and imaging techniques.