



# Early phonetic learning without phonetic categories: Insights from large-scale simulations on realistic input

Thomas Schatz<sup>a,b,1</sup>, Naomi H. Feldman<sup>a,b</sup>, Sharon Goldwater<sup>c</sup>, Xuan-Nga Cao<sup>d</sup>, and Emmanuel Dupoux<sup>d,e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Linguistics, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; <sup>b</sup>University of Maryland Institute for Advanced Computer Studies, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; <sup>c</sup>School of Informatics, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9AB, United Kingdom; <sup>d</sup>Cognitive Machine Learning, École Normale Supérieure–École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales–Paris Sciences et Lettres Research University–CNRS–Institut National de Recherche en Informatique et en Automatique, 75012 Paris, France; and <sup>e</sup>Facebook A.I. Research, 75002 Paris, France

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Before they even speak, infants become attuned to the sounds of the language(s) they hear, processing native phonetic contrasts more easily than nonnative ones. For example, between 6 to 8 mo and 10 to 12 mo, infants learning American English get better at distinguishing English [ɹ] and [l], as in “rock” vs. “lock,” relative to infants learning Japanese. Influential accounts of this early phonetic learning phenomenon initially proposed that infants group sounds into native vowel- and consonant-like phonetic categories—like [ɹ] and [l] in English—through a statistical clustering mechanism dubbed “distributional learning.” The feasibility of this mechanism for learning phonetic categories has been challenged, however. Here, we demonstrate that a distributional learning algorithm operating on naturalistic speech can predict early phonetic learning, as observed in Japanese and American English infants, suggesting that infants might learn through distributional learning after all. We further show, however, that, contrary to the original distributional learning proposal, our model learns units too brief and too fine-grained acoustically to correspond to phonetic categories. This challenges the influential idea that what infants learn are phonetic categories. More broadly, our work introduces a mechanism-driven approach to the study of early phonetic learning, together with a quantitative modeling framework that can handle realistic input. This allows accounts of early phonetic learning to be linked to concrete, systematic predictions regarding infants’ attunement.

phonetic learning | language acquisition | computational modeling

Adults have difficulties perceiving consonants and vowels of foreign languages accurately (1). For example, native Japanese listeners often confuse American English [ɹ] and [l] (as in “rock” vs. “lock”) (2, 3), and native American English listeners often confuse French [u] and [y] (as in “roue,” *wheel*, vs. “rue,” *street*) (4). This phenomenon is pervasive (5) and persistent: Even extensive, dedicated training can fail to eradicate these difficulties (6–8). The main proposed explanations for this effect revolve around the idea that adult speech perception involves a “native filter”: an automatic, involuntary, and not very plastic mapping of each incoming sound, foreign or not, onto native phonetic categories—i.e., the vowels and consonants of the native language (9–13). American English [ɹ] and [l], for example, would be confused by Japanese listeners because their productions can be seen as possible realizations of the same Japanese consonant, giving rise to similar percepts after passing through the “native Japanese filter.”

Surprisingly, these patterns of perceptual confusion arise very early during language acquisition. Infants learning American English distinguish [ɹ] and [l] more easily than infants learning Japanese before they even utter their first word (14). Dozens of other instances of such early phonetic learning have been documented, whereby cross-linguistic confusion patterns matching those of adults emerge during the first year of life (15–17). These observations naturally led to the assumption that the same mechanism thought to be responsible for adults’ perception might

be at work in infants—i.e., foreign sounds are being mapped onto native phonetic categories. This assumption—which we will refer to as the *phonetic category hypothesis*—is at the core of the most influential theoretical accounts of early phonetic learning (9, 18–21).

The notion of *phonetic category* plays an important role throughout the paper, and so requires further definition. It has been used in the literature exclusively to refer to vowel- or consonant-like units. What that means varies to some extent between authors, but there are at least two constant, defining characteristics (22). First, phonetic categories have the characteristic size/duration of a vowel or consonant, i.e., the size of a *phoneme*, the “smallest distinctive unit within the structure of a given language” (1, 23). This can be contrasted with larger units like syllables or words and smaller units like speech segments corresponding to a single period of vocal fold vibration in a vowel. Second, phonetic categories—although they may be less abstract than phonemes\*—retain a degree of abstractness and never refer to a single acoustic exemplar. For example, we would expect a given vowel or consonant in the middle of a word repeated multiple times by the same speaker to be consistently realized as the same phonetic category, despite some acoustic variation across repetitions. Finally, an added characteristic in the context of early phonetic

## Significance

Infants become attuned to the sounds of their native language(s) before they even speak. Hypotheses about what is being learned by infants have traditionally driven researchers’ attempts to understand this surprising phenomenon. Here, we propose to start, instead, from hypotheses about how infants might learn. To implement this mechanism-driven approach, we introduce a quantitative modeling framework based on large-scale simulation of the learning process on realistic input. It allows learning mechanisms to be systematically linked to testable predictions regarding infants’ attunement to their native language(s). Through this framework, we obtain evidence for an account of infants’ attunement that challenges established theories about what infants are learning.

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<sup>1</sup>To whom correspondence may be addressed. Email: thomas.schatz.1986@gmail.com.

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\*For example, the same phoneme might be realized as different phonetic categories depending on the preceding and following sounds or on characteristics of the speaker.

learning is that phonetic categories are defined relative to a language. What might count as exemplars from separate phonetic categories for one language might belong to the same category in another.

The phonetic category hypothesis—that infants learn to process speech in terms of the phonetic categories of their native language—raises a question. How can infants learn about these phonetic categories so early? The most influential proposal in the literature has been that infants form phonetic categories by grouping the sounds they hear on the basis of how they are distributed in a universal (i.e., language-independent) perceptual space, a statistical clustering process dubbed “distributional learning” (24–27).

Serious concerns have been raised regarding the feasibility of this proposal, however (28, 29). Existing phonetic category accounts of early phonetic learning assume that speech is being represented phonetic segment by phonetic segment—i.e., for each vowel and consonant separately—along a set of language-independent phonetic dimensions (9, 19, 20).<sup>†</sup> Whether it is possible for infants to form such a representation in a way that would enable distributional learning of phonetic categories is questionable, for at least two reasons. First, there is a lack of *acoustic-phonetic invariance* (30–32): There is not a simple mapping from speech in an arbitrary language to an underlying set of universal phonetic dimensions that could act as reliable cues to phonetic categories. Second, *phonetic category segmentation*—finding reliable language-independent cues to boundaries between phonetic segments (i.e., individual vowels and consonants)—is a hard problem (30). It is clear that finding a solution to these problems for a given language is ultimately feasible, as literate adults readily solve them for their native language. Assuming that infants are able to solve them from birth in a language-universal fashion is a much stronger hypothesis, however, with little empirical support.

Evidence from modeling studies reinforces these concerns. Initial modeling work investigating the feasibility of learning phonetic categories through distributional learning sidestepped the lack-of-invariance and phonetic category segmentation problems by focusing on drastically simplified learning conditions (33–38), but subsequent studies considering more realistic variability have failed to learn phonetic categories accurately (29, 39–43) (*SI Appendix, Discussion 1*).

These results have largely been interpreted as a challenge to the idea that distributional learning is how infants learn phonetic categories. Additional learning mechanisms tapping into other sources of information plausibly available to infants have been proposed (26, 28, 29, 39–44), but existing feasibility results for such complementary mechanisms still assume that the phonetic category segmentation problem has somehow been solved and do not consider the full variability of natural speech (29, 36, 39–43, 45). Attempts to extend them to more realistic learning conditions have failed (46, 47) (*SI Appendix, Discussion 1*).

Here, we propose a different interpretation for the observed difficulty in forming phonetic categories through distributional learning: It might indicate that what infants learn are not phonetic categories. We are not aware of empirical results establishing that infants learn phonetic categories, and, indeed, the phonetic category hypothesis is not universally accepted. Some of the earliest accounts of early phonetic learning were based on syllable-level categories and/or on continuous representations

without any explicit category representations<sup>‡</sup> (48–51). Although they appear to have largely fallen out of favor, we know of no empirical findings refuting them.

We present evidence in favor of this alternative interpretation, first by showing that a distributional learning mechanism applied to raw, unsegmented, unlabeled continuous speech signal predicts early phonetic learning as observed in American English and Japanese-learning infants—thereby providing a realistic proof of feasibility for the proposed account of early phonetic learning. We then show that the speech units learned through this mechanism are too brief and too acoustically variable to correspond to phonetic categories.

We rely on two key innovations. First, whereas previous studies followed an outcome-driven approach to the study of early phonetic learning—starting from assumptions about what was learned, before seeking plausible mechanisms to learn it—we adopt a mechanism-driven approach—focusing first on the question of how infants might plausibly learn from realistic input, and seeking to characterize what was learned only a posteriori. Second, we introduce a quantitative modeling framework suitable to implement this approach at scale using realistic input. This involves explicitly simulating both the ecological learning process taking place at home and the assessment of infants’ discrimination abilities in the laboratory.

Beyond the immediate results, the framework we introduce provides a feasible way of linking accounts of early phonetic learning to systematic predictions regarding the empirical phenomenon they seek to explain—i.e., the observed cross-linguistic differences in infants’ phonetic discrimination.

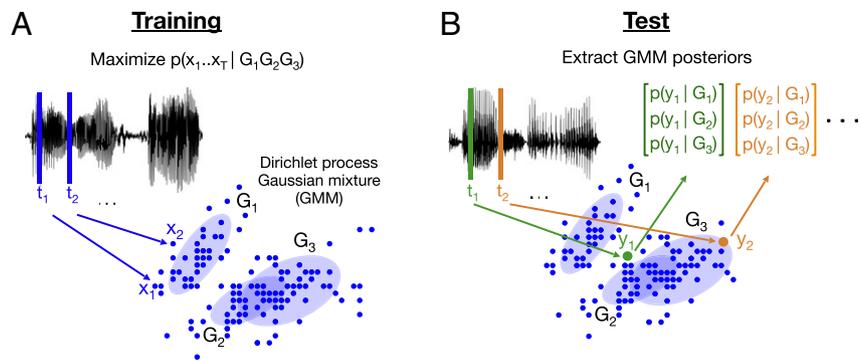
## Approach

We start from a possible learning mechanism. We simulate the learning process in infants by implementing this mechanism computationally and training it on naturalistic speech recordings in a target language—either Japanese or American English. This yields a candidate model for the early phonetic knowledge of, say, a Japanese infant. Next, we assess the model’s ability to discriminate phonetic contrasts of American English and Japanese—for example, American English [ɹ] vs [l]—by simulating a discrimination task using speech stimuli corresponding to this contrast. We test whether the predicted discrimination patterns agree with the available empirical record on cross-linguistic differences between American English- and Japanese-learning infants. Finally, we investigate whether what has been learned by the model corresponds to the phonetic categories of the model’s “native” language (i.e., its training language).

To identify a promising learning mechanism, we build on recent advances in the field of machine learning and, more specifically, in *unsupervised representation learning* for speech technology, which have established that, given only raw, untranscribed, unsegmented speech recordings, it is possible to learn representations that accurately discriminate the phonetic categories of a language (52–69). The learning algorithms considered have been argued to be particularly relevant for modeling how infants learn in general, and learn language in particular (70). Among available learning algorithms, we select the one at the core of the winning entries in the Zerospeech 2015

<sup>‡</sup>Note that the claims in all of the relevant theoretical accounts are for the formation of explicit representations, in the sense that they are assumed to be available for manipulation by downstream cognitive processes at later developmental stages (see, e.g., ref. 20). Thus, even if one might be tempted to say that phonetic categories are implicitly present in some sense in a representation—for example, in a continuous representation exhibiting sharp increases in discriminability across phonetic category boundaries (48)—unless a plausible mechanism by which downstream cognitive processes could explicitly read out phonetic categories from that representation is provided, together with evidence that infants actually use this mechanism, this would not be sufficient to support the early phonetic category acquisition hypothesis.

<sup>†</sup>In some accounts, the phonetic dimensions are assumed to be “acoustic” (9)—e.g., formant frequencies—in others, they are “articulatory” (19)—e.g., the degree of vocal tract opening at a constriction—and some accounts remain noncommittal (20).



**Fig. 1.** Gaussian mixture model training and representation extraction, illustrated for a model with three Gaussian components. In practice, the number of Gaussian components is learned from the data and much higher. (A) Model training: The learning algorithm extracts moderate-dimensional ( $d = 39$ ) descriptors of the local shape of the signal spectrum at time points regularly sampled every 10 ms (speech frames). These descriptors are then considered as having been generated by a mixture of Gaussian probability distributions, and parameters for this mixture that assign high probability to the observed descriptors are learned. (B) Model test: The sequence of spectral-shape descriptors for a test stimulus (possibly in a language different from the training language) are extracted, and the model representation for that stimulus is obtained as the sequence of posterior probability vectors resulting from mapping each descriptor to its probability of having been generated by each of the Gaussian components in the learned mixture.

and 2017 international competitions in unsupervised speech-representation learning (57, 58, 68). Remarkably, it is based on a Gaussian mixture clustering mechanism—illustrated in Fig. 1A—that can straightforwardly be interpreted as a form of distributional learning (24, 26). A different input representation to the Gaussian mixture is used than in previously proposed implementations of distributional learning, however (29, 33, 35, 37–39, 41). Simple descriptors of the shape of the speech signal’s short-term auditory spectrum sampled at regular points in time (every 10 ms) (71) are used instead of traditional phonetic measurements obtained separately for each vowel and consonant, such as formant frequencies or harmonic amplitudes.<sup>§</sup> This type of input representation only assumes basic auditory abilities from infants, which are known to be fully operational shortly after birth (74), and has been proposed previously as a potential way to get around both the lack-of-invariance and the phonetic category segmentation problems in the context of adult word recognition (30). A second difference from previous implementations of distributional learning is in the output representation. Test stimuli are represented as sequences of posterior probability vectors (posteriorgrams) over  $K$  Gaussian components in the mixture (Fig. 1B), rather than simply being assigned to the most likely Gaussian component. These continuous representations have been shown to support accurate discrimination of native phonetic categories in the Zerospeech challenges.

To simulate the infants’ learning process, we expose the selected learning algorithm to a realistic model of the linguistic input to the child, in the form of raw, unsegmented, untranscribed, multispeaker continuous speech signal in a target language (either Japanese or American English). We select recordings of adult speech made with near-field, high-quality microphones in two speech registers, which cover the range of articulatory clarity that infants may encounter. On one end of the range, we use spontaneous adult-directed speech, and on the other, we use read speech; these two speaking registers are crossed with the language factor (English or Japanese), resulting in four corpora, each split into a training set and a test set (Table 1). We would have liked to use recordings made in infants’ naturalistic environments, but no such dataset

<sup>§</sup>There was a previous attempt to model infant phonetic learning from such spectrogram-like auditory representations of continuous speech (72, 73), but it did not combine this modeling approach with a suitable evaluation methodology.

of sufficient audio quality was available for this study. It is unclear whether or how using infant-directed speech would impact results: The issue of whether infant-directed speech is beneficial for phonetic learning has been debated, with arguments in both directions (75–82). We train a separate model for each of the four training sets, allowing us to check that our results hold across different speech registers and recording conditions. We also train separate models on 10 subsets of each training set for several choices of subset sizes, allowing us to assess the effects of varying the amount of input data and the variability due to the choice of training data for a given input size.

We next evaluate whether the trained “Japanese native” and “American-English native” models correctly predict early phonetic learning, as observed in Japanese-learning and American English-learning infants, respectively, and whether they make novel predictions regarding the differences in speech-discrimination abilities between these two populations. Because we do not assume that the outcome of infants’ learning is adult-like knowledge, we can only rely on infant data for evaluation. The absence of specific assumptions a priori about what is going to be learned and the sparsity of empirical data on infant discrimination make this challenging. The algorithm we consider outputs complex, high-dimensional representations (Fig. 1B) that are not easy to link to concrete predictions regarding infant discrimination abilities. Traditional signal-detection theory models of discrimination tasks (87) cannot handle high-dimensional perceptual representations, while more elaborate (Bayesian) probabilistic models (88) have too many free parameters given the scarcity of available data from infant experiments. We rely, instead, on the *machine ABX* approach that we previously developed (89, 90). It consists of a simple model of a discrimination

**Table 1.** Language, speech register, duration, and number of speakers of training and test sets for our four corpora of speech recordings

Corpus	Language	Reg.	Duration		No. of speakers	
			Train	Test	Train	Test
R-Eng (83)	Am. English	Read	19h30	9h39	96	47
R-Jap (84)	Japanese	Read	19h33	9h40	96	47
Sp-Eng (85)	Am. English	Spont.	9h13	9h01	20	20
Sp-Jap (86)	Japanese	Spont.	9h11	8h57	20	20

Am., American; reg., register; spont., spontaneous.

task, which can handle any representation format, provided the user can provide a reasonable measure of (dis)similarity between representations (89, 90). This is not a detailed model of infant's performance in a specific experiment, but, rather, a simple and effectively parameterless way to systematically link the complex speech representations produced by our models to predicted discrimination patterns. For each trained model and each phonetic contrast of interest, we obtain an "ABX error rate," such that 0% and 50% error indicate perfect and chance-level discrimination, respectively. This allows us to evaluate the qualitative match between the model's discrimination abilities and the available empirical record in infants (see *SI Appendix, Discussion 3* for an extended discussion of our approach to interpreting the simulated discrimination errors and relating them to empirical observations, including why it would not be meaningful to seek a quantitative match at this point).

Finally, we investigate whether the learned Gaussian components correspond to phonetic categories. We first compare the number of Gaussians in a learned mixture to the number of phonemes in the training language (*category number test*): Although a phonetic category can be more concrete than a phoneme, the number of phonetic categories documented in typical linguistic analyses remains on the same order of magnitude as the number of phonemes. We then administer two diagnostic tests based on the two defining characteristics identified above that any representation corresponding to phonetic categories should pass.<sup>¶</sup> The first characteristic is size/duration: A phonetic category is a phoneme-sized unit (i.e., the size of a vowel or a consonant). Our *duration* test probes this by measuring the average duration of activation of the learned Gaussian components (a component is taken to be "active" when its posterior probability is higher than all other components), and comparing this to the average duration of activation of units in a baseline system trained to recognize phonemes with explicit supervision. The second characteristic is abstractness: Although phonetic categories can depend on phonetic context<sup>||</sup> and on nonlinguistic properties of the speech signal—e.g., the speaker's gender—at a minimum, the central phone in the same word repeated several times by the same speaker is expected to be consistently realized as the same phonetic category. Our *acoustic (in)variance* test probes this by counting the number of distinct representations needed by our model to represent 10 occurrences of the central frame of the central phone of the same word either repeated by the same speaker (within-speaker condition) or by different speakers (across-speaker condition). We use a generous correction to handle possible misalignment (*Materials and Methods*). The last two tests can be related to the phonetic category segmentation and lack-of-invariance problems: Solving the phonetic category segmentation problem involves finding units that would pass the duration test, while solving the lack-of-invariance problem involves finding units that would pass the acoustic (in)variance test. Given the laxity in the use of the concept of phonetic category in the literature, some might be tempted to challenge that even these diagnostic tests can be relied on. If they cannot, however, it is not clear to us how phonetic category accounts of early phonetic learning should be understood as scientifically refutable claims.

<sup>¶</sup>This provides necessary but not sufficient conditions for "phonetic categoriness," but since we will see that the representations learned in our simulations already fail these tests, more fine-grained assessments will not be required.

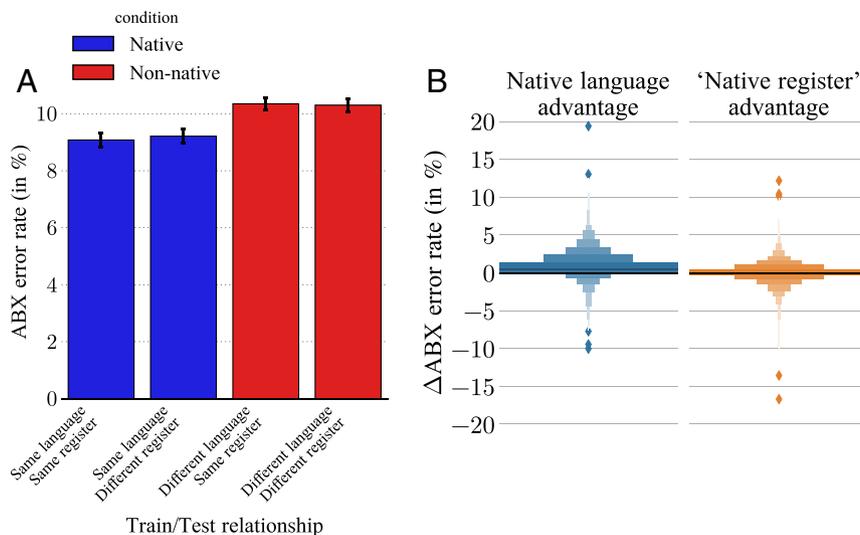
<sup>||</sup>For example, in the American English word "top," the phoneme /t/ is realized as an aspirated consonant [t<sup>h</sup>] (i.e., there is a slight delay before the vocal folds start to vibrate after the consonant), whereas in the word "stop," it is realized as a regular voiceless consonant [t], which might be considered to correspond to a different phonetic category than [t<sup>h</sup>].

## Results

**Overall Discrimination.** After having trained a separate model for each of the four possible combinations of language and register, we tested whether the models' overall discrimination abilities, like those of infants (15–17), are specific to their "native" (i.e., training) language. Specifically, for each corpus, we looked at overall discrimination errors averaged over all consonant and vowel contrasts available in a held-out test set from that corpus (Table 1). We tested each of the two American English-trained and each of the two Japanese-trained models on each of four test sets, yielding a total of 4×4 discrimination errors. We tabulated the average errors in terms of four conditions, depending on the relation between the test set and the training background of the model: native vs. nonnative contrasts and same vs. different register. The results are reported in Fig. 2 (see also *SI Appendix, Figs. S1 and S4* for nontabulated results). Fig. 2A shows that discrimination performance is higher, on average, in matched-language conditions (in blue) than in mismatched-language conditions (in red). In contrast, register mismatch has no discernible impact on discrimination performance. A comparison with a supervised phoneme-recognizer baseline (*SI Appendix, Fig. S3*) shows a similar pattern of results, but with a larger absolute cross-linguistic difference. If we interpret this supervised baseline as a proxy to the adult state, then our model suggests that infant's phonetic representations, while already language-specific, remain "immature".\*\* Fig. 2B shows the robustness of these results, with 81.7% of the 1,295 distinct phonetic contrasts tested proving easier to discriminate on the basis of representations from a model trained on the matching language. Taken together, these results suggest that, similar to infants, our models acquire language-specific representations, and that these representations generalize across register.

**American English [x]–[l] Discrimination.** Next, we focus on the specific case of American English [x]–[l] discrimination, for which Japanese adults show a well-documented deficit (2, 3) and which has been studied empirically in American English and Japanese infants (14). While 6- to 8-mo-old infants from American English- and Japanese-language backgrounds performed similarly in discriminating this contrast, 10- to 12-mo-old American English infants outperformed their Japanese peers. We compare the discrimination errors obtained with each of our four models for American English [x]–[l] and for two controls: the American English [w]–[j] contrast (as in "wet" vs. "yet"), for which we do not expect a gap in performance between American English and Japanese natives (95), and the average error over all of the other consonant contrasts of American English. For each contrast and for each of the four models, we averaged discrimination errors obtained on each of the two American English held-out test sets, yielding 3×4 discrimination errors. We further averaged over models with the same native language to obtain 3×2 discrimination errors. The results are shown in Fig. 3 (see also *SI Appendix, Figs. S2 and S6* for untabulated results and a test confirming our results with the synthetic stimuli used in the original infant experiment, respectively). In Fig. 3A, we see that, similar to 10- to 12-mo old infants, American English native models (in blue) greatly outperform Japanese native models (in red) in discriminating American English [x]–[l]. Here, again, a supervised phoneme-recognizer baseline yields a similar pattern of results, but with larger cross-linguistic differences (Fig. 3C; see also *SI Appendix, Fig. S5*), again suggesting that the representations learned by the unsupervised models—like those of infants—remain somewhat "immature."

\*\*This is compatible with empirical evidence that phonetic learning continues into childhood well beyond the first year (see refs. 91–93, for example).



**Fig. 2.** (A) Average ABX error rates over all consonant and vowel contrasts obtained with our models as a function of the match between the training-set and test-set language and register. Error bars correspond to plus and minus one SD of the errors across resampling of the test-stimuli speakers. The native (blue) conditions, with training and test in the same language, show fewer discrimination errors than the nonnative (red) conditions, whereas there is little difference in error rate within the native and within the nonnative conditions. This shows that the models learned native-language-specific representations that generalize across register. (B) Letter-value representation (94) of the distribution of native advantages across all tested phonetic contrasts (pooled over both languages). The native-language advantage is the increase in discrimination error for a contrast of language L1 between an “L1-native” model and a model trained on the other language for the same training register. The “native register” advantage is the increase in error for a contrast of register R1 between an “R1-native” model and a model trained on the other register for the same training language. A native language advantage is observed across contrasts (positive advantage for 81.7% of all contrasts), and there is a weaker native register advantage (positive advantage for 60.1% of all contrasts).

In Fig. 3B, we see results obtained by training 10 different models on 10 different subsets of the training set of each corpus, varying the sizes of the subsets (see *Materials and Methods* for more details). It reveals that 1 h of input is sufficient for the divergence between the Japanese and English models to emerge robustly and that this divergence increases with exposure to the native language. While it is difficult to interpret this trajectory relative to absolute quantities of data or discrimination scores, the fact that the cross-linguistic difference increases with more data mirrors the empirical findings from infants (see also an extended discussion of our approach to interpreting the simulated discrimination errors and relating them to empirical data in *SI Appendix, Discussion 3*).

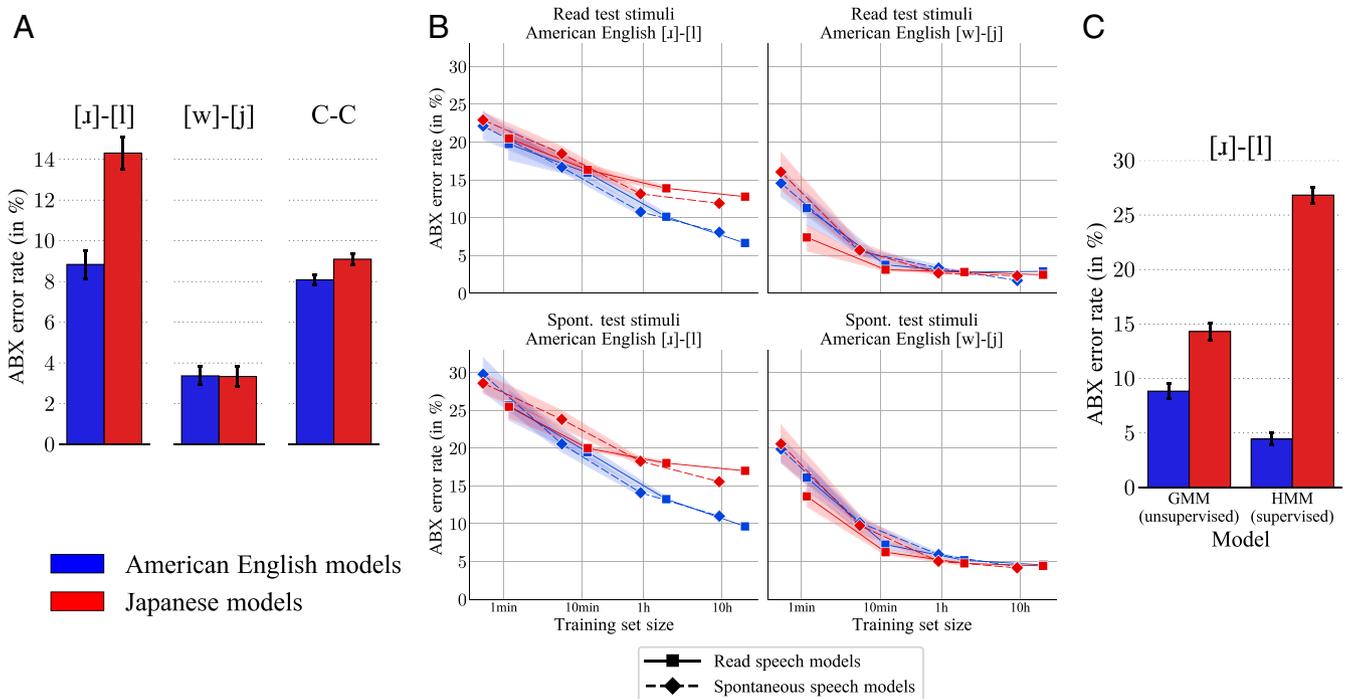
**Nature of the Learned Representations.** Finally, we considered the nature of the learned representations and tested whether what has been learned can be understood in terms of phonetic categories. Results are reported in Fig. 4 (see also *SI Appendix, Fig. S7* for comparisons with a different supervised baseline). First, looking at the category number criterion in Fig. 4A, we see that our models learned more than 10 times as many categories as the number of phonemes in the corresponding languages. Even allowing for notions of phonetic categories more granular than phonemes, we are not aware of any phonetic analysis ever reporting that many allophones in these languages. Second, looking at the duration criterion in Fig. 4B, the learned Gaussian units appear to be activated, on average, for about a quarter the duration of a phoneme. This is shorter than any linguistically identified unit. It shows that the phonetic category segmentation problem has not been solved. Next, looking at the acoustic (in)variance criterion in Fig. 4C and D—for the within- and across-speakers conditions, respectively—we see that our models require, on average, around two distinct representations to represent 10 tokens of the same phonetic category without speaker variability and three distinct representations across different speakers. The supervised phoneme-recognizer baseline establishes that our results cannot be explained by defective test stimuli. Instead, this result shows

that the learned units are finer-grained than phonetic categories along the spectral axis and that the lack-of-invariance problem has not been solved. Based on these tests, we can conclude that the learned units do not correspond to phonetic categories in any meaningful sense of the term.

## Discussion

Through explicit simulation of the learning process under realistic learning conditions, we showed that several aspects of early phonetic learning, as observed in American English and Japanese infants, can be correctly predicted through a distributional learning (i.e., clustering) mechanism applied to simple spectrogram-like auditory features sampled at regular time intervals. This contrasts with previous attempts to show the feasibility of potential mechanisms for early phonetic learning, which only considered highly simplified learning conditions and/or failed (26, 28, 29, 33–44, 46–48). We further showed that the learned speech units are too brief and too acoustically variable to correspond to the vowel- and consonant-like phonetic categories posited in earlier accounts of early phonetic learning.

Distributional learning has been an influential hypothesis in language acquisition for over a decade (24, 26, 27). Previous modeling results questioning the feasibility of learning phonetic categories through distributional learning have traditionally been interpreted as challenging the learning mechanism (26, 28, 29, 39–44), but we have instead suggested that such results may be better interpreted as challenging the idea that phonetic categories are the outcome of early phonetic learning. Supporting this view, we showed that when the requirement to learn phonetic categories is abandoned, distributional learning on its own can be sufficient to explain early phonetic learning under realistic learning conditions—using unsegmented, untranscribed speech signal as input. Our results are still compatible with the idea that mechanisms tapping into other relevant sources of information might complement distributional learning—an idea supported by evidence that infants learn from some of these sources in the laboratory (96–102)—but they suggest that those other sources



**Fig. 3.** (A) ABX error rates for the American English [ɪ]-[I] contrast and two controls: American English [w]-[j] and average over all American English consonant contrasts (C-C). Error rates are reported for two conditions: average over models trained on American English and average over models trained on Japanese. Error bars correspond to plus and minus one SD of the errors across resampling of the test-stimuli speakers. Similar to infants, the Japanese native models exhibit a specific deficit for American English [ɪ]-[I] discrimination compared to the American English models. (B) The robustness of the effect observed in A to changes in the training stimuli and their dependence on the amount of input are assessed by training separate models on independent subsets of the training data of each corpus of varying duration (*Materials and Methods*). For each selected duration (except when using the full training set), 10 independent subsets are selected, and 10 independent models are trained. We report mean discrimination errors for American English [ɪ]-[I] and [w]-[j] as a function of the amount of input data, with error bands indicating plus or minus one SD. The results show that a deficit in American English [ɪ]-[I] discrimination for Japanese-native models robustly emerges with as little as 1 h of training data. (C) To give a sense of scale we compare the cross-linguistic difference obtained with the unsupervised Gaussian mixture models (GMM) on American English [ɪ]-[I] (*Left*) to the one obtained with supervised phoneme-recognizer baselines (hidden Markov model, HMM; *Right*). The larger cross-linguistic difference obtained with the supervised baselines suggests that the representations learned by our unsupervised models, similar to those observed in infants, remain somewhat immature.

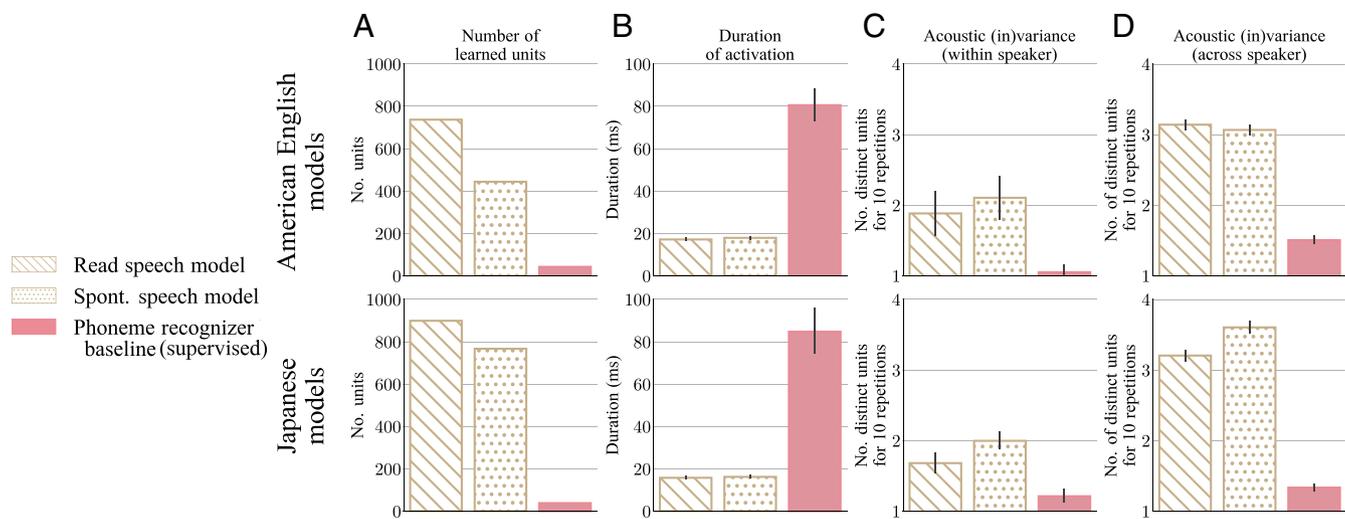
of information may not play a role as crucial as previously thought (26). Our findings also join recent accounts of “word segmentation” (103) and the “language familiarity effect” (104) in questioning whether we might have been overattributing linguistic knowledge to preverbal infants across the board.

#### An Account of Early Phonetic Learning without Phonetic Categories.

Our results suggest an account of phonetic learning that substantially differs from existing ones. Whereas previous proposals have been primarily motivated through an outcome-driven perspective—starting from assumptions about what it is about language that is learned—the motivation for the proposed account comes from a mechanism-driven perspective—starting from assumptions about how learning might proceed from the infant’s input. This contrast is readily apparent in the choice of the initial speech representation, upon which the early phonetic learning process operates (the input representation). Previous accounts assumed speech to be represented innately through a set of universal (i.e., language-independent) phonetic feature detectors (9, 18–21, 48–51). The influential phonetic category accounts, furthermore, assumed these features to be available phonetic segment by phonetic segment (i.e., for each vowel and consonant separately) (9, 18–21). While these assumptions are attractive from an outcome-driven perspective—they connect transparently to phonological theories in linguistics and theories of adult speech perception that assume a decomposition of speech into phoneme-sized segments defined in terms of abstract phonological features—from a mechanism-driven perspective,

both assumptions are difficult to reconcile with the continuous speech signal that infants hear. The lack of acoustic-phonetic invariance problem challenges the idea of phonetic feature detectors, and the phonetic category segmentation problem challenges the idea that the relevant features are segment-based (30–32). The proposed account does not assume either problem to be solved by infants at birth. Instead, it relies on basic auditory abilities that are available to neonates (74), using simple auditory descriptors of the speech spectrum obtained regularly along the time axis. This type of spectrogram-like representation is effective in speech-technology applications (71) and can be seen as the output of a simple model of the peripheral auditory system (ref. 90, chap. 3), which is fully operational shortly after birth (74). Such representations have also been proposed before as an effective way to get around both the lack-of-invariance and the phonetic category segmentation problems in the context of adult word recognition (30) and can outperform representations based on traditional phonetic measurements (like formant frequencies) as predictors of adult speech perception (105–109).

While the input representation is different, the learning mechanism in the proposed account—distributional learning—is similar to what had originally been proposed in phonetic category accounts. Infants’ abilities, both in the laboratory (24, 27) and in ecological conditions (25), are consistent with such a learning mechanism. Moreover, when applied to the input representation considered in this paper, distributional learning is adaptive in that it yields speech representations that can support remarkably accurate discrimination of the phonetic categories of the



**Fig. 4.** Diagnostic test results for our four unsupervised Gaussian mixture models (in beige) and phoneme-recognizer baselines trained with explicit supervision (in pink). (*Upper*) American English native models. (*Lower*) Japanese native models. Models are tested on read speech in their native language. (*A*) Number of units learned by the models. Gaussian mixtures discover 10 to 20 times more categories than there are phonemes in the training language, exceeding any reasonable count for phonetic categories. (*B*) Average duration of activation of the learned units. The average duration of activation of each unit is computed, and the average and SD of the resulting distribution over units are shown. Learned Gaussian units get activated, on average, for about the quarter of the duration of a phoneme. They are, thus, much too “short” to correspond to phonetic categories. (*C*) Average number of distinct representations for the central phone for 10 repetitions of a same word by the same speaker, corrected for possible misalignment. The number of distinct representations is computed for each word type with sufficient repetitions in the test set, and the average and SD of the resulting distribution over word types are shown. The phoneme-recognizer baseline reliably identifies the 10 tokens as exemplars from a common phonetic category, whereas our Gaussian mixture models typically maintain on the order of two distinct representations, indicating representations too fine-grained to be phonetic categories. (*D*) As in *C*, but with repetitions of a same word by 10 speakers, showing that the learned Gaussian units are not speaker-independent. Spont., spontaneous.

training language, outperforming a number of alternatives that have been proposed for unsupervised speech representation learning (57, 58, 68).

As a consequence of our mechanism-driven approach, what has been learned needs to be determined a posteriori based on the outcomes of learning simulations. The speech units learned under the proposed account accurately model infants’ discrimination, but are too brief and acoustically variable to correspond to phonetic categories, failing, in particular, to provide a solution to the lack-of-invariance and phonetic category segmentation problems (30). Such brief units do not correspond to any identified linguistic unit (22) (see *SI Appendix, Discussion 4* for a discussion of possible reasons why the language-acquisition process might involve the learning by infants of a representation with no established linguistic interpretation and a discussion of the biological and psychological plausibility of the learned representation), and it will be interesting to try to further understand their nature. However, since there is no guarantee that a simple characterization exists, we leave this issue for future work.

Phonetic categories are often assumed as precursors in accounts of phenomena occurring later in the course of language acquisition. Our account does not necessarily conflict with this view, as phonetic categories may be learned later in development, before phonological acquisition. Alternatively, the influential *PRIMIR* account of early language acquisition (“a developmental framework for Processing Rich Information from Multi-dimensional Interactive Representations”, ref. 20) proposes that infants learn in parallel about the phonetics, word forms, and phonology of their native language, but do not develop abstract phonemic representations until well into their second year of life. Although *PRIMIR* explicitly assumes phonetic learning to be phonetic category learning, other aspects of their proposed framework do not depend on that assumption, and our framework may be able to stand in for the phonetic learning process they assume.

To sum up, we introduced and motivated an account of early phonetic learning—according to which infants learn through distributional learning, but do not learn phonetic categories—and we showed that this account is feasible under realistic learning conditions, which cannot be said of any other account at this time. Importantly, this does not constitute decisive evidence for our account over alternatives. Our primary focus has been on modeling cross-linguistic differences in the perception of one contrast [ɪ]–[I]; further work is necessary to determine to what extent our results extend to other contrasts and languages (110). Furthermore, an absence of feasibility proof does not amount to a proof of infeasibility. While we have preliminary evidence that simply forcing the model to learn fewer categories is unlikely to be sufficient (*SI Appendix, Figs. S9 and S10*), recently proposed partial solutions to the phonetic category segmentation problem (e.g., refs. 111–113) and to the lack-of-invariance problem (114) (see also *SI Appendix, Discussion 2* regarding the choice of model initialization) might yet lead to a feasible phonetic category-based account, for example. In addition, a number of other representation learning algorithms proposed in the context of unsupervised speech technologies and building on recent developments in the field of machine learning have yet to be investigated (52–69). They might provide concrete implementations of previously proposed accounts of early phonetic learning or suggest new ones altogether. This leaves us with a large space of appealing theoretical possibilities, making it premature to commit to a particular account. Candidate accounts should instead be evaluated on their ability to predict empirical data on early phonetic learning, which brings us to the second main contribution of this article.

**Toward Predictive Theories of Early Phonetic Learning.** Almost since the original empirical observation of early phonetic learning (115), a number of theoretical accounts of the phenomenon have coexisted (9, 19, 48, 49). This theoretical underdetermination has

typically been thought to result from the scarcity of empirical data from infant experiments. We argue instead that the main limiting factor on our understanding of early phonetic learning might have been the lack—on the theory side—of a practical method to link proposed accounts of phonetic learning with concrete, systematic predictions regarding the empirical discrimination data they seek to explain. Establishing such a systematic link has been challenging due to the necessity of dealing with the actual speech signal, with all its associated complexity. The modeling framework we introduce provides a practical and scalable way to overcome these challenges and obtain the desired link for phonetic learning theories—a major methodological advance, given the fundamental epistemological importance of linking explanandum and explanans in scientific theories (116).

Our mechanism-driven approach to obtaining predictions—which can be applied to any phonetic learning model implemented in our framework—consists first of explicitly simulating the early phonetic learning process as it happens outside of the laboratory, which results in a trained model capable of mapping any speech input to a model representation for that input. The measurement of infants’ perceptual abilities in laboratory settings—including their discrimination of any phonetic contrast—can then be simulated on the basis of the model’s representations of the relevant experimental stimuli. Finally, phonetic contrasts for which a significant cross-linguistic difference is robustly predicted can be identified through a careful statistical analysis of the simulated discrimination judgments (*SI Appendix, Materials and Methods 4*). As an illustration of how such predictions can be generated, we report specific predictions made by our distributional learning model in *SI Appendix, Table S1* (see also *SI Appendix, Discussion 5*).

Although explicit simulations of the phonetic learning process have been carried out before (29, 33–43, 45, 48, 72, 73), those have typically been evaluated based on whether they learned phonetic categories, and have not been directly used to make predictions regarding infants’ discrimination abilities. An outcome-driven approach to making predictions regarding discrimination has typically been adopted instead, starting from the assumption that phonetic categories are the outcome of learning. To the best of our knowledge, this has never resulted in the kind of systematic predictions we report here, however (see *SI Appendix, Discussion 6* for a discussion of the limits of previous approaches and of the key innovations underlying the success of our framework).

Our framework readily generates empirically testable predictions regarding infants’ discrimination, yet further computational modeling is called for before we return to experiments. Indeed, existing data—collected over more than three decades of research (5, 15–17)—might already suffice to distinguish between different learning mechanisms. To make that determination, and to decide which contrasts would be most useful to test next, in case more data are needed, many more learning mechanisms and training/test language pairs will need to be studied. Even for a specified learning mechanism and training/test datasets, multiple implementations should ideally be compared (e.g., testing different parameter settings for the input representations or the clustering algorithm), as implementational choices that weren’t initially considered to be important might, nevertheless, have an effect on the resulting predictions and, thus, need to be included in our theories. Conversely, features of the model that may seem important a priori (e.g., the type of clustering algorithm used) might turn out to have little effect on the learning outcomes in practice.

Cognitive science has not traditionally made use of such large-scale modeling, but recent advances in computing power, large datasets, and machine-learning algorithms make this approach more feasible than ever before (70). Together with ongoing efforts in the field to collect empirical data on a large scale—such as large-

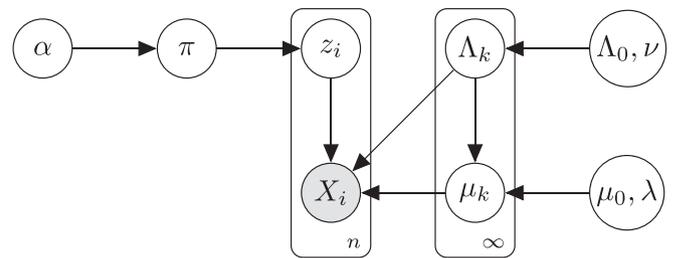
scale recordings of infants’ learning environments at home (117) and large-scale assessment of infants’ learning outcomes (118, 119)—our modeling approach opens the path toward a much deeper understanding of early language acquisition.

## Materials and Methods

**Datasets.** We used speech recordings from four corpora: two corpora of read news articles—a subset of the *Wall Street Journal* corpus of American English (83) (WSJ) and the Globalphone corpus of Japanese (84) (GPJ)—and two corpora of spontaneous speech—the Buckeye corpus of American English (85) (BUC) and a subset of the corpus of spontaneous Japanese (86) (CSJ). As we are primarily interested in the effect of training language on discrimination abilities, we sought to remove possibly confounding differences between the two read corpora and between the two spontaneous corpora. Specifically, we randomly sampled subcorpora while matching total duration, number, and gender of speakers and amount of speech per speaker. We made no effort to match corpora within a language, as the differences (for example, in the total duration and number of speakers) only serve to reinforce the generality of any result holding true for both registers. Each of the sampled subsets was further randomly divided into a training and a test set (Table 1), satisfying three conditions: The test set lasts approximately 10 h; no speaker is present in both the training and test set; and the training and test sets for the two read corpora, and separately for the two spontaneous corpora, remain matched on overall duration, number of speakers of each gender, and distribution of duration per speaker of each gender. To carry out analyses taking into account the effect of input size and of the choice of input data, we further divided each training set in 10 with each 1/10th subset containing an equal proportion of the speech samples from each speaker in the original training set. We then divided each of the 1/10th subsets in 10 again following the same procedure and selected the first subset to obtain 10 1/100th subsets. Finally, we iterated the procedure one more time to obtain 10 1/1,000th subsets. See *SI Appendix, Materials and Methods 1* for additional information.

**Signal Processing, Models, and Inference.** The raw speech signal was decomposed into a sequence of overlapping 25-ms-long frames sampled every 10 ms, and moderate-dimensional ( $d = 39$ ) descriptors of the spectral shape of each frame were then extracted, describing how energy in the signal spreads across different frequency channels. The descriptors comprised 13 mel-frequency cepstral coefficients with their first and second time derivatives. These coefficients correspond approximately to the principal components of spectral slices in a log-spectrogram of the signal, where the spectrogram frequency channels were selected on a mel-frequency scale (linear for lower frequency and logarithmic for higher frequencies, matching the frequency selectivity of the human ear).

For each corpus, the set of all spectral-shape descriptors for the corpus’ training set was modeled as a large independent and identically distributed sample from a probabilistic generative model. The generative model is a Gaussian mixture model with no restrictions on the form of covariance matrices and with a Dirichlet process prior over its parameters with normal-inverse-Wishart base measure. The generative model is depicted as a graphical model in plate notation in Fig. 5, where  $n$  is the number of input descriptors,  $(X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n)$  are the random variables from which the observed descriptors are assumed to be sampled, and the other elements are latent variables and hyperparameters. The depicted variables have the following conditional distributions:



**Fig. 5.** Generative Gaussian mixture model with Dirichlet process prior with normal-inverse-Wishart base measure, represented as a graphical model in plate notation based on the stick-breaking construction of Dirichlet processes.

$$\begin{array}{l|l}
 x_i & z_i, (\mu_1, \mu_2, \dots), (\Lambda_1, \Lambda_2, \dots) \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu_{z_i}, \Lambda_{z_i}^{-1}) \\
 \mu_k & \Lambda_k, \mu_0, \lambda \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu_0, (\lambda \Lambda_k)^{-1}) \\
 \Lambda_k & \Lambda_0, \nu \sim \mathcal{W}(\Lambda_0, \nu) \\
 z_i & \pi \sim \text{Multi}(\pi) \\
 \pi & \alpha \sim \text{SB}(\alpha)
 \end{array}$$

for any  $1 \leq i \leq n$ , for any  $k \in \{1, 2, \dots\}$ , with  $\mathcal{N}$  the multivariate Gaussian distribution,  $\mathcal{W}$  the Wishart distribution, *Multi* the generalization of the usual multinomial probability distribution to an infinite discrete support, and *SB* the mixing weights generating distribution from the stick-breaking representation of Dirichlet processes (120). Mixture parameters with high posterior probability given the observed input features vectors and the prior were found by using an efficient parallel Markov chain Monte Carlo sampler (121). Following previous work (60, 65), model initialization was performed by partitioning training points uniformly at random into 10 clusters, and the hyperparameters were set as follows:  $\alpha$  to 1,  $\mu_0$  to the average of all input features vectors,  $\lambda$  to 1,  $\lambda_0$  to the inverse of the covariance of all input feature vectors, and  $\nu$  to 42 (i.e., the spectral shape descriptors dimension plus 3). We additionally trained a model on each of the 10 1/10th, 1/100th, and 1/1,000th training subsets of each of the four corpora, following the same procedure.

Given a trained Gaussian mixture with  $K$  components, mixing weights  $(\pi_1, \pi_2, \dots, \pi_K)$ , means  $(\mu_1, \mu_2, \dots, \mu_K)$ , and covariance matrices  $(\Sigma_1, \Sigma_2, \dots, \Sigma_K)$ , we extracted a test stimulus representation from the sequence  $(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_m)$  of spectral-shape descriptors for that stimulus, as the sequence of posterior probability vectors  $(p_1, p_2, \dots, p_m)$ , where for any frame  $i$ ,  $1 \leq i \leq m$ ,  $p_i = (p_{i1}, p_{i2}, \dots, p_{iK})$ , with, for any  $1 \leq k \leq K$ :

$$p_{ik} = \frac{\pi_k \mathcal{N}(x_i | \mu_k, \Sigma_k)}{\sum_{j=1}^K \pi_j \mathcal{N}(x_i | \mu_j, \Sigma_j)}.$$

As a baseline, we also trained a phoneme recognizer on the training set of each corpus, with explicit supervision (i.e., phonemic transcriptions of the training stimuli). We extracted frame-level posterior probabilities at two granularity levels: actual phonemes—the *phoneme-recognizer* baseline—and individual states of the contextual hidden Markov models—the *ASR phone-state* baseline. See *SI Appendix, Materials and Methods 2* for additional information.

**Discrimination Tests.** Discriminability between model representations for phonetic contrasts of interest was assessed by using machine ABX discrimination errors (89, 90). Discrimination was assessed in context, defined as the preceding and following sound and the identity of the speaker. For example, discrimination of American English [u] vs. [i] was assessed in each available context independently, yielding—for instance—a separate discrimination-error rate for test stimuli in [b].[t] phonetic context, as in “boot” vs. “beet,” as spoken by a specified speaker. Other possible factors of variability, such as word boundaries or syllable position, were not controlled. For each model, each test corpus, and each phonemic contrast in that test corpus (as specified by the corpus’ phonemic transcriptions), we obtained a discrimination error for each context in which the contrasted phonemes occurred at least twice in the test corpus’ test set. To avoid combinatorial explosion in the number of ABX triplets to be considered, a randomly selected subset of five occurrences was used to compute discrimination errors when a phoneme occurred more than five times in a given context. An aggregated ABX error rate was obtained for each combination of model, test corpus, and phonemic contrast, by averaging the context-specific error rates over speakers and phonetic contexts, in that order.

Model representations were extracted for the whole test sets, and the part corresponding to a specific occurrence of a phonetic category was then obtained by selecting representation frames centered on time points located between the start and end times for that occurrence, as specified by the test set’s forced aligned phonemic transcriptions. Given model representations  $\Delta = (\delta_1, \delta_2, \dots, \delta_{n_\delta})$  and  $\Xi = (\xi_1, \xi_2, \dots, \xi_{n_\xi})$  for  $n_\delta$  tokens of phonetic category  $\delta$  and  $n_\xi$  tokens of phonetic category  $\xi$ , the *nonsymmetrized machine ABX discrimination error* between  $\delta$  and  $\xi$  was then estimated as the proportion of representation triplets  $a, b, x$ , with  $a$  and  $x$  taken from  $\Delta$  and  $b$  taken from  $\Xi$ , such that  $x$  is closer to  $b$  than to  $a$ , i.e.,

$$\hat{\epsilon}(\Delta, \Xi) := \frac{1}{n_\delta(n_\delta - 1)n_\xi} \sum_{a=1}^{n_\delta} \sum_{b=1}^{n_\xi} \sum_{x=1}^{n_\delta} \left[ \mathbb{1}_{d(\xi_b, \delta_x) < d(\delta_a, \delta_x)} + \frac{1}{2} \mathbb{1}_{d(\xi_b, \delta_x) = d(\delta_a, \delta_x)} \right],$$

where  $\mathbb{1}$  is the indicator function returning one when its predicate is true and zero otherwise, and  $d$  is a dissimilarity function taking a pair of model representations as input and returning a real number (with higher values indicating more dissimilar representations). The *(symmetric) machine ABX discrimination error* between  $\delta$  and  $\xi$  was then obtained as:

$$\hat{\epsilon}(\Delta, \Xi) = \hat{\epsilon}(\Xi, \Delta) := \frac{1}{2} [\hat{\epsilon}(\Delta, \Xi) + \hat{\epsilon}(\Xi, \Delta)].$$

As realizations of phonetic categories vary in duration, we need a dissimilarity function  $d$  that can handle model representations with variable length. This was done, following established practice (12, 13, 55, 57, 68), by measuring the average dissimilarity along a time alignment of the two representations obtained through dynamic time warping (122), where the dissimilarity between model representations for individual frames was measured with the symmetrized Kullback–Leibler divergence for posterior probability vectors and with the angular distance for spectral shape descriptors.

**Analysis of Learned Representations.** Learned units were taken to be the Gaussian components for the Gaussian mixture models, the phoneme models for the phoneme-recognizer baseline, and the phone-state models for the ASR phone-state baseline. Since experimental studies of phonetic categories are typically performed with citation form stimuli, we studied how each model represents stimuli from the matched-language read speech corpus’ test set.

To study average durations of activation, we excluded any utterance-initial or utterance-final silence from the analysis, as well as any utterance for which utterance-medial silence was detected during the forced alignment. The average duration of activation for a given unit was computed by averaging over all episodes in the test utterances during which that unit becomes dominant, i.e., has the highest posterior probability among all units. Each of these episodes was defined as a continuous sequence of speech frames, during which the unit remains dominant without interruptions, with duration equal to that number of speech frames times 10 ms.

The acoustic (in)variance of the learned units was probed by looking at multiple repetitions of a single word and testing whether the dominant unit at the central frame of the central phone of the word remained the same for all repetitions. Specifically, we counted the number of distinct dominant units occurring at the central frame of the central phone for 10 repetitions of the same word. To compensate for possible misalignment of the central phones’ central frames (e.g., due to slightly different time courses in the acoustic realization of the phonetic segment and/or small errors in the forced alignment), we allowed the dominant unit at the central frame to be replaced by any unit that is dominant at some point within the previous or following 46 ms (thus covering a 92-ms slice of time corresponding to the average duration of a phoneme in our read-speech test sets), provided it could bring down the overall count of distinct dominant units for the 10 occurrences (see *SI Appendix, Materials and Methods 3* for more information). We considered two conditions: In the within-speaker condition, the test stimuli were uttered by the same speaker 10 times; in the across-speaker condition, they were uttered by 10 different speakers one time. See *SI Appendix, Materials and Methods 3* for more information on the stimulus-selection procedure.

**Data and Code Availability.** The datasets analyzed in this study are publicly available from the commercial vendors and research institutions holding their copyrights (83–86). Datasets generated during the course of the study that do not include proprietary information are available at <https://osf.io/d2fpb/>. Code to reproduce the results is available at <https://github.com/Thomas-Schatz/perceptual-tuning-pnas>.

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1

## 2 **Supplementary Information for**

### 3 **Early phonetic learning without phonetic categories** 4 **Insights from large-scale simulations on realistic input**

5 **Thomas Schatz, Naomi H. Feldman, Sharon Goldwater, Xuan-Nga Cao and Emmanuel Dupoux**

6 **Thomas Schatz.**

7 **E-mail: [thomas.schatz.1986@gmail.com](mailto:thomas.schatz.1986@gmail.com)**

#### 8 **This PDF file includes:**

9     Supplementary text

10    Figs. S1 to S11

11    Table S1

12    References for SI reference citations

## 13 Supporting Information Text

### 14 Supplementary Materials and Methods.

15 **1. Datasets.** The BUC and GPJ corpora annotations present a number of inconsistencies and were curated in-house. In particular,  
16 readers for the GPJ corpus often need several takes before they read an utterance correctly and the failed takes are included in  
17 the original corpus. We only keep the final take for each sentence. For the two spontaneous speech corpora, we keep disfluencies  
18 typical of spontaneous speech (such as hesitations, word fragments, pronunciation errors, fillers, etc.), but remove parts that  
19 were not phonetically transcribed or that include other kinds of noise or silence (96.11% and 80.38% of all utterances are kept  
20 for the BUC and CSJ corpora, respectively).

21 Phonetic transcriptions for the two read speech corpora are obtained by combining the read text with a phonetic dictionary.  
22 For the two spontaneous speech corpora, a manual phonetic transcription of the recordings is used. Word units, which are not  
23 directly apparent in the Japanese writing system, are obtained from the phonetic transcriptions by a Japanese morphological  
24 parser for the read Japanese corpus. For the spontaneous Japanese corpus, we use the provided ‘Long Word Units’ as words.  
25 We exclude phonemes occurring with frequency less than 1 in 10,000 by removing any utterance in which they occur and we  
26 harmonize the transcriptions in order to have the same phonemic inventory for the read and spontaneous corpora for each  
27 language. No phonemes are excluded for the American English corpora. For the Japanese corpora, a few geminate consonants  
28 are excluded (/b:/, /z:/, /h:/, /d:/, /z:/, /g:/, /ɸ:/ for both corpora and /ts:/ for the GPJ corpus only). The retained phonemic  
29 inventory for American English consists of 24 consonants (/p/, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/, /g/, /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/,  
30 /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /h/, /ɹ/, /l/ /w/, /j/) and 15 vowels (/ɪ/, /i:/, /ɛ/, /ʌ/, /ɜ:/, /æ/, /ɑ:/, /ɔ:/, /ʊ/, /u:/, /eɪ/, /aɪ/,  
31 /aʊ/, /ɔɪ/, /oʊ/). The retained phonemic inventory for Japanese consists of 27 consonants (/p/, /t/, /k/, /p:/, /t:/, /k:/, /b/,  
32 /d/, /g/, /s/, /ç/, /s:/, /ç:/, /z/, /z:/, /ts/, /ts:/, /tç/, /tç:/, /m/, /n/, /ɳ/, /h/, /ɸ/, /r/, /w/, /j/) and 10 vowels (/ä/, /e/,  
33 /i/, /o/, /u/, /ä:/, /e:/, /i:/, /o:/, /u:/). For each corpus, timestamps are obtained for the phonetic transcriptions through  
34 forced alignment with an automatic speech recognition (ASR) system (same architecture for the acoustic model as for the  
35 phoneme recognizer baseline described in Section 2 below, trained on the full corpus).

36 **2. Phoneme recognizer baselines.** As a baseline, we also train a phoneme recognizer on the training set of each corpus, with  
37 explicit supervision (i.e. providing the phonemic transcriptions of the training stimuli along with the waveforms). Specifically,  
38 we use the Kaldi toolkit (1) for automatic speech recognition (ASR) to train a hidden Markov model Gaussian mixture model  
39 (HMM-GMM) acoustic model and a phoneme-level bigram language model for each training set. The same training recipe  
40 (adapted from the Wall Street Journal corpus recipe), with the same parameters is used to train a separate model on each of  
41 the four corpora. The acoustic model takes the form of a probabilistic generative model with each phoneme modeled as a set of  
42 contextual variants that are allowed to depend on word-position and preceding and following phonemes. Each variant is itself  
43 modeled as a tri-state hidden Markov model with diagonal covariance Gaussian mixture emission probabilities. The models are  
44 adapted to speakers both during training and test through feature-space maximum likelihood linear regression (FMLLR). See  
45 the Kaldi toolkit documentation for more detail (<http://kaldi-asr.org/doc/>).

46 The trained acoustic and language models are combined (with kaldi acoustic scale parameter set to 0.1) to obtain  
47 representations of test stimuli (possibly in a ‘foreign’ language) under the form of a sequence of frame-level Viterbi-smoothed  
48 posterior probability vectors. We extract frame-level posterior probabilities at two granularity levels: actual phonemes—to  
49 which we refer as the *phoneme recognizer* baseline—and individual states of the contextual hidden Markov models—to which  
50 we refer as the *ASR phone state* baseline.

### 51 3. Analysis of learned representations.

52 **Correction for possible misalignment in the acoustic (in)variance test.** We compensate for possible misalignment  
53 of the central phones’ central frames by allowing the dominant unit at the central frame to be replaced by any unit that was  
54 dominant at some point within the previous or following 46ms, provided this brings down the overall count of distinct dominant  
55 units for the ten occurrences. Finding the optimal way to assign dominant units under this constraint corresponds to solving an  
56 instance of the NP-complete *minimal hitting set size problem* (2). We are able to solve the problem exactly in most cases, due  
57 to the small size of the considered instances. In the few cases where we are not able to solve the problem exactly, our solver  
58 provides a lower bound on the number of representations and we use a greedy search to obtain an upper bound. Although the  
59 effect on the results is very small, we report lower bounds for the Gaussian mixture models and upper bounds for the *phoneme*  
60 *recognizer* and *ASR phone state* baselines, in order to be maximally conservative.

61 **Stimulus selection for the acoustic (in)variance test.** To avoid potentially mispronounced short function words and  
62 possible co-articulation effect across word boundaries, for the acoustic (in)variance test, we select only words of at least five  
63 phonemes and study their central phoneme(s).<sup>\*</sup> We sample uniformly at random a subset of ten occurrences (by a single  
64 speaker or by at least ten distinct speakers, depending on the condition) for each such word with enough repetitions in the test  
65 set. We report results averaged over ten independent runs of this stimulus sampling procedure. The results are also averaged  
66 over the two possible ‘central phone’ positions for words of even length and—in the within-speaker condition—over all available  
67 speakers for a given word type. This yields one average number of distinct dominant units per tested word type. The number

<sup>\*</sup>This stimulus selection procedure was only applied for the acoustic (in)variance test and has the effect of making the test more conservative—i.e. the learned representations would look even more variable without this restriction. Other analyses were not restricted to such words, and all model training was carried out with unfiltered continuous speech that contained words of all different lengths in unsegmented whole sentences.

of available word types matching the specified conditions is 13 (within speaker) and 476 (across speaker) for the American English test stimuli and 83 (within speaker) and 408 (across speaker) for the Japanese test stimuli. As an example, here are the word types selected for the within-speaker American English condition: unquote, billion, dollars, hundred, company, market, million, mister, nineteen, percent, seven, seventy, thousand. For the within-speaker condition, we additionally listened to each test stimulus to identify potential mispronounced, noisy or misaligned stimuli and we checked that excluding these stimuli from the analysis (0/83 word types, 4/1048 word tokens excluded for American English; 14/168 word types, 204/2217 word tokens excluded for Japanese) did not affect the overall pattern of results (Figure S8).

**4. Deriving systematic model predictions.** We systematically seek phonetic contrasts of American English and of Japanese for which the learning mechanism under study robustly predicts a significant cross-linguistic difference in discrimination between Japanese- and American English-learning infants. By *robust* we mean that (a) a significant difference in discrimination errors between models trained on American English and Japanese is consistently found across possible choices for the training and test registers, and (b) that the magnitude of this difference does not decrease when the amount of training input is increased. The former criterion allows us to rule out effects that would reflect peculiarities of the training and/or test stimuli rather than an intrinsic property of the language pair under study. The latter criterion allows us to rule out transient effects that might reflect peculiarities of the model initialization and/or be unlikely to be observed empirically.

We define the predicted cross-linguistic effect for a phonetic contrast as the expected difference in average ABX discrimination error between an ‘American English-native’ and a ‘Japanese-native’ model on that contrast, where the expectation is taken over the choice of American English model, Japanese model, test speaker, phonetic context, and choice of the  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $x$  acoustic tokens given the contrast, speaker and phonetic context. For each contrast, we perform statistical significance tests separately for each of the 8 possible combinations of training register for the American English model, training register for the Japanese model, and test register. We use the models trained on the  $1/10^{th}$  training sets of each corpus for these significance tests, which allows us to take into account variance due to the model training procedure (including the choice of input data) in addition to that due to the choice of test stimuli. We estimate the predicted cross-linguistic effect and its variance and use those estimates to conduct asymptotic bilateral z-tests of the hypothesis that the cross-linguistic effect is different from 0. We also estimate the effects (but not the variances) using the full training sets, which allows us to test whether the observed effects increase (in absolute value) with the amount of input data. We report a robust predicted cross-linguistic effect for a contrast if each of the estimated effects for that contrast (for each of the 8 possible combination of training and test registers) is in the same direction and significantly different from 0 in our asymptotic bilateral z-test, with Benjamini-Yekutieli (3) correction for multiple correlated comparisons at level  $\alpha = 0.05$ ; and if the estimated effect for models trained on the full training sets are in the same direction and larger in absolute value than the corresponding effects estimated for models trained on the  $1/10^{th}$  subsets.

In what follows, we first formally define the predicted cross-linguistic effect for a phonetic contrast  $P_1, P_2$ . We then discuss how to estimate the effect in practice from finite samples of models trained on Japanese and trained on American English, and finite samples of test acoustic tokens from phonetic categories  $P_1$  and  $P_2$ . Finally, we explain in detail how the statistical significance of the estimated effects can be assessed.

**Effect of interest.** We are interested in the predicted cross-linguistic effect for a phonetic contrast  $P_1, P_2$ , i.e. the expected difference in average ABX discrimination error between a model trained on language  $L_1$  and a model trained on language  $L_2$ , which we denote as  $\delta(P_1, P_2, L_1, L_2)$  and define formally below.<sup>†</sup> Let us consider a model  $M$  trained on input language  $L$ , input register  $R_I$  and input amount  $A_I$ , and tested on phonetic category  $P$  from test language  $L_T$  in phonetic context  $C$  (preceding and following phonetic category) from test speaker  $S$  with test register  $R_T$ . Let us note

$$p_{P,L,R_I,A_I,L_T,R_T}(\mathfrak{R} \mid M, S, C),$$

the probability distribution over model representations  $\mathfrak{R}$ , where we treat the trained model  $M$ , test speaker  $S$  and test context  $C$  as conditioning random variables and assume fixed values for the other parameters. Then, the predicted cross-linguistic effect for phonetic contrast  $P_1, P_2$  and training languages  $L_1, L_2$  is defined as

$$\delta(P_1, P_2, L_1, L_2) := \mathbf{E}_{M_1, M_2, S, C}[\epsilon(P_1, P_2, M_1, S, C) - \epsilon(P_1, P_2, M_2, S, C)],$$

where

- $M_x$  for  $x$  in  $\{1, 2\}$  is a randomly sampled trained model for input language  $L_x$ , training register  $R_{I,x}$  and input amount  $A_{I,x}$ ;
- $S$  is a randomly chosen test speaker and  $C$  is a context chosen uniformly at random among available test phonetic contexts, for test language  $L_T$ , test register  $R_T$  and test phonetic contrast  $(P_1, P_2)$ ;
- $\epsilon(P_1, P_2, M_x, S, C)$  is the symmetric ABX discrimination error, defined as

$$\epsilon(P_1, P_2, M_x, S, C) := \frac{1}{2}[e(P_1, P_2, M_x, S, C) + e(P_2, P_1, M_x, S, C)],$$

<sup>†</sup>This is for a given choice of input registers  $R_{I,1}$  and  $R_{I,2}$  and input amounts  $A_{I,1}$  and  $A_{I,2}$  for each model, and of test language  $L_T$  and test register  $R_T$  (which we constrain to be the same for the two tested phonetic categories in our experiments). To avoid clutter, we do not indicate these dependencies explicitly in the notation.

with

$$e(P_1, P_2, M_x, S, C) := p[d(A, X) < d(B, X)] + \frac{1}{2}p[d(A, X) = d(B, X)],$$

for  $A, X$  drawn independently from  $p_{P_1, L}(\mathfrak{R} \mid M_x, S, C)$  and  $B$  drawn from  $p_{P_2, L}(\mathfrak{R} \mid M_x, S, C)$ .

This is the quantity we seek to estimate, given our trained models in English and Japanese, and the particular acoustic tokens in our corpora from the phonetic categories we would like to test.

**Estimation of the effect.** In order to obtain a sample of model representations  $S_{P, M, L_T, R_T, S, C}$  for each relevant combination of the index variables, we extract a representation of each test acoustic token for each model  $M$ .<sup>‡</sup> For each combination of test language  $L_T$ , test register  $R_T$ , test speaker  $S$  and test phonetic context  $C$ , we obtain a sample of up to 5 acoustic realizations of each phonetic category from the test corpus. For each combination of training language  $L$ , training register  $R_I$ , we obtain one model trained on the full training set and 10 models that are each trained on  $1/10^{\text{th}}$  of it.

Given these samples from the distributions of model representations of test stimuli, we define the following estimator of  $\delta(P_1, P_2, L_1, L_2)$ ,

$$\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2) := \frac{1}{|\mathcal{S}|} \sum_{S \in \mathcal{S}} \frac{1}{|\mathcal{C}(S)|} \sum_{C \in \mathcal{C}(S)} \left( \frac{1}{|\mathcal{M}_1|} \sum_{M_1 \in \mathcal{M}_1} \hat{e}(S_{P_1, M_1, S, C}, S_{P_2, M_1, S, C}) - \frac{1}{|\mathcal{M}_2|} \sum_{M_2 \in \mathcal{M}_2} \hat{e}(S_{P_1, M_2, S, C}, S_{P_2, M_2, S, C}) \right),$$

where  $\mathcal{S}$  is the set of sampled test speakers,  $\mathcal{C}(S)$  is the set of contexts available for the target contrast from test speaker  $S$ ,  $\mathcal{M}_1$  and  $\mathcal{M}_2$  are the sampled models for training language  $L_1$  and  $L_2$  respectively and  $\hat{e}$  is the estimator for the ABX discrimination error defined in the Material and Methods section of the main text.

Provided there is no systematic bias in how phonetic contexts are missing from the sample of any particular test speaker,  $\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)$  can be shown to be an unbiased estimator of  $\delta(P_1, P_2, L_1, L_2)$ .

**Significance testing.** We want to assess the contrasts for which a significant cross-linguistic difference in discriminability is observed. In order to do assess significance, we need a test statistic with a known distribution. For given  $P_1, P_2, L_1, L_2$ , we define

$$\hat{D}(S, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2) := \frac{1}{|\mathcal{C}(S)|} \sum_{C \in \mathcal{C}(S)} [\hat{e}(S_{P_1, M_1, S, C}, S_{P_2, M_1, S, C}) - \hat{e}(S_{P_1, M_2, S, C}, S_{P_2, M_2, S, C})].$$

It is straightforward to check that

$$\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2) = \frac{1}{|\mathcal{S}| |\mathcal{M}_1| |\mathcal{M}_2|} \sum_{\substack{S \in \mathcal{S} \\ M_1 \in \mathcal{M}_1 \\ M_2 \in \mathcal{M}_2}} \hat{D}(S, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2).$$

$\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)$  can thus be interpreted as a (generalized) U-statistic with kernel  $\hat{D}$  of order 3 and degree (1, 1, 1) (4), applied to mutually independent i.i.d. samples  $\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1$  and  $\mathcal{M}_2$  (where an element  $S$  of  $\mathcal{S}$  is effectively a sample of up to five acoustic tokens for each phonetic context available from speaker  $S$  for the target phonetic contrast).

Assuming this U-statistic is not degenerate, we can apply the central limit theorem for U-statistics (4) to obtain that

$$\frac{\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)}{\mathbf{Var}[\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)]}$$

has an asymptotic normal distribution with mean  $\delta(P_1, P_2, L_1, L_2)$  and variance 1. Provided we can estimate the variance of the estimator  $\mathbf{Var}[\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)]$ , this result allows us to perform asymptotic z-tests of  $\mathcal{H}_0 : \delta(P_1, P_2, L_1, L_2) = 0$  versus  $\mathcal{H}_1 : \delta(P_1, P_2, L_1, L_2) \neq 0$ . We provide the required estimator  $\hat{V}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)$  of  $\mathbf{Var}[\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)]$  in the next section.

**Estimation of the variance of  $\hat{\delta}$ .** The previous section showed that given an estimate  $\hat{V}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)$  of the variance  $\mathbf{Var}[\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)]$ , we can compute statistical significance of the estimated differences in discrimination error between languages. In this section we derive such an estimator.

We first find an expression for  $\mathbf{Var}[\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)]$ , then derive an estimator from it. We use  $n_1$  to denote the number of test speakers,  $|\mathcal{S}|$ ,  $n_2$  to denote the number of models trained on language  $L_1$ ,  $|\mathcal{M}_1|$ , and  $n_3$  to denote the number of models trained on language  $L_2$ ,  $|\mathcal{M}_2|$ . We can express the variance using the standard decomposition for the variance of a U statistic (4),

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{Var}[\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)] &= \frac{1}{n_1 n_2 n_3} [(n_1 - 1)(n_2 - 1)\sigma_{001}^2 + (n_1 - 1)(n_3 - 1)\sigma_{010}^2 + (n_2 - 1)(n_3 - 1)\sigma_{100}^2 \\ &\quad + (n_1 - 1)\sigma_{011}^2 + (n_2 - 1)\sigma_{101}^2 + (n_3 - 1)\sigma_{110}^2 \\ &\quad + \sigma_{111}^2] \end{aligned}$$

where  $\sigma_{xyz}^2$  denotes the covariance between  $\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1)$  and  $\hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_2)$  for two triplets  $(s_1, a_1, j_1), (s_2, a_2, j_2)$  formed of a randomly sampled combination of a test speaker, an American English model, and a Japanese model, with the subscripts  $x, y$ ,

<sup>‡</sup>Possibly with some missing data, as not all possible phonetic contexts occur for each speaker and each phonetic category in any given test set.

and  $z$  indicating whether the two test speakers, American English models and Japanese models, respectively, are constrained to be identical (subscript 0) or not (subscript 1). For example,

$$\begin{aligned}\sigma_{000}^2 &= \mathbb{E}_{s_1, s_2, a_1, a_2, j_1, j_2} [\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_2)] - (\mathbb{E}_{s, a, j} [\hat{D}(s, a, j)])^2 = 0; \\ \sigma_{111}^2 &= \mathbb{E}_{s, a, j} [\hat{D}(s, a, j)^2] - (\mathbb{E}_{s, a, j} [\hat{D}(s, a, j)])^2; \\ \sigma_{001}^2 &= \mathbb{E}_{s_1, s_2, a_1, a_2, j} [\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j)] - (\mathbb{E}_{s, a, j} [\hat{D}(s, a, j)])^2.\end{aligned}$$

We now use the above variance decomposition to derive an estimator. Let us define the order 3, degree (2, 2, 2) kernel  $\psi_{k_1 k_2 k_3}$  for some strictly positive integers  $k_1, k_2, k_3$ , as follows

$$\begin{aligned}\psi_{k_1 k_2 k_3}(s_1, s_2, a_1, a_2, j_1, j_2) &:= \frac{1}{k_1 k_2 k_3} [(k_1 - 1)(k_2 - 1)(\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_1) - \hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_2)) \\ &\quad + (k_1 - 1)(k_3 - 1)(\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_1, j_2) - \hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_2)) \\ &\quad + (k_2 - 1)(k_3 - 1)(\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_1, a_2, j_2) - \hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_2)) \\ &\quad + (k_1 - 1)(\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_1, j_1) - \hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_2)) \\ &\quad + (k_2 - 1)(\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_1, a_2, j_1) - \hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_2)) \\ &\quad + (k_3 - 1)(\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_2) - \hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_2)) \\ &\quad + (\hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) - \hat{D}(s_1, a_1, j_1) \hat{D}(s_2, a_2, j_2))]\end{aligned}$$

147 Let us consider some arbitrary orderings  $(s_1, s_2, \dots, s_{n_1})$ ,  $(a_1, a_2, \dots, a_{n_2})$  and  $(j_1, j_2, \dots, j_{n_3})$  of  $\mathcal{S}$ ,  $\mathcal{M}_1$ , and  $\mathcal{M}_2$ , respectively.  
148 Let us also note  $(n \ k)$ , for any integers  $n$  and  $k$ , the set of all integer  $k$ -tuples  $(i_1, i_2, \dots, i_k)$  such that  $1 \leq i_1 < i_2 < \dots < i_k \leq n$ .

It is straightforward to show that  $\psi_{n_1 n_2 n_3}$  is an unbiased estimator for  $\mathbf{Var}[\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)]$ , leading to the following symmetric unbiased estimator based on all of the available data

$$\hat{V}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2) := \frac{1}{\binom{n_1}{2} \binom{n_2}{2} \binom{n_3}{2}} \sum_{\substack{i_1, i_2 \in \binom{n_1}{2} \\ j_1, j_2 \in \binom{n_2}{2} \\ k_1, k_2 \in \binom{n_3}{2}}} \psi_{n_1 n_2 n_3}^S(s_{i_1}, s_{i_2}, a_{j_1}, a_{j_2}, j_{k_1}, j_{k_2}),$$

where  $\psi_{n_1 n_2 n_3}^S$  is the symmetrized version of  $\psi_{n_1 n_2 n_3}$

$$\psi_{n_1 n_2 n_3}^S(s_1, s_2, a_1, a_2, j_1, j_2) := \frac{1}{(2!)^3} \sum_{\substack{i_1, i_2 \in S_2 \\ j_1, j_2 \in S_2 \\ k_1, k_2 \in S_2}} \psi_{n_1 n_2 n_3}(s_{i_1}, s_{i_2}, a_{j_1}, a_{j_2}, j_{k_1}, j_{k_2}),$$

149 with  $S_2 = \{(1, 2), (2, 1)\}$  the set of all permutations of  $\{1, 2\}$ .

150 With this estimator for the variance of  $\hat{\delta}(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{M}_1, \mathcal{M}_2)$ , we can now conduct a  $z$ -test over the test statistic defined in the  
151 previous section to compute statistical significance of cross-linguistic discrimination differences.

## 152 **Supplementary Discussion.**

153 **1. Input idealization in computational modeling of early phonetic learning.** Modeling studies investigating the feasibility of potential  
154 learning mechanisms for early phonetic learning have typically relied on input idealizations that sidestep the lack of invariance  
155 problem and the phonetic segmentation problem, and cannot therefore alleviate the feasibility concerns related to these  
156 problems. In initial modeling work investigating the feasibility of learning phonetic categories through distributional learning  
157 (5–9), the phonetic category segmentation problem was either simply assumed to have been solved (7–9), or the input speech  
158 was assumed to consist of exemplars from a restricted number of pre-segmented or isolated syllable types, that were furthermore  
159 chosen such that automatic segmentation of the vowel nucleus based on voicing cues would be easy (5, 6). The impact of the  
160 lack of invariance problem was minimized by artificially limiting the variability of the input. Specifically, the input speech  
161 signal was: chosen from a restricted set of phonemes (5–9); occurring in a restricted set of phonetic contexts (5–7); uttered  
162 by a (very) restricted set of speakers (5, 9); available to the learner in a manually encoded (7–9) and/or restricted (5–9)  
163 phonetic feature space; drawn from synthetic parametric sound distributions fitted to corpus data rather than using corpus data  
164 directly (7, 8). Subsequent studies considered slightly more realistic variability and found that distributional learning was not  
165 sufficient anymore to learn phonetic categories accurately (10–16) and proposed additional learning mechanisms tapping into  
166 other sources of information plausibly available to infants to complement distributional learning. However, demonstrations of  
167 feasibility for the proposed mechanisms still assumed the phonetic category segmentation problem to be solved (10–12, 14–16)  
168 and/or did not fully address the lack of invariance problem by not considering the full variability of natural speech (10–16).  
169 Specifically, input speech signal was: chosen from a restricted set of phonemes (10–12, 14–16); occurring in a restricted set of  
170 phonetic contexts (12, 14, 16); uttered by a very restricted set of speakers (10, 11, 13, 15, 16); available to the learner in a  
171 manually encoded (9, 10, 12, 14–16) and/or restricted (10–12, 14–16) phonetic feature space; drawn from synthetic parametric  
172 sound distributions fitted to corpus data rather than using corpus data directly (11–14). Existing attempts to extend some

of these results to more realistic learning conditions have failed (17, 18). The few studies that attempted to model infant phonetic learning from naturalistic, unsegmented speech input remained inconclusive for lack of a suitable evaluation method (19, 20). Finally, we know of only one demonstration of feasibility for an account of early phonetic learning in which the outcome of learning is not phonetic categories (21). It also assumes the phonetic category segmentation problem to be solved and minimizes the impact of the lack of invariance problem by artificially limiting the variability of the input speech.

Modeling assumptions are necessary in any model—for example, our approach ignores the visual component of speech and uses adult-directed rather than child-directed speech—but they should be critically examined to assess their suitability relative to the research objectives. For example, whereas the assumptions typically made in previous studies were all geared toward making the learning problem easier—by sidestepping the lack of invariance and phonetic segmentation problems—we focus, as much as possible, on modeling assumptions that make it harder. This means that in our framework, positive feasibility results constitute much stronger evidence. Our framework is not devoid of modeling assumptions that make the learning problem easier; for example, we consider speech input consisting of speech from a single speaker at a time, captured by a close-range microphone, and with no overlap with environmental sounds. However, we make many fewer such simplifying assumptions than previous models and we are careful not to sidestep the phonetic category segmentation and the lack of invariance problems in particular. This ensures that our simulations are suitable to address feasibility concerns related to these problems.

**2. Model initialization, learning procedure and convergence.** Following Chen et al. (22), the parameters of our Gaussian mixture models are learned through the exact Markov chain Monte-Carlo (MCMC) sampling algorithm proposed in Chang & Fisher (23). This algorithm combines, in a principled way, Gibbs sampling of the parameters of instantiated mixture components (i.e. the clusters with non-empty membership at any given point in the algorithm execution) with sampling of split and merge moves that increase or reduce the number of instantiated mixture components. It is designed to combine good statistical convergence properties with computational efficiency, and in particular to allow the parallelization of the computations to accommodate large training datasets.

We also follow Chen et al. (22) for model initialization. They used the default initialization procedure in the implementation proposed by Chang & Fisher (23), which consists of assigning each data point in the training set uniformly at random to one of ten initial clusters. The mean vector and covariance matrix for each of these ten initial clusters is then taken as the mean and covariance of the points assigned to that cluster. The weights of each of the cluster in the initial mixture is obtained by drawing from a Dirichlet distribution with ten categories and concentration parameter whose  $i$ -th component, for  $1 \leq i \leq 10$ , is the number of points that were initially assigned to the  $i$ -th cluster.

In theory, the initial state should not influence the learning outcomes when using this algorithm. The sampling algorithm we use comes with the usual guarantees (for sampling algorithms) of global convergence to the true posterior in the limit (23), so that in principle, the initialization procedure should not matter if we run the sampling procedure for long enough. The main issue in practice is that there is usually no definitive way to determine when it has been ‘long enough’. In our case, we look at the number of learned categories as a function of the number of sampling iterations (Figure S11). We see that this number is largely stabilized after about 600 iterations for all the models we train. This suggests that training the models for 1500 sampling iterations (per parameter), as we do—again following the example of (22)—is sufficient for model convergence. We also see that cross-linguistic differences emerge quite robustly on independent runs for models trained on one to two hours of speech input (Figure 3(b)). Thus, we are reasonably confident that the models have converged.

Still, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that running the algorithm for longer might ultimately lead to a different outcome (e.g. to units corresponding to phonetic categories), and that a different setting of the initial state might lead to that outcome faster. This leads us to consider the biological and psychological plausibility of the initialization procedure we used.

A prominent proposal in the literature (see 24, for example)—motivated by observations of a certain ‘language-readiness’ of the human brain at birth and even before (25)—is that infants start with an innately specified, ‘universal’ mapping from an auditory space to a phonetic space, which is then progressively altered as they gain experience with their native language. However, there have not yet been proposals for a concrete implementation of such a mapping (although see 26, for a possible technical solution).

This view is not universally shared. An alternative hypothesis has been argued to be fully compatible with the empirical record (e.g. 27, 28), according to which the observation of ‘universal’ phonetic discrimination abilities in newborns would correspond to an initial mode of perception of a purely auditory nature, in the absence of any mapping to phonetic space. Under this view, phonetic representations would be initiated through some form of random mapping, and subsequently refined through experience-dependent plasticity. One benefit of this latter view is that it assumes less in terms of what needs to be genetically specified than an innate universal mapping between acoustic and phonetic space.

As discussed in the main text, MFCC input features can be interpreted as the output of a (very) simple model of the peripheral auditory system, and our approach to initialization can thus be understood as an implementation of this latter view. We are not aware of many empirical constraints on what would constitute a plausible random initialization of the phonetic clusters within this auditory space, and our initialization procedure represents one possible, albeit admittedly arbitrary, solution.

**3. Interpretation of simulated discrimination errors and relation to empirical observations.** To evaluate our trained models, we expose them to appropriate test stimuli (e.g. exemplars of [ɹ] and [l]) and simulate discrimination tasks using the models’ representation of these stimuli. Here, we discuss our criteria to decide if the models successfully account for early phonetic learning on the basis of the resulting discrimination errors. For the purpose of this article, we deem our models successful if they can account for the

233 cross-linguistic differences in discrimination abilities observed in infants in the first year of life for the Japanese/American  
234 English language pair we study.

235 The results to be accounted for come from a 2006 study by Kuhl and colleagues (29), since we are not aware of other studies  
236 directly comparing the phonetic discrimination abilities of Japanese and American English infants in the first year. Using  
237 a conditioned head turning paradigm, they found no significant difference between American English and Japanese infants'  
238 ability to discriminate a synthetic [ja] stimulus from a synthetic [la] stimulus at 6-8 months. Both groups answered correctly on  
239 about 65% of test trials. In contrast, at 10-12 months, American English infants were found to be significantly more accurate  
240 than Japanese infants in the same task. American English infants answered correctly on about 75% of trials while Japanese  
241 infants answered correctly on about 60% of trials. All four groups discriminated the stimuli significantly above chance. When  
242 comparing across ages, American English 10-12 month olds were found to be significantly better at discriminating the stimuli  
243 than their 6-8 month old counterparts, whereas Japanese 10-12 month olds were not found to be significantly worse than their  
244 6-8 month old counterparts (but see 30). We adopt the standard interpretation that these results reflect infants' discrimination  
245 of the [ɹ]-[l] contrast, and not just of the two specific stimuli tested in the experiment. We therefore test our models both on  
246 those specific stimuli (Figure S6), and on other instances of [ɹ] and [l] (Figure 3). However, we do not assume these observations  
247 of early phonetic learning in infants to mean that 10-12 month old infants have formed adult-like representations; while this is  
248 a common view in the literature, it is premised on the phonetic category hypothesis we are contesting. In particular, we do not  
249 take the results from Kuhl et al. (29) to necessarily indicate that Japanese 10-12 month olds have become nearly deaf to the  
250 [ɹ]-[l] distinction, or that American English 10-12 month olds learned to discriminate it perfectly.<sup>§</sup>

251 Given our current state of knowledge about infant cognition, there are some quantitative aspects of these results that  
252 we cannot hope to model, even in principle. First, we cannot hope to model the quantitative values of the error rates or  $d'$   
253 measurements characterizing infant discrimination in these experiments, as these values depend strongly on the specifics of  
254 the experiments in ways that are not well understood (32). This uncertainty might potentially be accounted for through free  
255 parameters in the model, but fitting those parameters would not be feasible due to the limited number of datapoints available  
256 to constrain them.<sup>¶</sup> Second, we do not know the precise correspondence between an infant of a particular age and a model  
257 presented with a particular amount and quality of data. The quality and quantity of data in infants' environments does not  
258 directly translate into their *intake* (33), the data they use for learning. In addition, some of the differences in infants' behavior  
259 at different ages might also stem from developmental factors not directly related to perception, and these are not included in  
260 our model. Moreover, we do not know whether infants rely solely on learned representations for discrimination, even when those  
261 representations are just starting to be formed and might be unreliable, or whether they initially rely on language-universal  
262 input features for discrimination, and then smoothly transition to relying on the learned language-specific representations as  
263 the amount of training data increases. This prevents us from interpreting the change in discrimination errors as a function of  
264 the amount of training input given to the model on Figure 3(b) directly as a developmental trajectory for example.

265 Because we cannot hope to get a quantitative match in either the absolute discrimination scores or the absolute quantity of  
266 training data, we focus on modeling qualitative aspects of the empirical results. This means showing that American English  
267 models discriminate [ɹ] and [l] better than Japanese models do. We find this qualitative effect both with the original stimuli  
268 from Kuhl et al. (29), and with a broader set of speech stimuli drawn from American English speech corpora. Figure S6 shows  
269 that with small amounts of training data, the dissimilarity between the two original stimuli is roughly similar for all models.  
270 As the amount of training data increases, the two stimuli become more dissimilar for the American English models, while  
271 their dissimilarity stays roughly the same for the Japanese models. When tested on a broader set of [ɹ] and [l] stimuli, all  
272 models get better at discriminating this contrast as the amount of training data increases, but a clear cross-linguistic difference  
273 nevertheless emerges (Figure 3(b)). As noted above, there are a number of reasons why the direction of change in absolute  
274 error rates might not be reliable; but in both simulations, the increasing separation between English and Japanese models with  
275 increasing training data qualitatively matches the empirical pattern.

276 A limitation of this study is that it focuses on one language pair, limiting the relevant empirical record to mostly one study  
277 (29). Mugitani and colleagues (34) suggested that vowel length perception at 10 months could be similar in American English  
278 and Japanese listeners; our models appear broadly consistent with this hypothesis, as we find no systematic difference in  
279 Japanese vowel length discrimination between the Japanese and American English models (see Supplementary Discussion 5).  
280 However, we do not focus on this result, as Mugitani and colleagues (34) did not directly test American English 10 month olds,  
281 and recent evidence suggests that the development of vowel length perception, for Japanese listeners at least, might be more  
282 complicated than once thought (35). As argued in the main discussion, in the longer term our modeling framework will allow  
283 evaluating the proposed learning mechanism against the empirical record on further language pairs, comparing it with other  
284 possible learning mechanisms, and designing empirical tests of their predictions.

285 We are not aiming to model adult data, nor are we able to interpret absolute error rates relative to infant data. Thus, the  
286 absolute levels of the discrimination errors we obtain have little bearing on our main conclusions. However, it is still interesting  
287 to get a sense of how those absolute error rates might be interpreted. To this end, we added a supervised phoneme recognizer  
288 baseline as a possible approximation of an adult-like state.<sup>||</sup> In general, the supervised baselines show larger cross-linguistic  
289 differences than our (unsupervised) models do. For the [ɹ]-[l] contrast, for example, the absolute difference in discrimination  
290 errors between 'native' and 'non-native' models is about four times as large for the supervised phoneme recognizers as for the

<sup>§</sup>This view is supported by empirical evidence that American English infants' perception of [ɹ]-[l] develops well beyond the first year of life (31).

<sup>¶</sup>One potential solution might be to pool infant data across many experiments to try and calibrate task models. However, it is unclear whether this strategy could be successful, because of the heterogeneity in the way infant experiments are carried out in practice.

<sup>||</sup>This is different from its role in Figures 4, S7, S9 and S10, where it is used as a possible embodiment of the linguistic notion of phonetic category.

291 unsupervised models. These larger crosslinguistic differences are driven by decreased performance of the supervised baselines  
292 on the ‘non-native’ language and increased performance on the ‘native’ language (Figures S3, S5), though improvement on  
293 the ‘native’ language does not appear robust to a register change (Figure S3). These results show that the proposed learning  
294 mechanisms for early phonetic learning is compatible with the view that one-year-olds have not yet formed mature, adult-like  
295 speech representations.\*\*

296 We additionally included an unlearned ‘auditory’ input features baseline (with distances computed directly between sequence  
297 of MFCC input vectors) in Figures S3, S5, as a possible approximation of discrimination on the basis of a language-universal  
298 auditory representation. This baseline performs surprisingly well relative to both the supervised baseline and the unsupervised  
299 models in discriminating some phonetic contrasts. On average, the ‘native’ models do better than the baseline, and the  
300 ‘non-native’ models do worse, as expected (Figure S3). However, this is not true for every contrast, as can be seen for [ɹ]-[l]  
301 and [w]-[j] on Figure S5. There are a number of possible ways to interpret this result.†† This might reflect a shortcoming  
302 common to both the unsupervised models and supervised baselines for these contrasts. It might also be that, in order to  
303 catch up with the input features baseline, our models require larger amount of training input (Figure 3(b)) or input that is  
304 more similar to what infants hear (38). Finally, another possibility is that high level language-specific representation might  
305 need to be combined with information-rich auditory representation (39) to enable accurate phonetic discrimination of certain  
306 contrasts—as appears to be the case in humans (40).

307 **4. Interpretation and plausibility of the learned representations.** It might seem surprising for infants to be learning—as part of the  
308 language acquisition process—units such as those we find, with no established linguistic interpretation. Given the relative  
309 evolutionary recency of the language faculty in humans (41), however, early phonetic learning might be grounded in domain-  
310 general perceptual learning mechanisms (42, 43), the outcome of which might not conform to a purely linguistic interpretation.  
311 Supporting this view are observations of early perceptual attunement in other modalities than speech perception—for example  
312 in face (44), voice (45), pitch (46, 47), music (48) and linguistic sign (49) perception—and in other animals than humans—for  
313 example for conspecific vocalizations in rats (50), for music in mice (51) and for faces in macaques (52). Furthermore, there  
314 is evidence that the physiological mechanisms governing the onset and offset of perceptual attunement might be similar in  
315 these different modalities and conserved from mouse to man (53–55). Furthermore, from a more adaptive/functional point  
316 of view, phonetic categories embody sophisticated linguistic knowledge and inferring them from scratch might simply be  
317 too difficult. The learned representations under the proposed account support remarkably accurate discrimination of native  
318 language word-forms (22, 56–58)—a criterion for which early phonetic representations have been proposed to be optimized  
319 (59–61). They could thus serve as a more robust intermediate point in a bootstrapping process (62) ultimately leading to  
320 language proficiency.

321 Another question that arises is whether the learned representations are biologically and psychologically plausible given  
322 their relatively high dimensionality—between 444 and 899 learned categories, with posterior probability vectors of matching  
323 dimension. It is questionable whether infants—or even adults—would be able to explicitly access and manipulate such detailed  
324 representations of the phonetics of very short stretches of speech. We believe, however, that the learned units are plausible  
325 at least as lower-level perceptual representations. Such high-capacity intermediate representations are commonly postulated  
326 in other domains of adult and infant cognition—for example, as part of the ‘core’ object recognition and the ‘core’ spatial  
327 navigation systems (63), with corresponding computational models typically featuring representations in even higher dimensions  
328 than the ones we consider here (64–67). Computation over such high-capacity representations is likely to be costly and might  
329 be limited to a restricted set of operations—including the formation of integrated similarity or familiarity judgments, for  
330 example. Such representations are typically seen as supporting the operation of largely subconscious cognitive processes and  
331 allowing the formation of higher-level, lower-capacity, representations over which computations can be carried out more flexibly  
332 (see 68, for example).

333 **5. Systematic model predictions.** We provide a concrete demonstration of our framework’s ability to link accounts of early phonetic  
334 learning to systematic predictions regarding the empirical phenomenon they seek to explain by reporting in Table S1 phonetic  
335 contrasts of Japanese and American English for which the distributional learning mechanism we study robustly predicts a  
336 significant difference in discrimination abilities between learners of those languages. Note that nothing in our method—which  
337 we present in detail in Supplementary Materials and Methods 4—is specific to the particular distributional learning mechanism  
338 studied in this article. It applies directly to any learning mechanism taking actual speech signal as input, as long as a reasonable  
339 way to measure the (dis)similarity between the learned representations of relevant test stimuli can be provided.

340 Reassuringly, we find that American English [ɹ]-[l] is among the contrasts robustly predicted to be significantly harder to  
341 discriminate for Japanese-learning infants. Only two other contrasts of American English are predicted to be robustly harder to  
342 discriminate for Japanese-learning infants, both involving the rhotacized vowel [ɜ̃]. We are not aware of empirical comparisons  
343 of Japanese- and American English-learning infants (and even adults) having been carried out so far for these contrasts. No  
344 contrast of Japanese is predicted to be robustly harder for American-English-learning infants.

345 **6. Advantages of our approach over traditional approaches to making predictions.** Our approach to linking a learning mechanism to  
346 systematic predictions regarding infant phonetic discrimination relies on explicit simulations of the learning process. Such  
347 simulations have been carried out before (5–16, 19–21, 69), however this never resulted in concrete predictions regarding

\*\* This view is supported among other things by evidence of continued phonetic learning well after the first year (see e.g. 31, 36, 37).

†† We do not attempt to decide between these possible interpretations here, as this is not directly relevant to our main conclusions.

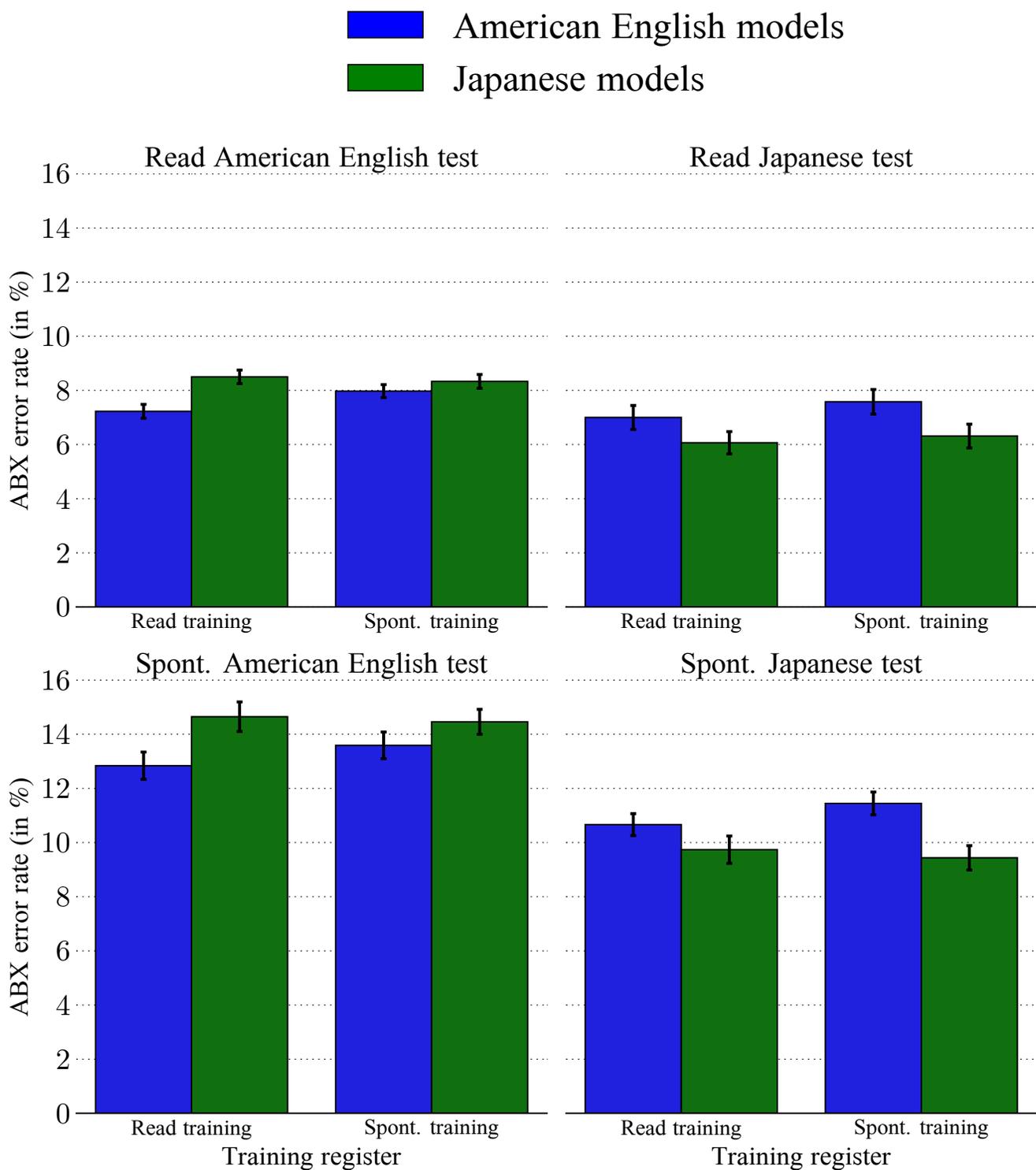
348 infants' discrimination abilities. One reason is that previous simulation studies were conducted in the context of *outcome-*  
349 *driven* approaches and therefore focused on testing whether phonetic categories could be learned, rather than on predicting  
350 discrimination patterns observed in infants. There are also methodological limitations that would have severely limited  
351 the possibility of obtaining systematic predictions in these studies. One of them is the drastically simplified input used in  
352 most studies. Influences of the phonetic context on cross-linguistic differences in discrimination abilities (70) might fail to be  
353 captured when the training data is restricted to just a few contexts, for example. Or meaningful predictions might be impossible  
354 for non-native contrasts falling into part of the phonetic space that is not represented in the input when it contains only a  
355 subset of the phonetic categories of the training language (e.g. if the input consists exclusively of vowels represented in terms  
356 of their formant frequencies). Even for the studies that did attempt to model infant phonetic learning from realistic speech  
357 input (19, 20), the lack of a suitable evaluation method to handle the complex speech representations typically produced by  
358 algorithms learning from raw speech without supervision would have prevented the derivation of systematic predictions. Indeed,  
359 as we already noted, traditional signal detection theory models of discrimination tasks (71) cannot handle high-dimensional  
360 input representations, while more elaborate Bayesian probabilistic models (72) typically have too many free parameters to be  
361 practical. Moreover, traditional evaluation methods for representation learning algorithms from the machine learning literature  
362 typically assess performance on downstream tasks such as supervised classification, or against known cluster labels, rather than  
363 on the discrimination abilities measured in infants. Finally, the procurement of appropriate test stimuli for all the phonetic  
364 contrasts for which predictions are to be obtained, and the need for a sound statistical methodology to separate signal from  
365 noise in the large number of resulting predictions, would have presented two additional challenges.

366 In principle, an alternative to our mechanism-driven approach would be to obtain predictions by relying on pre-specified  
367 notions of the outcome of learning. In phonetic category accounts, for example, predictions could be made based on how the  
368 phonetic categories from the test language map onto the phonetic categories of the native language. This has been the standard  
369 approach in the field until now, but to the best of our knowledge, has never resulted in the kind of systematic predictions  
370 we report here. Its scalability is limited by two central difficulties related to the intrinsic complexity of the speech signal.  
371 First, given that detailed aspects of the speech signal can strongly affect discrimination abilities (70, 73), making systematic  
372 predictions would require extraordinarily detailed phonetic descriptions of the whole phonetic space in all of the relevant  
373 languages. Such descriptions are not available at the required scale at present, and conducting detailed phonetic analyses to  
374 obtain them would represent a colossal undertaking. Second, even on a small scale, how to carry out the required phonetic  
375 analyses is not clear. Arbitrary decisions would have to be made, for example, regarding which phonetic dimensions to include,  
376 how to characterize these dimensions acoustically, how to characterize discrete categories in the presence of gradient effects,  
377 and how to concretely relate the observed cross-linguistic phonetic differences to predicted discrimination abilities. Some of this  
378 methodological uncertainty has been sidestepped in practice by relying on empirical assimilation patterns—adults' judgments  
379 regarding what sound from their native language is most similar to a non-native stimulus—to guide the derivation of predictions  
380 in an ad hoc fashion. This is not a scalable solution, however, given the costs associated with human experimentation. It also  
381 fails to explain how the observed assimilation patterns arise in the first place.

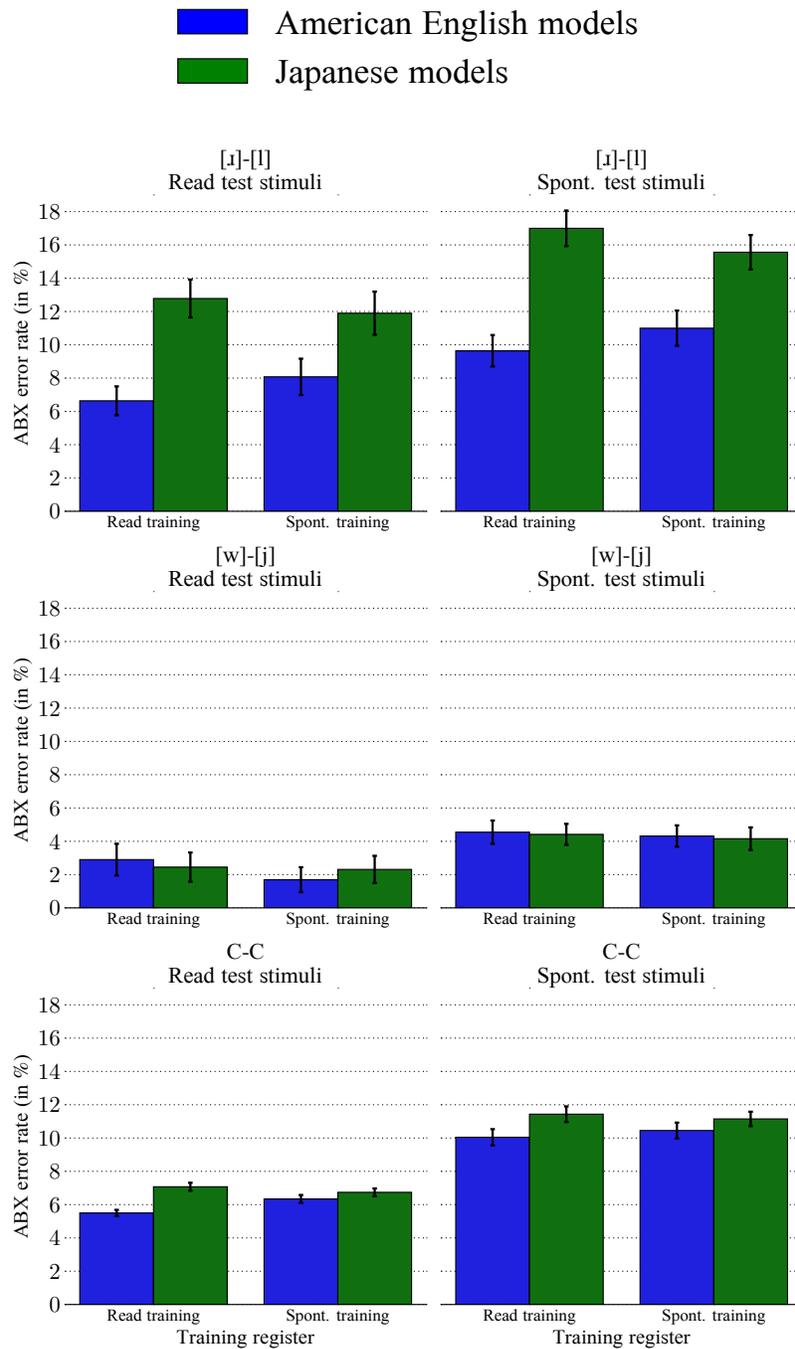
382 Our modeling framework provides the first practical, scalable way to link accounts of early phonetic learning to systematic  
383 predictions regarding infant phonetic discrimination. Key innovations underlying the success of our framework relative to  
384 previous approaches include a focus on mechanisms rather than outcomes, and on mechanisms capable of learning from  
385 naturalistic speech in particular, resulting in models capable of making systematic predictions. The testing of these models  
386 at scale relies on further important innovations. One of them is the use of large forced-aligned databases of transcribed  
387 continuous speech recordings to procure relevant test stimuli. Another is the use of the machine ABX test to link model  
388 representation of test stimuli to concrete, systematic predictions regarding infants' discrimination abilities. The machine  
389 ABX test is an automatized, parameterless measure of discriminability that is computationally tractable, statistically efficient,  
390 and can handle representations in essentially any format, as long as a reasonable way to measure the similarity between the  
391 speech representations to be evaluated can be provided, making it easy to compare the predictions from different models  
392 (74). The rationale for such an evaluation method, with a focus on simplicity of use and scalability—rather than seeking to  
393 provide a detailed model of infants' behavior in a particular experimental paradigm—is the idea that different discrimination  
394 tasks all index a common perceptual process and should result in qualitatively similar discrimination patterns—an idea that  
395 has received empirical support from the signal detection literature (71). Finally, another important innovation is the careful  
396 statistical analysis—taking into account noise sources in both model training and evaluation (see Supplementary Materials and  
397 Methods 4)—which allows us to tease out reliable effects in the large number of generated predictions.

**Table S1. Phonetic contrasts for which a significant difference in discriminability between American English- and Japanese-learning infants is *robustly* predicted by the proposed distributional learning mechanism. That is, for each possible choice of training and test register, these contrasts show a significant difference in discrimination errors between models trained on American English and Japanese, and the magnitude of this difference does not decrease as the training data size is increased. See Supplementary Materials and Methods 4 for justification of these criteria and details of the method.**

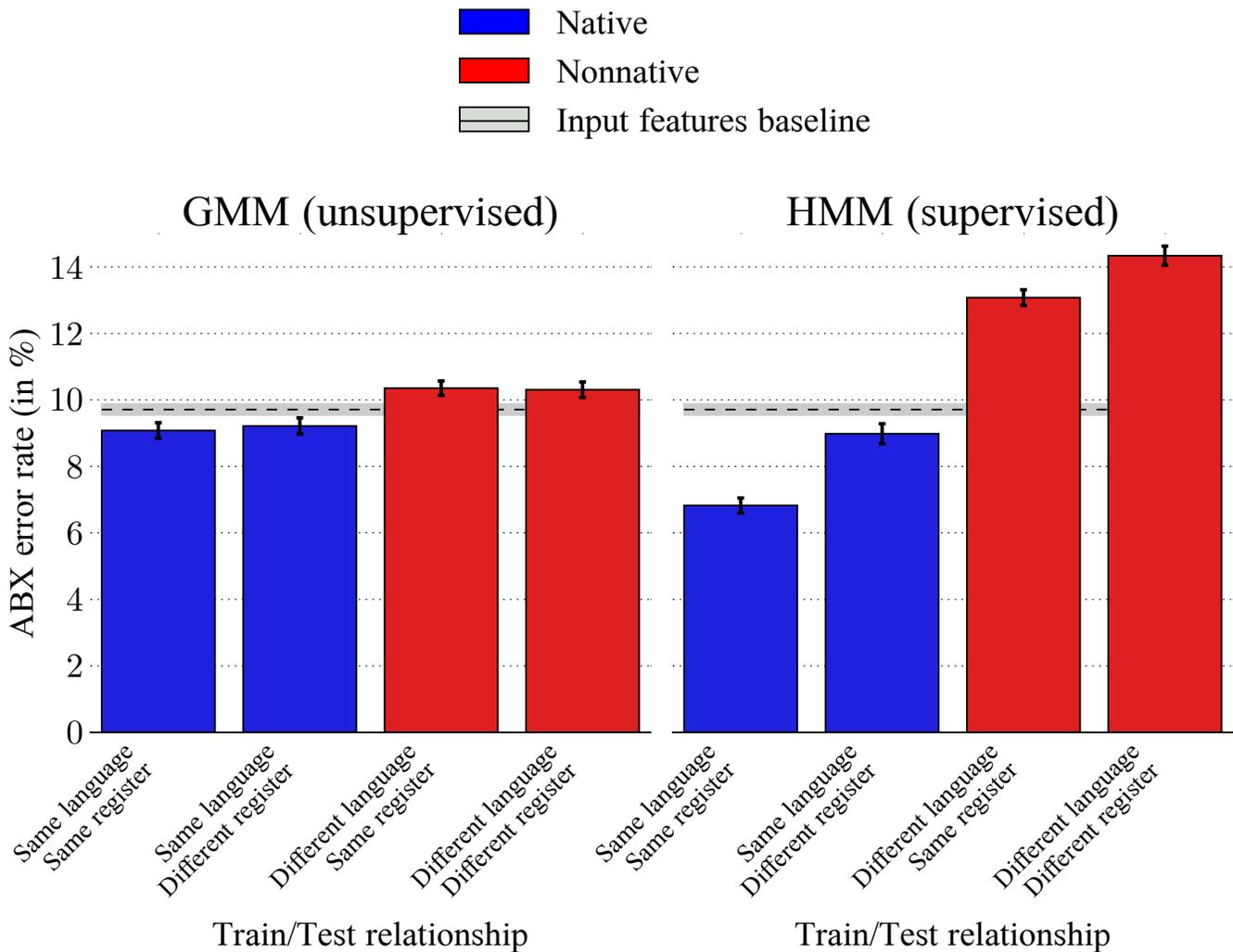
<b>Language</b>	<b>Contrast</b>	<b>Easier for learners of</b>	<b>Average difference in discrimination error</b>
Am. English	[ɜ] - [ɪ]	Am. English	5.4%
Am. English	[ɜ] - [ʌ]	Am. English	4.8%
Am. English	[ɹ] - [l]	Am. English	3.7%



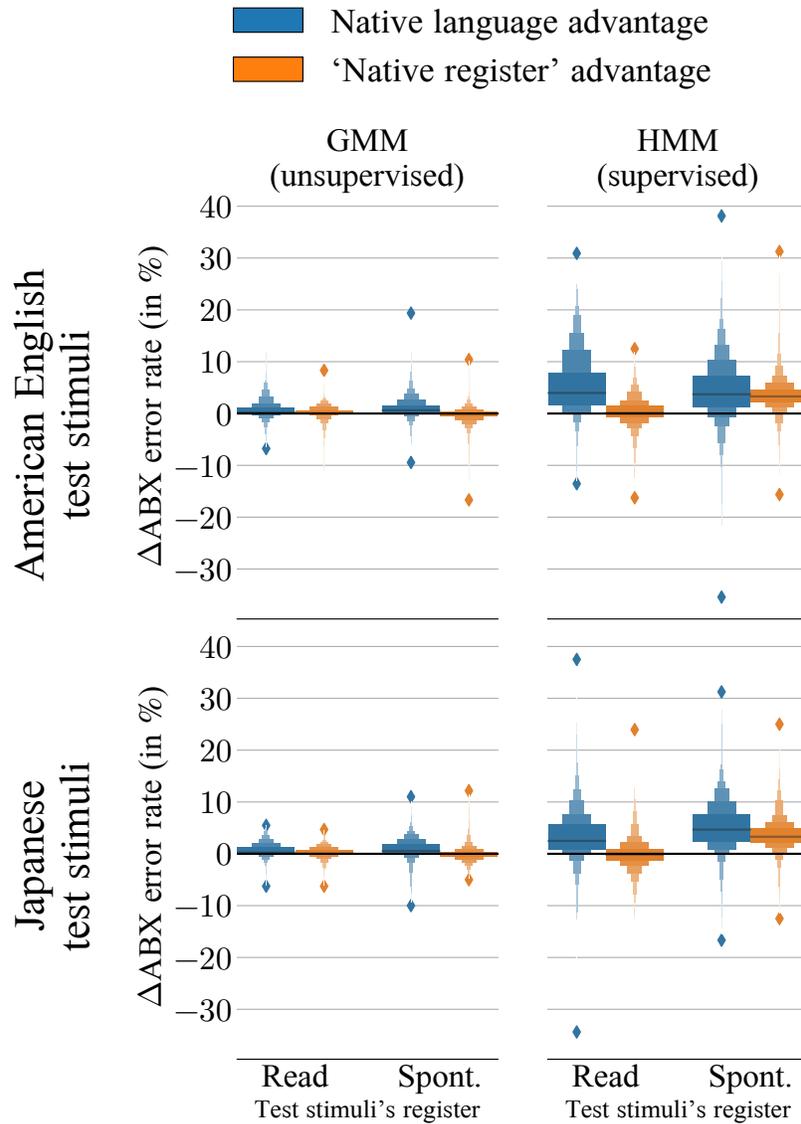
**Fig. S1.** Average ABX error rates over all consonant and vowel contrasts obtained with each of our four Gaussian mixture models on each of the four test sets. Error bars correspond to plus and minus one standard deviation of the errors across resampling of the test stimuli speakers. On all four test sets, 'native' models make fewer discrimination errors than 'non-native' models, illustrating the robustness of the observed native advantage.



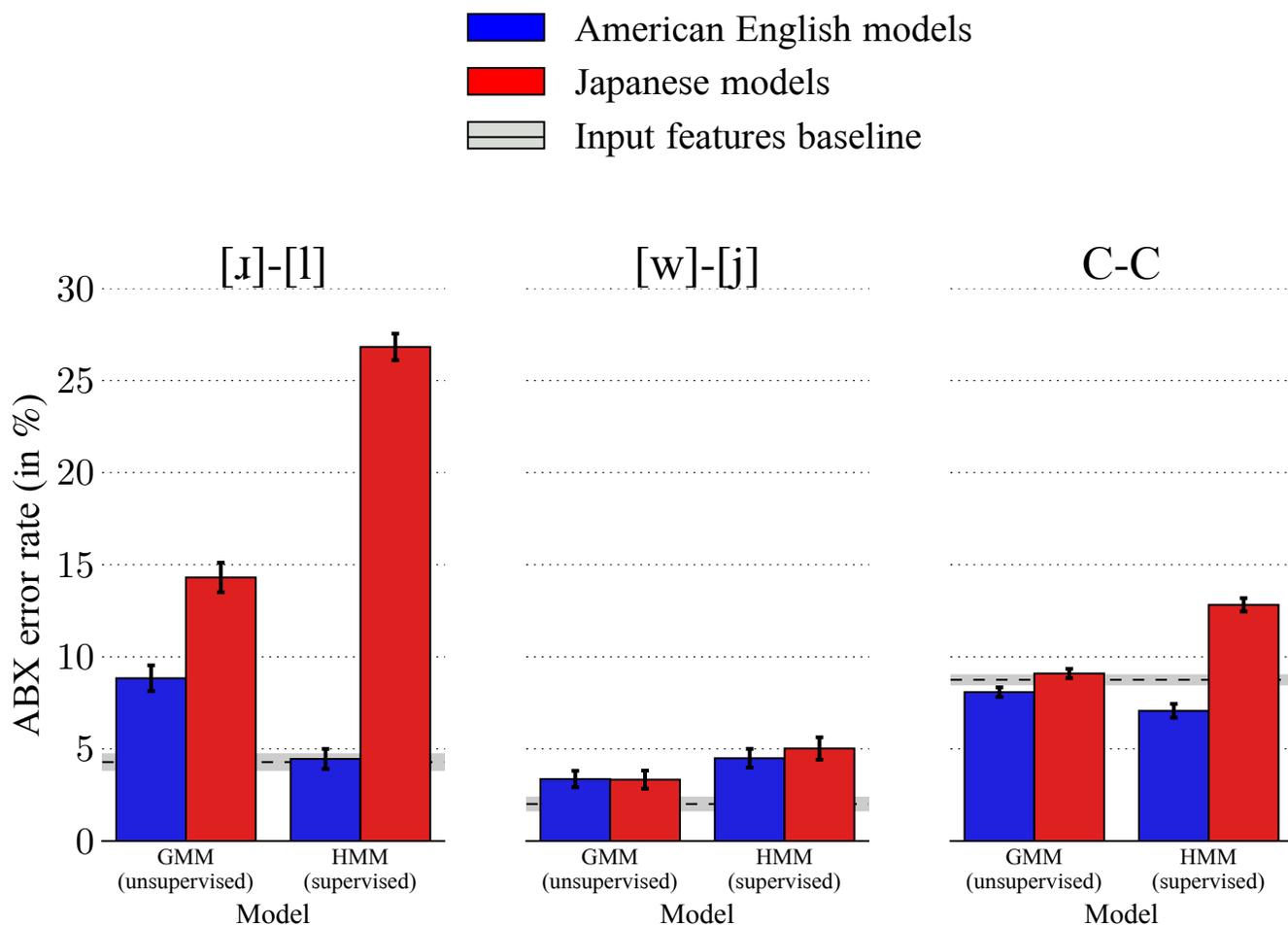
**Fig. S2.** ABX error rates for the American English [ɹ]-[l] contrast and two controls: American English [w]-[j] and average over all American English consonant contrasts. Error-rates are reported for each of the four trained Gaussian mixture models and each of the two American English test sets. Error bars correspond to plus and minus one standard deviation of the errors across resampling of the test stimuli speakers. Results show that the specific deficit for American English [ɹ]-[l] discrimination for 'Japanese' models compared to 'American English' models is robustly observed across all training and test conditions.



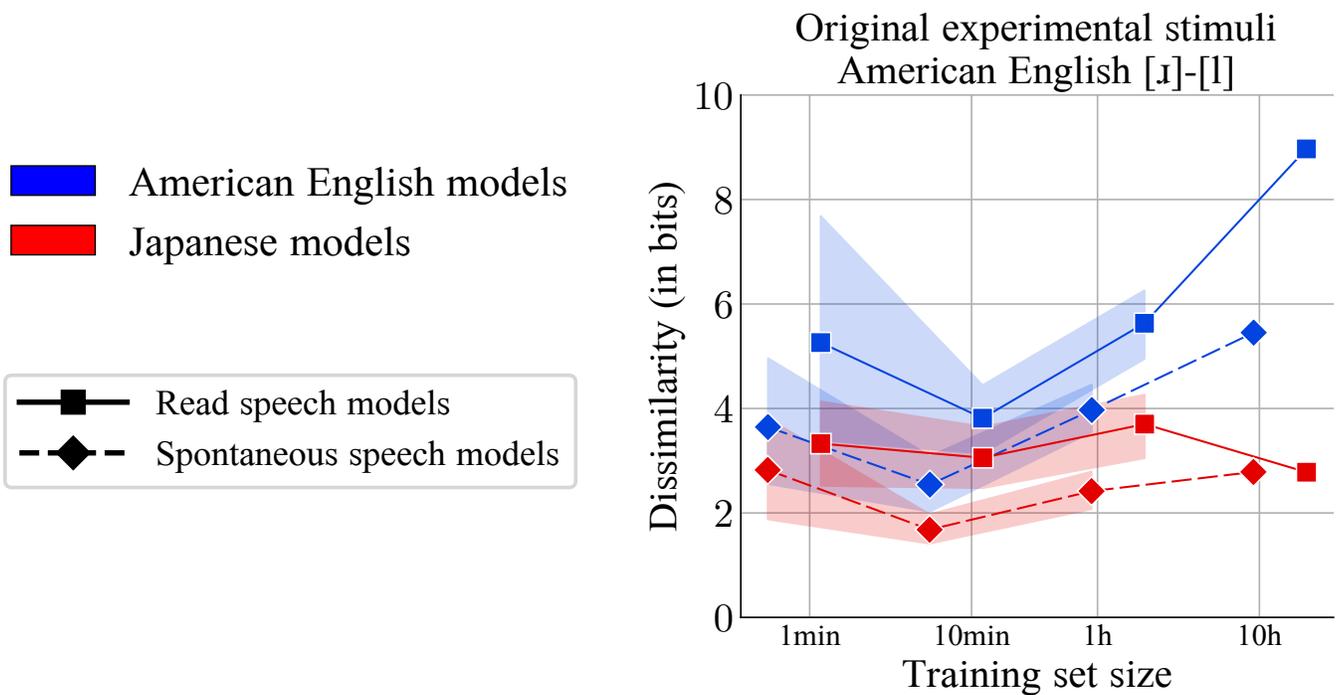
**Fig. S3.** Average ABX error rates over all consonant and vowel contrasts obtained with unsupervised Gaussian mixture models (GMM), with a supervised phoneme recogniser baseline (HMM) and with an input features (MFCC) baseline, as a function of the match between the training set and test set language and register. Error bars correspond to plus and minus one standard deviation of the errors across resampling of the test stimuli speakers. For both Gaussian mixture models and the phoneme recogniser baseline, the 'Native' (blue) conditions, with training and test in the same language, show fewer discrimination errors than the 'Non-native' (red) conditions. Also, in both cases the 'Native' conditions show fewer errors than the input features baseline, while 'non-native' conditions show more errors. However, the native language effect (difference between 'native' and 'non-native' models) is bigger for the supervised than the unsupervised models. Also, whereas the unsupervised models generalise very well across registers, the supervised models appear to overfit the training register.



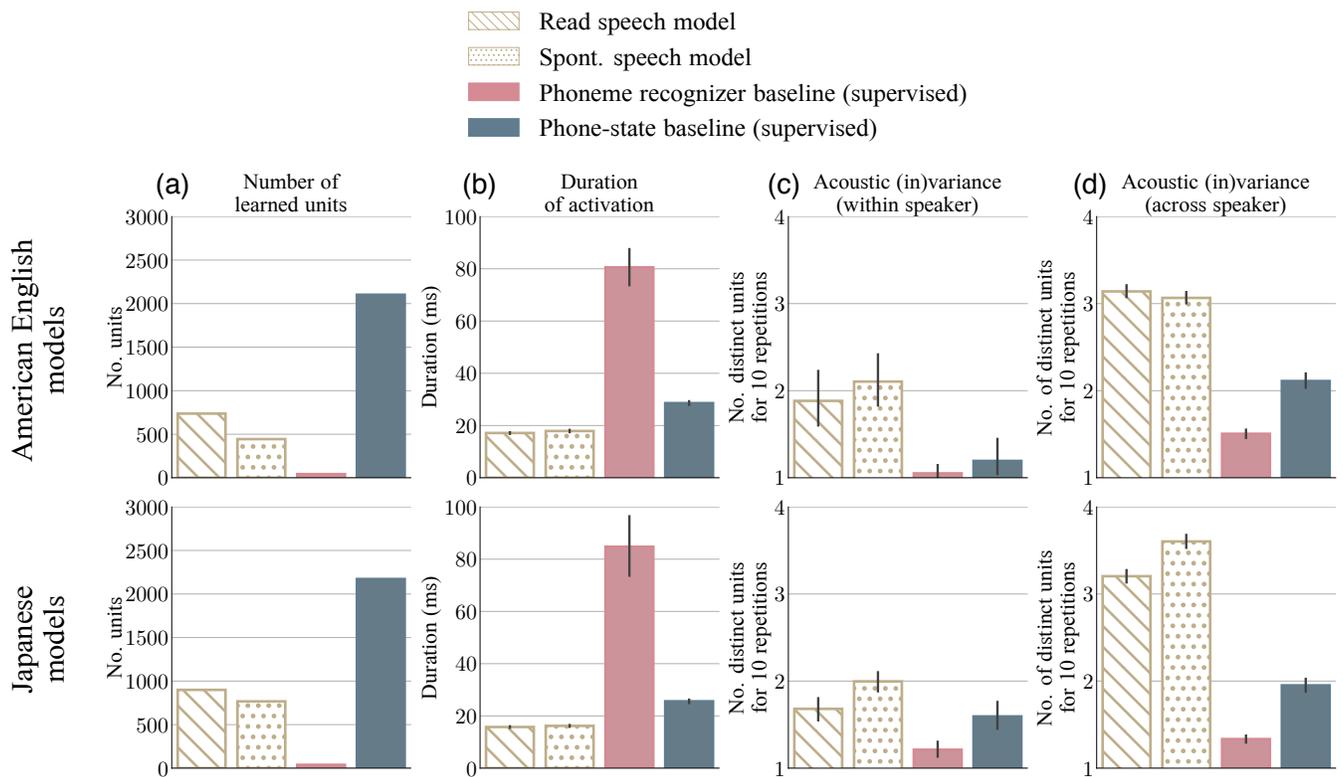
**Fig. S4.** Letter-value plots(75) of the distribution of 'native' advantages across all tested phonetic contrasts (pooled over both languages) for the unsupervised Gaussian mixture models (GMM) and the supervised phoneme recogniser baseline (HMM). The native language advantage is the increase in discrimination error for a contrast of language L1 between a 'L1-native' model and a model trained on the other language, keeping the training register constant. The 'native register' advantage is the increase in error for a contrast of register R1 between a 'R1-native' model and a model trained on the other register, keeping the training language constant. For both types of models and in all tested cases, the reduction in the average discrimination error between 'native language' and 'non-native language' conditions is not driven by just a few contrasts. The 'native register' only seems to play a role for the supervised models. In particular supervised models trained on read speech appear to have trouble discriminating spontaneous speech stimuli, while supervised models trained on spontaneous speech do not have problem discriminating read speech stimuli.



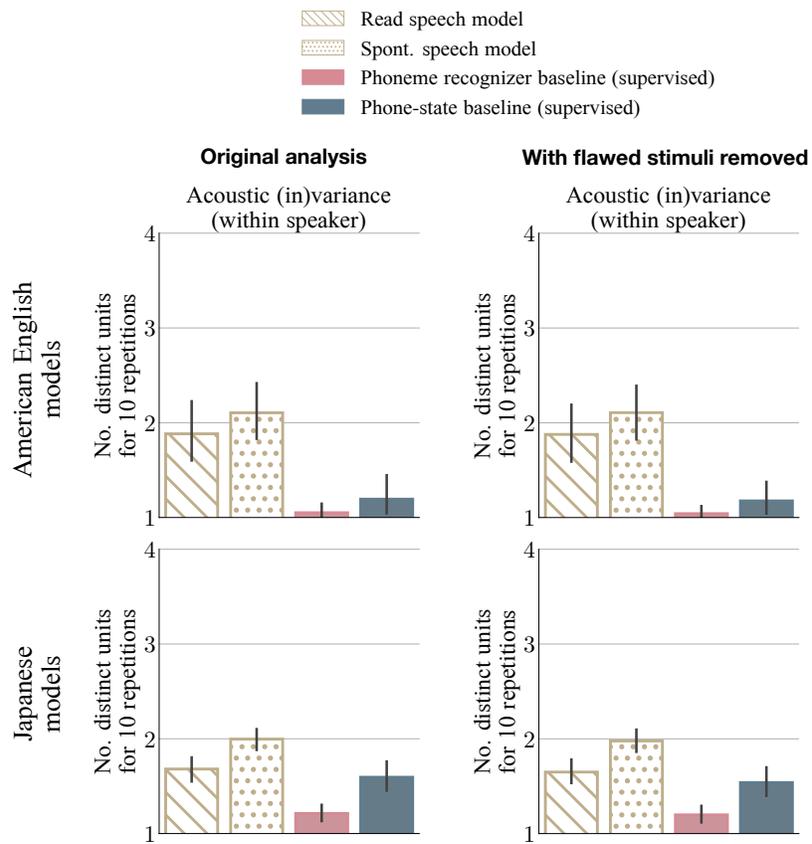
**Fig. S5.** ABX error rates for the American English [ɹ]-[l] contrast and two controls: American English [w]-[j] and average over all American English consonant contrasts (C-C). Error rates averaged over the two American English test sets and across model's training registers are reported for the unsupervised Gaussian mixture models (GMM), the supervised phoneme recogniser baseline (HMM) and the input features baseline. Error bars correspond to plus and minus one standard deviation of the errors across resampling of the test stimuli speakers. The specific deficit for American English [ɹ]-[l] discrimination for 'Japanese' models compared to 'American English' models is observed with both the unsupervised Gaussian mixtures and the supervised phoneme recognisers. The size of the deficit is larger for the supervised baseline, though, which we can interpret as the unsupervised GMM models producing somewhat immature representations of speech, like those of human infants (36), while the supervised HMM models produce more adult-like representations. Another interesting result is that the supervised American English models ('native' condition, in blue) do not outperform the input features baseline in the supervised case and underperform it in the unsupervised case. This suggests that some of the detailed information relevant to discrimination that was present in the input features was not preserved through the learning of a different representation of the speech signal in terms of discrete Gaussian components (see Supplementary Discussion 3 for further discussion).



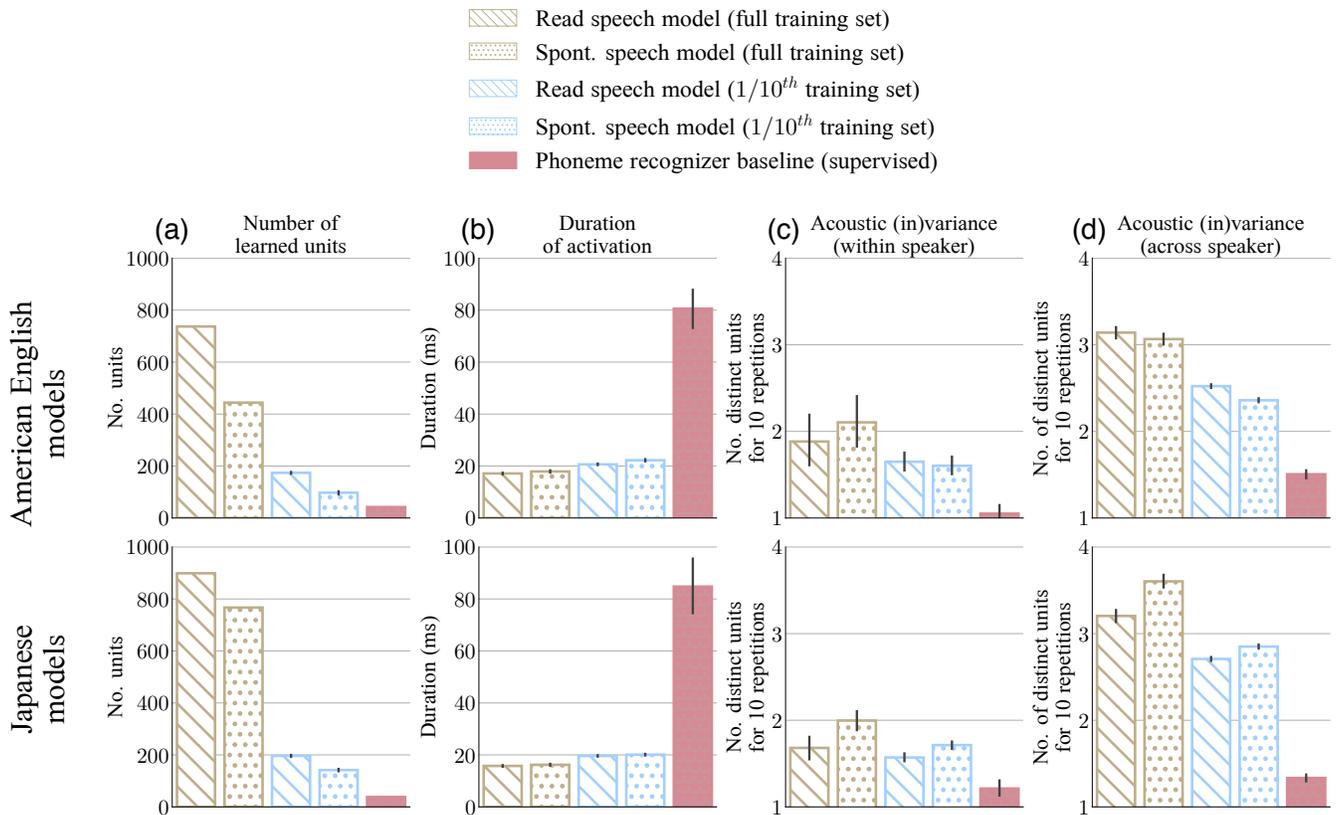
**Fig. S6.** Dissimilarity between the trained models' representation of a synthesized /ra/ stimulus and a synthesized /la/ stimulus as a function of the amount of input. These stimuli are those used in the empirical study which showed the emergence of a cross-linguistic difference in discriminability of these stimuli between Japanese- and American English-learning infants (29). For each selected duration (except when using the full training set), ten independent subsets are selected and ten independent models are trained. Solid lines indicate the average dissimilarity, with error bands indicating plus or minus one standard deviation. The dissimilarity corresponds to the average of the Kullback-Leibler divergence between posteriorgram representations of the stimuli along the dynamic time warping alignment path, expressed in bits (see Material and Methods). As the amount of input data increases, there does not appear to be much of a change in the dissimilarity of the two stimuli for the Japanese models, whereas there is sharp increase in dissimilarity for the American English models, especially between the 1-2h and 10-20h of training input. This is remarkably consistent with the empirically observed behavior of infants tested with these stimuli: no significant change was observed in the ability of Japanese-learning infants to discriminate these stimuli between 6-8 and 10-12 months of age, whereas American English infants became better at it (29). The predicted cross-linguistic difference between American English and Japanese learners appears to require more input to be observed reliably when testing the models with synthetic stimuli than with natural stimuli (cf. Figure 3).



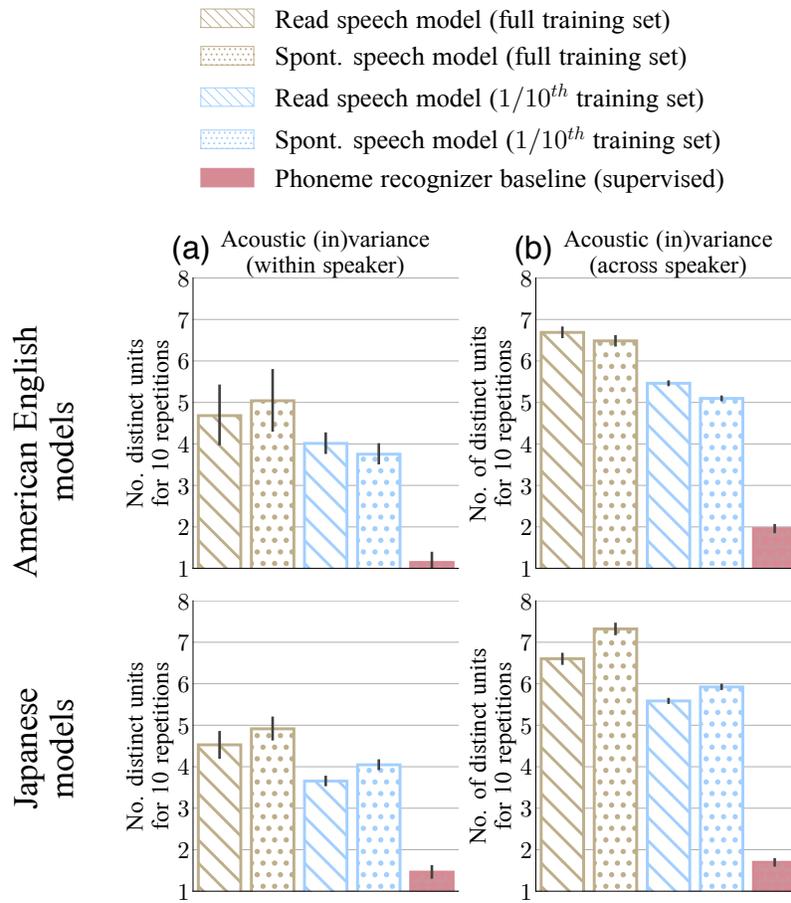
**Fig. S7.** As in Figure 4, with an additional ASR phone-state baseline (cf. Supplementary Materials and Methods 2). The Gaussian units in the learned (unsupervised) Gaussian mixtures are more similar to the phone-state units than to the phoneme units in the supervised baseline, although some differences remain. Even though the phone states are more numerous than the Gaussian components (a), they remain activated slightly longer on average (b) and they are better aligned with phonetic categories in terms of linguistic content, both within-speakers (c) and across speakers (d).



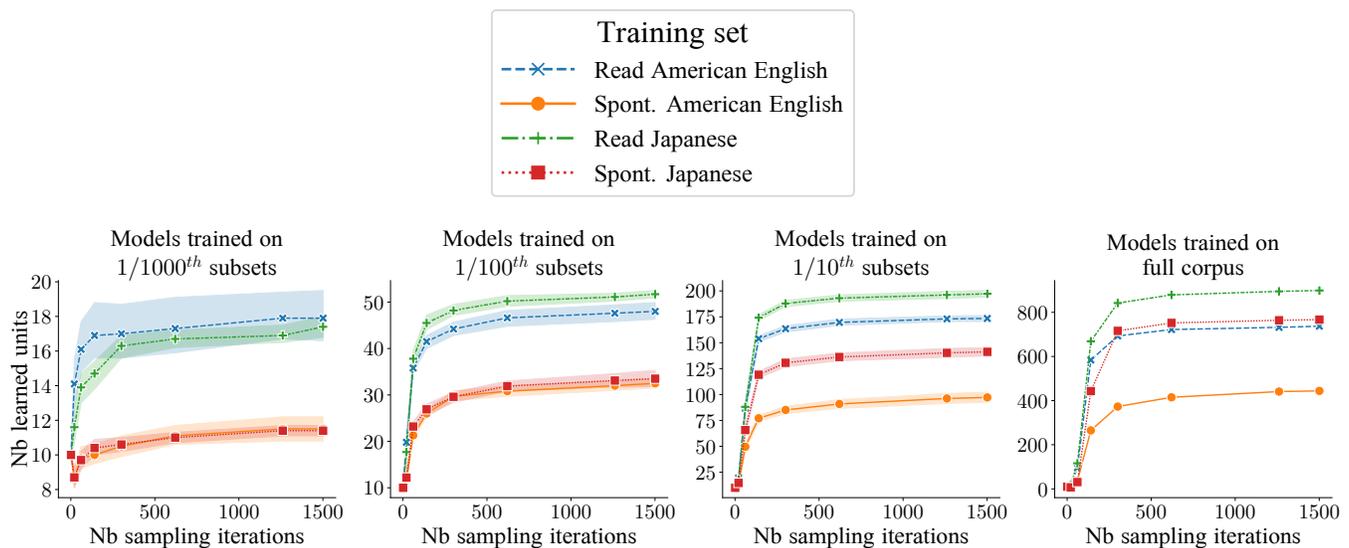
**Fig. S8.** Supporting evidence for Supplementary Materials and Methods 3. On the left hand side ('Original analysis' panel): acoustic (in)variance analysis for within speaker stimuli as in Figure S7. On the right hand side ('With flawed stimuli removed' panel): same analysis with potentially mispronounced, noisy or misaligned stimuli (as identified through a listening test, see Supplementary Materials and Methods 3) removed. Differences are barely visible and the overall pattern of results remains unchanged.



**Fig. S9.** As in Figure 4, with results for models trained on  $1/10^{th}$  subsets of the full training sets added in baby blue (these models already show a reliable cross-linguistic difference in [j]-[ɨ] discriminability between ‘American English’ and ‘Japanese’ models, see Figure 3(b)). For the duration and acoustic (in)variance analyses (panels b, c, d), results are averaged over the ten such models trained for each training corpus before standard deviations are estimated. For the number of learned units analysis (panel a), error bars show the standard deviations across the ten trained models. Models trained on  $1/10^{th}$  subsets learn much fewer categories (about one fourth as many). This is closer to the typical number of phonemes or of phonetic categories one would expect in a language. Yet, these learned units remain qualitatively different from phonetic categories as shown by the duration and acoustic (in)variance analyses (panels b, c, d). Although their average duration of activation are a few millisecond longer than for models trained on the full training sets, this is still about one fourth of the average duration of speech segments corresponding to phonetic category units. The units learned by the models trained on  $1/10^{th}$  subsets also appear slightly more acoustically invariant, with number of distinct units in the acoustic (in)variance tests about 80% that of the models trained on the full training sets (panels c, d). This remains much more variable than the phoneme recognizer baseline, however. Furthermore, for the acoustic (in)variance analysis we have applied a very generous correction for possible misalignment (see Supplementary Materials and Methods 3). This likely causes an overestimation of the acoustic invariance for all the unsupervised models, as indicated by the results on Figure S10. Overall these analyses suggest that the failure of our models to learn phonetic categories cannot be attributed solely to their learning of too many categories.



**Fig. S10.** As in Figure S9 (c, d), but without applying a correction for possible misalignments of the forced-aligned phone centers (Supplementary Materials and Methods 3). For the phoneme recognizer baseline, we see that the average number of distinct units for ten repetitions of a same word shows a small increase compared to the condition with correction for misalignment, with up to about 33% more distinct units (which remains less than what was found for the unsupervised models, *with correction*). In contrast the average number of distinct units more than doubles for our unsupervised models in all cases. This indicates that misalignment of the phone centers is not a very common issue—as the phoneme recognizer baseline manages to find largely invariant units without any correction—suggesting that our main acoustic (in)variance analyses overestimate the acoustic invariance of the units learned by our unsupervised models by a sizable margin.



**Fig. S11.** As a convergence check, we plot the number of learned units (i.e. Gaussian components in the sampled mixture) as a function of the number of sampling iterations. Confidence bands indicate mean  $\pm$  one standard deviation in number of learned units for models trained on independent subsets. For models trained on the full corpus no confidence band is available. The number of learned units remains stable after about 600 iterations for all models we trained, suggesting 1500 iterations was enough for our models to converge. For models trained on subsets of the full training set, we also see through the confidence bands that the number of learned categories does not depend a lot on the particular subset selected. Finally, we see evidence that for models trained on small amounts of data, the size of the training set appears to predict the number of learned units well, while for models trained on larger amounts of data, the precise nature of the training set appears to have a stronger effect. Models trained on similar amounts of input (full training sets are about 20 hours long for models trained on read speech and about 10 hours long for model trained on spontaneous speech) learn similar number of categories initially (for  $1/1000^{th}$  and  $1/100^{th}$  training subsets), but as the size of the training sets gets larger (starting with  $1/10^{th}$  training subsets), models trained on Japanese result in larger number of learned categories than models trained on similar amount of American English. This suggests that the number of learned units for the models trained on larger amounts—the models showing cross-linguistic differences in discrimination—does not simply reflect the amount of training input, but also the qualitative characteristics of the training sets.

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