

Human brains prewired to understand words

Analyzing brain scans of newborns, researchers found that this part of the brain – called the “visual word form area” (VWFA) – is connected to the language network of the brain.

“That makes it fertile ground to develop a sensitivity to visual words — even before any exposure to language,” said Zeynep Saygin, senior author of the study and assistant professor of psychology at The Ohio State University.

The VWFA is specialized for reading only in literate individuals. Some researchers had hypothesized that the pre-reading VWFA starts out being no different than other parts of the visual cortex that are sensitive to seeing faces, scenes or other objects, and only becomes selective to words and letters as children learn to read or at least as they learn language.

“We found that isn’t true. Even at birth, the VWFA is more connected functionally to the language network of the brain than it is to other areas,” Saygin said. “It is an incredibly exciting finding.”

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“Knowing what this region is doing at this early age will tell us a bit more about how the human brain can develop the ability to read and what may go wrong,” Saygin said. “It is important to track how this region of the brain becomes increasingly specialized.”

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