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Newborn infants are sensitive to sound timing

Gábor P. Háden*, Henkjan Honing**, István Winkler***

*Cognitive Science Center Amsterdam, Institute for Logic, Language and Computation, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
**Department of Experimental Psychology, Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience and Psychology, Research Centre for Natural Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary
***Institute of Psychology, University of Szeged, Hungary

'haden@uva.nl, 'honing@uva.nl, 'iwinkler@cogpsyphy.hu

ABSTRACT

Background
Detecting changes in temporal intervals is important for perceiving music and speech. Relatively long intervals (ca. 300-1500 ms), in the range of preferred tempo and beat perception, were extensively studied in music perception and production (Honing, 2012). Adults and infants are both able to reliably distinguish between different presentation rates as well as noticing changes in the presentation rate (Baruch & Drake, 1997, Baruch et al., 2004).

Shorter time intervals (ca. 10-100 ms) are relevant to the study of expressive timing in music and to prosody and phonology in language (Patel, 2008). Detection of short intervals occurs at the early stages of processing (Cowan, 1984) and it is reflected by the mismatch negativity (MMN; for a recent review, see Näätänen et al., 2011) event-related potential (ERP). Several studies have shown that presenting a stimulus earlier (or later) then expected in an isochronous sequence elicits MMN in adults (Sable et al., 2003) and in (10-month old) infants (Brannon et al., 2004). However, no previous study tested the sensitivity to instantaneous tempo changes in neonates.

Aims
The aim of this study was to test whether newborns detect the onsets and offsets of sound trains as well as instant changes in tempo at presentation rates relevant for music and language perception.

Method
ERPs were recorded from 37 (18 male) healthy, full-term newborn infants during day 1-3 postpartum (7 of the 37 were discarded due to excessive electrical artifacts). The study was approved by the relevant ethics committees (ETT-TUKEB Hungary, Institutional Review Board of ICNP, Hungary).

The stimulus trains consisted of 8 complex tones composed of five harmonics differing only in pitch (F0), which were taken from the C major scale (C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C3). Tone duration was 50 ms, with 5 ms rise and 5 ms fall times (raised cosine ramps). 170 trials were presented in two stimulus blocks. For each trial, a pitch was selected randomly (with equal probability; no pitch repetition was allowed). Trials consisted of 8-24 (randomly selected, equal probability) tone repetitions and a silent interval. Tones in the first half of the trial were presented at the “slow” rate (average inter onset interval [IOI]=200 ms), and in the second half at the “fast” rate (average IOI=100 ms), followed by a silent gap (average IOI 1050 ms). See Figure 1a. Time intervals were taken from normal distributions centered on the average with SD=5%.

EEG was recorded from the F3, Fz, F4, C3, Cz, and C4 locations (10-20 system) against a nose reference with Brain Products V-Amp amplifier (24-bit, sampling 250 Hz). Signals were off-line filtered between 1-30 Hz and epochs from -100 to 500 ms with respect to the tone onset were extracted for each sound. The 100-ms pre-stimulus served as the baseline. Epochs with a voltage change outside the 0.1-100 μV range were rejected from the analyses. Data from infants with less than 100 artifact-free epochs were dropped from the analyses.

The “Start of Train” responses were compared with the “Slow Control” responses, whereas “Change of Rate” and “Omission” responses with the “Fast Control” (see Figure 1a). Control tones were separated from the tempo change and the train onset and offset by 2 or more positions. Average response amplitudes were measured from 40 ms long windows centered on the early and late response maximums found in the difference waveforms (determined by visual inspection). Effects were tested with separate dependent ANOVAs of the structure Stimulus type [Event vs. Control] × Frontality [F vs. C electrode line] × Laterality [left vs. midline vs. right]. Tukey HSD post hoc tests were employed. For more detail on the recording and analysis, see Háden et al., (2009).

Figure 1. (a) Temporal relations between stimuli in the experimental design. (b-d) Grand average ERP responses and difference waves on channel Cz.
Results

Significant differential responses were found for the “Change of Rate” as well as for the “Start of Train” events, whereas the response to “Omission” was only significant for the signals recorded at the central electrodes (C3, Cz and C4).

“Start of Train” vs. “Slow Control” (see Figure 1b): For the early peak [92-132 ms], a significant main effect of Stimulus type, F(1,29)=8.17, p<.05, η²=0.20 was found. For the late peak [268-308 ms], the significant main effects of Stimulus type F(1,29)=15.03, p<.01, η²=0.34, Frontality F(1,29)=19.40, p<.01, η²=0.23 and Laterality F(1,29)=10.46, p<.01, η²=0.27 and Frontality × Laterality F(1,29)=3.99, p<.05, η²=0.12 were accompanied by significant Stimulus type × Frontality ε(1.52,44.23)=3.99, p<.05, ε=0.76, η²=0.12 interactions. The first interaction was due to more positive responses to control type, F(1,29)=8.17, p<.05, recorded at the central electrodes (C3, Cz and C4).

Stimulus type F(1,29)=8.69, p<.01, of Rate” as well as for the “Start of Train” events, whereas the Significant differential responses were found for the “Change of rate” event, as well as from the previous responses reported to stimulus omissions (Winkler et al., 2009). Thus it is likely that this event is registered differently from the other temporal violations tested in the study as well as from violations of rhythm (i.e., unlike Winkler et al., the current sequences lacked explicit metrical structure).

We conclude that the mechanisms for detecting auditory events based on timing are already functional at birth making this information available to the infant brain and thus providing an important prerequisite of entering dialogues as well as for music cognition.

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Keywords

Tempo, Interval-discrimination, Onset detection, Offset detection, Development, Neonates; Event-Related Potentials

REFERENCES


