Power and phase synchronization underlie a left processing advantage in 7-month-old infants with active auditory experience

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Introduction

During the first months of life infants construct language specific maps within the auditory cortex. Interactive acoustic experience using temporally modulated non-speech stimuli has been shown to impact the efficiency of infants’ acoustic processing. Significant effects of acoustic experience were documented for the accuracy and speed of discrimination of key pre-linguistic acoustic cues; this effect generalized to enhanced processing of novel non-speech stimuli (Benasich et al., 2014). However, analogous effects of such acoustic experience and the role of the underlying oscillatory mechanisms have not been examined within the speech domain.

In adults, oscillatory activity in the theta range is hypothesized to resolve syllabic information, whereas gamma activity may assist in resolving segmental information (Poeppe et al., 2008). In infants, low frequency theta oscillations support syllable (Ortiz-Martilla et al., 2013) and tone processing (Musacchia et al., 2013) and a burst in gamma power signals preference for native prosody (Peña et al., 2010) and native phonemes (Ortiz-Martilla et al., 2013).

In this study we explore neural mechanisms (i.e. changes in the pattern and the topography of oscillatory activity) that appear to underlie generalization effects seen during syllable processing in 7-month-old infants who had passive or active non-speech acoustic experience compared to naive controls with no such experience.

Methods

Participants: 49 7-month-old infants
- Active experience group (AEx): 18 (8 females)
- Passive experience group (PEx): 17 (8 females)
- Naïve control group (NC): 14 (7 females)

Interactive Acoustic Experience:
- Once a week for 6 weeks, infants between 4 and 7 months were exposed to paired complex tones, band-pass noise and simple sweeps.
- AEx: Go/no go operant conditioning protocol
- PEx: Passive experience protocol

ERP: Computer generated CV syllables with a VOT contrast followed by a 60 ms steady-state vowel were presented in a passive oddball paradigm. Total: 566 standards /100 deviants. bEEG/ERP was recorded with 128-channel EEG net.

Source Localization: ERP generators were located using age-appropriate infant templates (Ortiz-Martilla et al., 2012).

Single-trial Temporal-Spectral Analysis:
- Conducted in source space with a 2-desscope montage using a complex demodulation method in the 2-90 Hz frequency range, over 300 to 1020 ms, with 1 Hz frequency bins and time resolution of 50 ms.

Results

Source Localization of ERP Generators
Converging location of ERP generators, shown by distributed CLARA and discrete dipole solutions, for standard (STD) and deviant (DEV) for AEx, PEx and NC. group responses at left (LAC) and right (RAC) auditory cortices explaining ~97% of the ERP variance at 7-months.

Amplitude of Positive Response: 2 X 2 X 3 (source[LAC,RAC] X stimulus[STD,DEV] X group[AEx, PEx, NC]) ANOVA showed:
- In the AEx group, the DEV is larger in the LAC than the RAC as compared to the PEx and AEx groups.
- In the NC group, the DEV is larger in the RAC than the LAC as compared to the PEx and AEx groups.
- In the PEx group, the DEV is larger than the STD in the RAC as compared to the NC and AEx groups.

Temporal Spectral Evolution (TSE)
Measures changes in amplitude of frequency bands as a function of time relative to stimulus presentation.

Event-related potentials: Grand average ERPs
Frontal midline (Fz) channel

Conclusions

Results from this study show that specific temporal, spatial and spectral oscillatory patterns were modulated as a function of early acoustic experience as infants’ processed a syllable contrast.

- Generalization: Effects of early acoustic experience with non-speech stimuli that contained temporal and spectral cues important for speech processing, generalized to speech and conferred a left hemisphere advantage for the processing of a syllabic contrast varying in VOT.

- Effects of acoustic experience: Across typical development, oscillatory activity at lower frequencies gradually shifts to more precise oscillatory activity in higher frequency bands. In this study, early acoustic experience not only supported faster speech processing in the left hemisphere but also appeared to accelerate the maturational trajectory, particularly when the acoustic experience involved interactive training. The acoustic experience also appears to facilitate syllable recognition over an important period when infants are establishing their phonetic maps.

- Theta oscillations resolving syllabic information: increase in theta power during infants’ deviant processing was seen in auditory cortices, particularly on the left, known for its specialization for speech. But the acoustic experience did not modulate theta oscillations.

- Gamma functional specificity: High (>60 Hz) and low (<60 Hz) gamma oscillations may reflect distinct processes implying functional specialization. High gamma is more discretely localized and faster than low gamma, increases during cognitive processing and has been observed in temporal areas critical for discrimination of the complex acoustic features of speech. Infants with auditory experience, responded to syllables by activating early high gamma on the left while NC processed speech in low gamma and later on the right. These results suggest that acoustic experience facilitated segmental processing and therefore, phonetic mapping while the NC group continued to process the speech stimuli via acoustic discrimination.

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