Acquisition of the Temporal and Ordinal Structure of Movement Sequences in Incidental Learning

Jill X. O’Reilly, Katharine J. McCarthy, Mariagrazia Capizzi, and Anna Christina Nobre
1Department of Experimental Psychology, Oxford University, Oxford, United Kingdom

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O’Reilly JX, McCarthy KJ, Capizzi M, Nobre AC. Acquisition of the temporal and ordinal structure of movement sequences in incidental learning. J Neurophysiol 99: 2731–2735, 2008. First published March 5, 2008; doi:10.1152/jn.01141.2007. We investigated the acquisition and integration of temporal and ordinal sequence information in an incidental learning model of motor skill acquisition (the serial reaction time task). Human participants were exposed to a stimulus-response sequence that had temporal structure, ordinal structure, or both. By changing the temporal or ordinal structure, or both, we were able to ask two questions: first, does a regular temporal structure facilitate learning of an ordinal sequence and second, is a temporal sequence, presented in the context of a random ordinal sequence of finger movements, “picked up” through incidental learning? We found that a predictable temporal structure greatly facilitated the learning of an ordinal sequence but was not learned when presented in isolation. The results suggest that when motor skills are acquired under incidental learning conditions, timing is represented at a level specific to the ordinal sequence of movements rather than as an independent temporal template.

INTRODUCTION

Skilled actions often incorporate a precise temporal pattern—for example, in speech, and in playing a musical instrument, timing is crucial. Even when the temporal structure of an action is not essential to meaning, the timing with which learned actions are executed tends to be invariant, revealing the importance of temporal structure in learned motor behaviors. For example, the typical timing of pen strokes determines individuals’ handwriting (Wright 1993), whereas skilled typists develop invariant temporal patterns for common words (Tersuolo and Viviani 1980).

In the field of motor learning, the acquisition of temporal patterns of movement has been relatively neglected while research has traditionally focused on the learning of ordinal sequences of movements (Hikosaka et al. 2002; Tanji and Shima 1994; Toni et al. 1998) or spatial visuo-motor contingencies (Shadmehr and Holcomb 1997; see Doyon and Benali 2005 for review). Functional imaging literature suggests that temporal and nontemporal (ordinal) sequences are encoded in different regions of motor association cortex. Schubotz and von Cramon have reported such a dissociation in both medial (Schubotz and von Cramon 2001b) and lateral (Schubotz and von Cramon 2001a; Schubotz et al. 2003) premotor cortex when participants encoded sequence information (pre-SMA and ventral premotor cortex (PMd) were associated with temporal sequences, whereas supplementary motor area (SMA) proper and dorsal premotor cortex (PMd) were associated with ordinal sequences). To what extent are temporal and ordinal representations of movement separable? To address this question, we developed a modified version of the serial reaction-time (SRT) task (4).

The SRT is a useful model for real-world skill acquisition because learning is incidental—participants are simply instructed to respond to incoming information, and regularities in the pattern of inputs or responses are “picked up” by the brain and used to facilitate performance. This kind of bottom-up or unsupervised learning mimics motor-skill acquisition in which people are often unable to verbalize or even recognize consciously their motor strategies. In contrast, those studies that have so far addressed the temporal aspect of motor learning have generally involved explicit memorization of the temporal sequence (Bengtsson et al. 2004; Ramnani and Passingham 2001; Sakai et al. 2002; Ullen and Bengtsson 2003). The use of explicit training raises the possibility that temporal learning is underpinned by sensory rather than motor representations, a hypothesis supported by engagement of auditory cortex in the temporal tasks, but not nontemporal control tasks, in the cited studies. Intuitively it seems that a sensory route would not underlie the acquisition of the temporal parameters of movement in general (for example in typing) but may be a strategy employed when participants explicitly memorize a rhythm.

We developed a modified version of the SRT task designed to assess the relationship between temporal and ordinal motor learning when these develop incidentally. In our between-subjects design, the stimuli/responses were governed by one of three types of sequence: ordinal (a fixed order of finger movements, temporal (a fixed sequence of stimulus onset asynchronies (SOAs); i.e., a rhythm), or combined (parallel fixed
ordinal and temporal sequences). Note that the classic SRT task is a type of combined ordinal and temporal sequence, where a constant temporal interval is typically used for all stimuli.

This design allowed us to address two specific questions. First: does adding temporal structure to a sequence of movements facilitate learning of that sequence? If so, we should see a greater learning effect in the combined condition, when the ordinal sequence was combined with regular timing, than in the ordinal condition in which the same sequence of finger movements was used but with random timing. Second, can a sequence of movement timings be learned independently of the ordinal sequence of movements itself? That is, do people form an abstract representation of timing of actions, even when the temporal sequence is not presented in the context of a fixed ordinal movement sequence?

METH O D S  

Participants

Thirty-six young adults (15 male and 21 female) participated in the experiment: 12 in each of the three conditions: timing, ordinal, and combined. All participants were right handed. They were paid £10 in cash. The study was conducted in accordance with Central Oxford Research Ethics Committee guidelines.

Task

The task was a modified SRT paradigm. In the ordinal condition, the position of the target (and hence the order in which fingers were selected) was repeated in a 12-element cycle (ABACDBCADCBD), where A is the first position/index finger, B is the second position/selected) was repeated in a 12-element cycle (ABACDBCADCBD), the position of the target (and hence the order in which fingers were

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Probe blocks

Of the 25 blocks, blocks 15, 20, and 25 were probe blocks in which one or both dimensions of the stimulus sequence were altered to assess learning. In the combined condition, there were three types of probe block: 1) in probe change timing, the repeating cycle of 12 SOAs was replaced by a pseudorandom set of 84 SOAs, while the cycle of 12 positions/fingers was retained. 2) In probe change order, the sequence of positions/fingers was replaced with a pseudorandom set of 84 button-presses, but the repeating cycle of SOAs was maintained. 3) In probe change both, both repeating cycles were replaced. The order of probe blocks was completely counterbalanced between subjects.

All three probe-block types were included in all three conditions, but note that the logic was slightly different in the timing and ordinal conditions, as in one of the probed dimensions (order or timing, respectively) there was no sequence to abolish—one random set of 84 stimuli was switched for another random set. Therefore in these conditions the probe block in which the untrained dimension was abolished acted as a negative control.

RESULTS

Data cleaning

Only trials with an accurate response (“hits”) were included in the reaction-time analysis. The first correct response in the reaction-time range −250 to 500 ms (where stimulus onset time was 0) was treated as the response for that trial. We included anticipatory responses in the analysis because in the combined version in which participants could predict the exact response and timing, anticipatory responses were common and to exclude them would have artificially masked the learning effect.

Learning effects

Mean reaction time by block is shown in Fig. 1. Reaction times in the standard (non-probe) blocks decreased significantly over the course of the experiment in the ordinal and combined conditions. Data were analyzed block-wise using a repeated-measures ANOVA, with the three conditions as between-subjects variables and block (the 22 standard blocks) as the within-subjects variable. There was a significant block-by-condition interaction \( F(21,231) = 4.99, P < 0.001; F(1,11) = 9.84, P = 0.009 \) and in the combined condition \( F(21,231) = 8.14, P < 0.001; F(1,11) = 18.91, P < 0.001 \), suggesting that learning occurred in these conditions. No significant learning occurred in the timing condition [main effect of block: \( F(21,231) = 0.36, P = 0.996 \); linear interaction of block: \( F(1,11) <0.001, P = 0.99 \)]. The difference in reaction time between the first and last (22nd) standard blocks, which gives a sense of the learning effect, was much larger in the combined condition (mean RT decreases from block 1 to 14 = 85 ms) than for the ordinal condition (38 ms). In the timing condition, it was negligible (4 ms). The learning effect over the series of 22 blocks was quantified as the linear regression of RT on block and differed significantly between conditions. In an ANOVA, the effect of condition on slope of linear regression was significant \( F(2,33) = 8.66, P < 0.01 \). The learning effect (slope) was significantly greater in the combined condition than the ordinal condition \( t_{22} = 2.09, P = \)

\[ \text{We selected these intervals in line with the Scalar Property of timing (the increase between intervals is always proportional to the interval). This gave rise to a non-metrical rhythm. It is possible that learning may have been facilitated by the use of a metrical rhythm, although the temporal sequence we used was learned successfully in the combined condition.} \]

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0.048, independent samples t-test), while in the timing condition the learning effect was not significantly different from zero (t_{12} = 0.19, P = 0.985).

**Probe costs**

The probe cost is defined as the increase in reaction time in the probe blocks when the order or timing of stimuli, or both, was changed. We calculated the probe cost as the difference between mean reaction time in each probe block and the mean reaction time for the preceding three standard blocks for each participant, to account for individual differences in reaction times and rate of learning. Probe costs were compared statistically with zero, using one-sample t-test, Bonferroni corrected for multiple comparisons.

Probe costs for the three types of probe blocks are shown in Fig. 2. Size and significance of the costs (comparison against zero with a 1-sample t-test) are shown in Table 1. Note that in the case of the timing condition, the change order probe block is a negative control in that there was no ordinal sequence to change: one block of 84 nonrepeating stimuli was exchanged for another. The converse was true for the ordinal condition. The probe costs were much higher in the combined condition than in either the timing or ordinal condition. This is in accordance with the much greater learning effect in that condition. Note that where SRT paradigms have been used in the

![Fig. 1. Decrease in reaction time with learning. Data points show group mean reaction time for each block; error bars show SE for the group. Blocks 1–14, 16–19, and 21–24 were standard blocks; blocks 15, 20, and 25 were probe blocks. The order of probe blocks was fully counterbalanced between subjects (with 2 people in each of 6 possible order conditions), so the probe costs seen here do not relate to any particular probe condition. Note that in the ordinal and timing conditions, 1 of the 3 probe types was a negative control so the probe cost seen here will be artificially decreased.](http://jn.physiology.org/)

![Fig. 2. Probe block reaction-time costs](http://jn.physiology.org/)
literature, each stimulus is generally presented at a fixed interval after the last response (without jitter), which means that the timing of stimuli is highly predictable. The magnitude of the reaction-time benefit in our combined condition was in line with such SRT studies using a fixed response-stimulus interval, whereas the reaction-time benefit in the ordinal sequence condition (i.e., in the absence of predictable temporal structure) was much smaller than usually seen in SRT paradigms.

In the combined condition, there were significant probe costs for changing the temporal sequence and the ordinal sequence separately as well as for changing both. The cost of changing the ordinal sequence was as high as the cost of changing both the ordinal and timing sequences (the difference was 6.7 ms; \( t = 0.85, P = 0.41 \), paired samples \( t \)-test). There was a cost of changing the timing, but this was significantly lower than the cost of changing both the rhythm and the ordinal sequence (difference = 48 ms, \( t = 3.72, P = 0.003 \), paired samples \( t \)-test).

In the timing condition, the probe cost in all three probe blocks was very small, reflecting the lack of learning in this condition. None of the probe costs was significantly different from zero (1-sample \( t \)-test; see Table 1).

In the ordinal condition, there was a significant cost of changing the order of fingers. There was no significant difference in probe costs between the change-order and change-both probes (the difference of 6.5 ms was not significant: \( t = 1.1, P = 0.32 \), paired samples \( t \)-test) in accordance with the fact that these were equivalent (because there was no rhythm to change in the change-both probe). There was no RT cost in the change-timing probe, in accordance with the fact that there was no temporal sequence to change in this condition.

In a de-briefing questionnaire, we asked participants to rate their awareness of the sequence in ordinal and temporal domains on a 5-point scale. However, we were unable to find a reliable effect of condition on the relative awareness of the temporal and ordinal sequences due to high intersubject variability in confidence.

**DISCUSSION**

The results suggest that in motor learning, timing information must be incorporated into a concrete motor plan to be used. When participants were exposed to a temporal sequence in isolation (in the timing condition), there was no evidence of learning. In contrast, timing information was learned in the context of a specific motor (ordinal) sequence and this significantly improved performance: The learning-related decrease in reaction times was much greater when a sequence of movements with regular timing was used (in the combined condition) than when the sequence of movements was fixed but the timing was random (in the ordinal condition).

What role does timing information play? In the combined condition, we included probe blocks in which the timing, order of fingers, or both was altered. This allowed us to ask whether the timing and order of movements were learned independently or as an integrated representation—if there was some degree of independence between the representations, some of the performance advantage should be retained when only one aspect of learning was altered compared with when both were changed. In fact, we found an asymmetrical relationship between temporal and ordinal sequences: in probe blocks when the order of stimuli was retained (with random timing), the probe cost was lower than when both the order and timing were abolished, but in probe blocks when the timing was retained (with random order of movements), performance was as bad as if both timing and order had been abolished. In other words, the ordinal sequence learned with a certain timing could be expressed with different timing (albeit at some cost in reaction time), but the temporal sequence could not be expressed with a random order of finger movements. This is in accordance with findings by Shin and Ivry (2002), who showed that if participants are exposed to interfering temporal and ordinal sequences (when the sequences had a different number of elements and were therefore “out of sync”), only the ordinal sequence is learned.

Had the representation of the rhythm been completely independent of (or superordinate to) effector selection, we would have expected an additive effect of temporal and ordinal regularity on learning and an additive cost in the probe blocks in the combined task. This was clearly not the case, suggesting that the representation of the temporal pattern was subordinate to the representation of the effector sequence. Had any representation of the temporal pattern been formed in the temporal condition, we would have expected at least a modest reduction in reaction time across training blocks, as temporal orienting experiments have shown that people can use temporal predictions to improve performance in discrimination tasks in an effector-independent way (Nobre et al. 2007).

It seems, then, that an abstract representation of timing, which could be executed with any response effector, was not formed. In the case of the timing condition, this meant that no representation of timing was formed, whereas in the combined condition, it meant that no benefit of learning the temporal sequence was retained when the ordinal sequence was changed (that is, the probe cost was as large in the change-order probe as the change-both probe). However, real life experience might cause us to question the generality of this finding because people clearly can form effector-independent representations of rhythms and express these through motor behavior—for example, people can tap their fingers to the rhythm of a tune that they have only experienced perceptually and indeed can express a given rhythm through different response effectors (e.g., tapping fingers on a desk, tapping a foot, dancing, or playing the tune on a musical instrument) without training each effector system separately. What is the difference between these examples and our experiment?

Perhaps the crucial difference is, as described in the preceding text, between explicit training and incidental pick-up of information: the use of sensory-imagery strategies. In inciden-
tal learning paradigms such as the SRT, participants are unlikely to use sensory imagery as an effector-free representation of timing because no sensory representation need be formed. Hikosaka and colleagues (2002) have proposed a model of skill acquisition in which separate, parallel associations are formed between successive sensory cues and between successive motor actions (although sensory representations can also be used to guide action, as with the song heard on the radio). They suggest that in motor learning tasks such as the SRT, direct associations may be formed between action representations (action-action associations). Timing may be represented as a property of these action-action associations and would therefore be specific to learned pairs of actions. Taken with the present results, this would imply that, if timing is incorporated into a purely motor sequence representation, then it is at a level that is specific to the ordinal sequence of effectors with which that temporal pattern was learned.

In conclusion, our results suggest that in motor-skill acquisition under incidental learning conditions, timing is represented at a level specific to the ordinal sequence of movements rather than as an independent temporal template. Further research might address the question of whether temporal representations are specific at the level of effector preparation, or are also specific to action sequences performed by a single effector.

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REFERENCES


