INTRODUCTION. It is well known that our ability to discriminate speech-like sounds is not uniform throughout acoustic space. For example, listeners are typically more sensitive to between-category differences than within-category differences, a phenomenon referred to as categorical perception. A heavily discussed example of auditory space warping is the perceptual magnet effect (Kuhl, 1991), in which prototypical examples of a vowel are more difficult to discriminate from each other than non-prototypical examples. This poster describes the results of an fMRI study investigating the representation of prototypical and non-prototypical examples of the vowel /i/. The study also acts as a test of neural network models of the perceptual magnet effect and of the effects of categorization training on sensory representations in cortex.

EFFECTS OF CATEGORIZATION TRAINING ON CORTICAL REPRESENTATIONS. Previous research has demonstrated that discrimination training with stimuli, including auditory stimuli, leads to an increase in the size of the cortical representation of these stimuli in sensory cortical areas. For example, Recanzone, Schreiner, and Merzenich (1993) performed a single-cell recording experiment in monkeys and reported an increase in the auditory cortical area representing tones that were used in a discrimination task, along with an increase in the monkey's ability to discriminate these tones. In a psychophysical study involving novel auditory stimuli, Guenther, Hosain, Cohen, and Shinn-Cunningham (1999) showed that, whereas discrimination training with a set of stimuli leads to an increase in discriminability of these stimuli in humans, categorization training (in which subjects learn to treat several stimuli as members of the same category) leads to a decrease in discriminability for the trained stimuli. Guenther et al. hypothesized that this decreased discriminability with categorization training was the result of a decrease in the size of the auditory cortical representation for the training stimuli. This hypothesis is schematized below:

According to Guenther et al. (1999), the perceptual magnet effect for vowels (see Introduction) is the result of vowel category training early in life. This prediction was supported by the Guenther et al. (1999) psychophysical finding that categorization training with non-speech auditory stimuli (bandpass-filtered acoustic noise) leads to a perceptual-magnet-like effect of reduced discriminability for category prototypical stimuli. We have preliminary results from an fMRI experiment testing the hypothesis that this reduced discriminability is the result of a smaller cortical representation for prototypical stimuli after training. The preliminary results from three subjects (only below) support this hypothesis by showing much more activation for the NP condition vs. the P condition after one week of categorization training (right) as compared to before training (left).

RESULTS. Prototypical vs. non-prototypical vowels. Significant activation (p<0.05) in response to vowel sounds was found in 17 of the 20 ROIs (30 regions x 2 hemispheres = 60 ROIs). Only left T1a, left T2a, and left T2p did not show significant activation for either the P or NP stimulus. The averaged activations for auditory cortical regions on the temporal lobe and supratemporal plane for the P and NP conditions are shown at right. As predicted by the neural models of Guenther et al. (1999) and Bauer et al. (1996), less activation is seen for the prototypical vowel than the non-prototypical vowel in auditory cortical areas, thus supporting a simple explanation for the perceptual magnet effect: prototypical vowels are more difficult to discriminate from each other than non-prototypical vowels because they have a smaller cortical representation. It is commonly believed that, all else equal, stimuli with smaller cortical representations are harder to discriminate from each other than stimuli with larger cortical representations, presumably because representations involving more neurons are less susceptible to noise in the signals of individual neurons.

The graph at right shows the difference in activation between the P and NP conditions for all ROIs that were significantly activated by the stimuli. Significant differences (p<0.05) were found in five right hemisphere regions: Hesseld's gyrus (H1), anterior and posterior supramarginal gyrus (SGa, SGp), planum temporale (PT), and parietal operculum (PO). H1 includes primary auditory cortex and PT is a higher-order cortical area. SGa and SGP are per-sylvian parietal areas that have been implicated in phoneme discrimination. (Caplan, Gow, and Makris, 1995). Effects of Categorization Training. As described in the left panel, the Guenther et al. (1999) model predicts that the reduced activation for prototypical vowels is the result of categorization training early in life. This prediction was supported by the Guenther et al. (1999) psychophysical finding that categorization training with non-speech auditory stimuli (bandpass-filtered acoustic noise) leads to a perceptual-magnet-like effect of reduced discriminability for category prototypical stimuli. We have preliminary results from an fMRI experiment testing the hypothesis that this reduced discriminability is the result of a smaller cortical representation for prototypical stimuli after training. The preliminary results from three subjects (only below) support this hypothesis by showing much more activation for the NP condition vs. the P condition after one week of categorization training (right) as compared to before training (left).

CONCLUSIONS. An fMRI analysis revealed that listening to prototypical examples of the vowel /i/ leads to less activation in perisylvian cortical areas than listening to non-prototypical examples. Preliminary results of a second fMRI study suggest that categorization training leads to a decrease in the relative size of the cortical representation for central members of a category. Taken together, these results support the following assertions of the Guenther et al. (1999) neural model of auditory training:

- Categorization training leads to a relative decrease in the size of the cortical representation of prototypical examples of a category.
- Similarly, vowel category training in infancy leads to a decrease in the size of the cortical representation of prototypical examples of a vowel.
- This decreased representation is responsible for the perceptual magnet effect (see also Bauer et al., 1996).


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. Supported by the National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders (RO1 DC02956) to F. Guenther, RO1 DC02915 to J. Schreiner. The authors thank the Massachusetts General Hospital NMR Center for use of their imaging facilities.

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Postdoctoral research position available.