A. SOME EFFECTS OF ADAPTATION ON SPEECH PERCEPTION

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1. Introduction

Several experiments have been reported recently that deal with the selective adaptation of "linguistic feature detectors."¹ ³ The motivation for this work was to establish the existence of auditory detectors sensitive to the distinctive features of speech, particularly for voice distinction, and for place of articulation.

The method is as follows. First, a continuum of synthetic syllables ranging from, say, the voiced /dae/ to voiceless /tae/ is constructed by cutting back on the onset time of voicing relative to the burst in successive, equal steps.⁴ The "phoneme boundary," the point on the continuum that would receive an equal number of "D" and "T" responses is then determined by a two-choice identification test. Next, an adapting sound, say /dae/, is repeatedly presented to the subject, and the phoneme boundary is measured again. In this case the boundary will be shifted by the adaptation toward the "D" end of the continuum. It has been argued¹ ² that this boundary shift is caused by the fatiguing of a "voice detector." Analogous results have been found for place of articulation, as exemplified by a series of syllables from /bae/ to /dae/ to /gae/.³

It has been claimed that the effect occurs at a phonetic rather than at an auditory level. Adaptation with either /bae/ or /dae/ can cause a shift in the voiced/voiceless boundary.¹ Similarly, not only /bae/ but also /bi/ and /pae/ have been shown to shift the bae/dae boundary toward "B",³ presumably because all three sounds, /bae/, /bi/,/pae/,
and /pae/, share the feature labial. On the other hand, these particular cases do not
distinguish phonetic similarities from the acoustic similarities that underlie them. We
shall report, among other things, some research on critical cases where quite different
acoustic structures give rise to the same phonemic percept.

Another important finding from previous work is that the effect is specific to speech
stimuli. The first 50 ms of the syllable /dae/, although in some sense containing all the
necessary information about the voicing of the consonant, is not a stimulus sufficient to
fatigue the hypothetical "voice detector." Since the first 50 ms of /dae/ is generally
heard as a nonspeech chirp, one infers that adaptation takes place at a speech-specific
level of representation not reached by nonphonetic sounds.

Research that is now in progress in the Department of Psychology, M.I.T., uses a
series of 7 three-formant synthetic sounds from /bae/ to /dae/. Three questions are
being asked. (i) Can adaptation occur only with speech stimuli as the adaptors? (ii) How
abstract is the level at which adaptation takes place? Can a "labial detector" be fatigued
by any instance of /b/ or /p/ or /m/, in any environment, in spite of gross acoustic dif-
fferences between the test stimuli and the adapting stimuli? Can adaptation help with the
problem of the variability of the acoustic cues to the same phoneme? (iii) Are there
components of the adaptation effect that take place bilaterally, and others that are cen-
tral, and does this distinction coincide with any distinction between auditory and phonetic
levels of analysis?

2. Stimuli and Procedure

The seven test stimuli differ only in their second and third formant frequency tran-
sitions. The transitions are 35 ms long and are followed by 190 ms of the steady-state
vowel /ae/ (F1 = 742, F2 = 1618, F3 = 2751 Hz; amplitudes of the formants relative to
F1 are -6 dB for F2, -17 dB for F3). The distances between the successive stimuli are
in the ratio 2, 1, 1, 1, 1, 2, where one unit corresponds to 39 Hz in F2 starting frequency
and 87 Hz in F3. Thus the extreme B stimulus had F2 and F3 transitions rise from
1384 Hz and 2422 Hz to the steady state, in a linear fashion, while in the extreme D they
fell from 1696 Hz and 3114 Hz. The relative amplitudes of the formant transitions fol-
lowed the acoustical theory of Fant.

In all experiments the procedure has been as follows. First, the identification (ID)
boundary is measured at every session (32 presentations of each of the seven test stim-
uli). The boundary is then computed as that point on a stimulus scale from 0 to 8 that
would receive an equal number of B and D responses. During adaptation every four
test stimuli are preceded by one minute of more than 90 presentations of the adapting
sound. This cycle is repeated until each test stimulus has been presented 35 times (or
21 times in the backwards tweet and aeb/aed experiments.)

The adapting stimuli are always presented at the same intensity (±0.5 dB) as the test
stimuli or whatever part of the test stimuli they correspond to. The adapting stimuli are always the same as, or derived from, the extreme B or the extreme D on the test series. Stimuli are presented binaurally, unless otherwise stated.

The subjects are paid volunteers from the Cambridge area.

3. Results

a. Syllables, Chirps and Tweets: Speech versus Nonspeech

Adaptation of either the B or D end of the continuum by repetition of /bae/ or /dae/, respectively, is easily obtained, as Cooper\(^3\) also found. Figure VIII-1 is a histogram showing the size of the boundary shift caused by adaptation. There is also a substantial effect of adapting with the chirp portion of the syllable, which is the transitions only. (The first 38 ms of the extreme test stimuli were used; that was the first four glottal pulses.) Although subjects describe chirps as sounding like dripping water, they find them quite easy to identify as b-like or d-like. Another even less speechlike stimulus, the tweet, can be made by removing the F1 portion of the chirp. This leaves only the F2 and F3 transitions, just that part of the sound that distinguishes it from the others in the series. Figure VIII-1 shows that the effect of adapting with tweets is small relative to syllables and chirps, but it is present (Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, \(p < 0.005\)). The sizes of all of these effects can be compared with the standard deviation of the unadapted boundary, as measured at the start of each session. The least consistent subject had a standard deviation of 0.32 stimulus units and the most consistent had 0.08. These deviations correspond to 13 Hz in the starting frequency of F2 and approximately 30 Hz for F3 in the worst subject; 3 Hz in F2, 7 Hz in F3 for the best.

It must be noted that these chirp stimuli, which give such a large adaptation effect on place of articulation, are substantially the same as those for which Eimas et al.\(^2\) found no effect on a voice continuum. Perhaps the chirp does not convey enough information about voice to affect the hypothetical "voice detector": although the information is present, it seems probable that a voice detector would be more interested in the relative onset time of fairly sustained components, or in the presence of a frequency change before a steady state. Whether or not a nonspeech sound can be made that would adapt the voice detector is not yet known, but there are some discrimination data on nonspeech stimuli that suggest that such sounds do exist.\(^7\),\(^8\)

Given that both tweets and chirps have an adapting effect, why are they not of the same magnitude? One possibility is that the small tweet effect is a result of fatiguing some quite low-level energy-detecting mechanisms. Accordingly, adaptation was attempted with tweets played backwards. These stimuli have exactly the same spectrum as tweets but the direction of frequency change is reversed and the phase relationships altered. The results also appear in Fig. VIII-1. There was no effect.
Whatever the source of the differences in the size of syllable, chirp, and tweet effects, it appears that the same mechanisms are partly responsible for all of them. The sizes of all three effects are correlated with each other, across subjects (syllables and chirps, \( r = 0.85, p < 0.005 \); syllables and tweets, \( r = 0.70, p < 0.05 \); chirps and tweets, \( r = 0.68, p < 0.005 \)).

Further research is being conducted to try to determine what makes a stimulus sufficiently speechlike, in some nonphenomenological sense, to cause adaptation, and to understand the differences in the tweet, chirp, and syllable effects.

b. Variability of Acoustic Cues to the Same Phoneme

If adaptation were taking place at a truly phonemic level, then repetition of any sound containing a /b/ should shift the ID boundary toward B. Attempts were made to adapt with /aeb/ and /aed/. These sounds were very similar to the bae/dae sounds used so
far, except that the transitions were at the end, rather than at the beginning of the syllable. The transitions were slightly curved, which made them sound much more natural, but of the same overall excursion. The results of trying to adapt the bae/dae test continuum with /aeb/ and /aed/ appear in Table VIII-1. Subjects performed so differently

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Boundary Shifts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adapting with /aeb/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TS</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>-1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BO</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Effect</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A positive boundary shift for /aeb/ indicates a shift toward the B end of the test continuum.

under the same conditions that tests were run twice on /aeb/ and twice on /aed/: consistency within each subject is reassuringly good. The boundary shifts are measured relative to the unadapted boundary of that session; a positive shift on /aeb/ adaptation means a shift toward the B end of the continuum. There is no evidence here that /aeb/ or /aed/ are adapting the same mechanisms as /bae/ and /dae/ do. If anything, /aeb/ and /aed/ have the same effects on bae/dae perception, rather than opposite ones. Possibly the initial portion of the /aeb/ and /aed/ syllables, i.e., the initial steady state, is responsible for whatever effect there is.

A follow-up experiment, now in progress, shows that /aeb/ and /aed/ can be used successfully to shift the boundary of an aeb/aed test continuum. It can be concluded that adaptation does not take place at a truly phonemic level. This is a disappointment for those of us who had looked forward to a powerful method of evaluating the perceptual significance of quite abstract linguistic feature systems, which are now motivated by purely linguistic and/or articulatory considerations.

Another case of acoustic variability underlying cues to the same phoneme arises with the syllable /de/. (This is one example from a class of similar ones.) A syllable perceived as /de/ can be synthesized with a slightly rising F2 transition (1875 Hz to a steady
state at 2048 Hz) and a flat F3. By contrast, the d-transitions before the vowel /æ/, or any other vowel that is not [+front] [-low], are falling. Preliminary results where /de/ is presented as an adapting stimulus suggest, however, that /de/ can fatigue the same mechanisms responsible for /dae/, in spite of the fact that acoustically /de/ is more like /bae/ than /dae/. Evidently adaptation can occur at quite an abstract level, yet not a level sufficiently abstract to generalize between /bae/ and /aeb/.

There is an interesting possibility that the tweet or chirp components of the same /de/, if such sounds do indeed have their adapting effect at a prephonetic auditory level, would fatigue the B end of the bae/dae continuum.

c. Dichotic Adaptation and Transfer of Adaptation

In these experiments the procedure differs, in that the unadapted boundaries for the left and right ears are measured separately. During adaptation the left and right ears are also tested separately. Various factors were counterbalanced across experimental conditions: orientation of the subjects' headsets, order of testing, and certain factors to do with the equipment.

In the dichotic experiment /bae/ is presented to one ear, and /dae/ to the other simultaneously. A single ID boundary in the adapted state is taken for each subject from two sessions (14 presentations of each stimulus per ear per session). The boundary shifts given in Table VIII-2, along with the standard deviation of the unadapted boundary,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Unadapted Boundary</th>
<th>Boundary Shifts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>/bae/ L, /dae/ R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N = 8) L R</td>
<td>L R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB</td>
<td>0.68 0.93</td>
<td>0.86 1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>0.48 0.18</td>
<td>0.87 0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT</td>
<td>0.37 0.42</td>
<td>0.86 1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK</td>
<td>0.26 0.48</td>
<td>0.46 0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Effect</td>
<td>0.76 0.865</td>
<td>0.515 0.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Negative entries indicate boundary shifts away from the predicted direction.

are relative to the mean unadapted boundary for a given subject's ear (N = 8). The experiment was performed with /bae/ left, /dae/ right, and the converse (two sessions each). Evidently it is possible to shift the boundary one way in one ear, and the other way in the
other ear. The two negative boundary shifts were produced by a subject who spoke Italian exclusively until she was seven, and whose unadapted boundaries were rather unstable. Nonetheless the effect is highly significant (Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, p < 0.005). We must conclude that some component of the adaptation effect is bilateral, one "detector" on the left, and one on the right.  

The transfer experiment simply involves adapting one ear with a syllable, and testing both ears separately. The results appear in Table VIII-3. The shifts are computed from the same baseline for each subject that was used for the dichotic boundary shifts. The adapted boundary was measured from a single session (14 presentations of each stimulus per ear). The percent transfer is the ratio of the shift in the unadapted ear to the shift in the adapted ear. For these stimuli the overall percent transfer was ~55%. Eimas, Cooper, and Corbit\(^2\) found that transfer for their voiced/voiceless continuum was ~100%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Transfer Left → Right</th>
<th>Transfer Right → Left</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/bae/ Left</td>
<td>/dae/ Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Transfer</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Transfer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Transfer</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Transfer</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Effect</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Transfer</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The symbol ">" indicates that the adaptation was so large that the boundary was shifted beyond the ends of the stimulus continuum.

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A transfer effect is generally taken as an indication of adaptation at a central site. Alternative arguments do exist, and will be explored, but provisionally we shall interpret the dichotic and transfer results as pointing to both central and bilateral components of adaptation. It should be stressed that the bilateral component should not be considered as "peripheral." The backwards tweet data rule out any simple energy-detecting mechanisms.

The question arises whether the bilateral effect is at a nonphonetic level, while the central effect reflects a much more abstract phonetic analysis. One could hypothesize that the bilateral effect is due to the tweet part of the syllable. (The dichotic and tweet effects are the same size, interestingly enough.) If this is correct, then there should be no transfer of adaptation for tweets, and there should be a dichotic effect of the same size as the dichotic syllable effect. On the other hand, there should be no dichotic effect with /be/ and /de/, since these sounds are quite different from the bae/dae test sounds at the auditory level. But there should be transfer with /de/ and /be/ because at the phonetic level they would be analyzed the same as /bae/ and /dae/. This experiment awaits more tests of the bae/dae boundary after adaptation with /be/, /de/ and their associated chirps and tweets.

4. Summary

Identification of stimuli on a bae/dae test continuum after adaptation with various stimuli has revealed several things.

1. Appropriate nonspeech sounds can fatigue the "detectors" responsible for identification of the bae/dae test sounds, but are not as effective as the syllables themselves.

2. Mechanisms that simply detect the energy at certain frequencies cannot explain any of the adaptation results.

3. Some adaptation takes place at a phonetic level sufficiently abstract to generalize between /de/ and /dae/ in spite of there being no obvious acoustic similarity between these sounds, but it is not so abstract that it treats initial and final consonants alike.

4. There are certainly bilateral, and almost certainly central, components of adaptation.

Further research will concentrate on defining an auditory/phonetic distinction which reflects the bilateral/central distinction.

Footnotes and References


5. All stimuli were generated by a program written by Dr. D. H. Klatt on the PDP-9 computer facility of the Speech Communication Group of the Research Laboratory of Electronics. The program, which was essentially a simulation of a parallel resonance synthesizer, also controlled the output of the stimuli onto recording tape, in a format suitable for the identification tests. Adapting stimuli were output in long sequences which were later made into tape loops.


9. Under dichotic syllable stimulation subjects were completely unaware that the sound in the left ear is different from that in the right: a single, fused percept is heard, even by non-naive listeners. This situation, not characteristic of most dichotic syllable stimulation, occurs because the left and right inputs are identical for the vowel. The precision of the temporal alignment achieved with the program AUDITS, written by Dr. A. W. F. Huggins, is also a factor.