

AD-A193 814

DIVIDED ATTENTION REVISITED: SELECTION BASED ON  
LOCATION OR PITCH(U) NEW YORK UNIV N Y  
L KAUFMAN ET AL. 28 FEB 88 AFOSR-TR-88-0343

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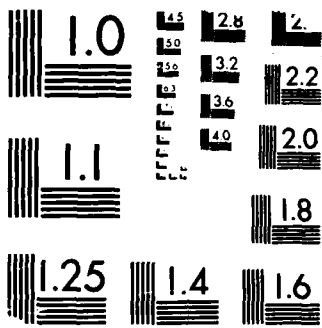
UNCLASSIFIED

F49628-85-K-0084

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MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART  
SERIAL 100 STANDARDS 1963 A

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

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Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION  
unclassified

1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS

2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY

DTIC  
ELECTE

JUL  
PR 0 4 1988

BER(S)

σD

3. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF REPORT  
Approved for public release distribution unlimited

AD-A193 814

5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)

AFOSR-TR- 88-0343

6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION  
New York University

6b. OFFICE SYMBOL  
(if applicable)

7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION  
Air Force Office of Scientific Research

6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)  
Departments of Psychology and Physics  
4 Washington Place - New York, NY 10003

7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)  
Building 410  
Bolling AFB, DC 20332-6448

8a. NAME OF FUNDING / SPONSORING ORGANIZATION  
AFSOR

8b. OFFICE SYMBOL  
(if applicable)  
NL

9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER  
F49620-85-k-0004

8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)  
Building 410  
Bolling AFB, DC 20332

10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS			
PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.	TASK NO.	WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.
61102F	2313	A4	

11. TITLE (Include Security Classification)  
DIVIDED ATTENTION REVISITED: SELECTION BASED ON LOCATION OR PITCH

12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S)  
Lloyd Kaufman, Samuel J. Williamson and S. Curtis

13a. TYPE OF REPORT  
Publication

13b. TIME COVERED  
FROM 1 Jan 88 TO 28 Feb 88

14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day)  
Feb. 28, 1988

15. PAGE COUNT  
5

16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION

17. COSATI CODES		
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP

18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)

19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)

The affect of attention on the level of cortical activity in human subjects was investigated by use of a novel paradigm involving the rapid and simultaneous presentation of two sequences of tones having different sets of frequencies. Measurements of the magnetic field of both the N100 and P200 components originating in auditory cortex showed enhancement for the attended sequence in comparison with the ignored sequence. This was observed whether the sequences were presented to different ears or the same ear. Thus pitch alone is a sufficient clue for attention. These results are also in general agreement with filter theories that postulate the attention of ignored stimuli prior to conscious perception.

20. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT  
 UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED  SAME AS RPT  DTIC USERS

21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION  
unclassified

22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL  
Dr. Alfred R. Fregly

22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code)  
202-767-5024

22c. OFFICE SYMBOL  
NL

07 MAR 1988

DIVIDED ATTENTION REVISITED: SELECTION BASED ON LOCATION OR PITCH

AFOSR-TR- 88-0343

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INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the auditory and visual N100 components of the event related potential (ERP) measured on the scalp are modulated by attention. Moreover, many investigators have proposed that N100 is produced by multiple sources whose potential patterns overlap at the scalp electrodes (Naatanen and Picton, 1987). Neuromagnetic investigations of the event related field (ERF) have revealed that at least some portion of the N100 component, which we shall refer to as N100m, originates in the auditory cortex (Bak et al., 1981; Hari et al., 1980, 1982), and that the source or sources of N100m are modulated by attention (Curtis, 1987; Kaufman and Williamson, 1987). Thus, primary sensory activity contributes substantially to the so-called "endogenous" N100.

One of the issues related to the effects of selective attention on the ERP has to do with the classic finding in dichotic listening experiments that attention to a message can be facilitated if the message is perceived as originating in one place in auditory space, while the competing message originates at some other place. In our earlier studies of the ERF we confirmed this finding, since in a dichotic listening task the two messages were delivered separately to the two ears, and attending to one of them results in a substantially enhanced N100m in comparison to the response for the message being ignored. We now test the hypothesis that separation in quality (pitch) rather than perceived space is sufficient to produce a similar effect on N100m. This would test for the applicability of the neuromagnetic findings to those obtained in behavioral studies (see Kahneman, 1973, for a review).

METHODS

A novel dichotic listening task was employed in which 100 ms tone bursts were delivered at a rate of 3 s<sup>-1</sup> to one ear and 3.5 s<sup>-1</sup> to the other ear. Since neither these fundamental frequencies nor their first four higher harmonics coincide, it was possible to simultaneously average the band-limited responses and then obtain the separate response at 3 Hz together with its first four harmonics and at 3.5 Hz together with its first four harmonics. The 3 s<sup>-1</sup> sequence of tone bursts had frequencies of either 1,000 Hz or 1,050 Hz, presented in random order. Similarly, the 3.5 s<sup>-1</sup> sequence was independently randomized, and the tone bursts were of higher pitch, namely 3,000 Hz and 3,050 Hz. Each randomly chosen pattern was repeated after about 40 bursts (a pseudorandom sequence). Of course, the precise lengths of the two sequences were different from each other, and also from trial to trial. It is to be noted that the repeat of each randomized segment was not accompanied by any audible cue. This arrangement made it possible for the subject to attend to one of the trains of tone bursts while ignoring the other.

With the 3 s<sup>-1</sup> and 3.5 s<sup>-1</sup> trains presented to separate ears by plastic earphones to produce the requisite spatial localization of the two trains of tone bursts, a 5-sensor SQUID probe (Williamson et al., 1984) was placed at various positions over the subject's head to record the magnetic response. The subject was instructed to attend to one train and to determine the number of tone bursts that occurred before the pseudorandom pattern repeated itself. The accuracy of this determination provided a measure of the subject's attention. During a session the lengths of the sequences were progressively increased, to insure that the subject was fully engaged in his task. The entire procedure was repeated with the subject paying attention to the tone bursts occurring at the other repetition rate. Hence it was possible to compare responses to tones when they were attended to and when they were ignored, but when they had the same repetition rate and the same spectral



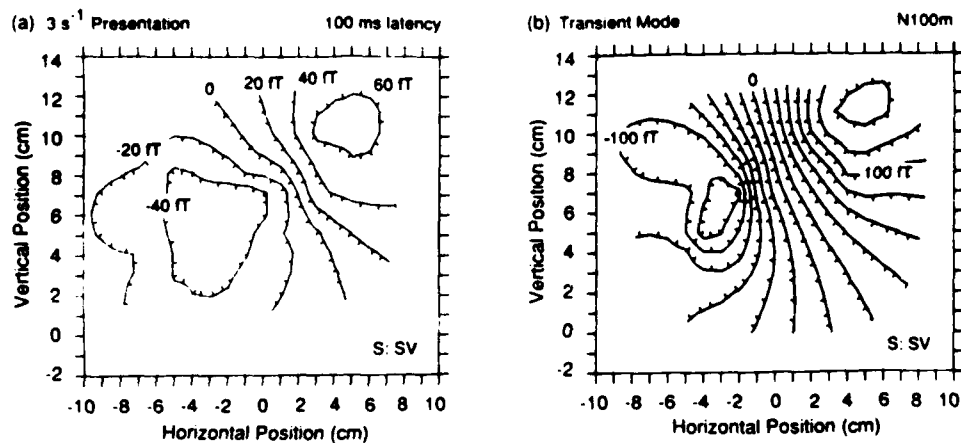


Fig. 2. Isofield contours over the left hemisphere of a subject for (a) the 100-ms component evoked by an attended  $3 \text{ s}^{-1}$  presentation rate of 1 kHz tones and (b) the N100m component evoked by a 200 ms tone burst with an interstimulus interval exceeding 500 ms. Contours are at 20 fT intervals. The horizontal coordinate indicates distance along the line passing through the ear canal, at (0,0), to the outer canthus of the eye; and the vertical coordinate is distance above this line measured along a perpendicular to the line.

the peaks measured at different positions, but this is to be expected as the different positions were at different distances from the field extrema. The most important finding was the effect of instruction to attend to a stimulus. This produced amplitudes of N100m and P200m that were greater than the corresponding amplitudes found when the stimuli were ignored (Fig. 3a). This difference was significant with  $p = 0.028$ . A similar analysis was performed separately on the first three harmonics of the responses after their waveforms were analyzed by means of an FFT (for subject CB). There was no significant effect of instructions on the 2nd and 3rd harmonics. The effect of attention was fully accounted for by changes in the amplitude of the fundamental component of the response. Moreover, in each hemisphere of the subjects there were substantial and systematic variations in the computed tangential current dipole moments of the sources that depended solely upon instruction. We conclude from these studies that activity originating in auditory cortex is modulated by attention. There is no sign at all of neural activity in extra-auditory areas that may contribute to auditory-evoked electrical N100 and P200 measured near the vertex by Hillyard et al. (1973).

In a control experiment one of the two stimuli was reduced in intensity by 20 dB. This had no effect on the amplitude of the response, whether it was a response obtained while the subject was paying attention to the stimulus or a response while the stimulus was being ignored.

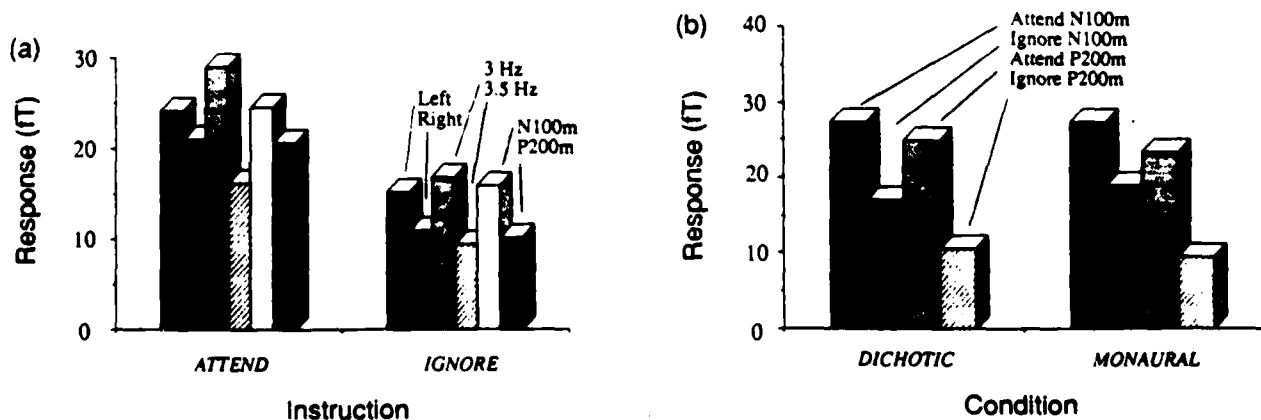


Figure 3. (a) Effect of the instruction to attend a stimulus, for left and right hemisphere responses to  $3 \text{ s}^{-1}$  and  $3.5 \text{ s}^{-1}$  stimuli, for both N100m and P200m components. (b) Response strengths of N100m and P200m for dichotic and monaural presentation, when attended and ignored.

## Dichotic vs. Monaural Presentation

To determine whether pitch differences alone mediated the effect, the two stimuli were applied to two different loudspeakers placed adjacent to each other and about 1 m from one ear, thus enabling both signals to be heard by both ears without artifact. For one subject, the N100m and P200m components were enhanced as a result of attending to one of these trains of tone bursts by the same amount as when they were presented dichotically. This was followed by a systematic experiment in which the two different trains were presented to one ear alone through one earpiece of the headset used in the main experiment. Thus, the only cue available to the subject was the difference in pitch of the two different trains of tone bursts. The result was that the effect of instruction was statistically the same as that obtained when both pitch and location were available as cues to permit the subject to divide attention between the two stimuli (Fig. 3b).

## DISCUSSION

The main conclusion to be drawn from these results is that activity originating in the auditory cortex is modulated by attention. There is no sign of activity in extra-auditory areas contributing to the attentional effect. While we cannot rule out the possibility that such sources may contribute to the effect of attention on the electrical N100 and P200, the magnitude of our effect suggests that such additional sources would add very little to the modality-specific effect of attention. These results are in general agreement with filter theories of attention that postulate the attention of ignored stimuli prior to conscious perception (Treisman, 1969).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Research was supported in part by Air Force Office of Scientific Research Grant F49620-85-K-0004.

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