Integration of Length and Curvature in Haptic Perception

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We investigated if and how length and curvature information are integrated when an object is explored in one hand. Subjects were asked to explore four types of objects between thumb and index finger. Objects differed in either length, curvature, both length and curvature correlated as in a circle, or anti-correlated. We found that when both length and curvature are present, performance is significantly better than when only one of the two cues is available. Therefore, we conclude that there is integration of length and curvature. Moreover, if the two cues are correlated in a circular cross-section instead of in an anti-correlated way, performance is better than predicted by a combination of two independent cues. We conclude that integration of curvature and length is highly efficient when the cues in the object are combined as in a circle, which is the most common combination of curvature and length in daily life.

The integration of cues from different modalities or from different sources of information is a topic of growing interest, because it teaches us about the way information is processed by the sensory system. In this study, we investigated how length and curvature are integrated in unimanual haptic exploration. We know that in unimanual exploration, the presence of curvature improves the ability to distinguish the oblongness of stimuli: the threshold for distinguishing cylindrical objects with circular and elliptical cross-sections is smaller than that for distinguishing between blocks with square and rectangular cross-sections. This is illustrated in Figure 1. Furthermore, we know that in bimanual exploration, length and curvature can be combined into a total percept of a cylinder with a circular cross-section. However, unimanual perception is different from bimanual perception. It is still unclear whether the improved detection of oblongness in unimanual exploration is due to some form of integration of two cues or only due to a higher sensitivity for differences in curvature compared to length.

We discuss three possible explanations for the increased performance for cylinders over blocks. Firstly, it could be that curvature provides more precise information than length. In the case when both length and curvature are present in an object, subjects could be more sensitive in detecting the difference based on curvature and therefore select that cue to base their judgement on. This is called the winner-take-all model, in which subjects are more sensitive to one of the cues present and base the combined percept on the cue they are most sensitive to. In this model, if subjects are more sensitive to, for instance, the curvature cue, they would be able to distinguish objects which contain both curvature and length cues as well as they can distinguish objects which contain only curvature cues. This would be irrespective of how the length and curvature are combined, i.e. whether curvature and length form a circle or are not correlated at all.

Secondly, subjects could perceive both length and curvature simultaneously but due to stochastic fluctuations, one cue might be more precise on a specific trial. Subjects then change the cue on which they base their judgement accordingly. In this way, the combined chance of perceiving the distinction becomes larger than the chance of perceiving a difference in either cue individually. This we call independent combination, in which two uncorrelated cues give rise to a higher detection probability. It is important to note here that although two cues can be correlated in the stimuli, it remains to be seen whether they are also correlated in the perception by subjects. In objects that have both length and curvature cues, it might depend on the way these two cues are combined whether they are treated as correlated in the perception.

Thirdly, subjects could combine the information from the length and curvature cues in a way that surpasses simple cue combination. An example is a combination according to the maximum-likelihood-estimator paradigm, in which cues are weighted with their statistical reliability. In this way, the perception of an object with two cues would be more accurate than when the cues are combined in an uncorrelated way.

We designed four stimulus sets with which we tested these three possible explanations. These stimuli were felt between the thumb and index finger. In condition 1, we used stimuli that differ only in length and have a flat surface. In condition 2, the stimuli differ only in curvature, which is defined as the reciprocal of the radius.
condition \( (F(3, 33) = 22, p = 4.5 \times 10^{-4}) \), difference from reference \( (F(4, 44) = 16, p = 1.6 \times 10^{-3}) \) and an interaction effect \( (F(4, 47) = 6.5, p = 2.5 \times 10^{-3}) \). The values for \( d' \) of both condition 1 (length only) and condition 2 (curvature only) are significantly lower than those of condition 3 where these two cues are combined in circular cross-sections \( (p = 2.0 \times 10^{-3} \text{ and } p = 1.5 \times 10^{-3}, \text{ respectively}) \).

Comparing the values for \( d' \) of these two conditions to condition 4, in which length and curvature correlate in the opposite way compared to condition 3, we see that condition 1 (length only) is not significantly different from condition 4 \( (p = 0.19) \), whereas condition 2 (curvature only) is \( (p = 6.4 \times 10^{-3}) \). Finally, we find that the values for \( d' \) of condition 3 are significantly higher than those of condition 4 \( (p = 0.046) \).

In Figure 3 the predicted values are shown with the values for conditions 3 and 4 for comparison. A 2 (condition) by 5 (difference from reference) repeated measures ANOVA shows an effect of condition \( (F(1, 11) = 9.9, p = 0.0092) \) and difference from reference \( (F(4, 44) = 73, p = 7.2 \times 10^{-13}) \) and no significant interaction effect. Since the effect of difference from reference is trivial, namely with increasing difference the \( d' \) increases, we only look into the effect of condition in more detail. Two paired \( t \)-tests show that the values for condition 3 are significantly larger than the predicted values for differences from reference of 1.0, 1.5 and 2.0 mm \( t(11) = 3.0, p = 0.012, t(11) = 3.5, p = 0.0050 \) and \( t(11) = 4.8, p = 5.9 \times 10^{-4}, \text{ respectively} \). In contrast, the values of condition 4 are never significantly different from the predicted values \( t(11) = -2.0, p = 0.076, t(11) = 0.53, p = 0.61, t(11) = 1.3, p = 0.21, t(11) = 2.1, p = 0.064 \) and \( t(11) = 0.28, p = 0.78, \text{ respectively} \).

**Discussion**

From Figure 2 it can be clearly seen that if both curvature and length are present in the object, subjects can distinguish the test stimulus from the reference much better than when only one of the cues is present. If one looks in more detail one can see that the \( d' \) for both length only and curvature only remain low until 2.5 mm difference. In contrast, if both cues are present the \( d' \) is already high at 1.0 mm difference. This means that with either of the cues by itself it is much harder to distinguish a difference smaller than 2.5 mm, but when both cues are combined already a very small difference is easily distinguished. Therefore, we conclude that there must be some form of integration of length and curvature and we can exclude the winner-take-all model.

The question that remains is whether the integration we find is due to an independent combination or due to subjects correlating the length and curvature cues in a more complex manner. From Figure 3 we can see that when length and curvature are combined in a circular cylinder, the predictions based on the assumption that the length and curvature cue are uncorrelated are significantly lower than the values for \( d' \) measured in condition 3. Thus, independent combination is insufficient to explain the better performance in condition 3. In contrast, the values of condition 4 are not significantly different from the predicted values, which means that in this condition the perception of length and curvature is probably independent and the increase in performance can be ascribed to independent combination.

Comparing condition 3 with condition 4, we can say that apparently, we are more sensitive to the length and curvature of objects if they are combined in a circular cross-section. Plaisier and Ernst\(^*\) showed that a strongly curved local surface leads to an overestimation of the length, whereas a weakly curved local surface leads to an underestimation. To explain their results, they suggested that subjects assume that local curvature is related to the length. This assumption by subjects would also explain the better performance on objects with circular cross-sections that we find when comparing condition 3 with condition 4. Whether subjects assume circularity or not, our results show that for integration of information in the brain...
it is not only important which cues are available, but also how they are combined.

Methods
Subjects. Twelve paid subjects (mean age 21 ± 2 years, 4 male) participated in this experiment. All subjects reported to be right-handed. All subjects were naive as to the purpose of the experiment and gave their informed consent. None of the subjects reported any known hand deficits. The program under which these experiments were performed is approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Human Movement Sciences at the VU University in Amsterdam.

Stimuli and set-up. The stimuli were printed on a Z-Corp Z450 3D printer, by binding a plaster composite with an epoxy. The resolution of this printer is 300 by

Figure 2 | Mean $d'$ of 12 subjects for conditions 1 (length only), 2 (curvature only), 3 (correlated length and curvature) and 4 (anti-correlated length and curvature). For conditions 1, 3 and 4, the mean $d'$ were plotted for differences from reference (diameter 20.0 mm) of 0.5, 1.0, 1.5, 2.0 and 2.5 mm. For conditions 2 and 3, the mean $d'$ were plotted for differences from reference (diameter 20.0 mm, curvature 100 m$^{-1}$) of 2.4, 4.8, 7.0, 9.1 and 11 m$^{-1}$ in curvature. The length of the stimuli for condition 2 were all 20.0 mm. Finally, the mean $d'$ of condition 4 were plotted for differences from reference (diameter 20.0 mm, curvature 88.9 m$^{-1}$) of 2.0, 4.1, 6.3, 8.7 and 11 m$^{-1}$ in curvature. Error bars indicate the standard error of the sample mean.

Figure 3 | The mean of the predicted values of $d'$ if subjects use both length and curvature cues in an uncorrelated way. The mean values for conditions 3 and 4 are shown for comparison. The mean $d'$ were plotted for differences from reference (diameter 20.0 mm) of 0.5, 1.0, 1.5, 2.0 and 2.5 mm. Error bars indicate the standard error of the sample mean.
Figure 4 | Stimuli used in condition 1 (top) differ only in length. Stimuli used in condition 2 (second from top) differ only in curvature. Stimuli used in condition 3 (third from top) differ in both length and curvature as circular cylinders with increasing radii. Stimuli used in condition 4 (bottom) differ in both length and curvature with curvature in reverse order compared to condition 3. The lengths of the stimuli used in conditions 1, 3 and 4 are written above the stimuli. The curvatures of the stimuli used in conditions 2, 3 and 4 are written below the stimuli.

Figure 5 | (A): stimuli were grasped between the thumb and the index finger of the right hand. Stimuli were placed such that the axis was horizontal. (B): stimuli were placed on a stand at a 45 degree angle with the edge of the table.

were given no further hints on how the shapes would differ. After feeling the two stimuli at the start of the experiment, subjects felt one stimulus at a time and had to indicate whether they thought it was number 1 or number 2. The experimenter provided feedback after every answer. Feedback in this type of experiment is important, because subjects easily lose their reference. Giving feedback ensures that subjects are constantly reminded which stimulus was named number 1 and which number 2. This was repeated 60 times for each pair of test and reference stimuli for each condition. The first 10 trials were practice trials and the final 50 trials were used for analysis. The subjects were not informed about this.

We tested five differences between reference and test stimuli per condition. Each condition was tested in one session of one hour, giving a total of 4 hours per subject. The order of the conditions and the order of the test stimuli within a condition were counterbalanced as much as possible across participants by constructing a Latin square. The rectangle was created by first creating a 4 by 4 Latin square. Another 2 Latin squares were constructed with the first line of the previous square shifted to the left. The same procedure was done for the five differences between reference and test stimuli. For the differences, a 5 by 5 Latin square was constructed and the last two rows of the last Latin square were left out.

In a run of 60 trials, subjects were presented with either one of the two duplicate reference stimuli (both of the same shape) or one of the two duplicate test stimuli. Which was to be presented was randomized. Each of the two identical stimuli was presented 15 times, which means that each shape was presented 30 times. Furthermore, in the first 10 trials, each shape was presented 5 times.

Analysis. For each run of 50 trials, we calculated the \( d' \) for each run. \( d' \) is a measure of sensitivity that takes into account the instances subjects indicate to detect a signal when there is no signal present (false alarm). In our case they indicate that they feel stimulus 1 while actually feeling stimulus 2. The \( d' \) values are calculated from the fraction of correct identifications of stimulus 1 and the fraction of incorrect identifications of stimulus 2 by the following equation:

\[
\text{\( d' = Z(\text{hit}) - Z(\text{false alarm}) \),}
\]

where \( Z(p) \), \( p \in [0, 1] \) is the inverse of the cumulative Gaussian distribution, \( \text{hit} \) is the fraction subjects indicate feeling stimulus 1 while actually feeling stimulus 2 and \( \text{false alarm} \) is the fraction subjects indicate feeling stimulus 1 while actually feeling stimulus 2. We plot the mean \( d' \) against the difference from reference for each condition. Statistical analysis was performed on the \( d' \) values. Firstly, we checked for sphericity. If sphericity was violated we used Greenhouse-Geisser corrected values. A 4 (condition) by 5 (difference from reference) repeated measures ANOVA was performed. Since the effect of difference from reference is trivial, namely with increasing length the \( d' \)
will increase, we only looked more closely at the effect of condition with Bonferroni corrected planned pairwise comparisons between the conditions 1–3, 2–3, 1–4, 2–4 and 3–4.

When the values of \( d' \) of length and of curvature are not correlated by the subjects when an object which contains both cues is felt, one can view these two cues as orthogonal\(^{4}\). In this case one can predict a \( d' \) for distinguishing two objects which contain both length and curvature by quadratically summing the values for \( d' \) of length only and curvature only:\(^{4}\)

\[
d'^2 = d'^2_{\text{length only}} + d'^2_{\text{curvature only}}
\]

In this equation, \( d'^2 \) stands for the predicted \( d' \) of an object that contains both length and curvature, \( d'^2_{\text{length only}} \) stands for the \( d' \) found in condition 1 (length only) and \( d'^2_{\text{curvature only}} \) stands for the \( d' \) found in condition 2 (curvature only). We calculated this \( d' \) for each subject per difference from reference. This leads to five mean values for the predicted \( d' \) which can be compared to the measured values of condition 3 and condition 4. In both conditions, the length and curvature are correlated within the stimulus. By comparing the predicted values to measured values we can check whether they are correlated in the perception of the subjects.

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