

Effect of arousal increase in predictable and random task switching: Evidence for the involvement of the anterior attentional network in random but not in predictable task switching

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Switch cost does not disappear as more preparation time for the next task is allowed. Tornay and Milán showed that the residual cost is smaller when tasks switch randomly than when they alternate in predictable sequences. They proposed that the difference was due to control mechanisms (anterior attentional network) being activated in the random condition because of its overall difficulty. Besides, it has been shown that increasing arousal levels inhibits the anterior attentional network. Therefore, Tornay and Milán's account predicts that high arousal should result in switch cost for the random condition increasing to the levels of predictable switching. In this work, this prediction was tested by assessing the interaction between increased arousal and switch cost with both predictable and random-task switching. The results may help to solve the ongoing controversy about the causes of switch cost.

Efecto del incremento de activación en tareas con cambio predecible y aleatorio: Evidencia que implica la red atencional anterior en el cambio aleatorio, pero no en el predecible. Tornay y Milán encontraron que el costo por cambio tiende a ser más pequeño cuando las tareas cambian de forma aleatoria que cuando lo hace de forma predecible. Estos autores proponen que esta diferencia es debida a la activación de la Red Atencional Anterior (RAA), provocada por las dificultades cognitivas que impone el cambio aleatorio. En este trabajo se sugiere que en las tareas de cambio aleatorio es posible recuperar el costo si la RAA es inhibida por la activación de la red de alerta. Se pone a prueba esta hipótesis evaluando la interacción entre el incremento de la activación (red de alerta) y el costo, tanto en cambio predecible como aleatorio. El resultado obtenido confirma la hipótesis y sugiere que las diferencias en costo por cambio entre tareas predecibles y aleatorias son debidas a la participación de mecanismos de control atencional. Estos datos pueden ayudar a aclarar la controversia existente al respecto.

Jersild (1927) was the first to study systematically the impairment in performance that occurs when changing from one task to another. Fifty years later, (Spector & Biederman, 1976) continued that line of research. In a typical experiment, participants are asked to alternate between two different tasks. Performance is usually worse on trials on which a different task is required from the one carried out on the previous one (*shift trials*) than when the same task is repeated (*repetition trials*). Such a difference in performance can be measured both as an increase in reaction time and as a decrease in response accuracy and is called *switch cost*.

Allport, Styles and Hsieh (1994) showed that cost did not vanish even when a fairly long amount of preparation time (1100 ms) for the next task was allowed. Later, Rogers and Monsell (1995) further studied this effect and reported that switch cost diminished with preparation time but reached an asymptote, so that it did not disappear even after long preparation times (up to 1200

ms). The authors interpreted this pattern of results by assuming that there are two components of switch cost: one that decreases with preparation time and one which remains constant. The latter is the so-called *residual cost*.

This is a surprising effect that may indicate the existence of a cognitive limitation for preparing for a new activity. There is an ongoing controversy about the reason for the existence of residual cost. Some authors think that it is due to a proactive automatic interference from the previous task set. This controversy is far from being settled. Waszak, Hommel and Allport (2003) have shown that not all switch cost can be attributed to a control mechanism, whereas Monsell, Summer and Waters (2003) have argued to the contrary.

Predictable and random task switching

One way of solving the controversy may be to distinguish between different variations of the task switching paradigm. Tornay and Milán (2001) showed that residual switch cost is smaller when tasks alternate at random than when they shift in predictable sequences (as was the case in the work of both Allport et al., 1994; Rogers & Monsell, 1995). This is a counterintuitive finding: The more difficult condition results in less cost. This

finding has been replicated a number of times, both in our laboratory (Milán & Tornay, 2001). Monsell et al., (2003) have also compared predictable and random task switching. Their procedure differed in a number of ways from that used by Tornay and Milán and some of their results were different, for instance random switch cost was still large at long preparation times and the temporal course of the interaction between random task switching was also different, switch cost being small in the random condition even at short preparation times. These differences are potentially very interesting and we are currently trying to explain them. For our current interest, however, what is important to note is that even Monsell et al., found smaller cost when tasks changed at random than when they switched in predictable sequences. Therefore, there seems to be an agreement in the literature about the fact that switch cost is smaller in the random switching paradigm, at least with long preparation times.

Tornay and Milán (2001) suggested that the random condition produces uncertainty about what the next task will be, which probably makes participants try to guess the task during the interval between trials. The uncertainty and difficulty of the task may activate the anterior attentional network, which, in turn, would help reconfigure the current task set. On the other hand, Hsieh and Liu (2008) using event-related-potentials (ERPs), found the P3b component involves inhibitory processes to overcome stimulus-induced task conflicts.

To sum up, the authors propose that processing in the predictable condition with long preparation time is more automatic, that is, it does not depend on the functioning of the anterior attentional network. On the other hand, the random condition leads to a comparatively more controlled way of processing as a result a diminished the switch cost. The present study aims at finding evidence that may confirm or discard this account.

Hypotheses and overview of the experiments

One way to check Tornay and Milán's explanation is to try to affect the functioning of the anterior attentional network (Cohen, Semple, Gross, Holcomb, Dowling and Nordahl, 1988). Cohen et al., (1988) found that increasing the level of arousal inhibits the anterior attentional network. Posner and Rothbart (1992) have argued about the theoretical plausibility of such an effect and have called it *clearing of consciousness*. Such a relationship has also been found by Fan, McCandliss, Sommer, Raz and Posner. (2002) and recently, Lavric, Mizon and Monsell (2008), using ERP technology, found that when advance preparation was effective, a protracted switch-related component, manifesting itself as widespread posterior positivity and concurrent right anterior negativity, preceded stimulus onset for 300 ms, with sources primarily in the left lateral frontal, right inferior frontal and temporal cortices. When advance preparation was ineffective (as implied by slow responses), a similar component, whit lateral prefrontal generator peaked 300 ms poststimulus. That suggest an attentional network interaction.

This finding allows us to propose a detailed hypothesis based on Tornay and Milán's proposal: Increasing arousal level should affect residual switch cost in the random switching condition because the anterior attentional network, which would be responsible for the decreased cost, would be inhibited and, therefore, unable to reconfigure the current task set. In particular, increasing the arousal should result in residual switch cost for the random condition

being similar to that found in the predictable condition, where (according to Tornay and Milan's account) the anterior attentional network is not playing a role in residual switch cost. We will call such an effect *switch cost recovery*. On the other hand, an increase in arousal should not interact with residual switch cost when tasks alternate in predictable sequences because the anterior attentional network would not be reconfiguring task set in this condition.

EXPERIMENT 1

Predictable switching paradigm with long preparation time. Tornay and Milán's proposal predicts no interaction between tone presentation and switch cost.

Method

Participants

Twenty-four Psychology students (17 women and 7 men) took part for course credit. They all had normal or corrected-to-normal vision. Their average age was 20.2 years.

Instruments

The experiment was run in PC with Pentium III processor, using the E-prime 1.0 software. Auditory stimuli were presented by means of MS 108 headphones. Their intensity was measured with a Brüel and Kjaer calibrator.

Stimuli

Two different fixation points were used. They also acted as predictors for the new task, as will be explained later. One of them was an *at* sign (@), the other was a *hash* sign (#).

As will be explained below, on some of the trials a tone was presented at the same time as the fixation point. Its duration was 100 ms, their wave length was 500 Hz and its intensity was 80 dB (cfr. Cohen et al., 1988). Target stimuli consisted of a capital letter and a digit.

Procedure

On every trial a fixation point (either @ or #) was presented on the centre of the screen for 1200 ms. In order to manipulate the level of arousal, a tone might appear simultaneously with the fixation point. The tone was presented at random, with a 50% probability¹ and lasted 100 ms. After the disappearance of the fixation point, a target stimulus pair, consisting of a number and a letter, was presented, to which participants had to respond. After response, or after 2000 ms if no response was made, participants were given visual feedback about the speed and accuracy of their response, the feedback screen remained for 1500 ms.

On every trial, participants had to carry out one of two different tasks: a) if the fixation point was an *at* sign, they had to decide whether the letter was a vowel or a consonant (*letter task*); b) if the fixation point was a *hash* sign, participants had to respond whether the number was odd or even (*number task*). The same response keys were used for both tasks.

Participants were instructed to alternate between these tasks in predictable sequences: LLNN, where L indicates letter task and

N number task. The first trial of every task was a *shift trial*, the second a *repetition trial*.

Before the experimental trials, participants carried out a 40-trial practice block for each task. Then there was an additional 80-trial practice block with alternating tasks. Two 160-trial experimental blocks followed. Short breaks were allowed between blocks. All the stimuli and conditions were randomised.

Results

In order to eliminate outliers, we discarded the trials on which reaction time was more than 2.5 standard deviations from the average. A 2,51% of the trials were discarded. Besides, the data from one of the participants were discarded from the analysis because more than 50% of their responses were incorrect. Including this participant did not change the pattern of results.

We submitted the reaction time data for correct responses to a 2 (task switching, either shift or repetition trials) × 2 (tone presentation, either present or absent) repeated-measures ANOVA. There was a significant main effect of task switching, $F(1, 22) = 10.63$, $MSE = 6292$, $p < 0.01$, but neither the effect of tone presentation nor the interaction was reliable, both $F(1, 22) < 1$. See Figure 1.

An equivalent ANOVA performed on response accuracy data (proportion of errors) only revealed a significant main effect of the task switching variable, $F(1, 22) = 9.61$, $MSE = 2$, $p < 0.01$. See Table 1.

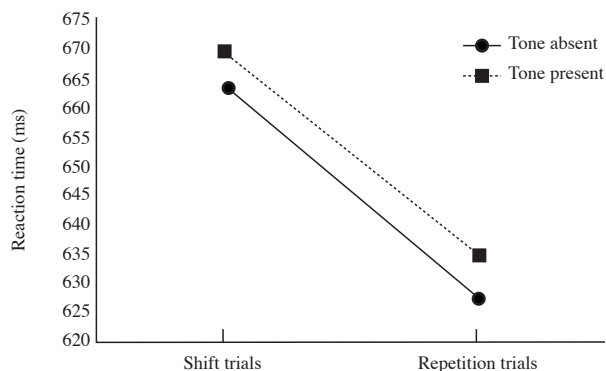


Figure 1. Mean reaction times for shift and repetition trials, in a predictable switching, when a tone was presented (dotted line) and when there was no tone (solid line) in Experiment 1

Tone present		Tone absent	
Shift trials	Repetition trials	Shift trials	Repetition trials
RT (ms)	% errors	RT (ms)	% errors
669	14	634	11
663	15	627	11
Switch cost= 35 ms		Switch cost= 36 ms	

Discussion

The results of this experiment replicate the finding that there is a significant residual switch cost even with fairly large preparation times (e.g., Allport et al., 1994; Rogers & Monsell, 1995; Tornay & Milan, 2001).

Besides, the presentation of the tone did not affect switch cost. This is apparent not only in the unreliable interaction but also in the sizes of the switch cost for trials with and without sound, which were virtually identical (see Table 1).

This pattern of results agrees with our hypothesis: increasing the level of arousal has no effect on predictable task switching. In turn, this conclusion supports the idea that the anterior attentional network is not playing an important role in the appearance of residual cost. Thus, the results favour the accounts proposing that switch cost is due to automatic processing, such as the task set inertia hypothesis.

However, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from the data at this stage. It is always tricky to interpret nonsignificant results. Besides, the data may also indicate that the presentation of the tone did not increase the level of arousal, especially because the tone presentation variable did not reach statistical significance. Therefore, we postpone a more elaborated discussion of the results until the next experiment, in which we use a random task switching paradigm and predict a significant interaction between tone presentation and task switching.

EXPERIMENT 2

According to Tornay and Milan’s proposal, random task switching should lead to a qualitatively different kind of processing than predictable task switching. In the former case, the anterior attentional network should be activated because of the general difficulty and high error probability associated with the paradigm, which would result in a more complete task-set reconfiguration and, thus, in a smaller cost.

Therefore, inhibiting the anterior attentional network by means of an increase in arousal should prevent such a reconfiguration and, thus, *recover switch cost*.

In this experiment we repeat the same procedure as in Experiment 1 but with random task switching. In contrast to the previous experiment, we predict a reliable interaction between tone presentation and task switching, in the direction of a smaller switch cost when no tone is presented.

Method

Participants

Twenty-four Psychology students (19 women and 5 men) took part. Their age averaged 23.9 years. Their vision was normal or corrected to normal. Each participant received course credit.

Procedure

The procedure, as well as the instruments and stimuli, were identical to those of the previous experiment, including the practice blocks and the duration of the different stimuli and events. The only difference was that tasks did not switch in predictable sequences. There were a set of all possible sequences, with one to three repetitions of each task. Such sequences were selected at random

and presented to the participants. They did not know what sequence was being used at a given time or on what trial within the sequence they were at a given moment. As a matter of fact, they were not even aware of the existence of the sequences, which resulted in a complete randomisation of the task switching while, at the same time, it was possible to keep track of the number of repetitions easily and make the different conditions as comparable as possible.

Results

The same outlier-elimination procedure as in experiment 1 was used, which resulted in 2.69% of the trials being discarded from the analysis. The data from one of the participants were also eliminated because response accuracy was lower than 50%. An analysis including this participant's data revealed the same pattern of results.

An ANOVA of reaction time data for correct responses showed a reliable main effect of the task switching variable, $F(1, 22)= 7.778, MSE= 982, p<0.01$. The Tone Presentation \times Task Switching interaction was also significant, $F(1, 22)= 4.873, MSE= 704, p<0.05$. See Figure 2.

Further analyses showed a significant cost switch on the trials on which the tone was presented, $F(1, 22)= 8.118, MSE= 1312, p<0.01$, whereas there was no reliable switch cost on trials with no tone present, $F(1, 22)= 1.11, MSE= 33707, p>0.3$.

The analysis of the response accuracy data only revealed a significant effect of the task switching variable, $F(1, 22)= 4.77, MSE= 0.1, p<0.05$. See Table 2.

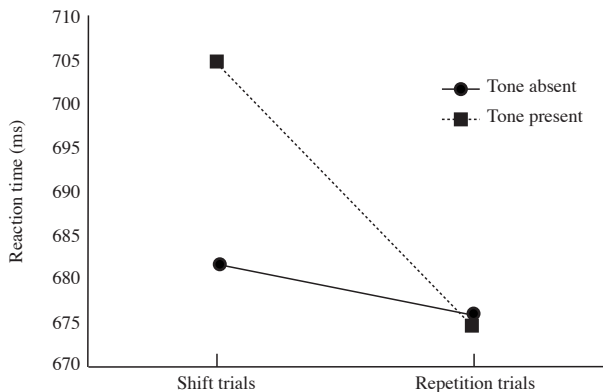


Figure 2. Mean reaction times for shift and repetition trials, in random switching, when a tone was presented (dotted line) and when there was no tone (solid line) in Experiment 2

Tone present		Tone absent		Tone present		Tone absent	
Shift trials	Repetition trials	Shift trials	Repetition trials	Shift trials	Repetition trials	Shift trials	Repetition trials
RT (ms)	% errors	RT (ms)	% errors	RT (ms)	% errors	RT (ms)	% errors
705	12	674	10	681	12	675	10
Switch cost = 31 ms				Switch cost = 6 ms			

Discussion

The first important result is the reduction of switch cost on trials without tone as compared to the same condition in experiment 1. This result replicates the findings reported by Tornay and Milán (2001). Time switch cost virtually disappears, although it still remains to some extent in terms of response accuracy. This is exactly the pattern found by Tornay and Milán.

On the other hand, trials on which the tone was present showed a completely different pattern. Switch cost is much larger and similar to the one found in the previous experiment using predictable task switching (compare Table 1 and Table 2). It seems that the presentation of the tone recovers residual switch cost with random task switching.

These results are congruent with our hypothesis and, thus, provide indirect evidence about Tornay and Milan's account of random switch cost. The appearance of the tone would result in an increase in arousal which, in turn, would inhibit the anterior attentional network, preventing it from reconfiguring task set. The outcome would be a more automatic processing, similar to the one found when tasks switch predictably. Another detail that seems to support this interpretation is the fact that the only significant difference is that between shift trials with and without tone. That is, the presence of the tone only impairs performance when a task-set switch is called for. This is exactly what would be expected if the reconfiguration process had been inhibited during the preparation time for the next task.

General discussion

The main results of the experiments presented this work can be summarised as follows. There is a substantial switch cost when tasks switch in predictable sequences even if a long preparation time is allowed (residual cost) but such a cost is much smaller when tasks switch at random (compare trials without tone in Experiment 1 and Experiment 2). Besides, the presentation of a surprising tone does not affect residual cost in predictable task switching (Experiment 1) but causes residual cost for random switching to increase to the same levels as in the predictable switching condition (Experiment 2). Data show clearly that cost recovery is influenced by the presence of the tone. The increase in arousal impairs performance, which agrees with our hypothesis proposed in Experiment 2

Taken together, the results agree with the hypothesis that increasing arousal levels inhibits the additional task reconfiguration found when tasks alternate at random. In turn, such a finding provides evidence in favour of Tornay and Milan's account of the difference between predictable and random cost: Predictable task switching with long preparation times is relatively independent of the anterior attentional network (control mechanism) whereas such a network is involved in the reconfiguration of task set found in the random switching condition. The support for such a proposal is indirect but we think it is important because the data agree with a fairly detailed hypothesis with very low a priori probability, which would have been difficult to propose without the theoretical framework provided by Tornay and Milan's account. The data presented here are, therefore, a severe test of such an account.

The implications of both the results of the experiment and the theoretical explanation are far reaching. The anterior attentional network may play a minor role when residual switch cost is larger, that is, in the predictable switching condition. Therefore, such

a cost does not seem to be dependent on the action of a control mechanism but, rather, appears to reflect a default or automatic kind of processing. On the other hand, control mechanisms seem to try to overcome such a processing and the cost that it produces.

At this stage, we can only speculate about the way both automatic and control mechanisms operate in the task switching paradigm. However, a simple explanation compatible with the findings reported here may run as follows. When control mechanisms do not take part in processing (predictable task switching with a long preparation time and random task switching when high arousal inhibits control mechanisms), performance in the current task seems to be highly dependent on the previous task. Such a dependency and its being rather automatic in nature agree with the task-set interference account of cost. On the other hand, when control mechanisms are activated (random task switching with no tone present) current performance becomes more independent of the previous task, suggesting that the role of such mechanisms is to reduce the inertia from the previous task set. Therefore, the results of the present research seem to agree with other studies which have shown that residual switch cost cannot be explained by the working of a control mechanism (e.g., Waszak et al., 2003). We argue that much of the mixed results present in the literature in this regard may stem from a failure to distinguish between the role of control mechanisms as the cause of cost and their implication as

cost reducers, which makes it possible to increase cost indirectly by preventing them from reducing interference from the previous task.

On the other hand, if we manipulate the tone presence probability in random task switching, perhaps we would find some variation in the cost recovery. Such a pattern of results would be congruent with the interpretations that the results of Experiment 2 were due to an increase in arousal level produced by the presentation of the tone. A careful comparison between the predictable and the random task switching paradigms may help to understand the implications of the Anterior Attentional Networks in the switching task paradigm.

Foot notes

- ¹ Therefore, the tone was independent of the experimental conditions and, thus, was irrelevant for the task. This was necessary in order to cross tone presentation with task switching. Such a procedure differs from Cohen et al.'s. As an additional test, we ran a pilot experiment in which the tone only appeared on shift trials (with a 50% probability). The results agreed with those of the present experiment, as far as they were comparable. That is, there was no increase in cost when the tone was presented.

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