Effect of Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation on Action Naming in Patients With Alzheimer Disease

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Objective: To assess the effect of repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS) to the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) on picture naming in patients with Alzheimer disease (AD).

Design: Experimental study. Patients with AD underwent rTMS in real and control conditions during picture-naming tasks.

Setting: San Giovanni di Dio Fatebenefratelli Scientific Institute in Brescia, Italy.

Patients: Fifteen patients with probable AD.

Intervention: High-frequency rTMS was applied to the left and right DLPFC during object and action naming.

Main Outcome Measures: Language ability was assessed by accuracy of verbal response during online rTMS.

Results: Stimulation to the left and right DLPFC improved accuracy in action naming.

Conclusions: These findings indicate that rTMS to the DLPFC, which speeds up action naming in normal controls, improves performance in patients with AD. While the mechanisms of rTMS-induced naming facilitation in these patients are unknown, the procedure may be worth testing as a novel approach to the treatment of language dysfunction.

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and 4 of 15 presented with mild to moderate periventricular leukoaraiosis.

Patients with potentially confounding neurological and psychiatric disorders, clinically known hearing or vision impairment, or a history of alcohol abuse, psychosis, or major depression were not included in the study. None of the subjects had implanted metal objects or history of seizure. These exclusion criteria were based on keeping the stimulation as safe as possible. Only patients with a mild to moderate form of cognitive decline were included (mean [SD] Mini-Mental State Examination score, 17.8 [3.7]; mean [SD] age, 76.6 [6.0] years; mean [SD] education, 6.0 [2.0] years). The local Human Ethics Committee approved the protocol.

A baseline evaluation of naming abilities was performed. The stimuli used in the action-object picture-naming task were taken from the Center for Research in Language International Picture-Naming Project corpus, which contains 795 black-and-white, 2-dimensional line drawings representing actions and objects. These items have been tested and normed in healthy and patient populations across 7 different international sites and languages. Items are coded for a number of variables known to influence naming difficulty. Among these, these are initial word frequency, age of acquisition, and picture imageability scores, which were tested to assess their influence on the participants' naming performance. For this particular set of patients, we used a subset of 120 items from the original corpus. These were 60 actions and 60 objects. All the selected stimuli were high-imagery items. The nouns and verbs corresponding to the set of objects and actions were matched for word frequency and word length. In this evaluation, patients with AD showed a worse performance in action (mean [SD], 65.31% [17%]) than in object (mean [SD], 77.86% [17%]) naming.

EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION

Stimuli

For the rTMS task, we used a subset of 70 items from the original corpus, different from the 120 stimuli used for baseline testing. These were 35 actions and 35 objects. None of the actions included in the picture-naming task was associated with the objects. The nouns and verbs corresponding to the set of objects and actions were matched for target-word frequency and length. Ten of the items were assigned to a practice block (5 action and 5 object); the remaining items were divided in 3 blocks designed for the 3 stimulation conditions. The frequency, length, and grammatical category (noun or verb) of the target word were counterbalanced in the experimental blocks. Visual complexity and imageability of the pictures were also matched between the 2 sets.

Procedure

Patients sat in front of a 17-inch monitor controlled by a personal computer running Presentation software (version 9.8; Neurobehavioral Systems, Albany, Calif, www.neurobs.com). The patient task was to name as fast as possible a picture presented on the monitor until the response. Verbal responses were recorded and digitized with the program GoldWave (version 5.12; GoldWave Inc, St John's, Newfoundland, www.goldwave.com) at 44.1 kHz. The responses were then analyzed offline for accuracy.

The experiment included 3 blocks corresponding to 3 stimulation sites: left DLPFC and right DLPFC and sham stimulation. Each block contained an equal number of objects and actions, presented in a random order, and the stimulation site (left, sham, or right rTMS) was counterbalanced. The stimulation site for the sham condition was on vertex (Cz in 10/20 electroencephalog-
The present findings provide direct evidence for a causal role of the DLPFC in action naming. The same procedure, in which young control subjects shortened naming latency, resulted in an increased number of correct responses in patients with anomic AD. This suggests that the failure to observe an effect on performance accuracy in normal controls was due to a ceiling effect. While the rTMS effect in normal controls was limited to the left-sided stimulation, the facilitation was bilateral in patients with AD. The presence of a bilateral facilitation effect in patients with AD could be attributed to the presence of a compensatory mechanism based on the recruitment of right hemispheric resources to support residual naming performance. It has been shown that early in the course of the dementia, the brains of patients with AD retain a significant degree of functional plasticity. A shift from unilateral to bihemispheric engagement has been repeatedly observed in healthy aging as well as in dementia in the case of memory tasks and has been suggested to play a compensatory role. In the case of language, the right hemisphere has been traditionally assigned a crucial role in supporting performance after left hemispheric damage.

Transcranial magnetic stimulation can transiently increase or decrease cortical excitability, depending on the stimulation frequency (inhibition ≤ 1 Hz vs facilitation ≥ 5 Hz). This possibility has generated interest in experiments aiming to improve deficits in the cognitive domain, as well as in clinical applications in the field of neuropsychiatry (e.g., treatment of depression). While the neurophysiological mechanisms responsible for rTMS-induced facilitation remain essentially unknown, it has been shown that transcranial magnetic stimulation can influence the activity of brain centers distant from the stimulated site, presumably via cortico-cortical connections. The present findings may reflect a transcranial magnetic stimulation–induced modulation, or even a rearrangement of synaptic efficiency within the language network. Repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation may be worth testing as a novel treatment approach for language deficits, based on the modulation of a distributed, bihemispheric language network.

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