
Auditory Perception

- 1 Motivation: Why & how
- 2 Auditory physiology
- 3 Psychophysics: detection & discrimination
- 4 Pitch perception
- 5 Auditory organization & scene analysis
- 6 Speech perception

Based on slides of Dan Ellis, Columbia University



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Why study perception?

- Perception is messy: Can we avoid it?

No!

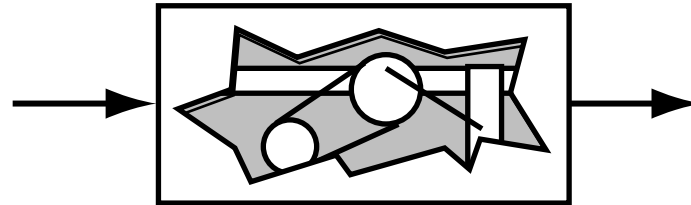
- **Audition provides the ‘ground truth’ in audio**
 - what is relevant and irrelevant
 - subjective importance of distortion
- **Some sounds are ‘designed’ for audition**
 - co-evolution of speech and hearing
- **The auditory system is very successful**
 - we would do extremely well to duplicate it



How to study perception?

Three different approaches:

- **Analyze the example: physiology**



- dissection & nerve recordings

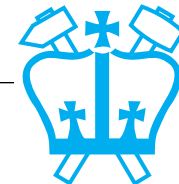
- **Black box input/output: psychophysics**



- fit simple models of simple functions

- **Information processing models**

- investigate and model complex functions
- e.g. scene analysis, speech perception



Outline

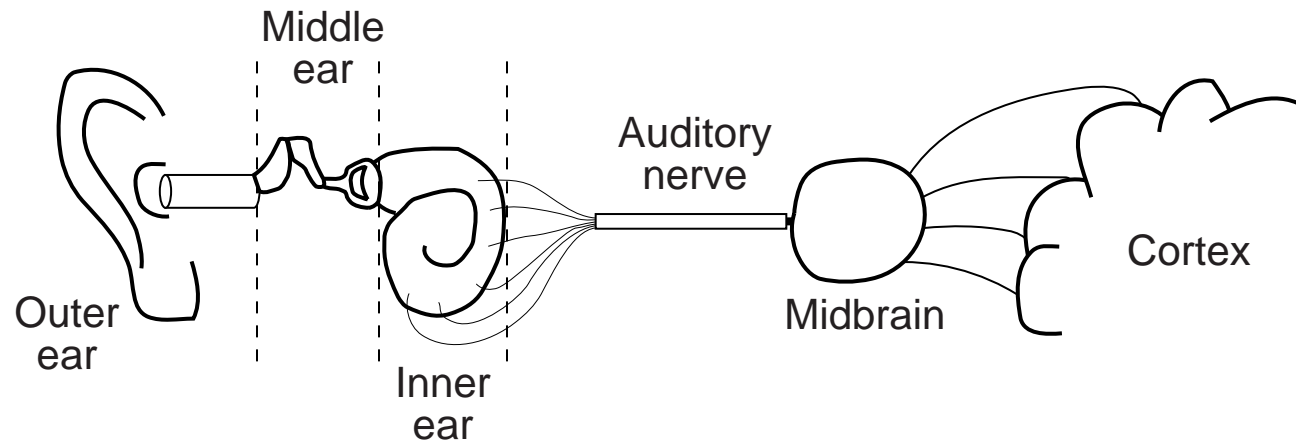
- 1 Motivation
- 2 **Physiology**
 - Outer, middle & inner ear
 - The Auditory Nerve and beyond
 - Models
- 3 Psychophysics
- 4 Pitch perception
- 5 Scene analysis
- 6 Speech perception



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Physiology

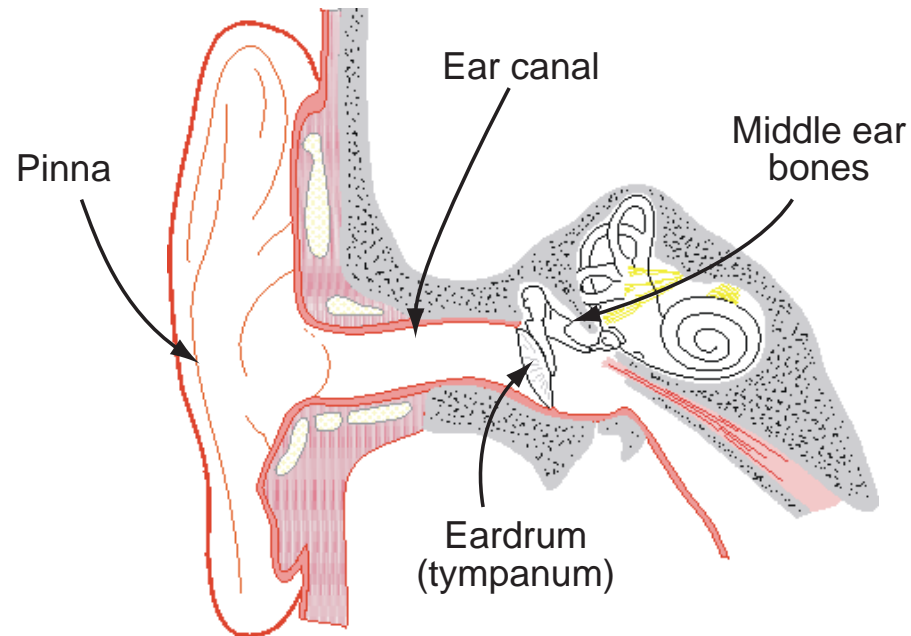
- **Processing chain from air to brain:**



- **Study via:**
 - anatomy
 - nerve recordings
- **Signals flow in both directions**



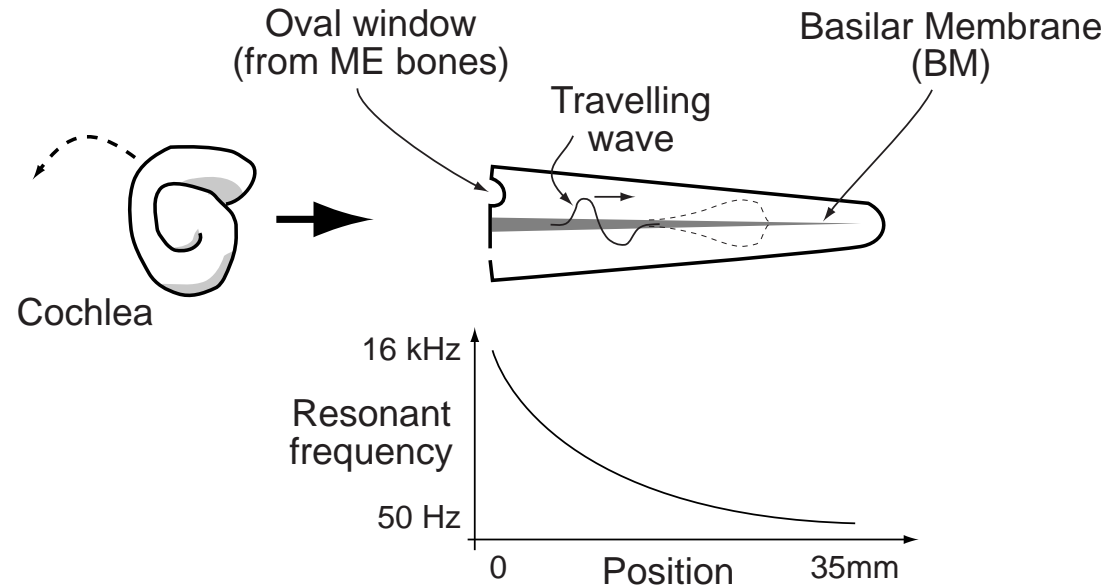
Outer & middle ear



- **Pinna 'horn'**
 - complex reflections give spatial (elevation) cues
- **Ear canal**
 - acoustic tube
- **Middle ear**
 - bones provide impedance matching



Inner ear: Cochlea

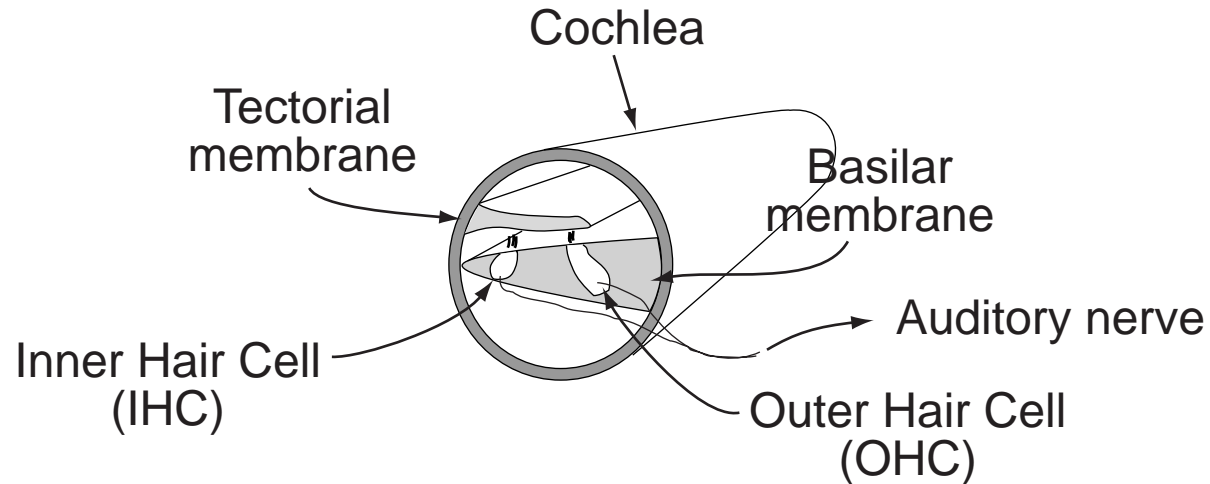


- **Mechanical input from middle ear starts traveling wave moving down Basilar Membrane**
- **Varying stiffness and mass of BM gives results in continuous variation of resonant frequency**
- **At resonance, traveling wave energy is dissipated in BM movement**
→ **Frequency (Fourier) analysis**

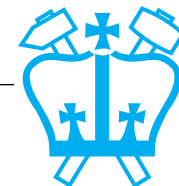


Cochlea hair cells

- **Ear converts sound in BM motion;
Each point on BM corresponds to a frequency**

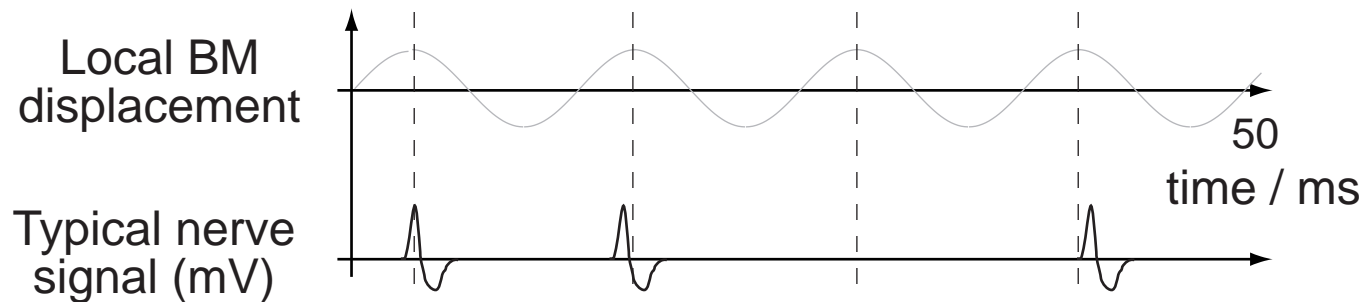


- **Hair cells on BM convert motion into nerve impulses (firings)**
- **Inner Hair Cells detect motion**
- **Outer Hair Cells? Variable damping?**

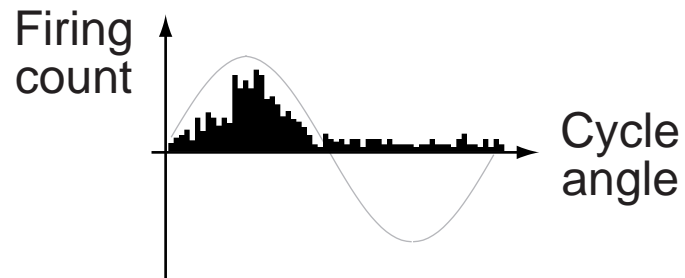


Inner Hair Cells

- IHCs convert BM motion into nerve firings
- Human hear has ~3500 IHCs;
Each IHC has ~7 connections to Auditory Nerve
- Each nerve fires (sometimes) near peak displacement:



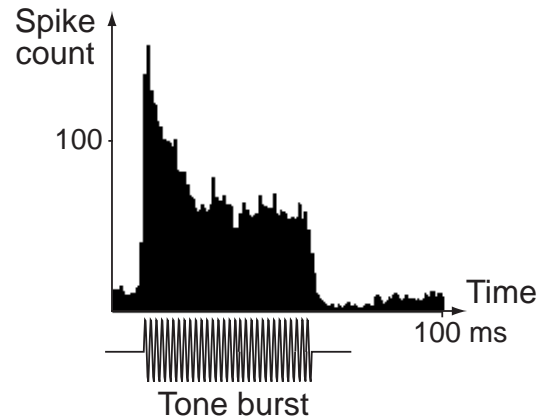
- Histogram to get firing probability:



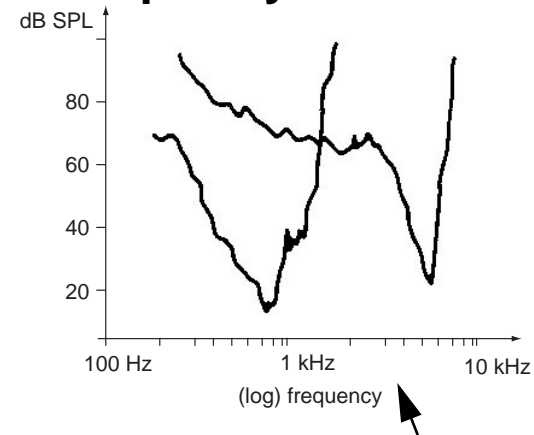
Auditory nerve (AN) signals

- Single nerve measurements:

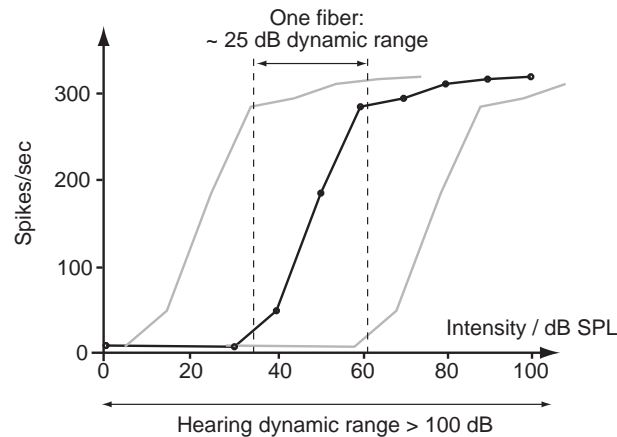
Tone burst histogram



Frequency threshold



Rate vs. intensity

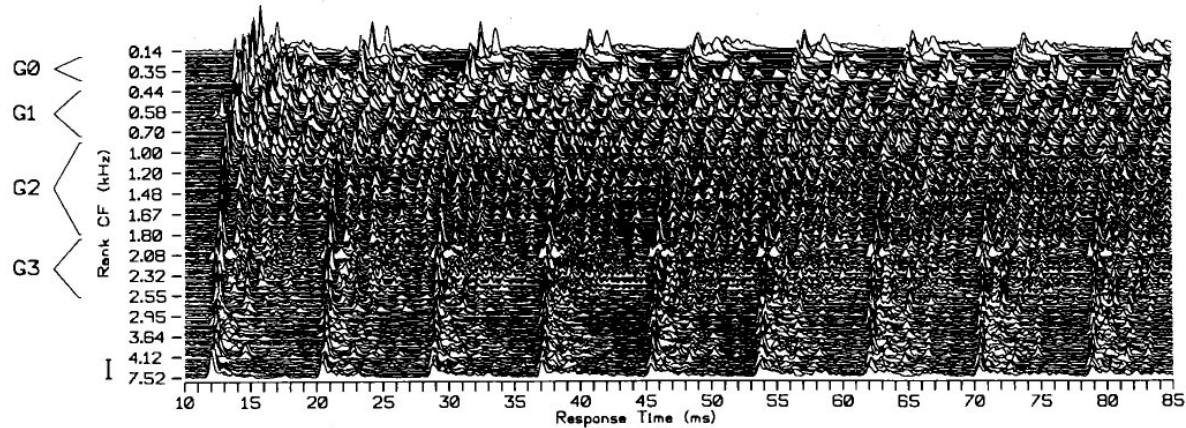


- Hard to measure: probe living ANs

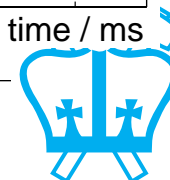
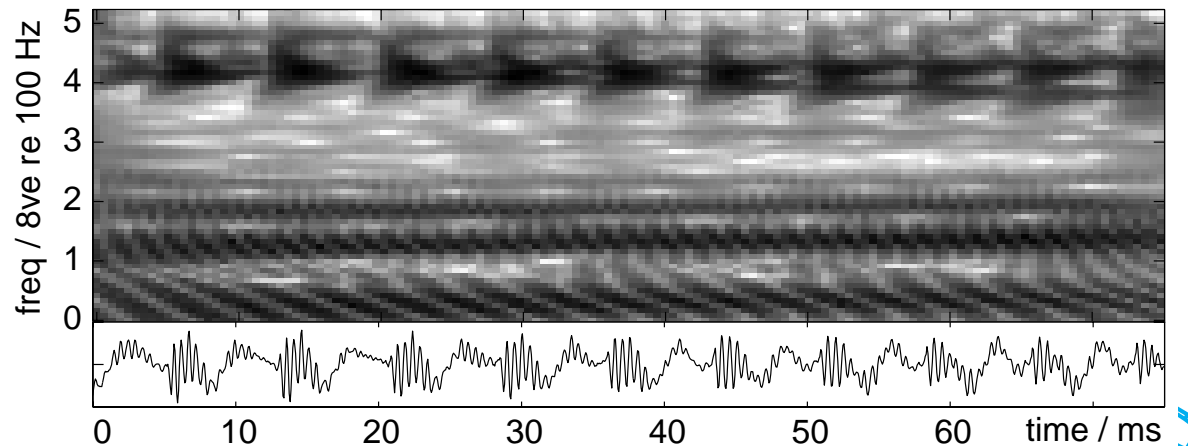


AN population response

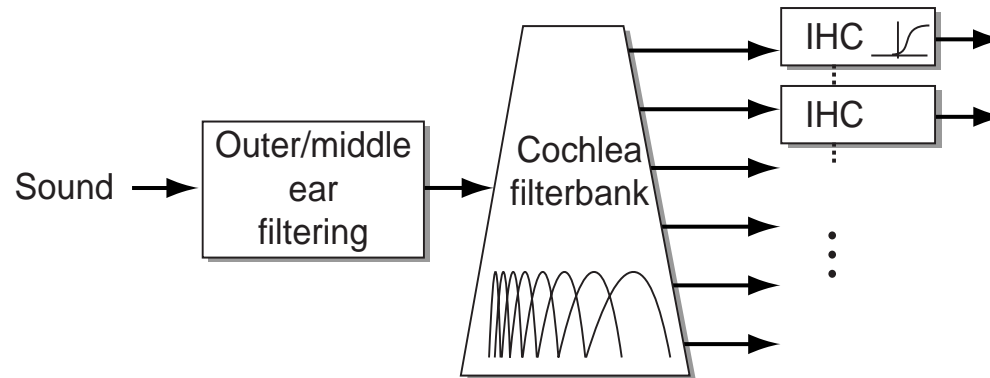
- All the information the brain has about sound:
 - average rate & spike timings on 30,000 fibers



- Not unlike a (constant-Q) spectrogram?

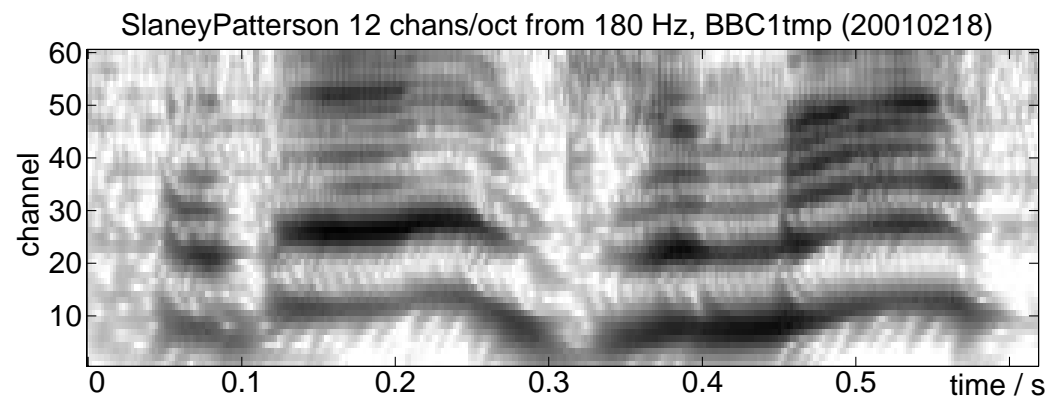


Periphery models



- **Modeled aspects:**
 - outer/middle ear
 - cochlea filtering
 - hair cell transduction
 - efferent feedback?

- **Result: 'neurogram' / 'cochleagram'**



Outline

- 1 Motivation
- 2 Physiology
- 3 Psychophysics**
 - Detection theory modeling
 - Intensity perception
 - Masking
- 4 Pitch perception
- 5 Scene analysis
- 6 Speech perception



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Psychophysics

- **Physiology looks at the implementation; Psychology looks at the function/behavior**
- **Analyze audition as *signal detection*: $p(\omega|O)$**

- **Many different avenues to measure**
 - time, frequency, intensity
 - tones, complexes, noise
 - pitch



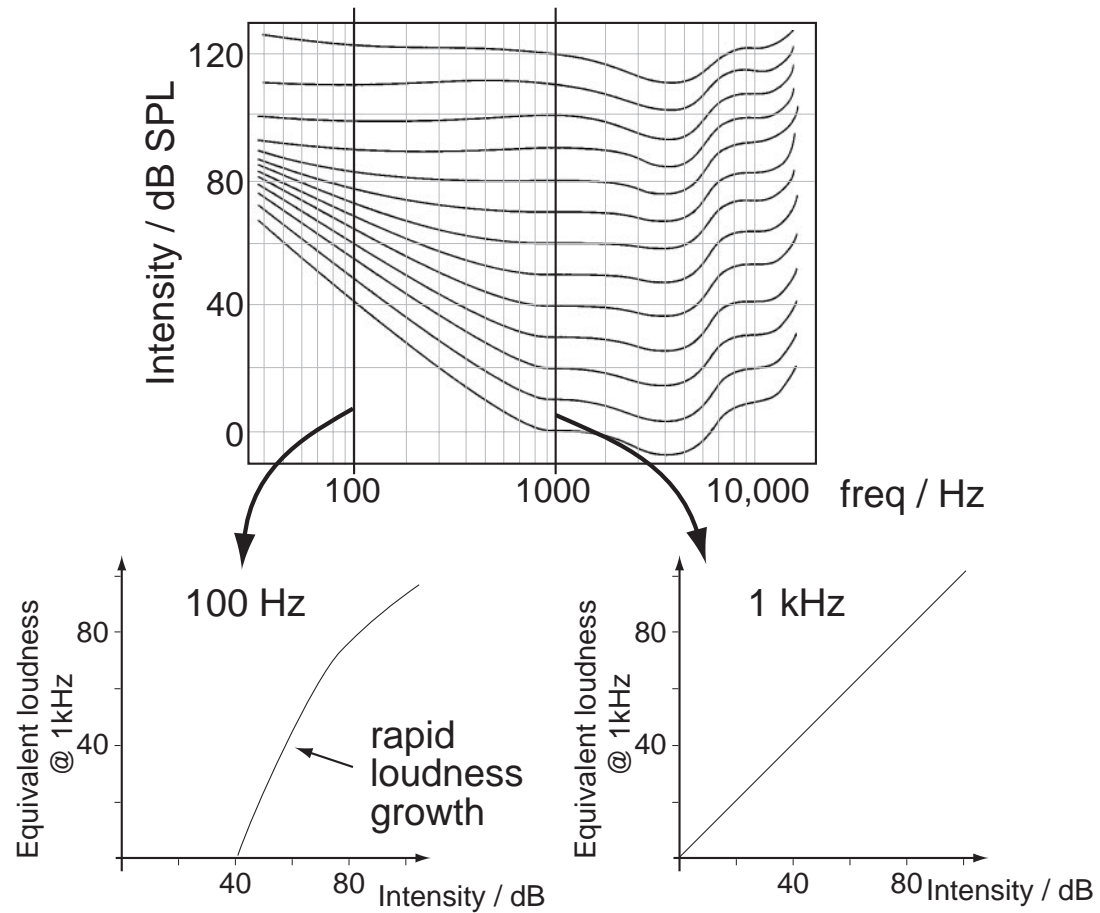
Basic psychophysics

- **Relate *physical* and *perceptual* variables**
 - e.g. intensity → loudness
frequency → pitch
- **Methodology: subject tests**
 - just noticeable difference (jnd)
 - magnitude scaling e.g. 'adjust to twice as loud'
- **Results for Loudness vs. Intensity:**
Loudness is proportional to $\log(\text{Intensity})$



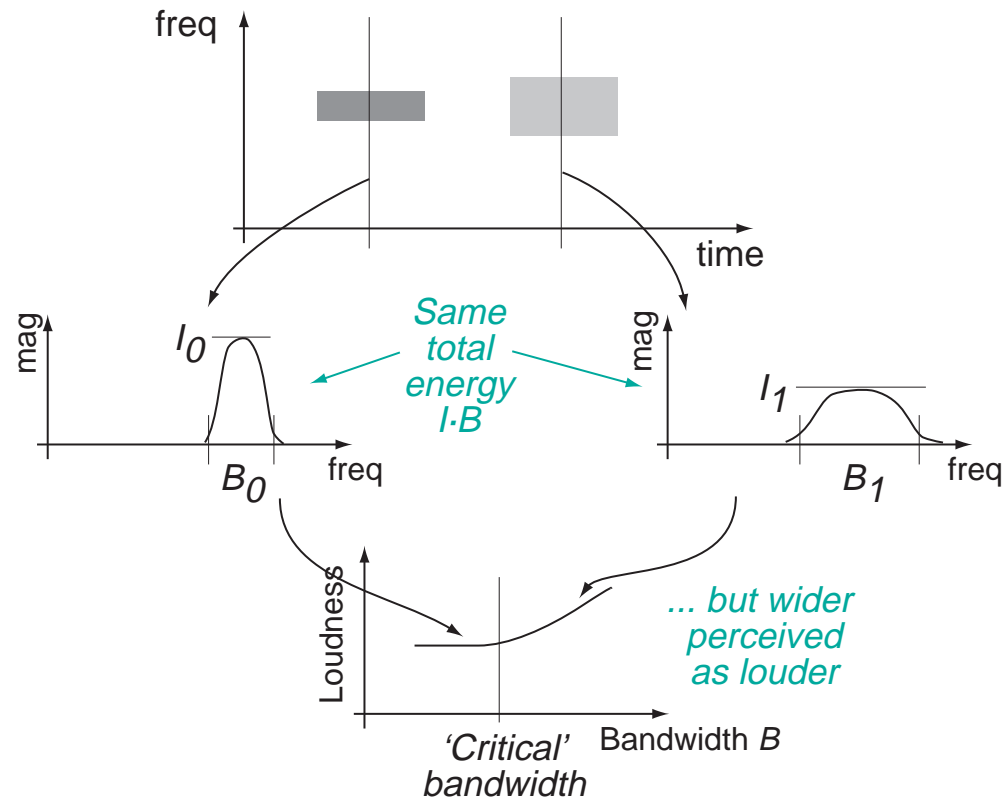
Loudness as a function of frequency

- Fletcher-Munson equal-loudness curves:



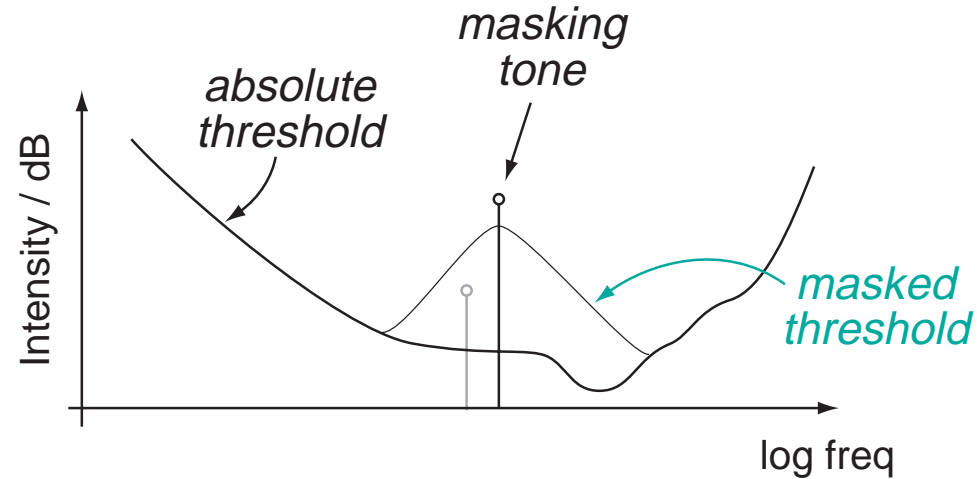
Loudness as a function of bandwidth

- Same total energy, different distribution:

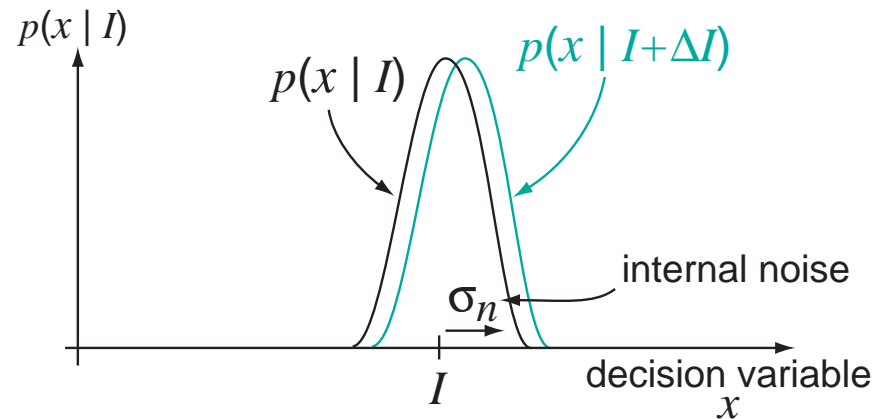


Simultaneous masking

- A louder tone can 'mask' the perception of a second tone nearby in frequency:

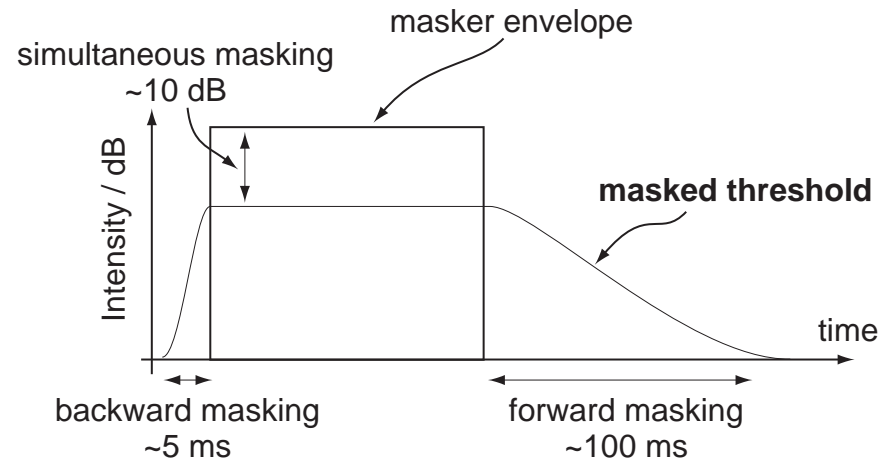


- Suggests an 'internal noise' model:



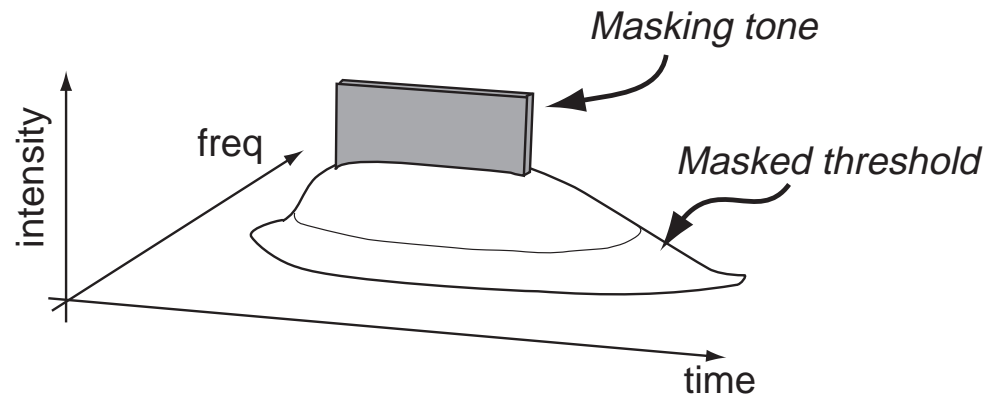
Sequential masking

- **Backward/forward in time:**



- suggests temporal envelope of decision var.

→ **Time-frequency masking 'skirt':**



Outline

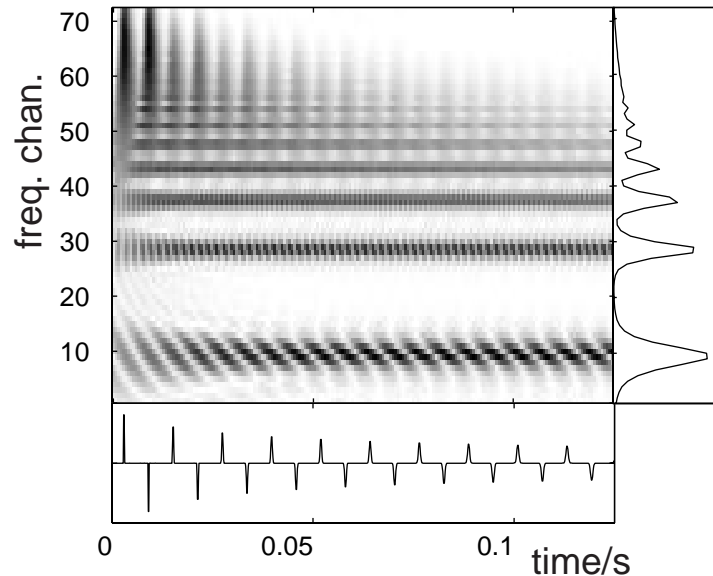
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 - 'Place' models
 - 'Time' models
 - Multiple cues & competition
- 5 Scene analysis
- 6 Speech perception



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Pitch perception: A classic argument in psychophysics

- Harmonic complexes are a pattern on AN

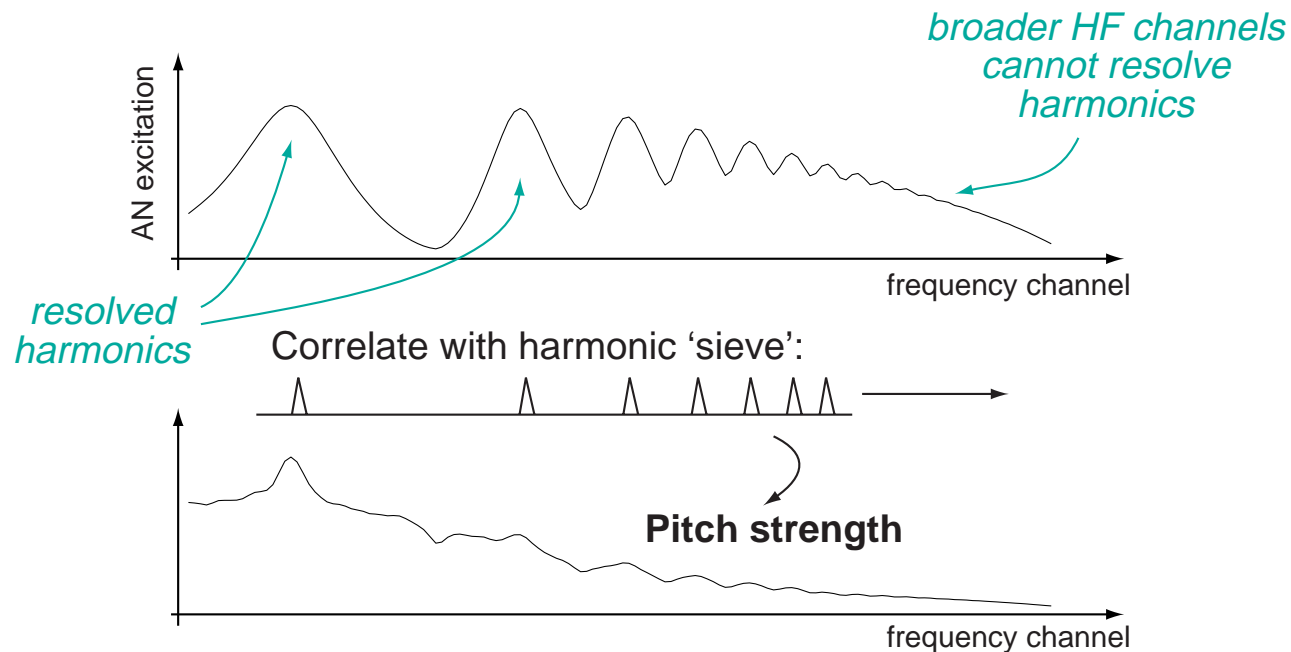


- .. but give a *fused* percept
- What determines the pitch percept?
 - *not* the fundamental
- How is it computed?
Two competing models: place and time



Place model of pitch

- AN excitation pattern shows individual peaks
- ‘Pattern matching’ method to find pitch:

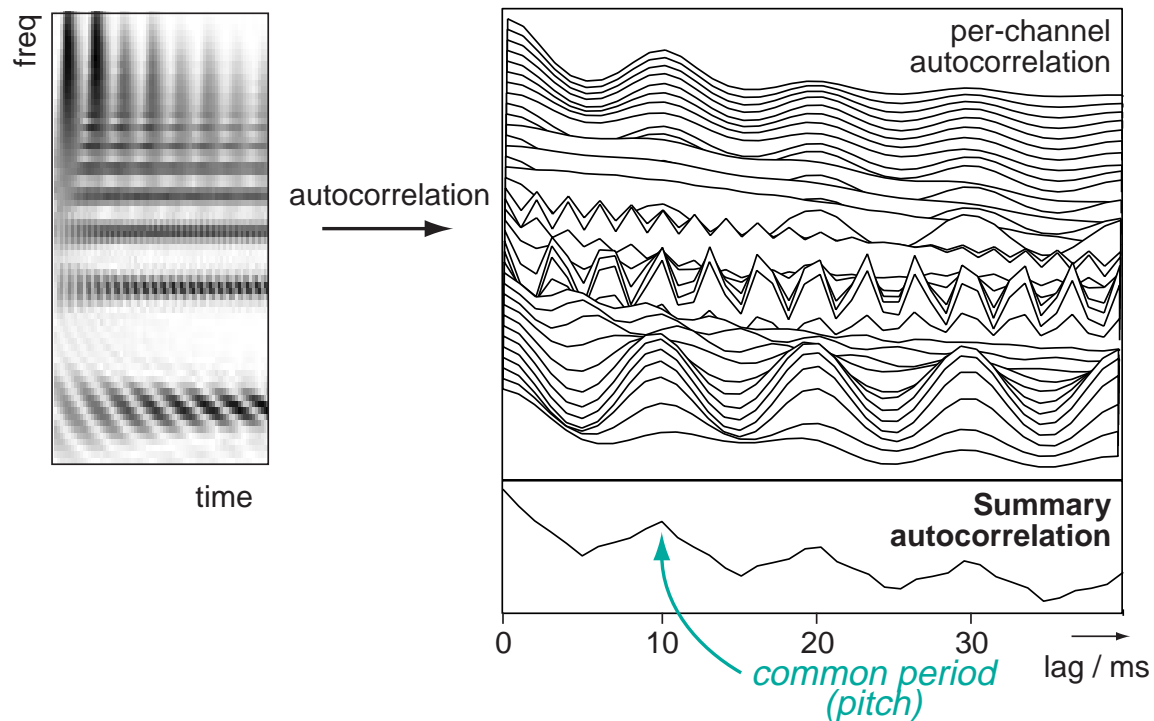


- **Support:**
Low harmonics are very important
- **But: Flat-spectrum noise can carry pitch**

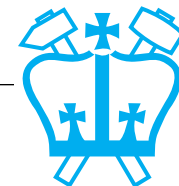


Time model of pitch

- **Timing information is preserved in AN up to ~ 1ms scale**
- **Extract periodicity by e.g. autocorrelation & combine across frequency chans:**



- **But: HF channels give weak pitch**



Alternate & competing cues

- **Pitch perception could rely on various cues**
 - average excitation pattern
 - summary autocorrelation
 - more complex pattern matching
- **Relying on just one cue is *brittle***
 - e.g. missing fundamental

→ **Perceptual system appears to use a flexible, opportunistic combination**

- **Optimal detector justification?**

$$\operatorname{argmax}_{\omega} p(\omega | \mathbf{o})$$

$$= \operatorname{argmax}_{\omega} \frac{p(\mathbf{o} | \omega) \cdot p(\omega)}{p(\mathbf{o})}$$

$$= \operatorname{argmax}_{\omega} p(o_1 | \omega) \cdot p(o_2 | \omega) \cdot p(\omega)$$

if o_1 and o_2 are *conditionally* independent



Outline

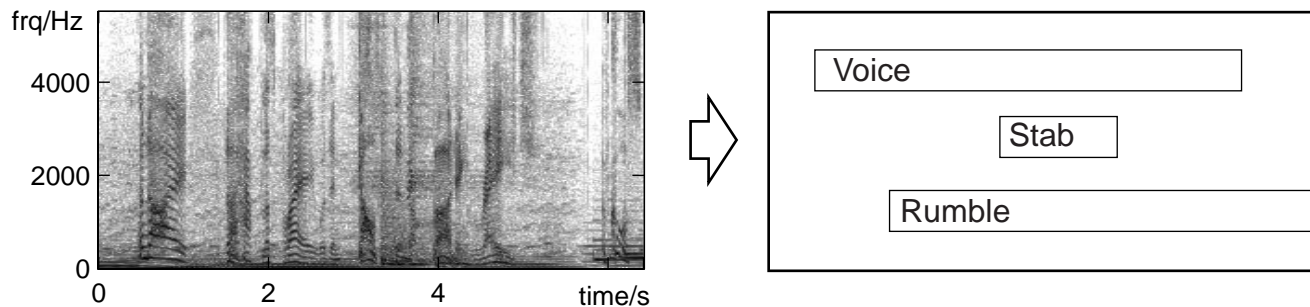
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 - Events and sources
 - Fusion and streaming
 - Continuity & restoration
- 6 Speech perception



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Auditory Organization

- **Detection model is huge simplification**
 - **Real role of hearing is much more general:
Recover useful information from outside world**
- **Sound *organization* into events and sources:**

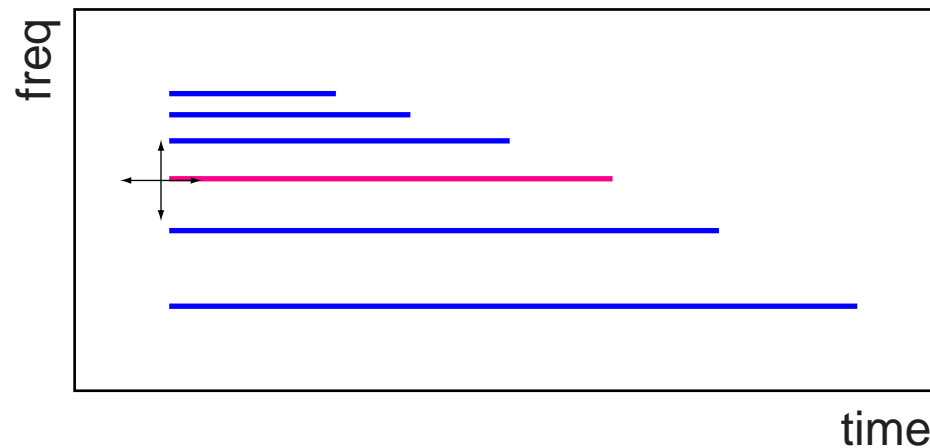


- **Research questions:**
 - what determines perception of sources?
 - how do humans separate mixtures?
 - how much can we tell about a source?



Auditory scene analysis: Simultaneous fusion

- Harmonics are distinct on AN,
but perceived as one sound (“fused”):

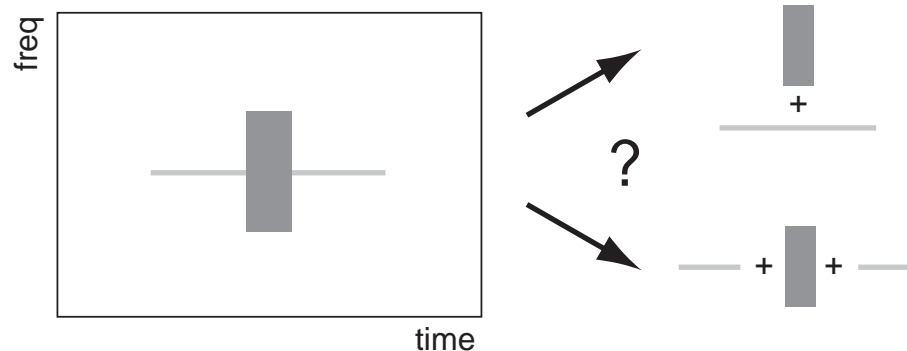


- depends on *common onset*
- depends on *harmonicity* (common period)
- **Methodologies:**
 - ask subject how many ‘objects’
 - match attributes e.g. object pitch
 - manipulate higher level e.g. vowel identity



Continuity & restoration

- **Tone is interrupted by noise burst:
What happened?**



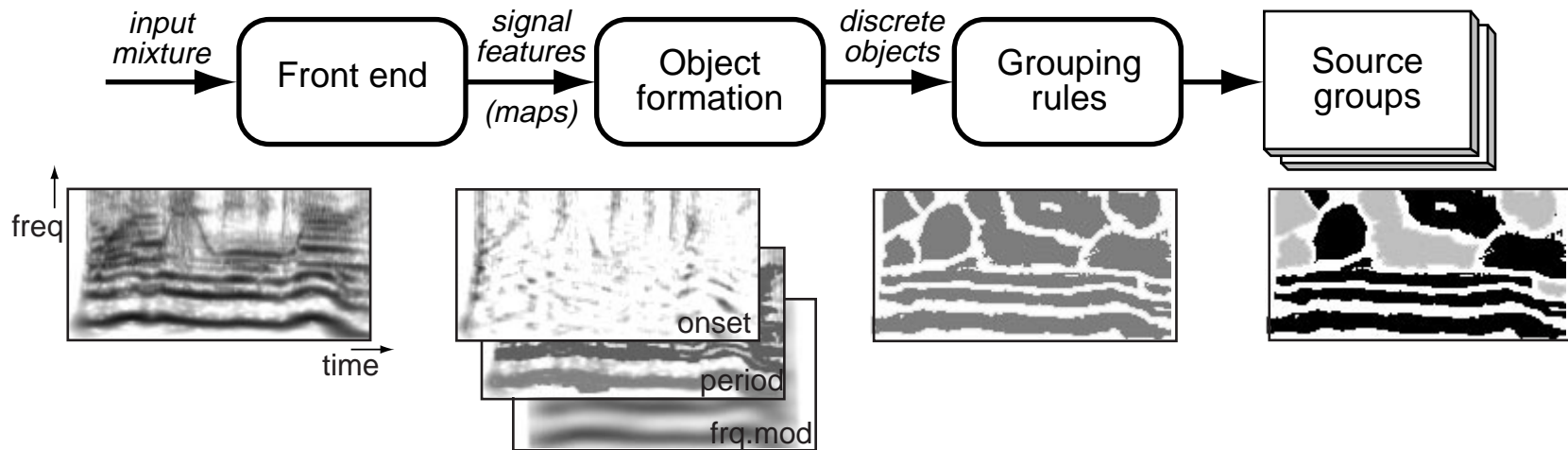
- masking makes tone undetectable during noise
- **Need to infer most probable real-world events**
 - observation equally likely for either explanation
 - *prior* on continuous tone much higher → choose
- **Top-down influence on perceived events...**

pulsation threshold example



Models of auditory organization

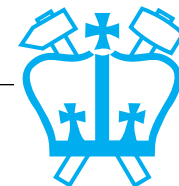
- Psychological accounts suggest bottom-up:



- (Brown 1991)

- **Complications in practice:**
 - formation of separate elements
 - contradictory cues
 - influence of top-down constraints (context, expectations)

...



Outline

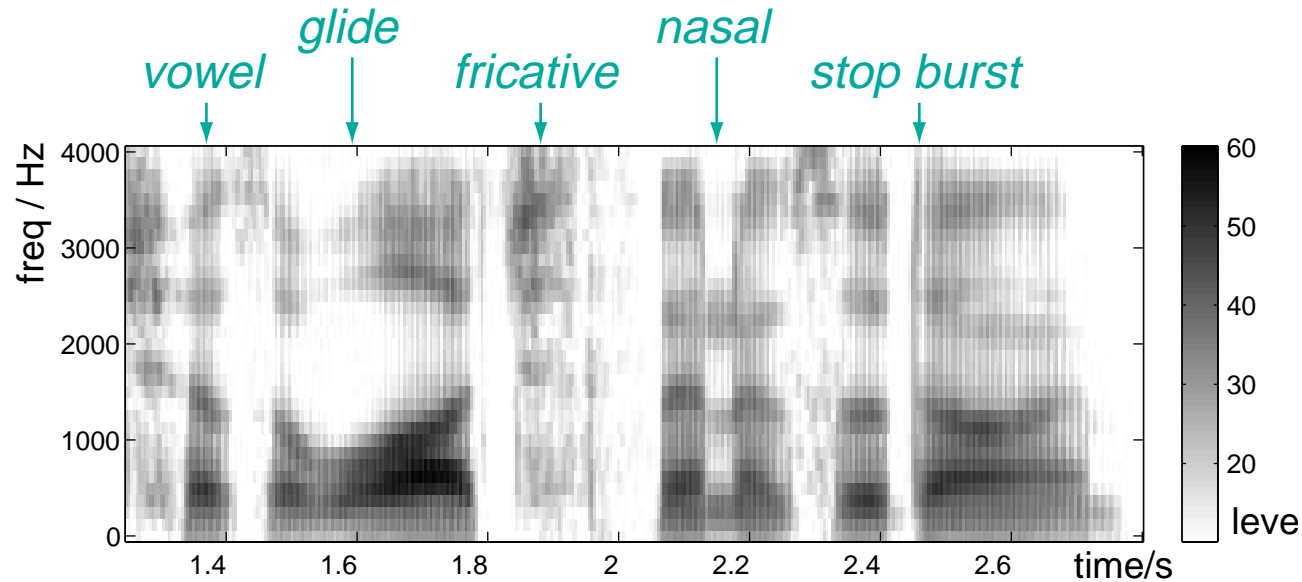
- 1 Motivation
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- 5 Speech perception**
 - The sounds of speech
 - Phoneme perception
 - Context and top-down influences
 - Simultaneous vowels



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Speech perception

- **Highly specialized function**
 - subsequent to source organization?
 - .. but also can interact
- **Kinds of speech sounds:**



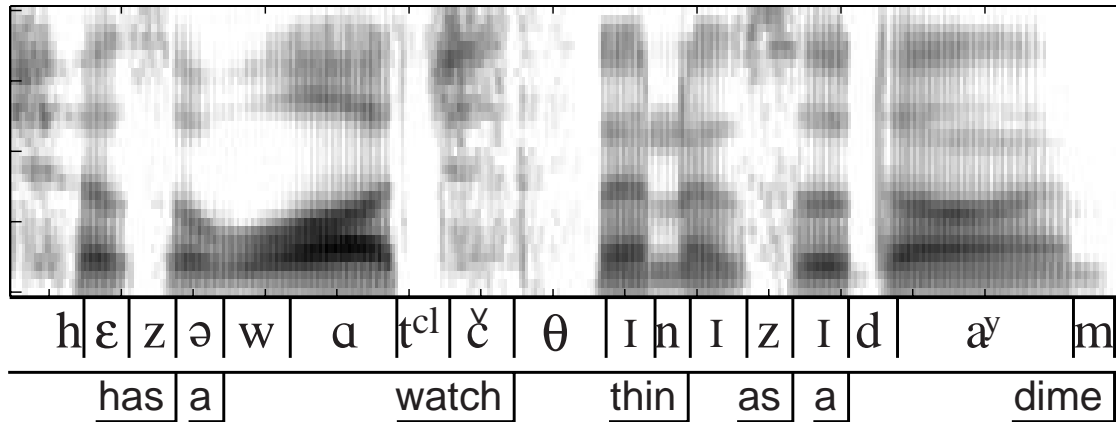
has | a | watch | thin | as | a | dime

- vowels
- glides
- nasals
- stops
- fricatives
- ...



Cues to phoneme perception

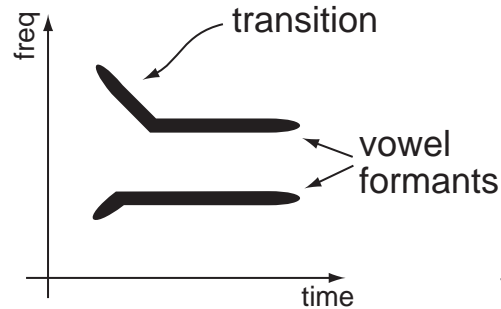
- Linguists describe speech with *phonemes*:



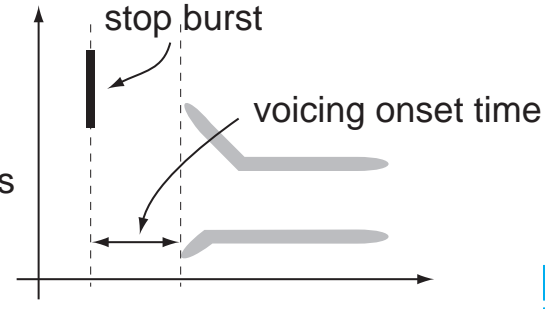
- phonemes define minimal word contrasts

- Acoustic-phoneticians describe phonemes by:

- formants & transitions



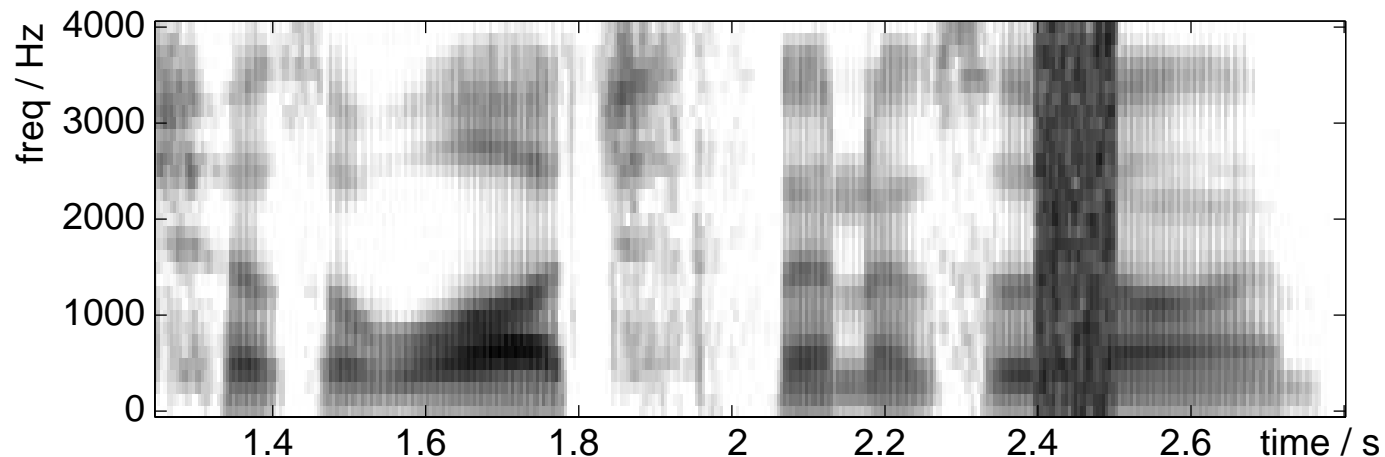
- bursts & onset times



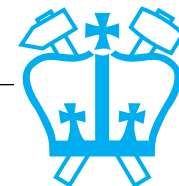
Top-down influences: Phonemic restoration

(Warren 1970)

- **What if a noise burst obscures *speech*?**



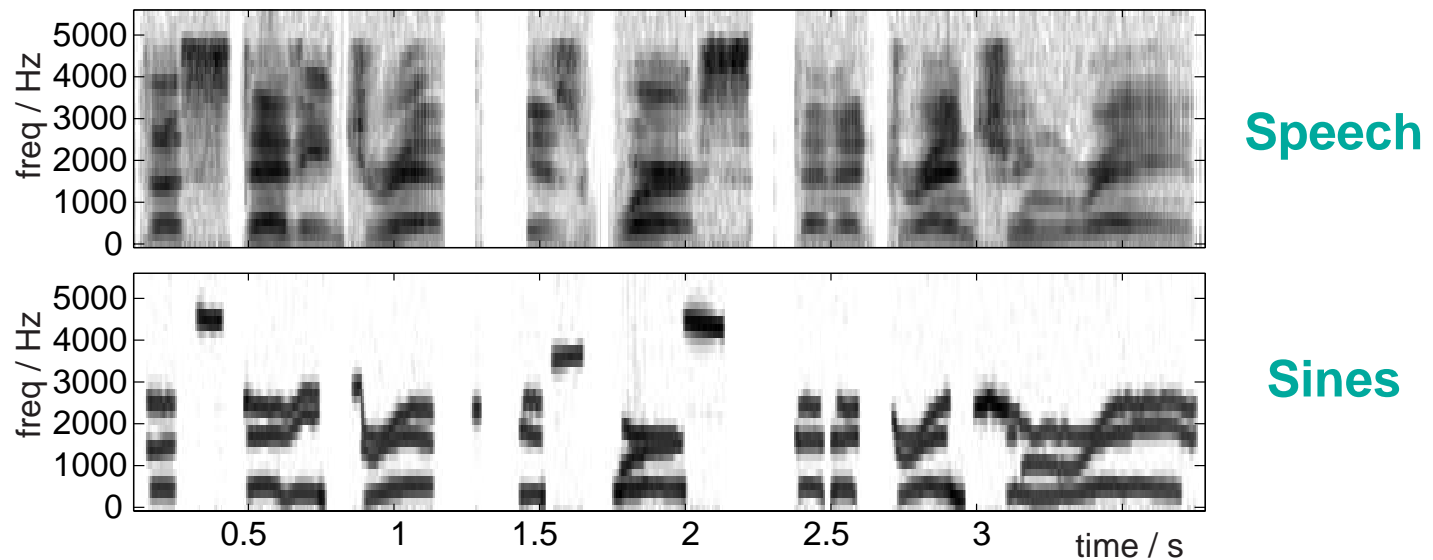
- auditory system 'restores' the missing phoneme
... based on *semantic* context
... even in *retrospect*!
- **Subjects are typically unaware of which sounds are restored**



A predisposition for speech: Sinewave replicas

(Remez et al. 1994)

- Replace each formant with a *single sinusoid*:

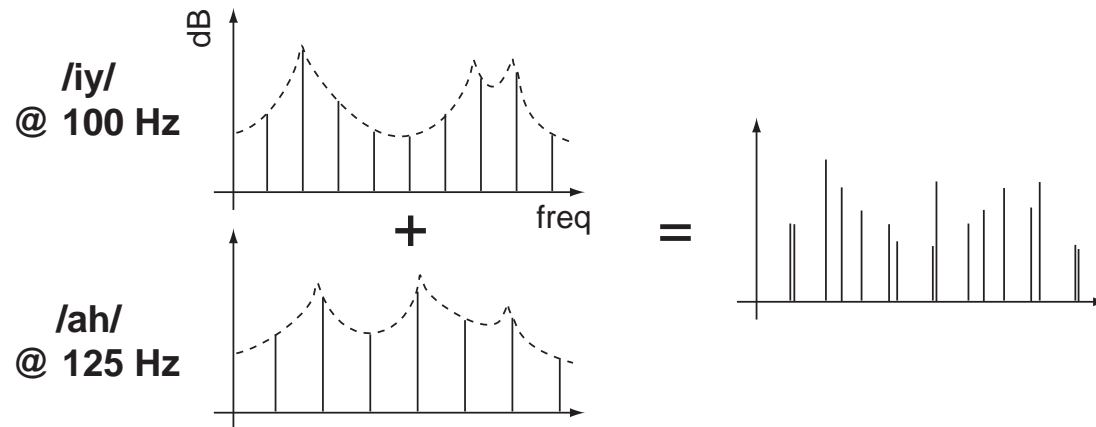


- speech is (somewhat) intelligible
 - people hear both whistles and speech (“duplex”)
 - processed as speech despite un-speech-like
- **What does it take to be speech?**

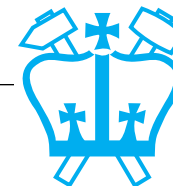
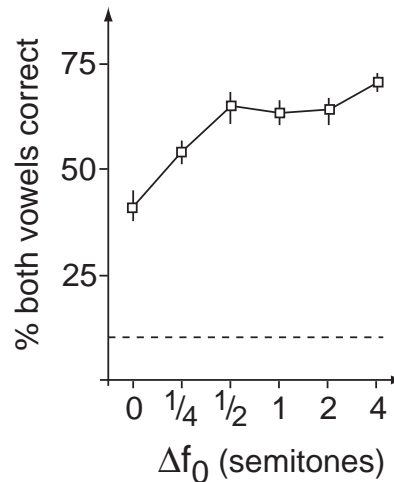


Simultaneous vowels

- **Mix synthetic vowels with different f_0 s:**

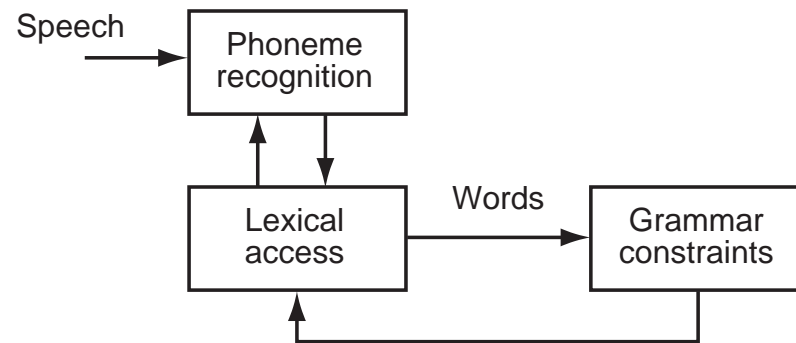


- **Pitch difference helps (though not necessary):**



Computational models of speech perception

- **Various theoretical - practical models of speech comprehension, e.g. :**



- **Open questions:**
 - mechanism of phoneme classification
 - mechanism of lexical recall
 - mechanism of grammar constraints



Summary

- **Auditory perception provides the ‘ground truth’ underlying audio processing**
- **Physiology specifies information available**
- **Psychophysics measures basic sensitivities**
- **Sound sources requires further organization**
- **Strong contextual effects in speech perception**

