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► To cite this version:

Samira Souffi, Léo Varnet, Meryem Zaidi, Brice Bathellier, Chloé Huetz, et al.. Reduction in sound discrimination in noise is related to envelope similarity and not to a decrease in envelope tracking abilities. The Journal of Physiology, 2023, 601 (1), pp.123-149. 10.1113/JP283526 . hal-03853055

HAL Id: hal-03853055

<https://hal.science/hal-03853055>

Submitted on 15 Nov 2022

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Reduction in sound discrimination in noise is related to envelope similarity and not to a decrease in envelope tracking abilities

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Number of pages: 33

Number of figures: 7

Number of words in abstract: 166

Number of words in introduction: 994

Number of words in discussion: 2429

Running title: Envelope tracking of noisy sounds in the auditory system

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First author profile

Samira Souffi completed her PhD in France at the Institute of Neuroscience in Paris-Saclay University (NeuroPSI) under the supervision of Dr. Jean-Marc Edeline. Her research was focused on understanding the effects of background noises on the neuronal discrimination in the whole auditory system. Her postdoctoral research in Prof. Israel Nelken laboratory (ELSC, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel) describes the neuronal networks involved in developing sound preferences (e.g. music preferences) on mice by recording the calcium activity in both the reward and the auditory systems.

Key points:

* In quiet, envelope tracking in the low amplitude modulation range (<20 Hz) is correlated with the neuronal discrimination between communication sounds as quantified by mutual information from the cochlear nucleus up to the auditory cortex.

* At each level of the auditory system, auditory neurons keep their abilities to track the communication sound envelopes in situations of acoustic degradation such as vocoding and the addition of masking noises up to a signal-to-noise ratio of -10 dB.

* In noise, the increase in between-stimulus envelope similarity explains both the reduction in behavioral and neuronal discrimination in the auditory system.

* Envelope tracking can be viewed as a universal mechanism allowing neural and behavioral discrimination as long as the temporal envelope of communication sounds display some differences.

Abstract

Humans and animals constantly face challenging acoustic environments such as various background noises that impair the detection, discrimination and identification of behaviorally relevant sounds. Here, we disentangled the role of temporal envelope tracking on the reduction in neuronal and behavioral discrimination between communication sounds in situations of acoustic degradations. By collecting neuronal activity from six different levels of the auditory system, from auditory nerve up to secondary auditory cortex in anesthetized guinea-pigs, we found that tracking of slow changes of the temporal envelope is a general functional property of auditory neurons for encoding communication sounds in quiet and also in adverse, challenging, conditions. Results from a Go/No-Go sound discrimination task on mice support the idea that the loss of distinct slow envelope cues in noisy conditions impacted the discrimination performance. Together, these results suggest that envelope tracking is potentially a universal mechanism operating in the central auditory system, which allows the detection of any between-stimuli difference in slow envelope and thus cope with degraded conditions.

Keywords: Auditory system; Temporal envelope tracking; Neuronal and behavioral discrimination; Degraded acoustic conditions.

90	Abbreviation list
91	
92	ABR: auditory brainstem responses
93	A1: primary auditory cortex
94	AM: amplitude modulation
95	CN: cochlear nucleus
96	CNIC: central nucleus of inferior colliculus
97	E: envelope
98	ERB: equivalent rectangular bandwidth
99	FM: frequency modulation
100	H: high
101	L: low
102	M: middle
103	MGv: ventral part of medial geniculate body
104	MI: mutual information
105	MUA: multiunit activity
106	PSTH: peristimulus histogram
107	R: correlation coefficient
108	$R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$: maximal value of correlation coefficient between envelope and PSTH
109	R_{Random} : correlation coefficient between envelope and shuffled PSTH
110	RMS: root mean square
111	sANF: simulated auditory nerve fibers
112	SNR: signal-to-noise ratio
113	SR: spontaneous rate
114	TFRP: time-frequency response profile
115	VRB: ventral-rostral belt (secondary auditory cortex)
116	
117	

Introduction

In humans, speech signals are characterized by rhythmic streams of amplitude and frequency modulations (AM and FM) that convey phoneme, syllable, word, and phrase information (Rosen 1992, Varnet et al., 2017, Ding et al., 2017). It is known for several decades that the low-frequency modulations of the temporal envelope carry essential cues for speech perception (Drullman et al., 1994a,b; Shannon et al., 1995; Zeng et al., 2005): even in challenging conditions (including in various types of noise), the human auditory system has the capacity to process highly degraded speech as long as the temporal envelope modulations below 20 Hz are preserved (Drullman et al., 1994a, b; Shannon et al., 1995; Zeng et al., 2005). This is consistent with electroencephalographic (EEG) and magnetoencephalographic (MEG) studies in which cortical responses were found in phase with the temporal envelope of speech signals and strongly correlated with the average level of speech comprehension both for normal and compressed speech (Ahissar et al., 2001; Luo and Poeppel, 2007; Ding et al., 2014). In a recent study, Ortiz-Barajas and colleagues (2021) have found that newborns possess the neural capacity to track the amplitude and the phase of the speech envelope in their native language (French), as well as in rhythmically similar and different unfamiliar languages (Spanish and English). These results support the hypothesis that speech envelope tracking may be a necessary prerequisite, although not sufficient, for speech comprehension (Kösem et al., 2016, 2017).

In animals, the synchronization of auditory cortex responses with the temporal envelope of guinea pig vocalizations has been observed in several studies (Wallace et al., 2005; Wallace & Palmer, 2009; Grimsley et al., 2011, 2012), some of them even suggesting that cortical responses could be isomorphic to the vocalization envelope (Figure 2A in Grimsley et al., 2012). Using speech stimuli with different levels of degradation (clear, conversational and compressed), Abrams and colleagues (2017) recorded responses of auditory cortex neurons in guinea pigs and showed that populations of cortical neurons encode both the periodicity and the temporal broadband envelope of the speech signal. These temporal representations in auditory cortex were quite resistant to the degradations (conversational and compressed speech) and additional studies have pointed out that cortical neurons can still respond to target stimuli in important levels of noise (between -5 and 0 dB SNR, Nagarayan et al., 2002; Narayan et al., 2007; Shetake et al., 2011; Homma et al., 2020). At the subcortical level, several studies revealed in both mammals and birds that the average responses of inferior colliculus neurons can reflect the communication sound envelope (Suta et al., 2003; Woolley et al., 2006; Rode et al., 2013).

Here, we used acoustic degradations that differentially affected the similarities between acoustic envelopes: vocoders strongly altered the spectral cues but preserved most of the temporal

153 information whereas noise addition produced spectrotemporal degradations, reduced the temporal
154 cues while introducing irrelevant envelope fluctuations and altered the spectral cues (Fig. 1 of
155 Souffi et al., 2020). We used a stationary noise which strongly increased the acoustic similarity
156 between the envelopes and a chorus noise which differed between the four envelopes and therefore
157 masked the vocalizations while not inducing an increase in the overall similarity of the stimuli. We
158 previously showed that the addition of a stationary noise strongly impaired the neuronal
159 discrimination performance at the subcortical and cortical levels, whereas it was less impaired in the
160 vocoding conditions (Fig. 6-9 of Souffi et al., 2020). To go further, our main goal in the current
161 study was to determine whether the similarities between acoustic envelopes or the loss in envelope
162 tracking ability by auditory neurons reduce or even prevent the neuronal and behavioral
163 discrimination in situations of acoustic degradations. In a condition-independent scenario, the
164 neurons keep the same intrinsic ability to track the stimulus envelopes whatever the acoustic
165 conditions (in quiet and in degraded conditions): As long as the stimulus envelopes differ, the
166 neurons will discriminate the stimuli. In contrast, in a condition-dependent scenario, the acoustic
167 degradations reduce the neurons' ability to track the stimulus envelopes. This deleterious effect can
168 potentially occur when the neurons are strongly driven by the acoustic degradations (such as noise
169 addition) leading to limited dynamic ranges for coding the target stimuli. This occurs for example
170 for the responses of auditory nerve fibers (ANF) to tones in continuous noise. Even if the responses
171 to 120-300Hz periodic AM stimuli were still preserved at 0 and +6 dB SNR (Figure 6 of Frisina et
172 al., 1996), many studies reported that the rate-level functions of ANF tested with pure tones were
173 largely altered in noise: in many cases the responses did not reach the same saturation level (Rhode
174 et al., 1978; Geisler and Sinex, 1980; Costalupes et al., 1984; Frisina et al., 1996) or the whole
175 curve was shifted toward the right (Rhode et al., 1978; Costalupes et al., 1984) indicating that the
176 thresholds were higher and the dynamic ranges were smaller than in quiet. This was also a function
177 of the bandwidth of the noise and the types of ANF (i.e., the effects differed between low, medium
178 or high spontaneous rate fibers, see for example Reiss et al., 2011). Based on these studies, it seems
179 that, as early as the auditory nerve, the detection of AM cues contained in target stimuli, and
180 therefore the tracking abilities of central auditory neurons, can be reduced. Similar results have
181 been observed in the inferior colliculus (Ramachandran et al., 2000).

182 In an attempt to dissociate between these two scenarios, we evaluated the relationship between the
183 envelope tracking of sounds and the neuronal discrimination in the entire auditory system. We
184 simulated auditory nerve fiber (sANF) responses (with a widely-used model, Bruce et al., 2018) and
185 recorded the neuronal activity in five auditory structures in response to four conspecific
186 vocalizations presented in quiet, using three tone-vocoders and two types of noise (a stationary and
187 a chorus noise at three SNRs +10, 0 and -10 dB) in anesthetized guinea pigs. We found that

188 subcortical and cortical neurons track the envelopes in the low AM range ($<20\text{Hz}$), with a high
189 degree of fidelity in original and degraded conditions, suggesting that the auditory system maintains
190 a robust temporal representation from the auditory nerve to the auditory cortex. Behaving mice
191 were also able to discriminate between these communication sounds, and performed the task above
192 chance level in all noisy conditions. Overall, our results demonstrate that the between-stimulus
193 envelope similarity, which increases in noise, negatively correlates both with the neuronal
194 discrimination and the behavioral performance.

195 **Materials and Methods**

196 Most of the Methods are similar to those described in Souffi and colleagues (2020).

197

198 **Subjects for the electrophysiological and behavioral experiments**

199 These experiments were performed under the national license A-91-557 (project 2014-25,
200 authorization 05202.02) and using the procedures N° 32-2011 and 34-2012 validated by the Ethic
201 committee N°59 (CEEAA, (Comité d’Ethique pour l’Expérimentation Animale) Paris Centre et Sud).

202 All surgical procedures were performed in accordance with the guidelines established by the
203 European Communities Council Directive (2010/63/EU Council Directive Decree).

204 Extracellular recordings were obtained from 47 adult pigmented guinea pigs (aged 3 to 16 months
205 old, 36 males, 11 females) at five different levels of the auditory system: the cochlear nucleus (CN),
206 the inferior colliculus (IC), the medial geniculate body (MGB), the primary (A1) and secondary
207 auditory cortex (area VRB). Animals, weighing from 515 to 1100 g (mean 856 g), came from our
208 own colony housed in a humidity (50-55%) and temperature (22-24°C)-controlled facility on a 12
209 h/12 h light/dark cycle (light on at 7:30 A.M.) with free access to food and water.

210 Two days before the electrophysiological experiment the animal’s pure-tone audiogram was
211 determined by testing auditory brainstem responses (ABR) under isoflurane anesthesia (2.5%) as
212 described in Gourévitch and colleagues (2009). A software (RTLlab, Echodia, Clermont-Ferrand,
213 France) allowed averaging 500 responses during the presentation of each pure-tone frequency and
214 each intensity (between 0.5 and 32 kHz, duration: 10 ms, rise-fall time: 2 ms) delivered by a
215 speaker (Knowles Electronics) placed in the animal’s right ear canal. The threshold of each ABR
216 was defined as the lowest intensity where a small ABR wave could still be detected (usually wave
217 III). For each frequency, the threshold was determined by gradually decreasing the sound intensity
218 (from 80 dB down to -10 dB SPL). There was a perfect agreement between the thresholds visually
219 determined by two co-authors (SS, JME). Based upon a large database of more than 250 guinea
220 pigs, we considered that all animals used in this study had normal pure-tone audiograms
221 (Gourévitch et al., 2009; Gourévitch and Edeline, 2011).

222 Behavioral experiments were performed on nine eight-weeks old C57Bl/6J female mice (see
223 *Behavioral Go/No-Go discrimination task* part for more details).

224

225 **Acoustic stimuli**

226 The acoustic stimuli were the same as in Souffi and colleagues (2020, 2021). They were generated
227 using MatLab, transferred to a RP2.1-based sound delivery system (TDT) and sent to a Fostex
228 speaker (FE87E). The speaker was placed at 2 cm from the guinea pig’s right ear, a distance at

229 which the speaker produced a flat spectrum (± 3 dB) between 140 Hz and 36 kHz. Calibration of
 230 the speaker was made using noise and pure tones recorded by a Bruel and Kjaer microphone 4133
 231 coupled to a preamplifier BandK 2169 and a digital recorder Marantz PMD671.
 232 Time-Frequency Response Profiles (TFRP) were determined using 129 pure-tone frequencies
 233 covering eight octaves (0.14-36 kHz) and presented at 75 dB SPL. The tones had a gamma
 234 envelope given by $\gamma(t) = (\frac{t}{4})^2 e^{-\frac{t}{4}}$, where t is time in ms. At a given stimulus level, each frequency
 235 was repeated eight times at a rate of 2.35 Hz in pseudorandom order. The duration of these tones
 236 over half-peak amplitude was 13.6 ms and at 50ms the sound intensity was 6.7 dB SPL. There was
 237 no overlap between tones.
 238 A set of four conspecific vocalizations was used to assess the neuronal responses to communication
 239 sounds. These vocalizations were recorded from animals of our colony. Pairs of animals were
 240 placed in the acoustic chamber and their vocalizations were recorded by a Bruel & Kjaer
 241 microphone 4133 coupled to a preamplifier B&K 2169 and a digital recorder Marantz PMD671. A
 242 large set of whistle calls was loaded in the Audition software (Adobe Audition 3) and four
 243 representative examples of whistles were selected (Figure 1A, left panel). As shown in Figure 1B
 244 (left panel), their overall envelopes clearly differed, W2 and W4 envelopes being the closest from
 245 each other. The four whistles were presented in two frozen noises ranging from 10 to 24 000 Hz. To
 246 generate these noises, audio-recordings were performed in the colony room where a large group of
 247 guinea pigs were housed (30-40 animals; 2-4 animals/cage). Several 4-seconds of audio recordings
 248 were added up to generate the "chorus noise", whose power spectrum was computed using the
 249 Fourier transform. The chorus noise masking each target vocalization was slightly different in terms
 250 of spectro-temporal content. The chorus noise spectrum was then used to shape the spectrum of a
 251 Gaussian white noise. The resulting "vocalization-shaped stationary noise" therefore matched the
 252 "chorus-noise" audio spectrum. Figure 1B displays the overall envelopes of the four whistles in the
 253 vocalization-shaped stationary noise (third panel) and in the chorus noise (fourth panel) with
 254 signal-to-noise ratios (SNR) of +10, 0 and -10 dB.
 255 The four selected whistles were also processed by three tone vocoders (Gnansia et al., 2009, 2010).
 256 In the following figures, the unprocessed whistles will be referred to as the original versions, and
 257 the vocoded versions as Voc38, Voc 20, and Voc10 using 38, 20, and 10 bands, respectively. In
 258 contrast to previous studies that used noise-excited vocoders (Nagarajan et al., 2002; Ranasinghe et
 259 al., 2012; Ter-Mikaelian et al., 2013), a tone vocoder was used here, because noise vocoders were
 260 found to introduce random (i.e., non-informative) intrinsic temporal-envelope fluctuations
 261 distorting the crucial spectro-temporal modulation features of communication sounds (Shamma and
 262 Lorenzi, 2013; Kates, 2011; Stone et al., 2011). Figure 1B displays the overall envelopes of the 38-
 263 band vocoded (first row, second panel), the 20-band vocoded (second row, second panel) and the

10-band vocoded (third row, second panel) versions of the four whistles. The three vocoders differed only in terms of the number of frequency bands (i.e., analysis filters) used to decompose the whistles (38, 20 or 10 bands). The 38-band vocoding process is briefly described below, but the same principles apply to the 20-band or the 10-band vocoders. Each digitized signal was passed through a bank of 38 fourth-order Gammatone filters (Patterson, 1987) with center frequencies uniformly spaced along a guinea-pig adapted ERB (Equivalent Rectangular Bandwidth) scale ranging from 50 to 35505 Hz (Sayles and Winter, 2010).

Overall envelope extraction

In each frequency band, the temporal envelope was extracted using full-wave rectification and low-pass filtering at 64 Hz with a zero-phase, sixth-order Butterworth filter. The resulting envelopes were used to amplitude modulate sine-wave carriers with frequencies at the center frequency of the Gammatone filters, and with random starting phase. Impulse responses were peak-aligned for the envelope (using a group delay of 16 ms) and the acoustic temporal fine structure across frequency channels (Hohmann, 2002). The modulated signals were finally weighted and summed over the 35 frequency bands (see section “*Quantification of the envelope tracking*”). The weighting compensated for imperfect superposition of the bands’ impulse responses at the desired group delay. The weights were optimized numerically to achieve a flat frequency response.

Surgical procedures

All guinea pigs were anesthetized by an initial injection of urethane (1.2 g/kg, i.p.) supplemented by additional doses of urethane (0.5 g/kg, i.p.) when reflex movements were observed after pinching the hind paw (usually 2-4 times during the recording session). A single dose of atropine sulfate (0.06mg/kg, s.c.) was given to reduce bronchial secretions and a small dose of buprenorphine was administered (0.05mg/kg, s.c.) as urethane has no analgesic properties. After placing the animal in a stereotaxic frame, a craniotomy was performed and a local anesthetic (Xylocain 2%) was injected in the wound.

For auditory cortex recordings (area A1 and VRB), a craniotomy was performed above the left temporal cortex. The dura above the auditory cortex was removed under binocular control and the cerebrospinal fluid was drained through the cisterna to prevent the occurrence of oedema. For the recordings in MGB, a craniotomy was performed above the most posterior part of the MGB (8mm posterior to Bregma) to reach the left auditory thalamus at a location where the MGB is mainly composed of its ventral, tonotopic, part (Redies et al., 1989; Edeline et al., 1999; Anderson et al., 2007; Wallace et al., 2007). For IC recordings, a craniotomy was performed above the IC and portions of the cortex were aspirated to expose the surface of the left IC (Malmierca et al., 1995, 1996; Rees et al., 1997). For CN recordings, after opening the skull above the right cerebellum,

portions of the cerebellum were aspirated to expose the surface of the right CN (Paraouty et al., 2018).

After all surgeries, a pedestal in dental acrylic cement was built to allow an atraumatic fixation of the animal's head during the recording session. The stereotaxic frame supporting the animal was placed in a sound-attenuating chamber (IAC, model AC1). At the end of the recording session, a lethal dose of Exagon (pentobarbital >200 mg/kg, i.p.) was administered to the animal.

Recording procedures

Data from multi-unit recordings were collected in 5 auditory structures, the non-primary cortical area VRB, the primary cortical area A1, the medial geniculate body (MGB), the inferior colliculus (IC) and the cochlear nucleus (CN). In a given guinea pig, neuronal recordings were only collected in one auditory structure.

Cortical extracellular recordings were obtained from arrays of 16 tungsten electrodes (TDT, TuckerDavis Technologies; \varnothing : 33 μm , <1 M Ω) composed of two rows of 8 electrodes separated by 1000 μm (350 μm between electrodes of the same row). A silver wire, used as ground, was inserted between the temporal bone and the dura mater on the contralateral side. The location of the primary auditory cortex was estimated based on the pattern of vasculature observed in previous studies (Wallace et al., 2000; Gaucher et al., 2013, 2020; Gaucher and Edeline, 2015). The non-primary cortical area VRB was located ventral to A1 and distinguished by its longer response latencies to pure tones (Rutkowski et al., 2002; Grimsley et al., 2012). For each experiment, the position of the electrode array was set in such a way that the two rows of eight electrodes sampled neurons responding from low to high frequency when progressing in the rostro-caudal direction [see examples in Figure 1 of Gaucher et al., (2012) and in Figure 6A of Occelli et al., (2016)].

In the MGB, IC and CN, the recordings were obtained using 16-channel multi-electrode arrays (NeuroNexus) composed of one shank (10 mm) of 16 electrodes spaced by 110 μm and with conductive site areas of 177 μm^2 . The electrodes were advanced vertically (for MGB and IC) or with a 40° angle to the CN surface until responses to pure tones could be detected on at least 10 electrodes.

All thalamic recordings were from the ventral part of MGB (see above surgical procedures) and all displayed response latencies < 9ms. At the collicular level, we distinguished the lemniscal and non-lemniscal divisions of IC based on depth and the latencies of pure tone responses. We excluded the most superficial recordings (until a depth of 1500 μm) and those exhibiting latencies \geq 20ms in an attempt to select recordings from the central nucleus of IC (CNIC). At the level of the cochlear nucleus, the recordings were collected from both the dorsal and ventral divisions.

333 The raw signal was amplified 10,000 times (TDT Medusa). It was then processed by an RX5
334 multichannel data acquisition system (TDT). The signal collected from each electrode (sampling
335 rate 25kHz on each channel) was filtered (610-10000 Hz) to extract multi-unit activity (MUA). The
336 trigger level was set for each electrode to select the largest action potentials from the signal with a
337 1ms precision. On-line and off-line examination of the waveforms suggests that the MUA collected
338 here was made of action potentials generated by a few neurons at the vicinity of the electrode.
339 However, as we did not use tetrodes, the result of several clustering algorithms (Pouzat et al., 2002;
340 Quiroga et al., 2004; Franke et al., 2015) based on spike waveform analyses were not reliable
341 enough to isolate single units with good confidence. Although these are not direct proofs, the facts
342 that the electrodes were of similar impedance (0.5-1 MOhm) and that the spike amplitudes had
343 similar values (100-300 μ V) for the cortical and the subcortical recordings were two indications
344 suggesting that the cluster recordings obtained in each structure included a similar number of
345 neurons. Even if a similar number of neurons were recorded in the different structures, we cannot
346 discard the possibility that the homogeneity of the multi-unit recordings (in terms of number of cells
347 contributing to each recording) differ between structures. By collecting several hundreds of
348 recordings in each structure, these potential differences should be attenuated in the present study.

349

350

351 **Simulations of auditory nerve fiber responses**

352

353 A computational model of auditory nerve fiber responses was used to assess whether the envelope-
354 tracking properties measured in the central auditory system could be a mere consequence of the
355 processing taking place at peripheral levels. For this purpose, we used a well-established and
356 widely-used model of the auditory periphery (Bruce et al., 2018). This model provides a
357 phenomenological description of the major functional stages of the auditory periphery, from the
358 middle ear up to the auditory nerve (Osses et al., 2022). The implementation used in the present
359 study is available as the routine 'bruce2018' within the AMT toolbox (v1.0) for MATLAB (Majdak
360 et al., 2022).

361 In order to make the simulated data as comparable as possible to the neuronal responses collected in
362 the electrophysiological experiments, the distribution of cochlear center frequencies was chosen to
363 be similar to the best frequencies obtained from the CN data. Default parameters were used for the
364 later stages of the model. For each cochlear channel, five auditory-nerve fibers were simulated with
365 different spontaneous rates (SR): 1 low-SR fiber (SR = 0.1 spikes/s), 1 medium-SR fiber (SR = 4
366 spikes/s) and 3 high-SR fibers (SR = 100 spikes/s). The outcome of the model corresponds to the
367 aggregated responses of these 5 simulated auditory nerve fibers (sANF) in an attempt (i) to keep the
368 physiological ratio between low, medium and high threshold fibers and (ii) to roughly match the

369 number of cells contributing to the MUA collected in the central auditory structures (<6 neurons at
370 the vicinity of the electrode).

371 The responses to twenty repetitions of each vocalization in the original and degraded conditions
372 were simulated and analyzed in the same way as recorded data.

373

374 **Experimental protocol**

375 As inserting an array of 16 electrodes in a brain structure unavoidably induces a deformation of this
376 structure, a 30-min recovery time was allowed for the structure to return to its initial shape, then the
377 array was slowly lowered. Time-frequency response profiles (TFRPs) were used to assess the
378 quality of our recordings and to adjust electrode depth. For auditory cortex recordings (A1 and
379 VRB), the recording depth was 500-1000 μm , which corresponds to layer III and the upper part of
380 layer IV according to Wallace and Palmer (2008). For thalamic recordings, the NeuroNexus probe
381 was lowered about 7mm below the pia before the first responses to pure tones were detected. For
382 the collicular and cochlear nucleus recordings, the NeuroNexus probe was visually inserted into the
383 structure and after a 15 minutes stabilization period, auditory stimuli were presented.

384 When a clear frequency tuning was obtained for at least 10 of the 16 electrodes, the stability of the
385 tuning was assessed: we required that the recorded neurons displayed at least three (each lasting 6
386 minutes) successive similar TFRPs (i.e., with similar best frequencies) before starting the protocol.
387 When the stability was satisfactory, the protocol was started by presenting the acoustic stimuli in
388 the following order: We first presented the four whistles at 75 dB SPL in their original versions (in
389 quiet), then the vocoded whistles (Voc38, Voc20 and Voc10 versions) were presented at 75 dB SPL
390 followed by the masked vocalizations presented against the chorus then against the vocalization-
391 shaped stationary noise at 65, 75 and 85 dB SPL. Thus, the level of the original vocalizations was
392 kept constant (75 dB SPL), and the noise level was increased (65, 75 and 85 dB SPL). In all cases,
393 each vocalization was repeated 20 times and all the loudness levels are in RMS value. Presentation
394 of this entire stimulus set lasted 45 minutes. The protocol was re-started either after moving the
395 electrode array on the cortical map or after lowering the NeuroNexus probe by at least 300 μm for
396 subcortical structures.

397

398 **Behavioral Go/No-Go discrimination task**

399 Nine eight-weeks old C57Bl/6J mice were water-deprived (33 ml/g per day) and trained daily for
400 200–300 trials in a Go/No-Go task involving two of the guinea pig whistles (W1 and W3 in figure
401 1), one (the S+) signaling the reward (a drop of water) and the other not (the S-). The training
402 procedures were similar to those described in previous studies (Deneux et al., 2016; Ceballo et al.,
403 2019). Mice were head-fixed and held in a plastic tube on aluminum foil. Mice first performed 1-3

404 habituation sessions to learn to obtain a water reward (~5 μ l) by licking on a stainless steel water
405 spout at least 8 times after the positive stimulus S+. A trial only started when the mice were not
406 licking the spout for at least 3 seconds. Licks were detected by changes in resistance between the
407 aluminum foil and the water spout. After habituation, the fraction of collected rewards was ~80%.
408 The learning protocol then started in which mice received the S- for which they had to lick less
409 than 3 times to avoid a 5s time-out. One of the two whistles (the S+ or the S-) was presented every
410 10-20 s (uniform distribution) followed by a 1s test period during which the mouse had to lick at
411 least 5-8 times to receive the reward. Positive and negative stimuli were played in a pseudorandom
412 order with the constraint that exactly 4 positive and 4 negative sounds must be played every 8 trials.
413 Once a mouse showed at least 80% of correct discrimination between the S+ and the S- for two
414 successive days in the original condition, it was trained in noisy conditions, first with the stationary
415 noise (successively at +10, 0 and -10 dB SNR), then with the chorus noise (successively at +10, 0
416 and -10 dB SNR). Each mouse had to perform at least one day at 80% in a given SNR to be tested
417 on the following day at a lower SNR. Behavioral analyses were all automated; thus no animal
418 randomization or experimenter blinding was used.

419

420 **Data analysis**

421

422 All the analyses were performed on MATLAB 2021 (MathWorks).

423 **Quantification of responses to pure tones**

424 The TFRPs were obtained by constructing post-stimulus time histograms for each frequency with 1
425 ms time bins. The firing rate evoked by each frequency was quantified by summing all the action
426 potentials from the tone onset up to 100 ms after this onset. Thus, TFRPs were matrices of 100 bins
427 in abscissa (time) multiplied by 129 bins in ordinate (frequency). All TFRPs were smoothed with a
428 uniform 5x5 bin window for visualization (not for the data analyses). For each TFRP, the Best
429 Frequency (BF) was defined as the frequency at which the highest firing rate was recorded. Peaks
430 of significant response were automatically identified using the following procedure: A positive peak
431 in the TFRP was defined as a contour of firing rate above the average level of the baseline activity
432 (100ms of spontaneous activity taken before each tone onset) plus six times the standard deviation
433 of the baseline activity. Recordings without significant peak of responses or with inhibitory
434 responses (decreases in firing rate 3 standard deviations below spontaneous activity) were excluded
435 from the data analyses.

Quantification of the envelope tracking

We first extracted the envelope as explained on a previous section (see above “Overall envelope extraction”) and then filtered them (original, vocoded and noisy vocalizations) using a bank of 35 gammatone filters with center frequencies uniformly spaced along a guinea pig - adapted ERB (equivalent rectangular bandwidth) scale ranging from 20 to 30 000 Hz. Then, three ranges of amplitude modulation (AM) were investigated: the low (L, < 20 Hz), middle (M, between 20 and 100 Hz) and high (H, between 100 and 200 Hz) AM ranges. For all the AM filtering, we used Butterworth filters at -6 dB per octave. Second, the envelopes were downsampled to a resolution of 1 ms to match the sampling rate of the PSTHs. Finally, we applied a half-wave rectification followed by a normalization with the corresponding RMS value.

The neuronal responses (i.e. the PSTHs) were also filtered with the same three frequency bands as the envelopes followed by a normalization with the corresponding RMS value. The rationale for this filtering step was that we wanted to isolate and quantify the correspondence between temporal aspects of the stimuli in particular frequency ranges and PSTHs.

Next, we performed normalized cross-correlations between the filtered envelopes and PSTHs for each AM range. We selected seven gammatones, as a trade-off between accurately representing the envelopes along the audio spectrum and minimizing redundancy between envelopes. Maximal values in the correlograms were automatically detected in each structure to account for propagation delays in the auditory system. The lags were selected according to the distributions of the latencies obtained in response to pure tones at 75 dB SPL. The different lags identified were: 1-10ms for CN, 5-20ms for CNIC, 6-15ms for MGv, 9-30ms for A1 and 9-40ms for VRB. In all analyses, we decided to keep the maximal correlation coefficient out of the seven selected gammatone filters ($R_{\max E-PSTH}$).

Evaluation of the correlation significance by shuffling the evoked activity

It is known that significant correlation between neuronal events and sensory stimuli can be obtained by chance (see for review Harris, 2020). Therefore, it was crucial to run drastic controls to reduce the probability that the correlations detected here result from spurious correlations.

To determine a significance threshold for the correlation, we shuffled only the evoked activity in the original condition on a time-scale of 1 ms, in order to preserve the global shape of the whole response (i.e., the four response peaks due to the starting of each stimulus separated by a period of silence). Specifically, for the original condition, we only shuffled the spikes obtained during the presentation of each whistle to avoid adding spikes in the silence period. The obtained shuffled PSTHs were then processed using the same procedure as for unshuffled PSTHs: filtering in the three AM ranges and half-wave rectification followed by a normalization with the corresponding

RMS value. Then, we computed the cross-correlation (R_{Random}) between each shuffled PSTH and each envelope. We performed this procedure 1000 times and set, for each correlation value PSTH-E, a significance threshold of the R value that is the mean of the R_{Random} values plus two fold the standard deviations ($\mu(R_{\text{Random}}) \pm 2\sigma$). Based upon this criterion, percentages of recordings were discarded in each structure and for each AM range: in VRB, 30%, 10%, 47% of recordings were discarded in the L, M and H range respectively; in A1, 51%, 38%, 73% of recordings were discarded in the L, M and H range respectively; in MGv, 61%, 49%, 63% of recordings were discarded in the L, M and H range respectively; in CNIC, 29%, 26%, 33% of recordings were discarded in the L, M and H range respectively; in CN, 33%, 43%, 50% of recordings were discarded in the L, M and H range respectively; in sANF, 35%, 86%, 77% of recordings were discarded in the L, M and H range respectively. Although this drastic procedure discarded a non-negligible proportion of recordings, it reduced the probability that the correlations described here were obtained by chance.

Quantification of mutual information from the responses to vocalizations

The method developed by Schnupp and colleagues (2006) was used to quantify the amount of information contained in the responses to vocalizations obtained with natural, vocoded or noisy stimuli. This method allows quantifying how well the vocalization's identity can be inferred from neuronal responses. Neuronal responses were represented using different time scales ranging from the duration of the whole response (total spike count) to a 1-ms precision (precise temporal patterns), which allows analyzing how much the spike timing contributes to the information. As this method is exhaustively described in Schnupp and colleagues (2006) and in Gaucher and colleagues (2013a), we only present below the main principles.

The method relies on a pattern-recognition algorithm that is designed to “guess which stimulus evoked a particular response pattern” (Schnupp et al., 2006) by going through the following steps: From all the responses of a subcortical or cortical site to the different stimuli, a single response (test pattern) is extracted and represented as a PSTH with a given bin size. Then, a mean response pattern is computed from the remaining responses for each stimulus class. The test pattern is then assigned to the stimulus class of the closest mean response pattern. This operation is repeated for all the responses, generating a confusion matrix where each response is assigned to a given stimulus class. From this confusion matrix, the Mutual Information (MI) is given by Shannon's formula:

$$MI = \sum_{x,y} p(x,y) \times \log_2 \left(\frac{p(x,y)}{p(x) \times p(y)} \right)$$

where x and y are the rows and columns of the confusion matrix, or in other words, the values taken by the random variables “presented stimulus class” and “assigned stimulus class”.

505 In our case, we used responses to the four whistles and selected the first 280 ms of these responses
506 to work on spike trains of exactly the same duration (the shortest whistle being 280 ms long). In a
507 scenario where the responses do not carry information, the assignments of each response to a mean
508 response pattern is equivalent to chance level (here 0.25 because we used 4 different stimuli and
509 each stimulus was presented the same number of times) and the MI would be close to zero. In the
510 opposite case, when responses are very different between stimulus classes and very similar within a
511 stimulus class, the confusion matrix would be diagonal and the mutual information would tend to
512 $\log_2(4) = 2$ bits. This algorithm was applied with different bin sizes ranging from 1 to 280 ms (see
513 figure 2B in Souffi and colleagues (2020) for the evolution of MI with temporal precisions ranging
514 from 1 to 40 ms). The value of 8 ms was selected for the data analysis because in each structure the
515 MI reached its maximum at this value of temporal precision.

516 The MI estimates are subject to non-negligible positive sampling biases. Therefore, as in Schnupp
517 and colleagues (2006), we estimated the expected size of this bias by calculating MI values for
518 “shuffled” data, in which the response patterns were randomly reassigned to stimulus classes. The
519 shuffling was repeated 100 times, resulting in 100 MI estimates of the bias (MI_{bias}). These MI_{bias}
520 estimates are then used as estimators for the computation of the statistical significance of the MI
521 estimate for the real (unshuffled) datasets: the real estimate is considered as significant if its value is
522 statistically different from the distribution of MI_{bias} shuffled estimates. Significant MI estimates
523 were computed for MI calculated from neuronal responses under one electrode and for each
524 condition. Therefore, there was a MI_{bias} value for each MI estimate. The range of MI_{bias} values was
525 very similar between brain structures: depending on the conditions (original, vocoded and noisy
526 vocalizations), it ranged from 0.102 to 0.107 bits in the CN, from 0.107 to 0.110 bits in the IC, from
527 0.105 to 0.114 bits in the MGB, 0.107 to 0.111 bits in the A1 and from 0.106 to 0.116 bits in VRB.
528 There was no significant difference between the mean values of MI_{bias} in the different structures
529 (Students’ t test unpaired, all $p > 0.25$).

530

531 **Quantification of acoustic envelope similarity**

532 For each acoustic condition and each AM range, we quantified the acoustic similarity between each
533 pair of stimuli as the correlation between their envelopes across the seven selected gammatones.
534 Then, we averaged the six correlation values (related to all possible combinations with the four
535 stimuli) to obtain an estimate of the similarity between the four stimuli for each condition (original,
536 vocoding and noisy conditions) and each AM range (see Fig. 7A, dark lines). More precisely, we
537 averaged Fisher z-transformed coefficients and reported the back-transformed averages on the
538 figure 7A. In order to confirm that there is no bias in our gammatone selection, we carried out the

539 same analysis on the output of the 35 gammatones and obtained similar results (see Fig. 7A, light
540 lines).

541

542 **Statistical analysis**

543

544 We used an analysis of variance (ANOVA) for multiple factors to reveal the main effects in the
545 whole data set (vocoding conditions: three levels, masking noise conditions: three levels for each
546 noise; auditory structures: six levels; AM ranges: three levels). Post-hoc pairwise tests were
547 performed between the original condition and the vocoding or noisy conditions, or between
548 structures to assess the significance of the multiple comparisons. They were corrected for multiple
549 comparisons using Bonferroni corrections and were considered as significant if their p-value was
550 below 0.05.

551 **Results**

552

553 We simulated auditory nerve fiber (sANF) responses and collected neuronal recordings from five
554 auditory structures: the cochlear nucleus (CN, 10 animals), the central nucleus of the inferior
555 colliculus (CNIC, 11 animals), the ventral part of the medial geniculate (MGv, 10 animals), the
556 primary auditory cortex (A1, 11 animals) and a secondary auditory area (VRB, 5 animals).

557 All analyses were performed on a set of recordings (or simulated recordings) selected using
558 stringent criteria and n values correspond to the number of selected recordings. Note that all the R
559 values presented below are considered as significant (see Method section for more details).

560 Figures 1A-B illustrate the spectrograms and the overall envelopes of all stimuli in the original,
561 vocoded and noisy conditions. In the following, the term stimulus refers either to the four original
562 or vocoded whistles, or to the four whistles embedded in noise. The four overall envelopes of the
563 stimuli were clearly different between each other in the original and vocoded conditions, however,
564 they progressively became more similar in noisy conditions as the SNR decreased, especially in
565 stationary noise.

566

567 **Auditory neurons track the envelopes in the low AM range better than in middle and high** 568 **AM ranges**

569

570 We first determined which ranges of amplitude modulations are tracked by the subcortical and
571 cortical neurons. To address this question, we filtered both the envelopes and the neuronal
572 responses in three AM ranges: the low (< 20 Hz), middle (between 20 and 100 Hz) and high
573 (between 100 and 200 Hz) AM ranges. Figure 1C presents the seven selected Butterworth-filtered
574 envelopes (among the 35) of the four whistles after first having been filtered using a gammatone
575 filterbank and brings out that the low AM range contained larger envelope fluctuations than the
576 middle and high AM ranges. Figures 2A-B present individual examples (Fig. 2A) and populations
577 (Fig. 2B) of PSTHs constructed from the responses to presentation of the original vocalizations in
578 each structure. Based on these PSTHs, it appears that the evoked responses tended to be more
579 phasic in the two cortical areas (A1 and VRB) than in the subcortical structures.

580 Figures 2C-E show the PSTHs from individual recordings (in black) and stimulus envelopes (E, in
581 red) obtained in each structure (and for the sANF) in the original condition, both filtered in the
582 same AM ranges. For each example of E-PSTH, we indicated the cross-correlation value (R) on the
583 top left of each panel. In the following results, the correlation value selected for each recording at a
584 given AM range was the maximum over the seven gammatone filters ($R_{\max E-PSTH}$). Note that
585 similar results were obtained when we used the correlation value obtained with the gammatone

filter the closest to the best frequency of each neuronal recording (data not shown). Whatever the structure, in these individual recordings, the higher R values were in the low AM range rather than in the middle and high AM ranges (Fig. 2C-E). Figure 2F presents the distribution, the mean and the interquartile range of the $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values for each structure in the three AM ranges (L, M and H) in the original condition. Overall, we found a statistically significant difference in average $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values for both the three AM ranges and the six structures (two-way ANOVA, $p < 0.05$) with a significant interaction between these two factors. For all structures, the mean $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values were much higher in the L range compared to the M and H ranges. In the low AM range, sANF, CN and CNIC recordings displayed significantly higher mean $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values than MGv and cortical recordings (one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(5, 1165)} = 138.25$ with Students' t test unpaired, sANF vs. MGv, A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, CN vs. MGv, A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, CNIC vs. MGv, A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$; mean (\pm STD) $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values: $R_{\text{sANF}(n=217)} = 0.81 \pm 0.03$, $R_{\text{CN}(n=336)} = 0.80 \pm 0.08$, $R_{\text{CNIC}(n=274)} = 0.78 \pm 0.11$, $R_{\text{MGv}(n=102)} = 0.68 \pm 0.13$, $R_{\text{A1}(n=171)} = 0.60 \pm 0.13$ and $R_{\text{VRB}(n=66)} = 0.63 \pm 0.14$). In the middle and high AM ranges, the differences between the structures were less clear but the CNIC recordings still exhibited slightly higher mean $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values compared to the other structures (mean (\pm STD) $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values in the middle AM range: $R_{\text{sANF}(n=44)} = 0.32 \pm 0.03$, $R_{\text{CN}(n=285)} = 0.31 \pm 0.07$, $R_{\text{CNIC}(n=285)} = 0.34 \pm 0.07$, $R_{\text{MGv}(n=133)} = 0.31 \pm 0.07$, $R_{\text{A1}(n=220)} = 0.27 \pm 0.05$ and $R_{\text{VRB}(n=85)} = 0.29 \pm 0.06$; mean (\pm STD) $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values in the high AM range: $R_{\text{sANF}(n=77)} = 0.31 \pm 0.03$, $R_{\text{CN}(n=249)} = 0.31 \pm 0.05$, $R_{\text{CNIC}(n=257)} = 0.33 \pm 0.05$, $R_{\text{MGv}(n=97)} = 0.29 \pm 0.04$, $R_{\text{A1}(n=196)} = 0.27 \pm 0.05$ and $R_{\text{VRB}(n=50)} = 0.30 \pm 0.05$). This poor ability to follow fast AM changes was expected for auditory cortex neurons but not expected for subcortical neurons and for sANF (which can synchronize at higher AM rates when tested with periodic artificial stimuli, review in Joris et al., 2004). This suggests that only a partial encoding of high AM rates contained in complex natural sounds is performed by subcortical neurons.

To summarize, in the original condition, the neurons' PSTHs were more strongly correlated with the stimulus envelope in the low AM range than in the middle and high AM ranges, both at the subcortical and cortical levels.

In the original condition, the better cortical and subcortical neurons track the slow envelope (<20 Hz), the higher the value of mutual information

Does envelope tracking allow auditory neurons to discriminate the four vocalizations in the original condition? To address this question, we examined whether there is a relationship between the neuronal discrimination performance and the neurons' abilities to follow the stimulus envelope (Fig. 3). The distribution, the mean and the interquartile range of the neuronal discrimination

(quantified by the mutual information, MI) are presented for each structure in Figure 3A. As previously reported (Souffi et al., 2020), subcortical neurons (CN, CNIC and MGv neurons) were better in discriminating the original whistles compared to cortical neurons (A1 and VRB neurons) and here we extended this result to sANF (one-way ANOVA $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(5, 1538)} = 266.46$ with Students' t test unpaired, sANF vs. A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, CN vs. A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, CNIC vs. A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, MGv vs. A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$; mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{sANF(n=77)} = 1.84 \pm 0.21$ bits, $MI_{CN(n=249)} = 0.92 \pm 0.47$ bits, $MI_{CNIC(n=257)} = 1.00 \pm 0.5$ bits, $MI_{MGv(n=97)} = 1.19 \pm 0.55$ bits, $MI_{A1(n=196)} = 0.68 \pm 0.37$ bits and $R_{VRB(n=50)} = 0.55 \pm 0.29$ bits, Fig. 3A). The scattergrams presented in Figure 3B display the $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ values as a function of the MI values in each structure and AM range.

Figure 3C summarizes the correlation values between $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI parameters, in each structure and in the three AM ranges. All significant correlation values between these two variables are reported in red. In all but one case (in CNIC in the middle AM range), significant positive correlations between $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI values were obtained in all AM ranges in subcortical structures ($p^L_{CN} < 0.0001$, $p^M_{CN} < 0.0001$, $p^H_{CN} = 0.01$, $p^L_{CNIC} < 0.0001$, $p^M_{CNIC} = 0.24$, $p^H_{CNIC} = 0.005$, $p^L_{MGv} = 0.006$, $p^M_{MGv} < 0.0001$, $p^H_{MGv} = 0.01$). For the sANF, the range of MI values was too limited to compute reliable correlations (most MI values were close to the maximum of 2 bits). At the subcortical level, the highest correlation values between $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI values as a whole, were found in MGv. At the cortical level, significant correlations between $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI values were detected in the low and middle AM ranges in A1 ($p^L_{A1} = 0.01$, $p^M_{A1} = 0.05$, $p^H_{A1} = 0.32$) and there was no significant correlation in VRB (may be as a consequence of fewer recordings in this area, $p^L_{VRB} = 0.31$, $p^M_{VRB} = 0.51$, $p^H_{VRB} = 0.99$). Interestingly, at each level except in VRB, there was a positive and significant correlation value in the low AM range suggesting that the neuronal ability for tracking the slow envelopes (< 20 Hz) better explains the neuronal discrimination in the entire auditory system than the tracking of higher AM rates.

To summarize, it appeared that in the original condition, the better the tracking of the temporal envelope, the better the between-stimuli neuronal discrimination. In addition, for cortical neurons, the correlation between the $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI values was stronger in the lower AM range, whereas for subcortical neurons, there were also still significant correlations in the higher AM ranges.

The acoustic degradations decreased the values of mutual information but did not affect the envelope tracking performed by the auditory neurons

In almost all situations of acoustic degradations, the neurons' ability to discriminate between the four vocalizations was decreased. Figures 4A-F present the distributions of the MI values for the original condition and the three levels of degradation conditions: the three tone-vocoders (38, 20 and 10 frequency bands) or the three SNRs (+10, 0 and -10 dB SNR) in the two types of noise (stationary and chorus noises). In general, there were modest effects on the MI values in the vocoding and chorus noise conditions compared to the stationary noise conditions for all structures except sANF. The decrease was significant only for the 10-band vocoded vocalizations in MGv and A1 (Fig. 4D, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.05$ $F_{(3, 811)} = 2.58$ with Students' t test paired, MGv_{Ori} vs. MGv_{Voc10} $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 1.19 \pm 0.55$ bits, $MI_{Voc38} = 1.13 \pm 0.57$ bits, $MI_{Voc20} = 1.15 \pm 0.55$ bits, $MI_{Voc10} = 1.03 \pm 0.53$ bits; Fig. 4E, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.001$ $F_{(3, 722)} = 3.73$ with Students' t test paired, $A1_{Ori}$ vs. $A1_{Voc10}$ $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 0.68 \pm 0.37$ bits, $MI_{Voc38} = 0.62 \pm 0.33$ bits, $MI_{Voc20} = 0.61 \pm 0.33$ bits, $MI_{Voc10} = 0.56 \pm 0.30$ bits), and no significant difference was detected in VRB (Fig.4F, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.75$ $F_{(3, 186)} = 0.41$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 0.55 \pm 0.29$ bits, $MI_{Voc38} = 0.55 \pm 0.28$ bits, $MI_{Voc20} = 0.55 \pm 0.29$ bits, $MI_{Voc10} = 0.61 \pm 0.31$ bits). However, the decrease was already significant with 38-band vocoded vocalizations in sANF or with 20-band vocoded vocalizations in CN and CNIC (Fig.4A, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1302)} = 111.3$ with Students' t test paired, $sANF_{Ori}$ vs. $sANF_{Voc38}$ $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 1.84 \pm 0.21$ bits, $MI_{Voc38} = 1.61 \pm 0.32$ bits, $MI_{Voc20} = 1.39 \pm 0.52$ bits, $MI_{Voc10} = 1.29 \pm 0.52$ bits; Fig.4B, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1424)} = 12.42$ with Students' t test paired, CN_{Ori} vs. CN_{Voc20} $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 0.92 \pm 0.47$ bits, $MI_{Voc38} = 0.96 \pm 0.46$ bits, $MI_{Voc20} = 0.86 \pm 0.45$ bits, $MI_{Voc10} = 0.75 \pm 0.43$ bits; Fig.4C, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1231)} = 13.17$ with Students' t test paired, $CNIC_{Ori}$ vs. $CNIC_{Voc20}$ $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 1.00 \pm 0.49$ bits, $MI_{Voc38} = 0.99 \pm 0.46$ bits, $MI_{Voc20} = 0.90 \pm 0.46$ bits, $MI_{Voc10} = 0.79 \pm 0.39$ bits). Note that there was also a significant increase in MI values with the 38-band vocoded vocalizations in CN (Fig.4B, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1424)} = 12.42$ with Students' t test paired, CN_{Ori} vs. CN_{Voc38} $p = 0.0073$). In chorus noise, in CN and CNIC, there was no significant decrease in mean MI values (Fig. 4B, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.05$ $F_{(3, 1176)} = 2.65$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 0.92 \pm 0.47$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 0.85 \pm 0.48$ bits, $MI_{0dB} = 0.83 \pm 0.50$ bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 0.83 \pm 0.49$ bits; Fig. 4C, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.36$ $F_{(3, 1188)} = 1.06$, $MI_{Ori} = 1.00 \pm 0.49$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 1.05 \pm 0.50$ bits, $MI_{0dB} = 1.06 \pm 0.52$ bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 1.06 \pm 0.52$ bits), whereas in sANF and MGv, the mean MI values significantly decreased at +10 dB or 0 dB SNR respectively (Fig. 4A, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1331)} = 232.86$ with Students' t test paired, $sANF_{Ori}$ vs. $sANF_{+10dB}$ $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 1.84 \pm 0.21$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 1.48 \pm 0.37$ bits, $MI_{0dB} = 1.20 \pm 0.45$ bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 1.09 \pm 0.50$ bits; Fig. 4D, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 753)} = 7.3$ with Students' t test

690 paired, MGv_{Ori} vs. MGv_{0dB} $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 1.19 \pm 0.55$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 1.08 \pm 0.52$ bits, $MI_{0dB} = 0.99 \pm 0.50$ bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 0.98 \pm 0.48$ bits). At the cortical level, there
691 was a significant decrease in A1 at 0 dB SNR and no significant change of mean MI values in VRB
692 (Fig. 4E, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.0039$ $F_{(3, 697)} = 4.5$ with Students' t test paired, $A1_{Ori}$ vs. $A1_{0dB}$ p
693 < 0.0001 , mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 0.68 \pm 0.37$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 0.64 \pm 0.36$ bits, $MI_{0dB} =$
694 0.55 ± 0.30 bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 0.60 \pm 0.31$ bits; Fig. 4F, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.31$ $F_{(3, 179)} = 1.19$, mean
695 (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 0.55 \pm 0.29$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 0.63 \pm 0.32$ bits, $MI_{0dB} = 0.54 \pm 0.27$ bits,
696 $MI_{-10dB} = 0.53 \pm 0.24$ bits).

698 Stationary noise strongly reduced the MI values compared to the vocoding and the chorus noise
699 addition. The mean MI value in sANF, CN and MGv was significantly reduced already at +10 dB
700 SNR (Fig. 4A, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1153)} = 767.64$ with Students' t test paired, $sANF_{Ori}$
701 vs. $sANF_{+10dB}$ $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 1.84 \pm 0.21$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 1.09 \pm 0.39$
702 bits, $MI_{0dB} = 0.68 \pm 0.37$ bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 0.66 \pm 0.39$ bits; Fig. 4B, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3,$
703 $812)} = 61.22$ with Students' t test paired, CN_{Ori} vs. CN_{+10dB} $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values:
704 $MI_{Ori} = 0.92 \pm 0.47$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 0.68 \pm 0.38$ bits, $MI_{0dB} = 0.53 \pm 0.26$ bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 0.41 \pm 0.17$
705 bits; Fig. 4D, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 630)} = 62.03$ with Students' t test paired, MGv_{Ori} vs.
706 MGv_{+10dB} $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 1.19 \pm 0.55$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 1.00 \pm 0.50$ bits,
707 $MI_{0dB} = 0.74 \pm 0.35$ bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 0.46 \pm 0.19$ bits), whereas the mean MI value in CNIC was
708 significantly reduced at 0 dB SNR (Fig. 4C, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1078)} = 32.08$ with
709 Students' t test paired, $CNIC_{Ori}$ vs. $CNIC_{0dB}$ $p < 0.0001$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 1.00 \pm$
710 0.49 bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 1.00 \pm 0.49$ bits, $MI_{0dB} = 0.87 \pm 0.44$ bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 0.63 \pm 0.28$ bits). At the
711 cortical level, noise significantly reduced the mean MI value in A1 only at -10 dB SNR (Fig. 4E,
712 one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 669)} = 13.99$ with Students' t test paired, $A1_{Ori}$ vs. $A1_{-10dB}$ $p <$
713 0.0001 , mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{Ori} = 0.68 \pm 0.37$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 0.62 \pm 0.34$ bits, $MI_{0dB} = 0.59$
714 ± 0.31 bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 0.42 \pm 0.18$ bits), whereas the mean MI values in VRB remained unchanged in
715 all conditions (Fig. 4F, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.26$ $F_{(3, 164)} = 1.34$, mean (\pm STD) MI values: MI_{Ori}
716 $= 0.55 \pm 0.29$ bits, $MI_{+10dB} = 0.55 \pm 0.28$ bits, $MI_{0dB} = 0.51 \pm 0.22$ bits, $MI_{-10dB} = 0.42 \pm 0.17$ bits).

717 What can be the scenarios explaining the decrease in neuronal discrimination and involving the
718 envelope tracking in situations of acoustic degradations? At least two scenarios can be envisioned:
719 First, in a condition-independent envelope tracking scenario, a neuron keeps the same intrinsic
720 capacity to track the stimulus envelopes whatever the acoustic conditions, i.e., both in quiet and in
721 conditions of acoustic degradations. In that case, as long as the stimulus envelopes present some
722 differences, the neuron will detect these differences and will discriminate the stimuli. Second, in a
723 condition-dependent scenario, the acoustic degradations reduce the neurons' ability to track the
724 stimulus envelope. In that case, despite differences between the stimulus envelopes, the intense

activity occurring when the neurons are strongly driven by the noise prevents the recorded neuron from tracking the stimulus envelopes. To determine which of these two scenarios actually operates, we investigated whether the $R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$ values were changed in the conditions of acoustic degradations such as the vocoding or the noise addition (Figures 5-6). Figure 5 shows, for individual recordings, the superpositions of the PSTH and the envelope (E) in the low AM range for the original condition and all the degraded conditions (vocoding, stationary and chorus noise) in each auditory structure. The $R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$ values are indicated on the top left of each panel. In these individual recordings, the $R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$ values presented very little changes in all degraded conditions compared to the original condition.

We next quantified for each recording, the $R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$ variations compared with the original condition ($\Delta R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$). This was quantified in each structure, for all the degraded conditions and each AM range (Fig. 6). Compared with the $R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$ values obtained in the original condition, there was little or no change in the degraded conditions for all structures. More precisely, in sANF and CN, we observed a maximal increase in mean (\pm STD) $R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$ values of 0.16 (\pm 0.03) (and 0.11 (\pm 0.13) for CN) and, a maximal decrease of 0.10 (\pm 0.04) (and 0.05 (\pm 0.06) for CN) depending on the degraded conditions and the AM range (Fig. 6). In CNIC and MGv, the mean (\pm STD) $R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$ changes in degraded conditions were very small (Fig. 6, between -0.06 (\pm 0.03) and 0.006 (\pm 0.06) for CNIC and between -0.08 (\pm 0.08) and -0.0002 (\pm 0.15) for MGv). In A1, the changes in mean (\pm STD) $R_{\max_{E-PSTH}}$ values varied between -0.09 (\pm 0.11) and 0.07 (\pm 0.15) and in VRB it varied between -0.13 (\pm 0.13) and 0.07 (\pm 0.15).

These results clearly provide evidence that the abilities of neurons for tracking the temporal envelope cues were preserved at each level of the auditory system and in all the situations of acoustic degradations.

The increase in between-envelope similarity explains the decrease in neuronal discrimination

If the neurons are still able to track the stimulus envelopes in all conditions of acoustic degradations, what could explain the pronounced MI decrease in these situations? The most parsimonious explanation is that the noise addition increases the similarity between stimulus envelopes, which in turn reduces the neuronal discriminative efficiency based on the envelope tracking. We thus quantified the acoustic similarity between the stimulus envelopes in the original condition and in all situations of acoustic degradations. The changes of the between-envelope similarity in each AM range are presented in figure 7A. In the M and H ranges, the between-stimulus envelope similarity was low and remained low in all degraded conditions. In contrast, large changes occurred in the low AM range: in these frequency ranges, the envelope similarity

760 increased progressively with the acoustic degradations. In the following results, we will focus on
761 this AM range.

762 In the vocoding conditions, the similarity between the four whistle envelopes was relatively
763 constant, except for the 10-band vocoded condition where this similarity was slightly higher. In the
764 stationary noise, the four stimulus envelopes became similar and reached a correlation value above
765 0.8 at the -10 dB SNR condition (which is very close to the maximal value of the acoustic
766 similarity). In the chorus noise conditions, the four stimulus envelopes remained different (because
767 spectro-temporal differences were present in the frozen chorus noise) with the highest similarity in
768 the -10 dB SNR condition.

769 Figure 7B points out that in the condition where the between-stimulus envelope similarity was
770 higher (at -10 dB SNR in stationary noise), the envelope tracking remained similar (the $\Delta R_{\max E}$ -
771 P_{STH} values remained stable) whereas the neuronal discrimination decreased compared to the
772 original condition (most of the ΔMI values were largely negative). This clearly demonstrates the
773 dissociation between changes in R_{\max} value and those in MI value. Figure 7C highlights the close
774 relationship between the acoustic similarity of the four stimulus envelopes and the abilities of
775 auditory neurons to discriminate between them. Both in subcortical and cortical structures, as the
776 acoustic distance between the four stimulus envelopes in the low AM range progressively
777 decreased, the neuronal discrimination decreased (Fig. 7C).

778 Together, these results indicate that it is not a loss in neuronal envelope tracking which leads to a
779 reduction of the neuronal discriminative abilities in the degraded conditions. Rather, it is the
780 increase in envelope similarity in situation of acoustic degradations that is one of the important
781 factors responsible for the decrease in discrimination abilities. Thus, the between-stimulus envelope
782 similarity in the lower AM range (<20 Hz) can predict the evolution of the discrimination in the
783 entire auditory system.

784

785 **The increase in between-envelope similarity also correlates with the behavioral performance** 786 **in noise**

787

788 To examine whether the discrimination performance of auditory neurons might provide a neuronal
789 basis for behavioral performance, we tested whether behaving animals can discriminate between
790 whistles when engaged in an operant conditioning task involving the same stimuli. We opted to
791 train mice in a behavioral task rather than guinea pigs for two main reasons: (1) guinea pigs are
792 poor and slow learners in instrumental tasks (2) this avoided that the stimuli used for the behavioral
793 task have innate particular meanings because whistles are alert signals for guinea pigs.

794 The behavioral task was a Go/No-Go task involving the discrimination between two of the four
795 whistles used in our electrophysiological studies (W1 and W3 see figure 1): Licks to the S+ were
796 rewarded by a 5 μ L drop of water and licks to the S- were punished by a 5-second time-out period.
797 Mice were first trained for 5-10 initial sessions to perform the discrimination in the original
798 condition until they reached 80% of correct responses for two successive days (N = 9). Then, the
799 mice were sequentially trained in the stationary noise at the +10, 0 and -10 dB SNR for at least four
800 sessions. The performance at the last four sessions at each SNR are displayed on figure 7D. For all
801 mice, the average performance decreased at the 0 and -10 dB SNR, even if two mice were still at
802 80% of correct performance, the others were slightly above the chance level. In the chorus noise,
803 the performance of most of the mice were relatively stable, which can be explained by the fact that
804 acoustically the chorus noise surrounding the two target vocalizations differed between the two
805 whistles, so that there were more acoustic cues to discriminate between the target stimuli in these
806 conditions (note that this could also come from the fact that the mice were already extensively
807 trained to perform the discrimination task in stationary noise when they started the chorus noise).
808 Despite this pitfall, the main result of this behavioral study was that mice can discriminate the target
809 vocalizations above chance level even at -10 dB SNR in stationary noise. Furthermore, the decrease
810 in behavioral performance was strongly related to the reduction of the differences between the two
811 temporal envelopes in the low AM range (inset in Fig. 7D). These results provide evidence that the
812 behavioral performance of mice is correlated with the changes in the slow temporal envelope cues.

813 **Discussion**

814

815 Our first major result is that the neuronal discrimination performance in the original condition was
816 correlated with the capacity for tracking the envelopes in the low AM range both for subcortical and
817 cortical neurons, except in the secondary auditory cortex (VRB) (Fig. 3C). Our second major result
818 is that, under acoustic degraded conditions and in each structure, the ability for envelope tracking
819 only slightly changed compared to the original condition (Fig. 5, 6, 7B). Finally, our findings
820 revealed that the increased similarity between the stimulus envelopes in the low AM range (<20 Hz,
821 Fig. 7C-D) is one of the important factors responsible for the decrease in neuronal and behavioral
822 discrimination.

823

824 **Slow envelope tracking: a general property of auditory neurons**

825

826 At the level of the auditory nerve, previous studies reported conflicting results concerning the noise
827 resistance: Frisina and colleagues (1996) found that all AN units partially preserve their AM coding
828 even in the presence of loud (0 or +6 dB SNR) background noise. However, many others
829 electrophysiological studies, and the present simulated data, showed a low resistance to noise in the
830 auditory nerve (Rhode et al., 1978; Geisler and Sinex, 1980; Palmer and Evans, 1982; Costalupes et
831 al., 1984; Costalupes, 1985; Young and Barta, 1986). This can be explained by several factors
832 including (i) the type of target stimuli (artificial vs. natural stimuli), (ii) the noise type (stationary
833 vs. non-stationary noise), (iii) the type of the auditory nerve fibers (low, middle and high SR fibers),
834 and also the noise levels which have been tested. For example, electrophysiological studies have
835 shown that low and medium SR fibers with best frequencies around the frequency of a pure tone
836 exhibited tone-evoked rate changes in presence of a stationary noise at positive SNRs (Rhode et al.,
837 1978; Geisler and Sinex, 1980; Palmer and Evans, 1982; Costalupes et al., 1984; Costalupes, 1985;
838 Young and Barta, 1986). High SR fibers, in contrast, exhibited much weaker tone-evoked rate
839 changes at positive SNRs limited by the high rate response to noise. Thus, as noise level increases,
840 the discharge rate approaches a fiber's saturation rate and ultimately eliminates the fiber's ability to
841 respond to tested tones. Low (and middle) SR fibers that have higher thresholds and wider dynamic
842 range, are significantly more resistant to saturation by high noise levels than high SR fibers.
843 Therefore, a different ratio between low, middle and high SR fibers could have changed our results
844 in a way that more sANF responses showed a higher resistance to noise. Here, as we wanted to be
845 as close as possible to the multi-unit activity recorded in the auditory structures (we assumed that
846 we recorded about 5 neurons under each electrode), we decided to choose five fibers with a
847 classical ratio of 1 low SR fiber, 1 medium SR fiber and 3 high SR fibers. However, we should

848 keep in mind that all these previous studies have used tones (or amplitude modulated tones) in noise
 849 at positive SNRs, but natural sounds can potentially trigger more complex encoding as early as the
 850 auditory nerve. Recently, using a similar model of auditory nerve as in the present study,
 851 Rabinowitz and colleagues (2013) showed a poor adaptation to the noise statistics by simulated
 852 fibers when natural environment sounds were used as target stimuli whereas auditory cortex and IC
 853 neurons showed a better adaptation to noise. In our study, we also found a high sensitivity to the
 854 noise for sANF as early as +10 dB SNR in both noises (see examples on Figure 5) and also in the
 855 vocoding conditions potentially due to a higher sensitivity to the spectrotemporal alterations
 856 compared to the other structures (see figure 4A).

857 A few electrophysiological studies have shown that subcortical neurons can display responses very
 858 close to the envelopes of natural stimuli (inferior colliculus: Suta et al., 2003; Rode et al., 2013;
 859 MGB: Tanaka and Taniguchi, 1991; Philibert et al., 2005; Suta et al., 2007). Rode and colleagues
 860 (2013) found that between 15 and 60% of collicular neurons displayed high correlations for at least
 861 one of the three vocalization envelopes, and a subset of collicular neurons even followed the
 862 envelopes of the three guinea pig vocalizations with high correlations (>0.85). A similar range of
 863 correlations (between 0.6-0.9) in CNIC was obtained in the present study and, as in their study, we
 864 also did not find a relation between the gammatone filter eliciting the highest R_{E-PSTH} value and the
 865 best frequency of the neurons.

866 Unlike to other previous cortical studies (Wang et al., 1995; Bar-Yosef et al., 2002; Nagarajan et
 867 al., 2002; Grimsley et al., 2012; Abrams et al., 2017), we filtered envelopes and neuronal responses
 868 in the same frequency bands - from low (<20 Hz) to high (100 and 200 Hz) ranges - to obtain a
 869 direct quantification of the envelope tracking abilities in particular frequency ranges. Furthermore,
 870 we compared the degree of envelope tracking performed by subcortical and cortical neurons in
 871 challenging situations where the envelope is either relatively well preserved or strongly degraded.
 872 Nagarajan and colleagues (2002) found that the synchronization between A1 responses and the
 873 temporal envelope of vocalizations was highly significant and, interestingly, this property was
 874 underestimated based on responses to amplitude-modulated tones. In addition, they pointed out that
 875 A1 responses were quite resistant to spectral degradations (generated by a noise-vocoder) and to
 876 noise addition up to 0 dB SNR. More importantly, the responses were similar when the vocalization
 877 envelope was preserved between 2 and 30 Hz, whereas the responses were strongly reduced when
 878 the envelope was low-pass filtered at 4 or 10 Hz. We confirmed these cortical results on several
 879 aspects: first, the highest correlation coefficients were detected in the lower AM range (<20 Hz) for
 880 each acoustic condition, second, we showed that the envelope tracking ability was little affected by
 881 the presence of noise addition or by the vocoding. We extended these results to a non-primary
 882 cortical area (VRB), to each subcortical level, and even to sANF. Note that the envelope tracking

ability is not specific to the processing of conspecific vocalizations: similar results were found with speech in noise in the auditory cortex of guinea pigs (Abrams et al., 2017).

Together, these results highlight that subcortical and cortical auditory neurons maintain their capacity to track the slow envelope of natural sounds both when they are composed of noise-free vocalizations or a mixture of noise and vocalizations, suggesting that this property is immutable and unchanged by the acoustic degradations.

In the low AM range (<20 Hz), we noticed a decrease in mean correlation ($R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$) values from midbrain to thalamus to cortex (Fig. 2F) reflecting that the further away from the periphery, the less precise is the phase-locking ability on the AM cues. For higher AM rates, we expected higher correlations between the neuronal responses and the envelopes for subcortical structures (Creutzfeldt et al., 1980; Frisina et al., 1990; Rhode and Greenberg, 1994; Neuert et al., 2001; for review, Joris et al., 2004). Surprisingly, such a hierarchy was not detected in our results, the mean correlations in higher AM rates (>20 Hz) being similarly low for each structure including the sANF. These lower correlation coefficients obtained for the middle- and high-AM frequency bands for all structures, might result because the envelopes have much lower amplitudes in these bands than in the low-AM frequency band (see Figure 1C). Another hypothesis is that shorter segments of neuronal responses could be highly correlated to the higher AM ranges of the envelopes. If so, reducing the time window on which the correlation is computed should increase the correlations in the higher AM ranges. We computed the cross-correlation for each whistle (around 300 ms) and still found low correlations in higher AM ranges (data not shown). This suggests that if higher correlations exist in higher AM ranges, smaller temporal windows (less than several hundreds of milliseconds) are required to reveal them. The fact that Abrams and colleagues (2017) found some residues of the fundamental frequency (between 100-120 Hz, relative to the pitch) in segments of A1 responses no longer than 100 ms argues in favor of this possibility.

The main hypothesis of our study was that the tracking abilities of auditory neurons is one of the mechanisms explaining the neuronal discrimination. Another possibility is that for higher AM cues, some auditory neurons respond by increasing their firing rate. This hypothesis relies on the existence of a rate-place code for periodicity: whereas the temporal tracking abilities decrease along the auditory pathway, higher periodicities can be encoded by a rate-place code as this has been demonstrated using amplitude modulated sounds in different species (Langner & Schreiner, 1988; Schreiner & Langner, 1988; Langner, 1992; Lu et al., 2001a, b; Liang et al., 2002; Lu and Wang, 2004). According to this possibility, neurons increasing their firing rate for coding higher AM cues should be located at particular locations in IC and auditory cortex (Langner et al., 2009; Schnupp et al., 2015). However, in order to explain the neuronal discrimination, it seems necessary that each of the four whistles activated different locations in the periodicity maps of the different auditory

918 structures. As shown in figure 1C, each of the four whistles contained about the same energy in
919 low, middle and high AM modulations, and as a consequence similar locations should be activated
920 in these periodicity maps leading to a low discrimination level. Thus, although we cannot discard
921 this hypothesis, the possibility that the neural discrimination relies on a rate-place code for
922 particular AM cues seems unlikely. At the cortical level (both in A1 and in VRB), it is also possible
923 that despite the fact individual neurons cannot keep tracking the detailed envelope fluctuations
924 (because of their low-pass properties regarding AM cues and their prominent onset responses), they
925 may, as a large population, track the envelope changes if each neuron is sensitive to a particular rate
926 of change of the stimulus envelope (a particular rate of transients). Note that according to this
927 hypothesis, which has been formulated almost twenty years ago (Heil, 2003), this tracking
928 mechanism would also lose accuracy with increasing levels of background noise.

929

930 **The decrease in neuronal discrimination can be explained by the increase of between-**
931 **envelopes similarities in the low AM range**

932

933 In the original condition, the better neurons track the slow envelope (<20 Hz), the higher the
934 neuronal discrimination performance for all structures (Fig. 3B-C). In situations of acoustic
935 degradation, the envelopes of the original stimuli were altered leading to situations where the
936 envelopes were mostly dominated by the noise envelopes. However, the three situations of acoustic
937 degradations used here notably differed. In the tone-vocoder situation, the spectral content is
938 strongly degraded but the slow temporal envelope is relatively well preserved (Shannon et al., 1995;
939 Kates, 2011; Souffi et al., 2020). In the chorus noise, there was only a small increase in acoustic
940 similarity in the low AM range (Fig. 7A) because the chorus noise itself contains strong temporal
941 variations which differ from one whistle to another. As a consequence of this pitfall, when the
942 target vocalizations were inserted in the chorus noise, specific regions in the spectro-temporal
943 domain were dominated by the target vocalizations, while in other regions, it was dominated by the
944 chorus noise. Consequently, the target vocalizations embedded in the chorus noise generated stimuli
945 that can be discriminated at all SNRs either based on the vocalization envelopes or based on the
946 chorus noise envelope itself. In all structures, the neuronal discrimination showed little decrease in
947 the chorus noise (see Fig. 4) and so was the behavioral performance (Fig. 7D). Only in the
948 stationary noise, the four slow envelopes became closer as the level of degradation increased (< 20
949 Hz, see Fig. 7A). This was detrimental for discriminating the vocalizations in noisy conditions in
950 which envelope tracking become inefficient and worst, can strongly reduce the neuronal
951 discrimination along the auditory system. Therefore, reducing or increasing the envelope
952 differences in the low AM range would constrain or facilitate the neuronal discrimination in

subcortical and cortical levels. Furthermore, the behavioral performance of mice revealed that they can discriminate the target vocalizations in quiet (with > 90% correct performance) and can even discriminate the vocalizations up to 0 dB SNR in stationary noise (with 70-80% correct performance), suggesting that the between-stimulus envelope differences could explain the behavioral performance during a discrimination task. Previous studies have reported good behavioral discrimination performance in conditions of acoustic degradations such as vocoded consonants or vowels (Ranasinghe et al., 2012a, b), consonants in various levels of background noise (Shetake et al., 2011), bird songs embedded in stationary and chorus noise (Narayan et al., 2007) or in broadband dynamic moving ripples (Homma et al., 2020). In all these studies, the discrimination performance of auditory cortex neurons, based upon spike-timing, has been found to match relatively well the behavioral performance (Narayan et al., 2007; Ranasinghe et al., 2012a; Homma et al., 2020) and sometimes even with performance of human subjects (Walker et al., 2008). Altogether, our results indicate that it is not a loss in neuronal envelope tracking which leads to a reduction of the neuronal discriminative abilities in the degraded conditions, rather, it is the direct consequence of the acoustic distance changes between stimulus envelopes.

Comparison with human studies: case of newborn infants

Speech envelope corresponds to the slow amplitude fluctuations of the signal over time, with peaks occurring roughly at the syllabic rate. The two pioneer results supporting the view that the envelope plays a key role in speech comprehension are (1) that comprehension is impaired when the speech envelope is filtered out (Drullman et al., 1994a, b), and (2) that adult listeners readily understand degraded speech in which only the envelope is preserved, at least when speech is presented in silence (Shannon et al., 1995). Additionally, studies have shown that when adults listen to speech, their neuronal activity synchronized with specific features of the envelope, a phenomenon known as speech envelope tracking (Ahissar et al., 2001; Luo and Poeppel, 2007; Abrams et al., 2008; Nourski et al., 2009). Several recent electrophysiological results have provided new insights into this putative speech envelope tracking mechanism. First, oscillations whose frequency corresponds to the modulation frequency of the speech envelope (4-5 Hz) have been found to be independent of comprehension: brain responses in the theta band track the speech envelope even when speech is time-compressed at a rate that renders it incomprehensible for adult listeners (Zoefel and VanRullen, 2016; Kösem et al., 2016, 2017; Pefkou et al., 2017). Results from newborns and young infants have also brought new insights. For example, combining hemodynamic (near-infrared spectroscopy) and EEG recordings, Cabrera and Gervain (2020) showed that infants (9-10 months old) detect consonant changes on the basis of envelope cues (without the temporal fine structure)

988 and they can even do so on the basis of the slow temporal variation alone (AM <8 Hz). More
989 recently, Ortiz-Barajas and colleagues (2021) found that the cortical networks of newborns
990 (exclusively exposed to French before birth) have the capacity to track the amplitude and the phase
991 of the speech envelope in their native languages as well as in unfamiliar languages (Spanish and
992 English). Altogether, these results suggest that amplitude - and phase-tracking take place in the
993 absence of attention and comprehension.
994 Thus, envelope tracking can be viewed as a universal mechanism used in all species to discriminate
995 between communication sounds in a large diversity of acoustic situations ranging from quiet to
996 adverse, challenging, conditions.

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1213 **Additional information section**

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1215 **Data availability statement**

1216 The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon
1217 reasonable request.

1218

1219 **Competing interests**

1220 The authors declare no competing financial interests.

1221

1222 **Author contributions**

1223 This work was performed at the Paris-Saclay Institute of Neurosciences (NeuroPSI). S.S. and J-
1224 M.E. designed the experiments. S.S. and M.Z. performed the experiments. S.S., L.V., B.B. and C.H.
1225 have participated in the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of data. All authors drafting the work
1226 or revising it critically for important intellectual content. All authors approved the final version of
1227 the manuscript. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that
1228 questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated
1229 and resolved; and all persons designated as authors qualify for authorship, and all those who qualify
1230 for authorship are listed.

1231

1232 **Funding**

1233 JME was supported by grants from the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) (ANR-14-
1234 CE30-0019-01). SS was supported by the Fondation pour la Recherche Médicale (FRM) grant
1235 number ECO20160736099 and by the Entendre Foundation.

1236

1237 **Acknowledgements**

1238 We thank Nihaad Paraouty for training us on the cochlear nucleus surgery. We thank Prf. Christian
1239 Lorenzi and Prf. Shihab Shamma for helpful comments on a previous version of the MS, and are
1240 particularly grateful to Dr. Virginie van Wassenhove for suggesting several improvements of the
1241 MS. We also wish to thank Céline Dubois, Mélanie Dumont and Aurélie Bonilla, for taking care of
1242 the guinea-pig colony.

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Figure legends

Figure 1. Overall and filtered envelopes in three amplitude modulation ranges.

A. Spectrograms of original and degraded stimuli.

B. Overall envelopes of original and degraded stimuli. The envelopes of the four original whistles are presented on the left panel. Two whistles were used for a Go/No-Go behavioral discrimination task (see Fig. 7D): whistle 1 as the “Go or S+” stimulus and whistle 3 as the “No-Go or S-” stimulus. From left to right, the four envelopes of these stimuli are presented first, in the vocoding conditions (with 38, 20 and 10 frequency bands from top to bottom), then in stationary noise (at +10, 0 and -10 dB SNR from top to bottom) and in chorus noise conditions (at +10, 0 and -10 dB SNR from top to bottom).

C. Examples of the filtered envelopes for the original vocalizations using a bank of 35 gammatone filters with center frequencies uniformly spaced along a guinea pig - adapted ERB (equivalent rectangular bandwidth) scale ranging from 20 to 30 000 Hz. Three ranges of amplitude modulation (AM) have been investigated here: the low (<20 Hz), middle (between 20 and 100 Hz) and high (between 100 and 200 Hz) AM ranges. The red curves indicate the seven filtered envelopes selected along the signal for the subsequent analyses.

Figure 2. Correlations in the original condition between peri-stimulus time histograms (PSTHs) of subcortical and cortical recordings and the stimulus envelope both filtered in the three selected AM ranges.

A. Individual examples of original PSTHs obtained in each structure (from bottom to top, sANF: simulated auditory nerve fibers, CN: cochlear nucleus, CNIC: central nucleus of the inferior colliculus, MGv: ventral division of the medial geniculate, A1: primary auditory cortex, VRB: ventro-rostral belt).

B. Population responses ranked from the lowest to the highest best frequencies with the color code representing the normalized firing rate. On the bottom of each panel, the population firing rate represents the instantaneous summed activity of the whole virtual population, and on the right, the total firing rate along the different best frequencies.

C-E. Examples of correlations between the PSTH (in black) and the envelope (in red). In each panel, the PSTHs and the stimulus envelopes are filtered in the same frequency range. For each recording, the correlation value between the PSTH and the envelope is shown on the top left. In a given AM range, the stimulus envelopes differ between examples because we selected the gammatone envelope (out of seven gammatones) which induced the highest correlation. Note that the PSTHs are not lagged compared to the envelopes as during the analysis.

F. Box plots showing the distributions of the $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values for the six auditory structures (sANF to VRB) in the three AM ranges. The red dots in the box plots correspond to the mean $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values and the boxes correspond to the interquartile ranges. Note the higher $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values in the low (L) AM range compared with the middle (M) and high (H) AM ranges. The black lines represent significant differences between the mean $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values. In the low AM range, sANF, CN and CNIC recordings displayed significantly higher mean $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values than MGv and cortical recordings (low AM range: one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(5, 1165)} = 138.25$ with Students' t test unpaired, sANF vs. MGv, A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, CN vs. MGv, A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, CNIC vs. MGv, A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$; mean (\pm STD) $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values: $R_{\text{sANF}(n=217)} = 0.81 \pm 0.03$, $R_{\text{CN}(n=336)} = 0.80 \pm 0.08$, $R_{\text{CNIC}(n=274)} = 0.78 \pm 0.11$, $R_{\text{MGv}(n=102)} = 0.68 \pm 0.13$, $R_{\text{A1}(n=171)} = 0.60 \pm 0.13$ and $R_{\text{VRB}(n=66)} = 0.63 \pm 0.14$). In the middle and high AM ranges, the CNIC recordings still exhibited slightly higher mean $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values compared to the other structures (mean (\pm STD) $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values in the middle AM range: $R_{\text{sANF}(n=44)} = 0.32 \pm 0.03$, $R_{\text{CN}(n=285)} = 0.31 \pm 0.07$, $R_{\text{CNIC}(n=285)} = 0.34 \pm 0.07$, $R_{\text{MGv}(n=133)} = 0.31 \pm 0.07$, $R_{\text{A1}(n=220)} = 0.27 \pm 0.05$ and $R_{\text{VRB}(n=85)} = 0.29 \pm 0.06$; mean (\pm STD) $R_{\text{maxE-PSTH}}$ values in the high AM range: $R_{\text{sANF}(n=77)} = 0.31 \pm 0.03$, $R_{\text{CN}(n=249)} = 0.31 \pm 0.05$, $R_{\text{CNIC}(n=257)} = 0.33 \pm 0.05$, $R_{\text{MGv}(n=97)} = 0.29 \pm 0.04$, $R_{\text{A1}(n=196)} = 0.27 \pm 0.05$

and $R_{VRB(n=50)} = 0.30 \pm 0.05$). Note that n values correspond to the selected simulations or recordings.

Figure 3. In the original condition, the better cortical and subcortical neurons track the slow envelope (<20 Hz), the higher the value of mutual information.

A. Box plots showing the distributions of the MI values obtained in the six levels of the auditory system in the original condition. The red dots in the box plots correspond to the mean MI values and the boxes correspond to the interquartile ranges. Note the lower significant values obtained at the cortical level in A1 and VRB compared to those obtained in sANF and subcortical structure (one-way ANOVA $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(5, 1538)} = 266.46$ with Students' t test unpaired, sANF vs. A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, CN vs. A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, CNIC vs. A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$, MGv vs. A1 or VRB $p < 0.0001$; mean (\pm STD) MI values: $MI_{sANF(n=77)} = 1.84 \pm 0.21$ bits, $MI_{CN(n=249)} = 0.92 \pm 0.47$ bits, $MI_{CNIC(n=257)} = 1 \pm 0.5$ bits, $MI_{MGv(n=97)} = 1.19 \pm 0.55$ bits, $MI_{A1(n=196)} = 0.68 \pm 0.37$ bits and $R_{VRB(n=50)} = 0.55 \pm 0.29$ bits). Note that n values correspond to the selected simulations or recordings. The black lines represent the first significant differences between the mean values. Note that for the sake of clarity, not all significant differences are indicated by black lines. For example, the difference between sANF and MGv was the first one to be significant but it was also significant between sANF and the two cortical areas A1 and VRB.

B. Scattergrams showing the relationships between $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI values for the six structures in the three AM ranges. Black lines correspond to the linear regression lines.

C. Matrix summarizing the correlation coefficients between $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI in each structure and AM range. The values in red indicate that the correlation was significant. In all but one case (in CNIC in the middle AM range), significant positive correlations between $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI values were obtained in all AM ranges in subcortical structures ($p_{CN}^L < 0.0001$, $p_{CN}^M < 0.0001$, $p_{CN}^H = 0.01$, $p_{CNIC}^L < 0.0001$, $p_{CNIC}^M = 0.24$, $p_{CNIC}^H = 0.005$, $p_{MGv}^L = 0.006$, $p_{MGv}^M < 0.0001$, $p_{MGv}^H = 0.01$). For the sANF, the range of MI values was too limited to compute reliable correlations (most MI values were close to the maximum of 2 bits). At the subcortical level, the highest correlation values between $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI values were found in MGv. At the cortical level, significant correlations between $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ and MI values were detected in the low and middle AM ranges in A1 ($p_{A1}^L = 0.01$, $p_{A1}^M = 0.05$, $p_{A1}^H = 0.32$) and there was no significant correlation in VRB ($p_{VRB}^L = 0.31$, $p_{VRB}^M = 0.51$, $p_{VRB}^H = 0.99$).

Figure 4. Neuronal discrimination performance in all degraded conditions along the auditory system.

A-F. Neuronal discrimination performance (quantified by the mutual information, in bits) in original condition and in the three situations of acoustic degradation (top panels: vocoding, middle panels: stationary noise and bottom panels: chorus noise). In each box plot, the horizontal line corresponds to the median value and the boxes correspond to the interquartile ranges. For all structures except in sANF, note the largest decrease in MI value in the stationary noise in the subcortical structures compared with the relative stability of these values in vocoding and chorus noise. Note also the much smaller decreases observed at the cortical level in the three situations of acoustic alterations. The stars represent the first significant differences between the mean original values and those obtained in degraded conditions. Note that for the sake of clarity, not all significant differences are indicated by stars. The decrease was significant only for the 10-band vocoded vocalizations in MGv and A1 (Fig. 4D, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.05$ $F_{(3, 811)} = 2.58$ with Students' t test paired, MGv_{Ori} vs. MGv_{Voc10} $p < 0.0001$; Fig. 4E, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.001$ $F_{(3, 722)} = 3.73$ with Students' t test paired, $A1_{Ori}$ vs. $A1_{Voc10}$ $p < 0.0001$), and no significant difference was detected in VRB (Fig. 4F, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.75$ $F_{(3, 186)} = 0.41$). The decrease was already significant with 38-band vocoded vocalizations in sANF or with 20-band vocoded vocalizations in CN and CNIC (Fig. 4A, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1302)} = 111.3$ with Students' t test paired, $sANF_{Ori}$ vs. $sANF_{Voc38}$ $p < 0.0001$; Fig. 4B, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1424)} = 12.42$ with Students' t test paired, CN_{Ori} vs. CN_{Voc20} $p < 0.0001$; Fig. 4C, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3,$

$_{1231}) = 13.17$ with Students' t test paired, $CNIC_{Ori}$ vs. $CNIC_{Voc20}$ $p < 0.0001$). Note that there was also a significant increase in MI values with the 38-band vocoded vocalizations in CN (Fig. 4B, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1424)} = 12.42$ with Students' t test paired, CN_{Ori} vs. CN_{Voc38} $p = 0.0073$). In chorus noise, in CN and CNIC, there was no significant decrease in mean MI values (Fig. 4B, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.05$ $F_{(3, 1176)} = 2.65$; Fig. 4C, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.36$ $F_{(3, 1188)} = 1.06$), whereas in sANF and MGv, the mean MI values significantly decreased at +10 dB or 0 dB SNR respectively (Fig. 4A, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1331)} = 232.86$ with Students' t test paired, $sANF_{Ori}$ vs. $sANF_{+10dB}$ $p < 0.0001$; Fig. 4D, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 753)} = 7.3$ with Students' t test paired, MGv_{Ori} vs. MGv_{0dB} $p < 0.0001$). At the cortical level, there was a significant decrease in A1 at 0 dB SNR and no significant change of mean MI values in VRB (Fig. 4E, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.0039$ $F_{(3, 697)} = 4.5$ with Students' t test paired, $A1_{Ori}$ vs. $A1_{0dB}$ $p < 0.0001$; Fig. 4F, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.31$ $F_{(3, 179)} = 1.19$). In stationary noise, the mean MI value in sANF, CN and MGv was significantly reduced already at +10 dB SNR (Fig. 4A, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1153)} = 767.64$ with Students' t test paired, $sANF_{Ori}$ vs. $sANF_{+10dB}$ $p < 0.0001$; Fig. 4B, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 812)} = 61.22$ with Students' t test paired, CN_{Ori} vs. CN_{+10dB} $p < 0.0001$; Fig. 4D, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 630)} = 62.03$ with Students' t test paired, MGv_{Ori} vs. MGv_{+10dB} $p < 0.0001$), whereas the mean MI value in CNIC was significantly reduced at 0 dB SNR (Fig. 4C, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 1078)} = 32.08$ with Students' t test paired, $CNIC_{Ori}$ vs. $CNIC_{0dB}$ $p < 0.0001$). At the cortical level, stationary noise significantly reduced the mean MI value in A1 only at -10 dB SNR (Fig. 4E, one-way ANOVA, $p < 0.0001$ $F_{(3, 669)} = 13.99$ with Students' t test paired, $A1_{Ori}$ vs. $A1_{-10dB}$ $p < 0.0001$), whereas the mean MI values in VRB remained unchanged in all conditions (Fig. 4F, one-way ANOVA, $p = 0.26$ $F_{(3, 164)} = 1.34$).

Figure 5. Individual examples of correlations between neuronal responses and envelopes in all acoustic conditions and all structures.

Note that for the subcortical and cortical structures, we presented the results from the low AM range. The correlation value between the PSTH (in black) and the envelope (in red) is shown on the left. In all structures, the correlation values for these individual recordings remained similar between the acoustic conditions.

Figure 6. The envelope tracking is only slightly affected by the different situations of acoustic degradation.

Mean changes of the $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ (\pm STD) quantified from the original condition in the different situations of acoustic degradations (vocoding, stationary noise (SN) and chorus noise (CN)) for all recordings obtained in the six structures. Note that, in each structure and AM range, the $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ values were only slightly changed between the original and the degraded conditions. In sANF and CN, we observed a maximal increase in mean (\pm STD) $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ values of 0.16 (\pm 0.03) (and 0.11 (\pm 0.13) for CN) and, a maximal decrease of 0.10 (\pm 0.04) (and 0.05 (\pm 0.06) for CN) depending on the degraded conditions and the AM range (Fig. 6). In CNIC and MGv, the mean (\pm STD) $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ changes in degraded conditions were very small (Fig. 6, between -0.06 (\pm 0.03) and 0.006 (\pm 0.06) for CNIC and between -0.08 (\pm 0.08) and -0.0002 (\pm 0.15) for MGv). In A1, the changes in mean (\pm STD) $R_{maxE-PSTH}$ values varied between -0.09 (\pm 0.11) and 0.07 (\pm 0.15) and in VRB it varied between -0.13 (\pm 0.13) and 0.07 (\pm 0.15).

Figure 7. In all situations of acoustic alteration, the decrease in neuronal discrimination performance can be explained by the increase in envelope similarity in the low range.

A. Acoustic similarity (R_{Env}) between the envelopes of the four whistles in the original condition (Ori) and in the three situations of acoustic alterations (vocoding, stationary noise and chorus noise) for the low (L, red lines), middle (M, yellow lines) and high (H, purple lines) AM ranges. Dark lines correspond to the R_{Env} values based on the 7 selected gammatones, whereas the light lines

correspond to the R_{Env} values based on the 35 gammatones. Note that in the stationary noise, the correlation between the stimulus envelopes largely increased in the L range, indicating that the stimuli tended to be similar to each other in these AM ranges, which was not the case in the middle and high ranges (M and H). This between-stimuli increase in correlation in the L range was much weaker in the vocoding and chorus noise situations.

B. Scattergrams showing the variation of the maximal correlation ($\Delta R_{maxE-PSTH}$) in the low AM range as a function of the variation of MI (ΔMI) in the -10 dB SNR condition compared to the original condition in each structure.

C. Mean changes (ΔMI , in percentage) of mutual information in sANF, CN, CNIC MGv, A1 and VRB as a function of the variation (ΔR_{Env} , in percentage) of the acoustic similarity in low AM range relative to the original condition. Each dot represents neuronal data (ΔMI) in sANF (in dark red), CN (in black), CNIC (in green), MGv (in orange), A1 (in blue) and VRB (in purple). From left to right, all degraded acoustic conditions were organized according to the acoustic distance of the envelopes (R_{Env}) between the four whistles quantified on Figure 7A (+10 dB SNR - Chorus N., Voc 38, Voc20, +10 dB SNR - Stationary N., 0 dB SNR - Chorus N., Voc10, -10 dB SNR - Chorus N., 0 dB SNR - Stationary N., -10 dB SNR - Stationary N.). Linear fits were generated for the different structures across all degraded conditions (color lines). For the sake of clarity, we did not use an orthonormal coordinate system.

D. Percentage of correct responses obtained during the four last sessions for each condition. The dark thick line corresponds to the mean (\pm STD) values obtained for all mice. The individual performances of each mouse ($n=9$) are presented by the grey thin lines. The last four sessions of discrimination in the original conditions are represented followed by the discrimination in the three conditions in stationary noise (+10, 0 and -10 dB SNR), followed by the discrimination in the three conditions in chorus noise (+10, 0 and -10 dB SNR). The chance level is represented by the red dashed line. The drops in performance were observed for the 0 dB and the -10 dB SNR in the stationary noise. The inset shows that the decrease in behavioral performance (average across sessions and animals) was strongly related to the reduction in the differences between the two temporal envelopes (W1 and W3) in the low AM range.

Abstract figure legend

Methods: We simulated auditory nerve fiber (sANF) responses and recorded the neuronal activity in five auditory structures (from cochlear nucleus to secondary auditory cortex) in response to four vocalizations presented in quiet and in two types of noise (a stationary and a chorus noise at three SNRs: +10, 0 and -10 dB). In addition, we tested whether behaving animals can discriminate between whistles when engaged in a Go/No-Go task involving the discrimination between two of the four whistles used in our electrophysiological studies (W1 and W3). Licks to the S+ were rewarded by a drop of water and licks to the S- were punished by a 5-second time-out period.

Results: Subcortical and cortical auditory neurons track the slow changes of the temporal envelope (<20Hz), with a high degree of fidelity in the original (positively correlated with the neuronal discrimination) and degraded conditions. Our results demonstrate that the between-stimulus envelope similarity, which increases in noise, negatively correlates both with the neuronal discrimination and the behavioral performance.

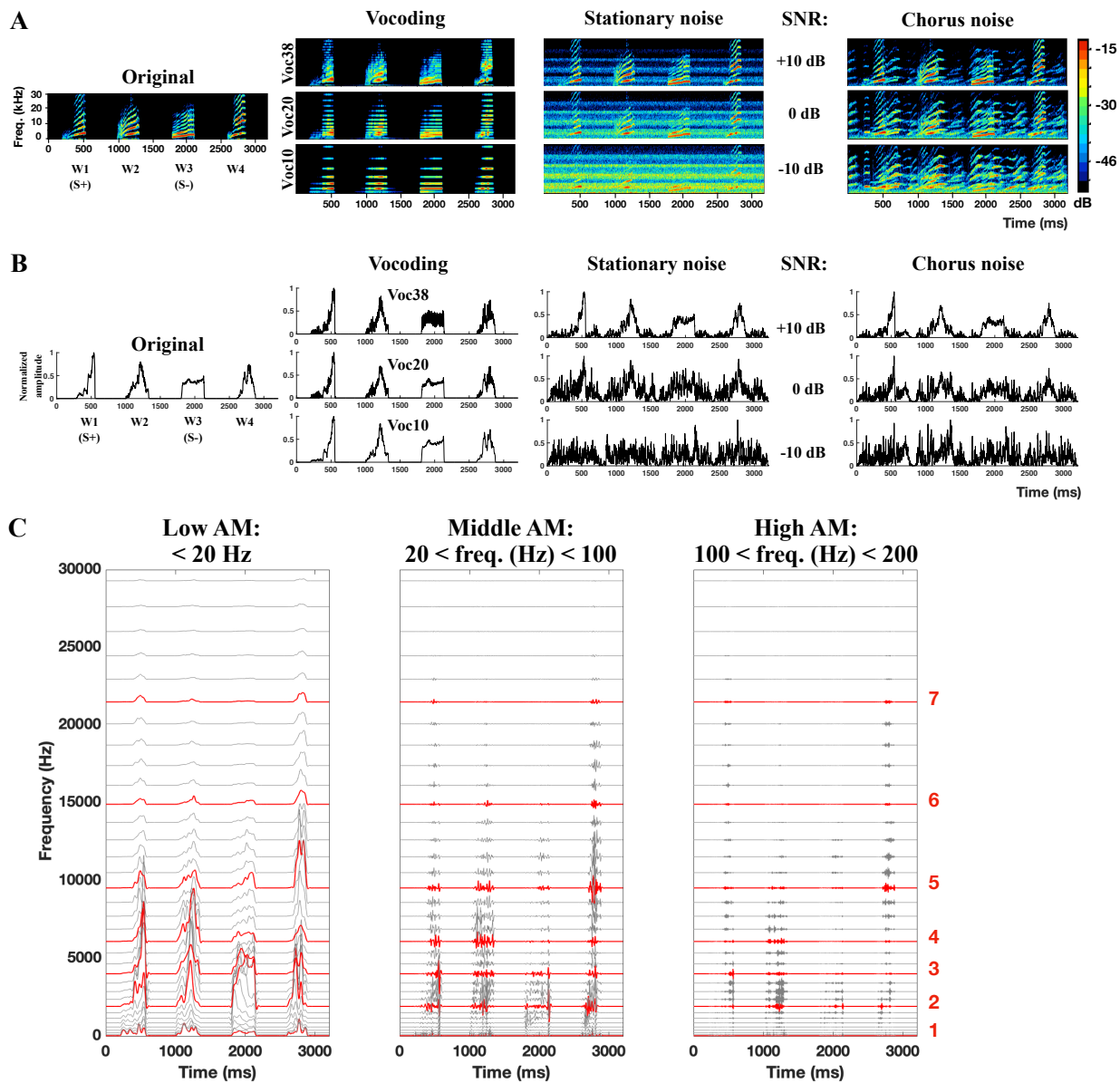


Figure 1.

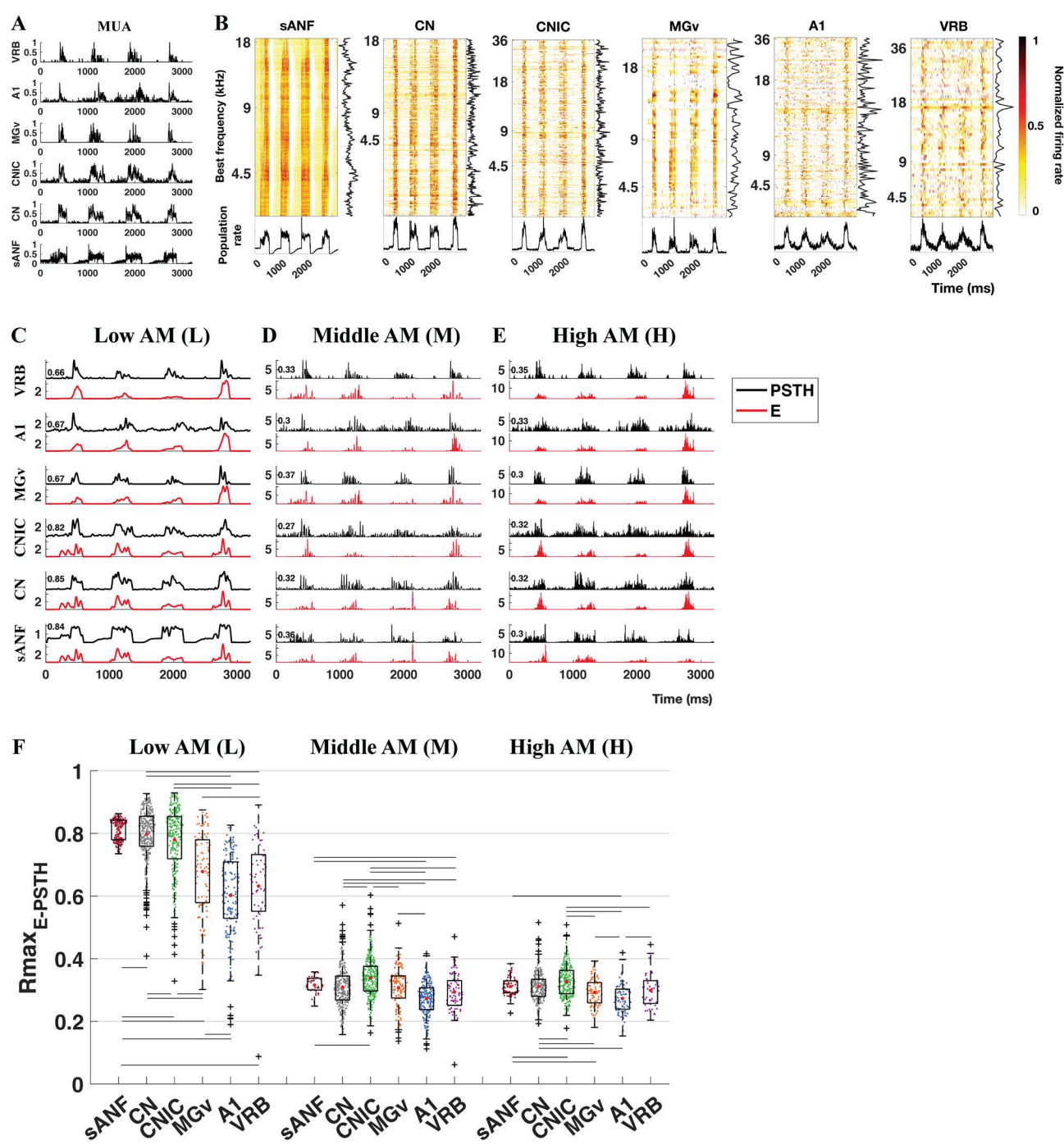


Figure 2.

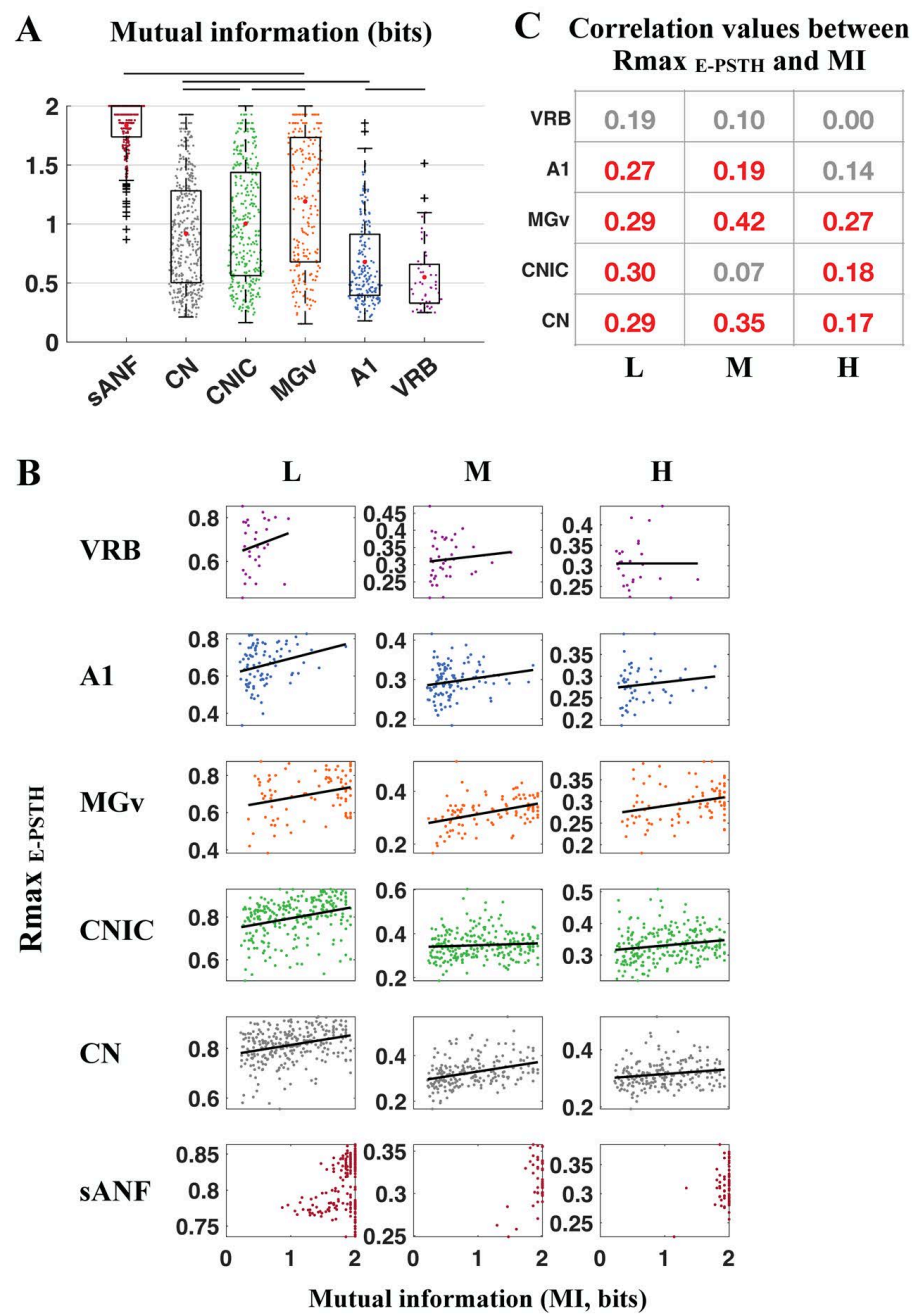


Figure 3.

Mutual information (bits)

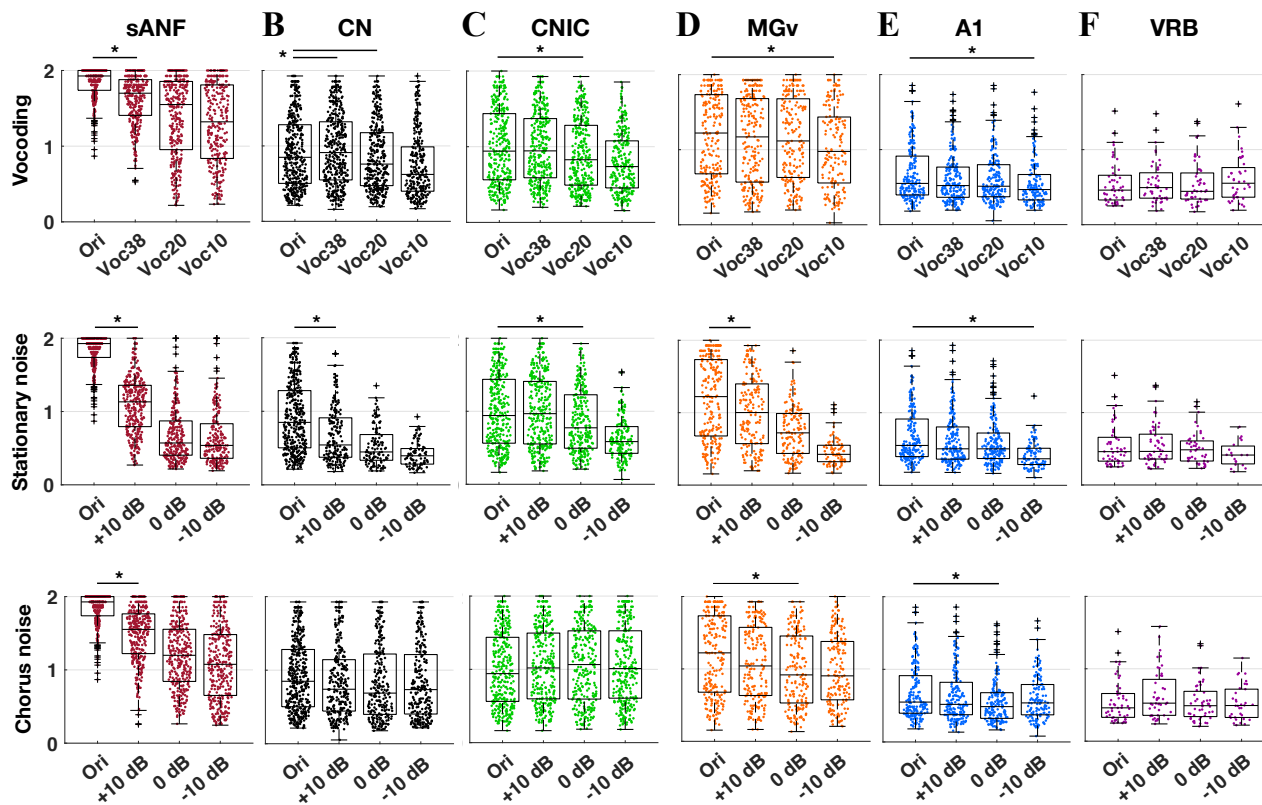


Figure 4.

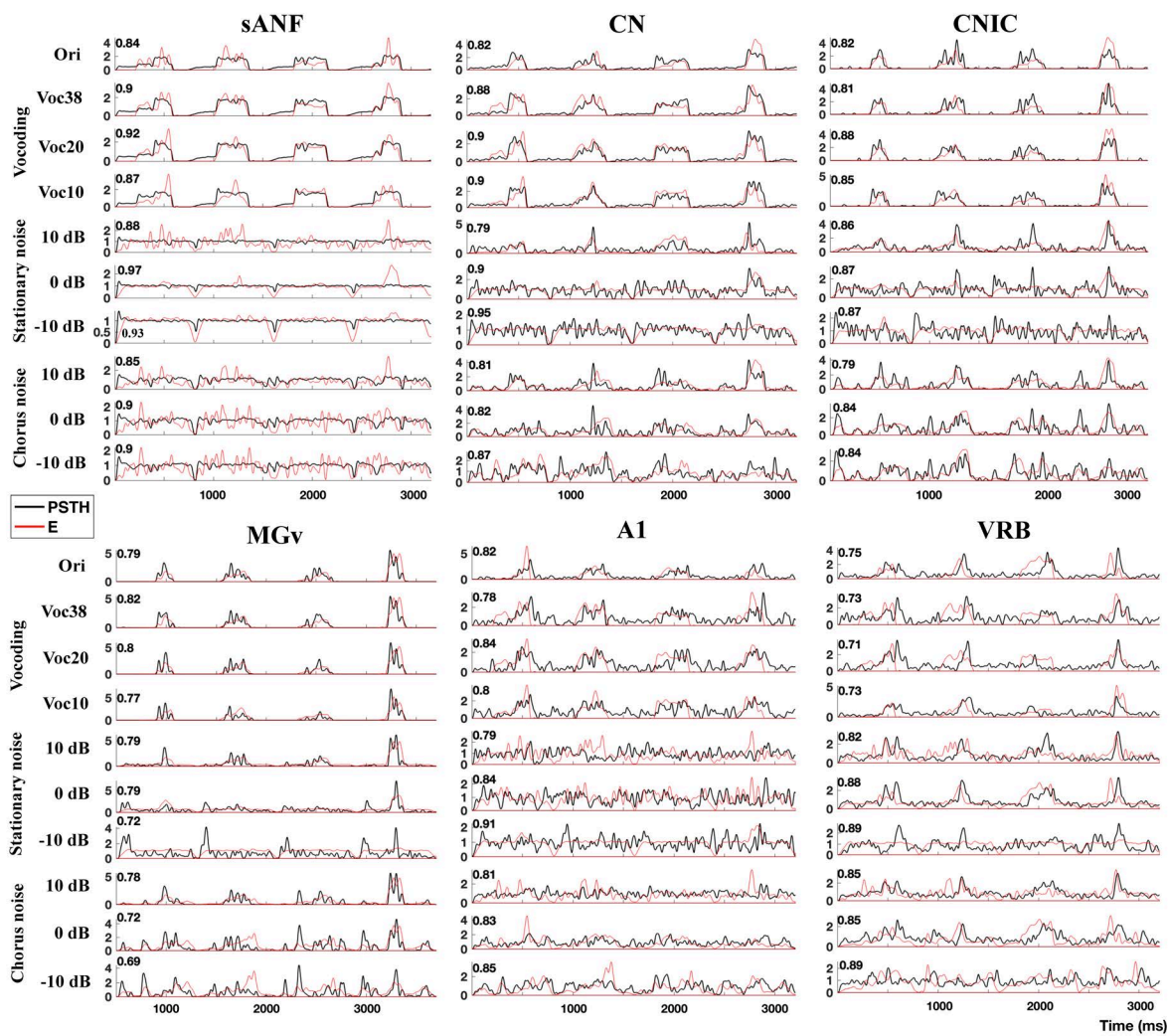


Figure 5.

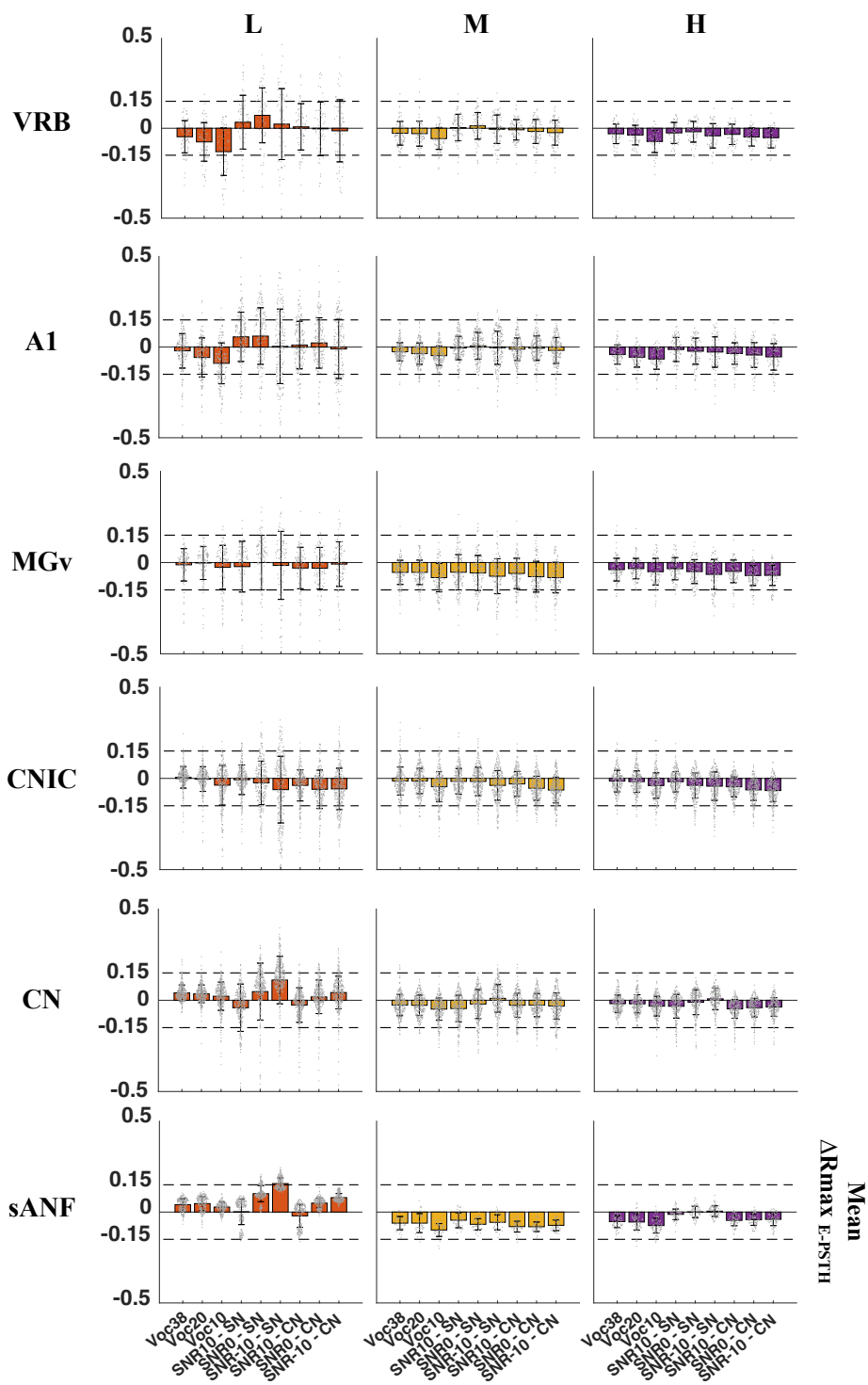


Figure 6.

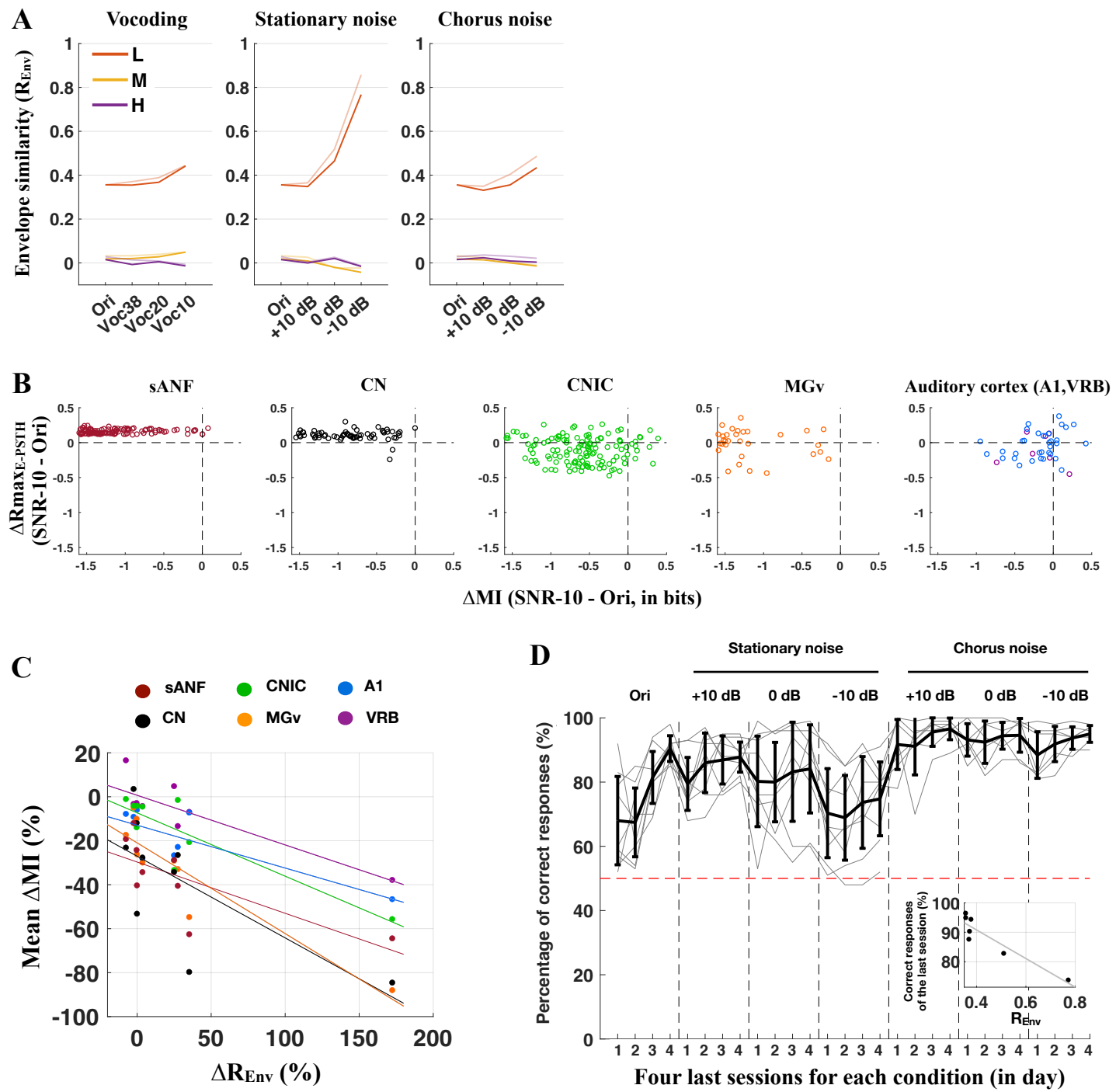
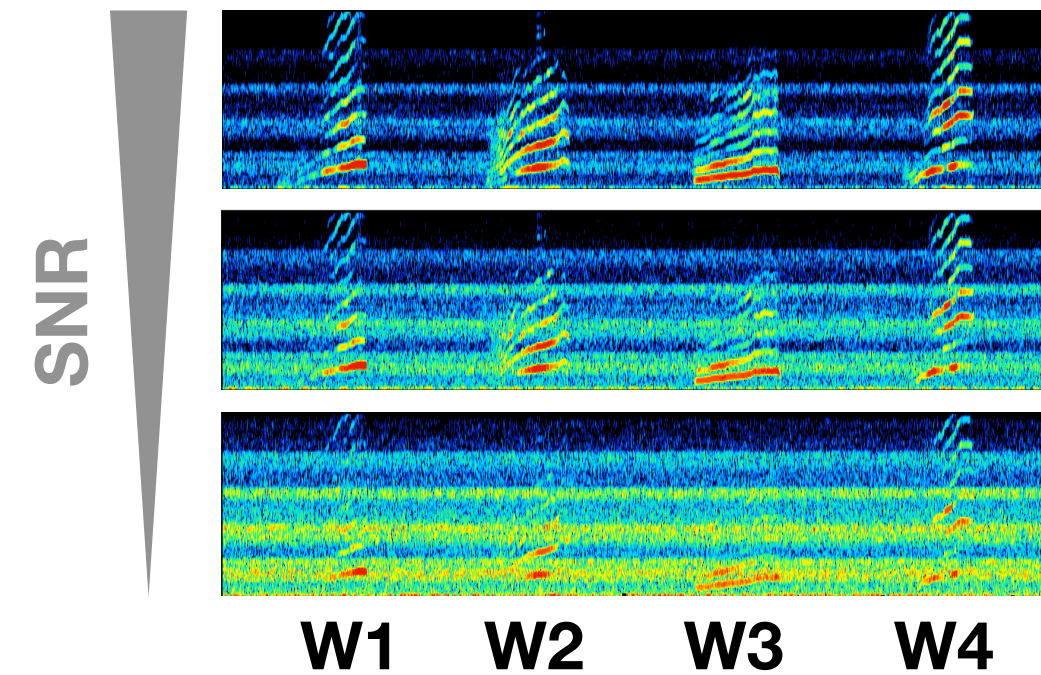


Figure 7.

Methods

Vocalizations in noise



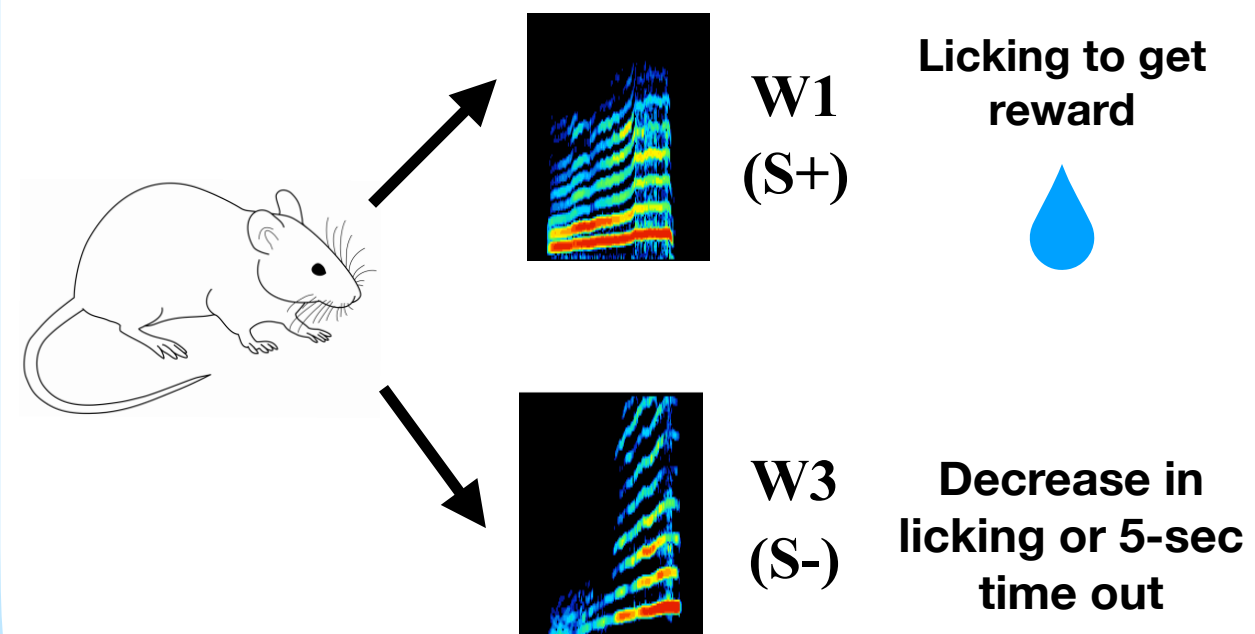
Extracellular recordings from the whole auditory system

MUA



+

Simulations of auditory nerve fibers

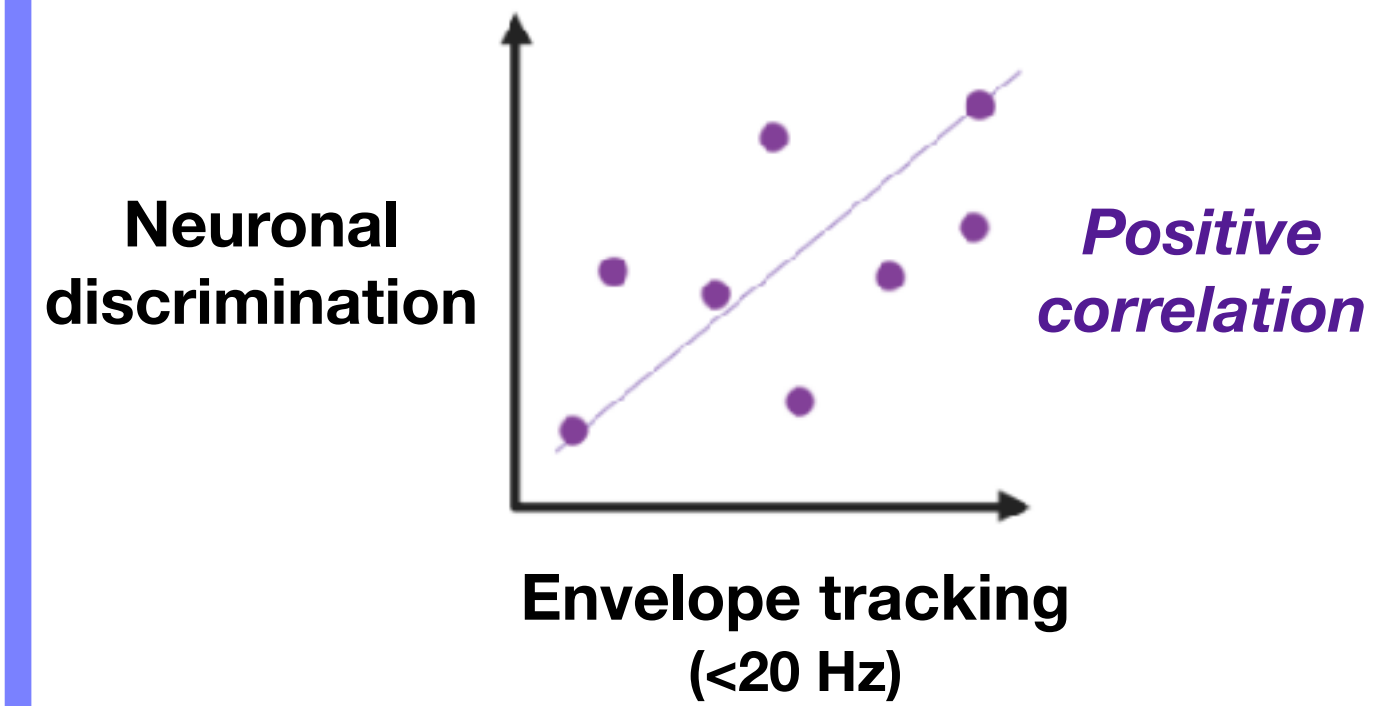


Go/No-Go sound discrimination task

Results



In quiet



Noise addition

Envelope tracking abilities remain stable

Behavioral and neuronal discrimination

