Implicit adaptation to mirror-reversal is in the correct coordinate

system but the wrong direction

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Abstract

Learning in visuomotor adaptation tasks is the result of both explicit and implicit processes.

Explicit processes, operationalized as re-aiming an intended movement to a new goal, account

for the lion's share of learning while implicit processes, operationalized as error-dependent

learning that gives rise to aftereffects, appear to be highly constrained. The limitations of implicit

learning are highlighted in the mirror-reversal task, where implicit corrections act in opposition to

performance. This is surprising given the mirror-reversal task has been viewed as emblematic of

implicit learning. One potential confound of these studies is that both explicit and implicit

processes were allowed to operate concurrently, which may interact, potentially in opposition.

Therefore, we sought to further characterized implicit learning in a mirror-reversal task with a

clamp design to isolate implicit learning from explicit strategies. We confirmed that implicit

adaptation is in the wrong direction for mirror-reversal and operates as if the perturbation were a

rotation, and only showed a moderate attenuation after three days of training. This result raised

the question of whether implicit adaptation blindly operates as though perturbations were a

rotation. In a separate experiment, which directly compared a mirror-reversal and a rotation, we

found that implicit adaptation operates in a proper coordinate system for different perturbations:

adaptation to a mirror-reversal and rotational perturbation is more consistent with Cartesian and

polar coordinate systems, respectively. It remains an open question why implicit process would

be flexible to the coordinate system of a perturbation but continue to be directed inappropriately.

Keywords: sensorimotor adaptation, motor learning, mirror-reversal, implicit adaptation,

coordinate system

Public Significance Statement

Patients with severe amnesia can improve their performance from day to day in mirror-reversal

tasks. These findings led, in part, to the codification of explicit and implicit processes in classic

theories regarding the taxonomy of memory systems, with motor learning resting firmly in the

branch of implicit memory. However, recent evidence has shown that explicit processes also play

an important role in motor learning. What's more, these studies have found that implicit learning

doesn't operate in a useful way in the mirror-reversal task. In the present study, we further

examine this puzzling behavior of implicit learning in a mirror-reversal task using a design that

can isolate implicit processes from explicit strategies. We clearly showed that the implicit system

adapts in the wrong direction for a mirror-reversal, acting as if the perturbation were a rotation.

Surprisingly, however, we found that although adaptation is in the wrong direction, the implicit

system is sensitive to a particular coordinate system. These findings further challenge the

flexibility of this implicit adaptation process in motor learning.

Introduction

Since the seminal findings of Patient H.M., there has been a tendency to view motor learning as the result of an implicit process (Milner, 1962; Corkin, 1968; Squire, 2004). However, in recent years, it has become clear that motor learning can result from a number of different learning processes (Heuer & Hegele, 2008, 2010; Izawa & Shadmehr, 2011; Verstynen & Sabes, 2011; Taylor, Krakauer, & Ivry, 2014). As such, there has been considerable interest in isolating implicit learning from these other processes to better characterize its operation (Mazzoni & Krakauer, 2006; Taylor & Ivry, 2011; Morehead et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018; Leow, Marinovic, de Rugy, & Carroll, 2018). One of the most surprising findings from these efforts to study implicit learning, in the context of a visuomotor adaptation task, is that it appears to have a very limited dynamic range: It is relatively insensitive to the magnitude of the perturbation (Bond & Taylor, 2015; Morehead et al., 2017; Hutter & Taylor, 2018), only corrects for errors in one direction (Butcher & Taylor, 2018), operates automatically regardless of task goals (Morehead et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018), saturates at a value far below complete learning (Bond & Taylor, 2015; Wilterson & Taylor, 2019), and may even reduce its contribution with extended training (Avraham, Morehead, Kim, & Ivry, 2021).

These findings present a significant challenge to current theories of sensorimotor adaptation, which center around the idea of an internal forward model (Jordan & Rumelhart, 1992; Krakauer & Shadmehr, 2006; Shadmehr, Smith, & Krakauer, 2010; Hadjiosif, Krakauer, & Haith, 2021). Indeed, it has been suggested that implicit adaptation process observed in visuomotor adaptation tasks may not reflect the operation of an internal forward model and, perhaps, it should be considered the outcome of a different computational process (Wolpert, Ghahramani, & Flanagan, 2001; Abdelghani, Lillicrap, & Tweed, 2008; Krakauer et al., 2019; Wilterson & Taylor, 2019;

Avraham et al., 2021; Hadjiosif et al., 2021). In fact, it is the mirror-reversal task used with Patient

H.M. that underscores the limitations of this implicit process. Upon experiencing a mirror reversal,

feedback corrections appear to be in the wrong direction and this response only gently decreases

with extended training (Gritsenko, Yakovenko, & Kalaska, 2009; Telgen, Parvin, & Diedrichsen,

2014; Kasuga et al., 2015). Likewise, the adaptive response is similarly in the wrong direction,

creating trial-by-trial instabilities in performance (Hadjiosif et al., 2021), and only becomes

suppressed with days of training (Wilterson & Taylor, 2019). Thus, it appears that, at least initially,

implicit motor adaptation shows a highly stereotyped response that is incompatible with the

operation of a forward model (Hadjiosif et al., 2021).

While it might be tempting to reach this conclusion based on the recent findings in the mirror-

reversal task, it should be noted that in these previous studies learning may be contaminated by

other processes, such as explicit re-aiming strategies. Recent studies have found that explicit

strategies warp the generalization of implicit learning (Day et al., 2016; McDougle et al., 2017),

task performance errors interact with implicit adaptation processes (Kim et al., 2018; Leow et al.,

2018), and how explicit and implicit processes are measured may influence the observed pattern

of results (Maresch, Werner, & Donchin, 2021). While it seems unlikely that the operation of other

learning processes, or the way in which they are assayed, could dramatically alter the underlying

operation of implicit adaptation process, such as reversing the direction of corrective or adaptive

response, it still remains worthwhile to attempt to isolate it.

The task-irrelevant visual-error clamp task has recently been developed with the hopes of

isolating implicit adaptation from other sources of potential contamination (Morehead et al., 2017).

Here, in a center-out visuomotor-rotation task, the angular direction of cursor feedback is fixed

regardless of hand direction. Participants have control only over the radial direction of the

movement and are instructed to ignore cursor feedback entirely. Despite the task-irrelevance of

the feedback, movements gradually begin drifting in the direction opposite of the cursor -- most

often without awareness of the participants.

While these initial studies applied a rotational perturbation to the cursor, the perturbation can

equally arise from a mirror reversal, thus, presenting the opportunity to study implicit adaptation

in a mirror reversal task in relative isolation from other processes. Here, we employed this mirror-

reversal clamped-feedback task to better characterize implicit adaptation over the course of three

consecutive days of training. Regardless of the participants' reach direction, cursor feedback was

always reflected across the mid-sagittal axis of the workspace (i.e., x-axis). Participants were

informed that the movement of the cursor was not under their control, so they should ignore it and

try their best to place their hand under the presented target. Similar to previous reports of implicit

adaptation under a mirror reversal, we found that implicit adaptation was in the inappropriate

direction and only gently decreased across sessions. What's more, the observed pattern of

adaptation was consistent with what we would be expected of adapting to different rotation

magnitudes and directions across the workspace, in effect, reflecting a complex in a dual-

adaptation paradigm to opposing rotations (Schween & Hegele, 2017; Schween, Taylor, & Hegele,

2018).

The finding that adaptation to a mirror reversal is homologous to a rotation raises the question:

Does implicit adaptation truly operate as though visual errors arise from a rotational perturbation?

That is, does adaptation operate in a polar-like coordinate system? This question has been asked

before by Hudson and Landy (2016) in a paradigm where the errors were either drawn from a

polar or Cartesian-based coordinate system. While they found that the adaptive response was

flexible to either form of perturbations, they did not make a dissociation between explicit or implicit

learning processes. Thus, we sought to revisit this question contrasting adaptive responses to

mirror-reversal and rotational perturbation using a paradigm that assays both implicit and explicit

learning (Bond & Taylor, 2017; Hutter & Taylor, 2018). While we again found that the direction of

implicit adaptation to a mirror reversal was similar to a rotation, the pattern of the adaptive

response appeared to be appropriate for the coordinate system.

Experiment 1 (Clamped mirror-task)

Materials and Methods

Participants

Fourteen young adults (six women, age: 20.5 ± 0.5y) were recruited from the research

participation pool maintained by the Department of Psychology at Princeton University or from

the local community. One participant withdrew midway through the study, resulting in thirteen

participants for analysis. All participants were right-handed, verified by the Edinburgh handedness

test (Oldfield, 1971) and reported normal or corrected-to-normal visual acuity. The experiment

consisted of separate 1-hour sessions spread across three days of participation. Participants

performed each session approximately at the same time each day. All participants provided

informed, written consent before participation. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by

the Princeton University's Institutional Review Board. All participants received $60 for participation.

Apparatus

Participants performed a center-out reaching task, making horizontal movements with their right

hand. Movements were recorded by a digitizing tablet (Wacom Co., Kazo, Japan), which recorded

the motion of a digitizing pen held in the hand. Stimuli were displayed on a 60 Hz, 17-in. touch-

sensitive monitor (Planar Systems, Hillsboro, Oregon), which was mounted horizontally above the

tablet and, thus, obscured view of the limb. The task was controlled by custom software coded in

MATLAB (The MathWorks, Natick, Massachusetts), using Psychtoolbox extensions (Brainard,

1997, Kleiner, Brainard, and Pelli, 2007), and run on a Dell OptiPlex 7040 computer (Dell, Round

Rock, Texas) with Windows 7 operating system (Microsoft Co., Redmond, Washington).

Procedure

Each trial began with participants holding their right hand in the center of the workspace for 500

ms. After this delay, a green target (0.25 cm radius) appeared 7 cm from the start location. The

target could appear at one of twelve locations (+/-30°, +/-60°, +/- 75°, +/-105°, +/-120°, +/-150°;

see Figure 1A). Participants were instructed to move as quickly as possible to the target and then

immediately return back to the center in one smooth movement. During the outbound portion of

the reach, a small circular cursor (0.15 cm radius) was displayed. Depending on the phase of the

experiment, the cursor either represented the location of the hand or clamped feedback (see

below). In addition, a neutral "click" sounded to indicate that the participant's hand exceeded 7

cm. If the movement time from the start to 7 cm exceeded 800 ms, then a computer-generated

voice sounded "Too Slow" following the "click" (<1% of trials, which were excluded from further

analysis). During the inbound portion of the reach, the small circular cursor was replaced by a

white ring that was centered on the start location and with a radius that matched the distance of

the participants' hand to the start location. This form of feedback was used to help guide

participants back to the start location by providing only radial but not directional information.

Participants received either veridical feedback or clamped feedback in different phases of

Experiment 1. On veridical feedback trials, the cursor accurately showed the location of the hand.

For visual-error clamp feedback trials, the feedback followed a trajectory that was fixed along a

specific heading angle (Shmuelof, Krakauer, & Mazzoni, 2012; Morehead et al., 2017). This fixed

heading angle was determined as the mirror-reversed direction of the target angle across the

vertical axis (mid-sagittal axis). The radial location of the cursor was based on the radial extent of

the participant's hand (up to 7 cm amplitude) but was independent of the angular location of the

hand.

On the first day of the experiment, participants experienced a familiarization phase consisting of

60 trials with veridical, online feedback. Following the familiarization phase, the experimenter then

paused the task to explain the visual-error clamped feedback. Participants were informed that

they could no longer control the direction of the cursor movement in the following sessions of the

experiment. They were instructed to ignore the cursor and continue to reach directly to the visual

location of the target. Participants then practiced completing twelve trials, one to each target

location, with the clamped feedback. The experimenter then paused the experiment again to

ensure that the participants understood the instructions and confirmed that they understood that

they could not – and should not – attempt to control the direction of the cursor. Following this

practice phase, participants completed another 996 trials with clamped feedback (clamp phase).

On the second day of the experiment, participants completed another 1008 trials of clamped

feedback, which was present on the very first trial. On the third day of the experiment, participants

completed 1500 trials of clamped feedback and ended the experiment with a "washout" of 60 trials

without any feedback. In sum, participants completed 3636 trials in total and note, they were

instructed to aim at the visual target directly in all phases of the experiment.

Data analysis — All initial data analyses were conducted in Matlab, with the exception that

repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted in SPSS (IBM, 2011). The Greenhouse-Geisser

correction was used for ANOVAs when data violated the homoscedasticity assumptions. Multiple

comparisons were Bonferroni corrected. Task performance was assessed by calculating the

angular difference between the target and the initial heading angle of the hand. The initial heading

angle of the hand was calculated as the angle between the first and last sample of hand position

between 1 and 3cm radially from the start location.

Our previous study employing a mirror-reversal found that the direction of the implicit component

of motor adaptation was not in a direction consistent with counteracting a mirror-reversal but

instead in a direction consistent with countering a rotation (Wilterson & Taylor, 2019). As such,

this requires a relatively unintuitive transformation of the data to get it to a common axis. Figure

1D presents the raw hand trajectory of the last ten trials toward each target at the end of the first-

day training. It is clear from this figure that to transform the data to a common axis, the movements

in quadrants II-VI need to be transformed as follows: II) the x-locations of the second quadrant

movements (targets 105°, 120°, 150°) were multiplied by -1 to flip the y-axis, III) both x- and y-

locations of the third quadrant movements (targets -105° , -120°, -150°) were multiplied by -1,

and IV) the y-locations of the fourth quadrant movements (targets -30°, -60°, -75°) were multiplied

by -1. After this, the flipped trajectories were rotated to a common axis, as though the intended

target was always located at 0°, despite being oriented at different target directions. With these

transformations, a positive angle indicates movements of the hand in a counterclockwise direction

relative to the target.

The order of the targets was pseudorandomized, such that each of the twelve targets was visited

once before being repeated. To minimize the influence of target order differences between

subjects and the potential biomechanical biases associated with specific target directions, trials

were averaged into bins of twelve trials. In addition, the averaged hand angle of the last three

bins (36 trials) in the clamp phases was calculated for day 1-3, respectively, to assess the

adaptation of training of each day. The hand angles in the clamp phase and washout were

corrected by subtracting with the mean of the familiarization phase.

Power Analysis

In our previous five-day mirror-reversal task (Wilterson & Taylor, 2019), the magnitude of implicit

adaptation reached the peak at the end of the first day and gradually decreased over the course

of the next four days of training. Based on these findings, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the

adaptation in the early phase of the training under the clamped mirror also decreases after

multiple days of training. To decide the necessary sample size we need to examine this

hypothesis, the means of implicit adaptation at the end of day one were compared with the end

of day 2, day 3, day 4, and day 5 in our previous five-day mirror task (32 trials based on Wilterson

& Taylor, 2019). Effect sizes of $d = 0.99, 1.08, 1.08, 1.53$ were found for day 2, day 3, day 4, day

5 compared to day 1, respectively. A paired t-test using a two-tailed α of 0.05 and power of 0.8

suggested that a sample size of 17, 14, 14, 7 participants was needed, respectively. Considering

the constraints in participant recruitment, we decided to perform a three-day experiment with 14

participants, which was chosen as a balanced compromise in terms of length of the experiment,

power, and typical sample sizes is in visuomotor adaptation experiments.

Results and Discussion

Previous studies of adaptation under mirror-reversed feedback have found that feedback

corrections and adaptation are in a direction that is counterproductive to overcoming the mirror

perturbation. Instead, the responses appear to be more consistent with an adaptation system that

treats the perturbation as though it was a rotation. However, as training progresses the

inappropriate response is gradually decreased. Here, we set out to study this behavior in more

detail by isolating implicit adaptation over the course of three days of training under clamped

mirror feedback.

The direction of adaptation

Prior to the introduction of the clamped mirror feedback, participants practiced reaching to the

targets with veridical feedback. Their reaches were fairly accurate in reaching toward the target

(0.94 ± 0.74°, mean ± standard deviation, same below, Figure 1B). Following this familiarization

phase, cursor feedback was mirror-reversed and clamped, where the mirror-reversal was applied

along the y-axis and centered on the starting location and the angle of the cursor feedback was

fixed.

Figure 1. Target locations and moving trajectories of Experiment 1.

A) The locations of twelve targets: +/-30°, +/-60°, +/- 75°, +/-105°, +/-120°, +/-150°. Mirror-reversal was

applied along the y-axis and centered on the starting location. Targets are color-coded by the size of error

between clamped feedback and target location: red: 120°, green: 60°, blue: 30°. Different darkness levels

indicate 4 quadrants. B) Moving trajectory of the last circle in the familiarization phase. Each trajectory is

averaged over thirteen participants and colored according to the target it aims. The shaded area represents

standard error. Same below. C) Moving trajectory of the first circle in the clamped phase of day one. D)

Moving trajectory of the last circle in the clamped phase of day one. E) Moving trajectory of the last circle

in the clamped phase of day three. F) Averaged Moving trajectories of B-E. All twelve targets in one circle

are flipped and rotated into a common axis at 0° (see methods) and averaged.

Initially, participants reaching movements were directed toward the target, but with training their

reaches deviated from the target (Figure 1C/D). For targets in all four quadrants, the heading

angle of reaching movements biased considerably away from the mirror-axis at the end of the first

day (Figure 1D) and this bias was still present at the end of the third day of training (Figure 1E).

Specifically, the heading angle drifted clockwise in quadrant I and quadrant III, and drifted

counterclockwise in quadrant II and quadrant IV. When considering the target location in the

workspace relative to mirror axis, this pattern of results suggests that implicit adaptation is acting

to in a direction more consistent with adaptation to a visuomotor rotation rather than a mirror

reversal as we have observed previously (Wilterson & Taylor, 2019; Hadjiosif et al., 2021). Indeed,

when we transformed the data to a common axis (see Methods), it is clear that implicit adaptation

is acting as if to counter a visuomotor rotation (Figure 1F).

Figure 1F also reveals that the amount of adaptation on the final day of training is less than that

observed at the end of the first day. With the data now on a common axis, it is evident that the

amount of implicit adaptation peaked at the end of the first day (15.8 ± 6.3°) and only gently

decreased over the remaining two days of training (Figure 2A); by the end of day two, adaptation

was 13.6 ± 6.9° and by the end of day three was 10.8 ± 7.1°. This decrease was confirmed by

submitting these data to a three-way, repeated measures ANOVA with the factor of Day ANOVA:

$F_{2, 24} = 8.32$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.41$ (Figure 2B). While there is a significant decrease over the course

of three days, the decrease is quite modest averaging only 2-3° each day. In the post hoc

comparisons, only day 1 and day 3 showed a significant difference (p=0.02). At this pace, it would

take an additional four days of training to decline to zero – a total of seven days of training with

approximately 7000 trials. However, it appears as though the reduction occurs between days

rather than within a day. To test this possibility, we performed a separate linear regression on the

time series of hand angles for each day of training to determine if there was a significant slope to

the time course. As expected, we found a positive slope in day 1 (0.077 ± 0.068 °/trial, t_{12} = 4.08,

p = 0.002), and almost a zero slope in day 2 (0.0007 ± 0.0406 °/trial, t_{12} = 0.06, p = 0.95) and day

3 (-0.007 ± 0.027 °/trial, t_{12} = -0.90, p = 0.39), indicating almost no decrease within a day.

Figure 2. Time course of the adaptation in Experiment 1.

A) Time course of the hand angle over twelve targets across three days. Each dot is an average of twelve

trials (one circle). The horizontal dashed lines represent first the onset of the mirror-clamp perturbation,

then day breaks, then the start of washout. The shaded area represents standard error. Same below. B)

Amplitude of adaptation after each day training. The error bars indicate mean and standard error. C) Time

courses of the hand angle for three different error sizes. Each dot is the average of twelve trials (three

circles).

While we observed a reduction in the amount of implicit adaptation over the course of three days

of training, it remains an open question as to whether the adaptive response of the implicit system

would become appropriate for a mirror reversal or simply be suppressed. Note, if the adaptation

was in the mirror direction, i.e., the adaptation worked to bring the cursor to the target following

the rule of a mirror, the hand would have drifted to the direction of the cursor. The cursor was in

the counterclockwise direction to the targets in quadrant I (the clamped feedback for them was in

quadrant II), so the hand angle would be negative instead of positive. Nevertheless, after the three

days of training, only one participant showed a slight negative hand angle at the end of day three,

while all the other participants' hand angles remained positive throughout the whole training

process (Figure 2B).

In the washout phase with no visual feedback, implicit adaptation was still present (9.8 ± 6.2°),

which was slightly smaller than the end of the training session (t_{12} = 2.46, p = 0.03). Notably,

before the washout phase, we needed to pause the program to give participant instruction, which

resulted in a longer intertrial interval (11.3 ± 3.8s) than the normal intertrial interval in the training

phase (1.2 ± 0.1s). This may be one reason why adaptation in washout is smaller than at the end

of training.

Influence of error size

The finding that implicit adaptation under a mirror reversal resembles that observed under a

visuomotor rotation and that previous studies have revealed that the extent of generalization of a

rotation is narrow, then we should expect that each target direction is learned relatively

independently. Furthermore, if the mirror-reversal task is acted upon by the implicit system as a

rotational perturbation, then each target would technically have a different degree of rotation. For

example, reaches to the 30° target (quadrant I) results in errors near the 150° target (quadrant II),

which could be viewed as a 120° rotation. Likewise, reaches to the 75° target (quadrant I), results

in errors at 105° (quadrant II), which could be viewed as a 30° rotation. Morehead and colleagues

(2017) found that in a rotation-based visual-error clamp, adaptation declines as the size of the

rotation increases (adaptation decreased at a point between 95° and 135°). Thus, if implicit

adaptation treats mirror reversal perturbations as a rotational error, then we would expect more

adaptation for targets resulting in smaller error (<95-135°). Indeed, when we separate the learning

curves by targets resulting in similar errors, the adaptation for different error sizes showed a

significant difference after the first day of training ($F_{2, 24}$ = 27.2, $p < 0.001$, η_p^2 = 0.28). Post hoc

pairwise comparisons showed that the adaptation to target of 120° errors (targets +/-30, +/-150;

9.9 ± 3.3°) was significantly smaller than the adaptation to targets of 60° errors (targets +/-60, +/-

120; 16.3 ± 4.9°, $p < 0.001$) or the adaptation to targets of 30° errors (targets +/-60, +/-120; 15.6

± 5.4°, $p = 0.002$). No difference was found between the adaption to 60° errors and the adaptation

to 30° errors ($p = 0.504$), consistent with Morehead and colleagues (2017).

The findings from Experiment 1 suggest that implicit adaptation, even under a mirror reversal,

acts as though the error arises from a rotational perturbation: The implicit system adapted in a

direction opposite to the visual error and the magnitude of adaptation was target-dependent,

which is consistent with a rotational-based error signal. This raises the question: Does the implicit

system truly operate in a rotational manner, such as being transformed into a polar-like coordinate

system, or does it simply act to bring visual feedback toward the intended reach direction, such

as an equal and opposite corrective behavior, which would be more similar to a Cartesian-based

system. Note, we do not necessarily think that adaptation actually operates in such a well-defined

coordinate system but may be more consistent with a particular coordinate system. In fact,

Hudson and Landy (2016) asked this question in a clever visuomotor adaptation task that sought

to dissociate these two coordinate systems. Interestingly, they found that participants

appropriately adapted to perturbations generated from either coordinate system.

At face value, our current results appear to be at odds with the findings from Hudson and Landy

(2016) since implicit adaptation appeared to treat the mirror reversal as a rotation, but their study

did not distinguish between explicit and implicit contributions. Explicit re-aiming strategies have

been shown to be quite flexible to the details of the perturbation (Bond & Taylor, 2015; Bond &

Taylor, 2017; Butcher & Taylor, 2018). While the nature of their perturbations would seem unlikely

to afford a large contribution from explicit re-aiming, it still remains an open question. Experiment

1 was ill-equipped to shed light on this issue because it used a center-out task design with

shooting movements that always passed the target location (7cm), which prevents the potential

coordinate system underlying adaptation to be observed.

Here, we sought to revisit this question by using a modified version of the visual-error clamp

method in which participants were required to stop on the target without visual feedback. Once

the movement terminated, clamped mirror-reversal endpoint feedback was provided. To

dissociate explicit and implicit learning, participants were asked to report their intended reaching

location (re-aiming) using a touch-screen monitor before starting the movement. As such, this

method would allow us to observe both the x- and y-positions of the hand to observe if learning

was more consistent with a rotational correction (e.g., more Polar-like coordinates; Figure 3A) or

with an equal and opposite correction (e.g., more Cartesian-like coordinates; Figure 3B).

Figure 3. Illustration of correction and target locations in Experiment 2.

Appropriate correction of implicit adaptation for Polar (A) and Cartesian (B) coordinate.

Experiment 2 (Mirror verse Rotation)

Materials and Methods

Participants

Twenty-four participants (thirteen women, age: 23.2 ± 4.3y) were randomly assigned into two

perturbation conditions (mirror and rotation), with twelve participants in each condition. Since one

participant failed to understand the instruction in the washout phase and continuously aimed at

the solution instead of the target, she was excluded from the analysis of aftereffects. Each

participant received $12 for participation.

Procedure

Each trial began with participants holding their right hand in the center of the workspace for 500

ms. After this delay, a circular orange target (0.25 cm radius) appeared 7 cm from the start location.

The target could appear at one of four locations (45°, 135°, -135°, and -45°). The order of the

targets was pseudorandomized, such that each of the four targets was visited once before being

repeated. To begin the trial, participants indicated their intended reaching position by tapping on

the screen with their left hand (Bond & Taylor, 2017; Hutter & Taylor, 2018). Once an aim was

recorded, the target turned from orange to green, and participants were allowed to begin their

reaching movement with the right hand. If a participant attempted to begin moving their right hand

before an aiming location was registered, the message "Remember to report aim" was displayed

and the trial restarted. Participants were instructed to move quickly and, different from Experiment

1, they are instructed to stop either on the target or the aim position depended on task phases. If

the location of the cursor overlapped with the target (< 2 mm of deviation), the participant heard

a pleasant "ding". Otherwise, an unpleasant "buzz" sounded. The feedback "Too Slow" was given

if the reaching time exceeded 1200 ms. After participants stopped moving their right hand (speed

< 1.3mm/s), a small circular cursor (0.15-cm radius) appeared to provide feedback for 500 ms.

During the perturbation phase, either a mirror-reversal or a visual rotation was applied. In mirror-

reversal, the endpoint feedback was reversed over the y-axis. In rotation, the endpoint feedback

was rotated 90° to the clockwise direction to match the size of the perturbation in the mirror-

reversal task. To avoid priming participants with a certain coordinate system, no visual guidance

was used to help participants get back to the center of the workspace. Instead, a small sticker

was attached to the tablet surface to provide a tactile cue of the start location. The next trial began

once the subject reached the start location.

Sixteen trials with online feedback began the experiment. Then, an 80-trial familiarization phase

with veridical endpoint feedback helped participants learn the distance between targets and start

location. After that, a baseline phase was composed of 32 trials without feedback to determine if

any subject held strong biomechanical biases that would not be averaged out by the target set.

Participants were not asked to report their aim during the familiarization phases and baseline

phase, as it was assumed that they would always be aiming at the target. A pause was included

after the baseline phase so that the experimenter could explain the aiming procedure to the

participants. Following these instructions, participants completed 32 trials with veridical feedback

to familiarize themselves with the touchscreen and aiming procedure. A perturbation phase of

400 trials with either mirror-reversal or visual-rotation feedback followed this familiarization. The

experiment ended with a no-feedback and no-aiming-report washout phase with 32 trials.

Data analysis

During the experiments, the digitizing tablet logged the trajectory of the right hand and the

touchscreen monitor recorded the location tapped to indicate aiming location. The first data point

collected after the movement's speed was lower than 1.3mm/s was registered as the hand

location. Aiming location for each trial was the location tapped on the touchscreen.

In the mirror task, all the hand and aiming locations were transformed such that the locations of

the targets were in quadrant II (see method of Experiment 1). Similarly, to make the solutions to

perturbations positive, in the rotation task, hand and aiming locations of targets in I, II, and VI

were rotated for 180°, 90°, and 270° clockwise, respectively, to match the target in quadrant III.

Trials were averaged into bins of 8 trials for each individual (2 cycles). The last 36 trials were used

to measure participants' performance at the end of the perturbation phase. The hand angles in

the perturbation phase and washout were corrected by subtracting with the mean of the baseline

phase.

Model Simulation — To predicts the time courses of the Cartesian-Based-Correction Model and

the Polar-Based-Correction Model, we used a modified version of the two-state model (Smith et

al., 2006). Here, we modeled explicit re-aiming as the fast process (Xf) and implicit adaptation as

the slow process (Xs) over the course of 624 trials (McDougle et al., 2015). Besides, we assumed

that explicit re-aiming is updated based on target error, while implicit adaptation is updated based

on the aim-to-cursor distance (McDougle et al., 2015; Equations 1 and 2).

① $Xf(n+1) = \alpha f \times Xf(n) + \beta f \times Ef(n)$

② $Xs(n+1) = \alpha s \times Xs(n) + \beta s \times Es(n)$

Where Ef is the error between the target and the cursor locations, while Es is the error between

explicit re-aiming (Xf) and the cursor location. In the Polar-Based-Correction Model, the errors (Ef,

Es) are supposed to be coded in theta-dimension, thus the correction (Xf, Xs) is also performed

in theta-dimension. Everything remained zero in the rho-dimension. In the Cartesian Based-

Correction Model, Xf, Xs, Ef, and Es were all coded in x-dimension and everything remained zero

in the y-dimension. Since our major interest focused on implicit adaptation during the training,

rather than how the participants solved the perturbation with explicit strategies, the models

assumed that the explicit system can solve the mirror task as in Wilterson & Taylor, (2019). That

is, the participants could figure out the solution to explicit re-aiming (Xf) after observing

perturbation for one trial. In the following trials, explicit re-aiming (Xf) was updated according to

the equations mentioned above. The values for αf, βf, αs, and βs were determined by hand-tuning

these parameters to the simple rotation case ($\alpha f=1$, $\beta f=0.0005$, $\alpha s=0.99$, and $\beta s=0.003$). The same

parameters were used for the two models. Note, both models assumed the slow process (Xs)

updates to compensate mirror-reversal as if it were visuomotor rotation. The simulated data were

processed with the same procedure as the behavioral data to make the figures comparable. Note,

for simplicity, we opted to present both the model simulations and the behavioral analyses in the

Cartesian coordinate system (instead of polar) because if learning in the mirror reversal task is

sensitive to the coordinate system, then the majority of learning would be confined to the x-

dimension (Figure. 4).

Power Analysis

Our goal here was to determine how many participants would be needed to detect significant

adaptation following a single day of training. We based this estimate on our previous study

(Wilterson & Taylor 2019), which found an effect size of d=1.4 for the mean of implicit adaptation

at the end of one day of training. A paired t-test using a two-tailed α of 0.05 and power of 0.8

suggested that a sample size of only 7 participants was needed. Since this estimate appeared

small, we decided to recruit 12 participants for each task, which is a typical sample size is in

visuomotor adaptation experiments and matched that used in our previous study.

Results and Discussion

The coordinate system of adaptation

Both groups of participants were able to hit the target precisely in the familiarization phase

(Rotation: X -0.7 ± 3.7 mm, Y -1.4 ± 2.7 mm; Mirror: X -1.9 ± 2.7 mm, Y -0.3 ± 1.9 mm). Although

some weak biases were generated in the x-axis during the no-feedback baseline phase in the

mirror perturbation group (-5.8 ± 8.2 mm), this bias was quickly washed out when the veridical

endpoint feedback came back at the beginning of the aiming report (-1.9 ± 5.0 mm). After the

participants became familiar with the aiming-report procedure, the perturbation was introduced

(mirror-reversal or 90° rotation). In both tasks, participants appeared to solve the perturbations

relatively quickly. The hand angle is close to the perfect solution for each perturbation at the end

of training (Table 1 – row one). In both tasks, this compensation was carried out in a quite explicit

way, since participants could aim precisely at the perfect solutions to the perturbations without

any systematic bias at the group level (Table 1 – row two). Although explicit strategy itself is

almost sufficient to meet with the task command, the hand positions still deviated away from the

aiming positions, indicating the involvement of implicit adaptation (Table 1 –row three).

Table 1

The hand location, aiming location and implicit adaptation at the end of the mirror-reversal or rotation

perturbation in Experiment 2 (mean (SD); mm).

	Rotation-X	Rotation -Y	Mirror -X	Mirror -Y
Hand	102.8(3.2)	4.93(4.3)	104.6(7.7)	0.40(2.2)
Aim	97.2(4.5) [n.s.]	-1.42(2.2) [n.s.]	96.3(6.0) [n.s.]	0.94(1.8) [n.s.]
Implicit	5.6(6.6)*	6.35(5.3)*	8.3(6.0)*	-0.54(2.8) [n.s.]

The values of aiming locations are compared with the perfect solutions (99.0 mm for x; and 0 mm for y) by

simple t tests. The values of implicit adaptations are compared with 0; *: $p<0.05$; n.s., $p>0.05$.

Importantly, the Polar-Based-Correction Model and the Cartesian-Based-Correction Model

predicted different time courses of learning for explicit and implicit processes in the perturbation

phase. In the Polar-Based-Correction Model, implicit adaptation gradually increased in both x-

and y-dimensions (Figure 4A) and reached a considerable amplitude at the end of the perturbation

phase. However, the Cartesian-Based-Correction Model predicted that implicit adaptation would

only appear in x-dimension, while adaptation in y-dimension would remain zero (Figure 4B).

Interestingly, we found implicit adaptation in the rotation and mirror tasks are different. Implicit

adaptation in the rotation task were aligned to the prediction of the Polar-Based-Correction Model

(Figure 4C). Participants showed considerable implicit adaptation in both x and y-dimensions (X:

5.57 ± 6.61 mm, t_{11} = 2.92, p=0.014; Y: 6.35 ± 5.26 mm, t_{11} = 4.18, p=0.002) under the rotation.

On the contrast, implicit adaptation in the mirror task was similar to the prediction of the Cartesian-

Based-Correction Model (Figure 4D), where adaptation only appeared in x-dimension (8.27 ± 5.96

mm, t_{11} = 4.81, p=0.0005). A slight negative implicit adaptation was found in y-dimension at the

beginning of the mirror task, but it dropped back to zero in the late perturbation (-0.54 ± 2.77 mm,

t_{11} = -0.67, p=0.515). Similar to Experiment 1, this adaptation in the mirror task was in the "wrong"

direction for mirror reversal which increased the error instead of compensating for it. When

comparing between two tasks, the implicit adaptations in x and y-dimensions were roughly equal

in the rotation task (t_{11} = 0.267, p=0.794), while they showed a large difference in the mirror task

(t_{11} = 3.95, p=0.002). These results indicated that the implicit learning system applied different

coordinate systems under different visual perturbations.

Figure. 4. Time courses of model predictions and behavioral result in Experiment 2.

(A-B) Simulations of the Polar-based-correction model (A) and the Cartesian-based-correction model (B).

Left and middle: Time courses presented by the changes in x- and y-dimensions, respectively. Right: The

x- and y-values of implicit adaptation at the end of the perturbation phase. (C-D) Participant's performance

in the rotation task (C) and the mirror task (D). Left and middle: The time course for hand location (purple),

cognitive strategy/explicit re-aiming (blue), and implicit adaptation (red). The vertical dashed lines

represent the onset of aiming report, then the onset of the visual perturbation, then the end of visual

perturbation. The horizontal dashed lines represent the value of 0 mm and 99.0 mm, respectively, which

were the perfect solutions of visual perturbation in y- and x-dimensions, respectively. The shaded areas

represent standard error. Right: The x- and y-values of implicit adaptation at the end of the perturbation

phase. Each line represents a participant. Error bar represents standard error.

To illustrate the adaptation in a more straight-forward way, we presented the aiming location and

hand location in the late training of mirror-reversal and visual-rotation, respectively (Figure 5). We

get clearly different patterns between the two tasks. In the rotation task, aiming location and hand

location fall on a ring with a radius of target distance (Figure 5A), while in the mirror task, the aim

and the hand had a large divergence in the x-dimension but little difference in y-dimension (Figure

5B). Thus, it is clear that the learning in the rotation task is more consistent with a polar system,

and learning in the mirror task is more consistent with a Cartesian system. Moreover, in the mirror

task, the hand overshoot in the x-dimension relative to the aim, indicating that implicit adaptation

to mirror-reversal is still in the inappropriate direction.

Figure. 5. Hand location and aiming location at the end of rotation task and mirror task.

A) Covariance ellipses of hand (purple) and aiming location (blue) for 95% CI at the end of the rotation.

The data of twelve participants were averaged trial by trial. Hand location and aiming location of all targets

are aligned as if the target were in quadrant IV (target -45°, unshown). The covariance of the last forty trials

in the perturbation phase was calculated to plot the covariance ellipses. Green spot indicates the target

location in quadrant I. B) Covariance ellipses of hand location and aiming location at the end of the vertical

mirror. Hand location and aiming location are aligned as if the target were in quadrant II (target 135°,

unshown).

Aftereffect

In both tasks, no significant aftereffect was found in the washout. In rotation task, there was almost

nothing left in both x (-0.07 ± 6.42 mm, t_{10} = 0.039, p=0.97) and y-dimension (-2.81 ± 6.80 mm, t_{10}

= 1.38, p=0.20) in the washout. In mirror task, hand location slightly went negative in x-dimension

(-6.97 ± 7.17 mm, t_{10} = 3.36, p=0.06). Since a correct re-aiming location in training is the same

location as another target on the opposite side of the mirror axis, the new aiming location in

washout (i.e. directly at the target) is at the same location as that for the opposite target in training.

Therefore, the negative aftereffect in x-dimension was aligned with the positive implicit adaptation

in the training. Again, very little was found in y-dimension (4.61 ± 5.15 mm, t_{10} = 3.10, p=0.10) in

the mirror task. One reason for the weak aftereffect might be we only presented the feedback at

the movement end, This kind of feedback was proved to induced less adaptation compared to

presenting the feedback during the whole movement (Taylor et al., 2014).

General Discussion

In the current study, we examined the direction and the coordinate system of implicit adaptation

under a mirror reversal perturbation. In the first experiment, we isolated the implicit learning

process with clamp mirror perturbation and confirmed that implicit adaptation is in the wrong

direction for the mirror reversal, in which the adaptation could only increase the error instead of

compensating for it. Interestingly, this adaptation was somehow suppressed during the three-day

training. In the second experiment, we examined whether the implicit system was sensitive to the

difference in coordinate systems between the rotation and mirror perturbations. This was

accomplished by using an aiming report procedure which allowed us to separate implicit and

explicit components during the learning. We found the implicit learning system appeared to be

consistent with the coordinate system of the particular perturbation, but puzzlingly continued to

adapt in the wrong direction for a mirror reversal.

Adaptation to mirror reversal is in the right coordinate but wrong direction

Both our two experiments aligned with several previous studies that have found that the implicit

system learns the mirror reversal in the wrong direction (Gritsenko et al., 2009, Telgen et al., 2014,

Kasuga et al., 2015, Hadjiosif et al., 2021, Wilterson & Taylor, 2019). Hadjiosif and colleagues

have suggested that this pattern of adaptation in the mirror-reversal is inconsistent with the

internal forward model framework for sensorimotor adaptation (Jordan & Rumelhart, 1992;

Krakauer & Shadmehr, 2006; Shadmehr, Smith, & Krakauer, 2010). Here, the forward model

supposes that the implicit learning system works to minimize the sensory-prediction error (SPE),

that is the error between the aim position and the feedback. To reduce an SPE in a mirror reversal,

the participant's hand should adapt closer to the mirror axis, which would bring the cursor and

hand to get close to each other. However, the hand appears to adapt in the direction of the rotation

and, thus, increases the error in a mirror-reversal task (Wilterson & Taylor, 2019; Hadjiosif et al.,

2021). This raised concerns to the internal forward model and asked for other computational

models to explain the implicit learning process. Remarkably, even though the implicit component

failed to work under mirror reversal, participants actually performed well in the mirror task in

Experiment 2 by applying re-aiming strategies. Aligned with previous studies (Wilterson & Taylor,

2019), our result suggested that learning under mirror reversal is at least initially made possible

through explicit re-aiming strategies.

Besides the direction of adaptation, the degree of implicit adaptation to different targets in the

mirror reversal were consistent with adaptation to different sizes of rotations (Morehead et al.,

2017; Schween & Hegele, 2017; Schween et al., 2018). The strong similarity between the

performance in mirror and rotation tasks raises the question of whether the implicit system could

only process the perturbation as a rotation. However, in a two-dimensional reaching task, in which

participants need to control both movement angle and radius, we found implicit adaptation under

a mirror reversal was very different from that under a 90° rotation in terms of the coordinate system.

This result is consistent with Hudson and Landy's (2016) study, where they found that participants

were sensitive to the coordinate system of an error that was generated in a Polar or a Cartesian

system. However, they did not separate the implicit and explicit systems in their study. Our

findings suggest that both implicit and explicit learning systems appear to be sensitive to the

coordinate system of the perturbation.

We note that, unlike mirror reversal which is somewhat artificial and unlikely to be encountered in

everyday life, errors in different coordinate systems may be more common in motor learning. For

example, controlling a steering wheel or a bicycle handle asks for manipulation in the Polar system,

while a computer mouse may need motor planning in the Cartesian system. However, what

information signals the appropriate coordinate system remains to be determined. For every single

target in Experiment 2, there was 90° of separation between targets, which is generally outside

the range of generalization (Brayanov, Press, & Smith, 2012; Krakauer, Pine, Ghilardi, & Ghez,

2000; Zhou, Fitzgerald, Colucci-Chang, Murthy, & Joiner, 2017). This limitation in the breadth of

generalization would suggest that the coordinate system would have to be determined individually

at each target location.

There is the possibility that the global pattern of errors could signal the coordinate system of the

errors, however, evidence for a meta-learning processes such as this is scant. While incidental

contextual cues have been shown to affect learning and change the pattern of generalization

(Taylor, Hieber, & Ivry, 2013), it most likely operates on explicit re-aiming. We made sure to

remove these visual cues, such as the arrangement of the targets or requiring shooting

movements in experiment 2. However, explicit strategies might still operate in different coordinate

systems for mirror and for rotation since they ask for different mental manipulations. Different

explicit strategies might generate errors in different coordinate systems, which then influences the

selection of coordinate system for implicit adaptation. Another possibility is the consistency of the

error signals, which has been shown to reduce the sensitivity of implicit adaptation (Castro-

Gonzalez, Hadjiosif, Hemphill, and Smith, 2014, Hutter & Taylor, 2018; Albert et al., 2021). In the

mirror-reversal task, the sign of the error changes across the workspace while in the rotation task

it remains consistent. Again, however, it is unclear if a memory for errors (Herzfeld, Vaswani,

Marko, & Shadmehr, 2014) operates globally and could serve as a cue to signal a particular

coordinate system.

Suppression of the implicit adaptation

One interesting result in Experiment 1 is that the adaptation in the wrong direction is suppressed

significantly during the three-day training. We also observed suppression of implicit adaptation in

our previous five-day contingent mirror task (Wilterson & Taylor, 2019). One explanation for this

suppression is that the implicit system changed its error-correction policy during the extended

training. When exposed to the mirror reversal, a transformation matrix for rotation was initially

applied, which caused the unsuitable adaptation, but after days of training, the implicit system

may gradually change the error derivative (Lillicrap et al., 2013; Hadjiosif et al., 2021) or create a

more appropriate transformation matrix for a mirror reversal. However, even after days of training,

the accumulated adaptation is still in the wrong direction, and to our knowledge, no research has

observed an adaptation to the correct direction under mirror reversal. This poses the question of

whether the implicit system figure can eventually correct for a mirror reversal or just becomes

suppressed.

Attenuation of implicit adaptation does not appear to be specific to the mirror reversal task.

Previous studies also found attenuation of the implicit system in some rotation tasks (Avraham et

al., 2020). Our previous five-day rotation task (Wilterson & Taylor, 2019) showed a tendency of

attenuation in explicit adaptation in the extended training. Moreover, a recent study indicated that

implicit adaptation would be attenuated in the re-exposure of the visual perturbation compared to

the original adaptation (Leow, Marinovic, de Rugy, & Carroll, 2020; Avraham et al., 2021). What's

more, another study manipulated the variation of the perturbation in a rotation task suggesting

that the error sensitivity of the implicit system seems to be suppressed when continuously

exposed to the error signal of different directions (Fernandes, Stevenson, & Kording, 2012, Albert

et al., 2020). Although the error signal is clamped to each target in our Experiment 1, the error

direction is opposite in terms of clockwise or counter-clockwise for targets on the two sides of the

mirror axis. Thus, exposure to inconsistent error directions might contribute to the attenuation of

implicit adaptation in our result.

The utility of the implicit system in the sensorimotor learning

The incorrect adaptation direction for mirror reversal and the suppression of the adaptation across

days raise the question regarding the utility of implicit adaptation in motor learning. Since the

mirror task was indeed the experiment that defined implicit learning (Milner, 1962), it is strange

that recent studies showed that implicit adaptation could not overcome the mirror-reversal. A

plausible account is that another implicit learning system, e.g., reinforcement learning system,

might be critical in motor learning instead of the so-called "implicit adaptation" defined here. The

"implicit adaptation" referred to in our analysis was initially defined and proved to be useful in the

visuomotor rotation task (Taylor, Krakauer, & Ivry, 2014; Taylor & Ivry, 2011). However, as

accumulated evidence showed the limitations of this implicit adaptation (Bond & Taylor, 2015;

Hutter & Taylor, 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Schaefer, Shelly, & Thoroughman, 2012, Shmuelof,

Krakauer, & Mazzoni, 2012; Morehead et al., 2017), its utility might be restricted to several specific

tasks but unable to full fill complex task demands, e.g., mirror-reversal. In those complex

situations, this implicit system might be suppressed, and other implicit learning systems somehow

help explore and select a proper policy.

Conclusions

Our study confirmed that implicit adaptation operates in the wrong direction under mirror reversal

perturbation. This adaptation was attenuated in the extended training across three days. Although

in the wrong direction, the implicit system does appear sensitive to a particular coordinate system.

These findings are consistent with previous reports challenging the flexibility of this implicit

adaptation process (Bond & Taylor, 2015; Morehead et al., 2017; Wilterson & Taylor, 2019;

Hadjiosif et al., 2021).

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study and code for the task and for data analyses are

available from the corresponding author upon request.

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