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Nonlinear processing of shape information in rat lateral extrastriate cortex

Abbreviated title: Nonlinear shape processing in rat visual cortex

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Abstract

In rodents, the progression of extrastriate areas located laterally to primary visual cortex (V1) has been assigned to a putative object-processing pathway (homologous to the primate ventral stream), based on anatomical considerations. Recently, we found functional support for such attribution (Tafazoli et al., 2017), by showing that this cortical progression is specialized for coding object identity despite view changes – the hallmark property of a ventral-like pathway. Here, we sought to clarify what computations are at the base of such specialization. To this aim, we performed multi-electrode recordings from V1 and laterolateral area LL (located at the apex of the ventral-like hierarchy) of male rats, during the presentation of drifting gratings and noise movies. We found that the extent to which neuronal responses were entrained to the phase of the gratings sharply dropped from V1 to LL, along with the quality of the receptive fields inferred through reverse correlation. Concomitantly, the tendency of neurons to respond to different oriented gratings increased, while the sharpness of orientation tuning declined. Critically, these trends are consistent with the nonlinear summation of visual inputs that is expected to take place along the ventral stream, according to the predictions of a hierarchical model of ventral computations and a meta-analysis of the monkey literature. This suggests an intriguing homology between the mechanisms responsible for building up shape selectivity and transformation tolerance in the visual cortex of primates and rodents, reasserting the potential of the latter as models to investigate ventral stream functions at the circuitry level.

Significance Statement

Despite their growing popularity as models of visual functions, it remains unclear whether, in rodents, visual cortex contains specialized modules for processing shape information. To addresses this question, we compared how neuronal tuning evolves from rat primary visual cortex (V1) to a downstream visual cortical region (area LL) that previous work has implicated in shape processing. In our experiments, LL neurons displayed a stronger tendency to respond to drifting gratings with different orientations, while maintaining a sustained response across the whole duration of the drift cycle. These trends match the increased complexity of pattern selectivity and the augmented tolerance to stimulus translation found in monkey visual temporal cortex, thus revealing a surprising homology between shape processing in rodents and primates.

Introduction

In rodents, primary visual cortex (V1) is bordered by several extrastriate visual areas, whose involvement in dorsal and ventral stream processing [i.e., extraction of, respectively, motion and shape information (Maunsell and Newsome, 1987; Orban, 2008)] has become the object of intense investigation (Gao et al., 2010; Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Andermann et al., 2011; Marshel et al., 2011; Roth et al., 2012; Matsui and Ohki, 2013; Glickfeld et al., 2013; Tohmi et al., 2014; Vermaercke et al., 2014; Ji et al., 2015; Vinken et al., 2016, 2017; Tafazoli et al., 2017). Inspired by previous anatomical (Wang and Burkhalter, 2007; Wang et al., 2011a, 2012a) and lesion studies (Gallardo et al., 1979; McDaniel et al., 1982; Wörtwein et al., 1993; Aggleton et al., 1997; Sánchez et al., 1997; Tees, 1999), we recently looked for functional evidence of ventral processing along the progression of extrastriate areas that, in the rat brain, run laterally to V1 (Tafazoli et al., 2017). Our experiments showed that the neuronal populations along this progression become increasingly capable of supporting discrimination of visual objects despite transformations in their appearance (e.g., due to translation and scaling), with the largest transformation tolerance achieved in the most ventral region: the laterolateral area (LL). This trend closely matches the one found along the primate ventral pathway (Li et al., 2009; Rust and DiCarlo, 2010; DiCarlo et al., 2012; Pagan et al., 2013; Yamins et al., 2014; Hong et al., 2016), thus supporting the central role of LL in processing object information. At the same time, these findings raise the question of what tuning mechanisms are responsible for building up such a specialization for ventral processing in LL.

Here, we addressed this question by comparing V1 and LL in terms of two key properties that are highly discriminant of higher-order vs. lower-order shape processing: the nonlinearity of the stimulus-response relationship and the tendency of a neuron to be selective for different stimulus orientations. The first property was assessed by measuring the

degree to which neuronal responses were entrained to the phase of drifting gratings (Movshon et al., 1978; Skottun et al., 1991; Wypych et al., 2012), thus distinguishing linear, phase-locked neurons with a *simple-like* tuning from nonlinear, phase-invariant units with a *complex-like* behavior – where *simple* and *complex* refer here to the classes of cells originally discovered by Hubel and Wiesel in cat primary visual cortex (Hubel and Wiesel, 1968). In addition, we directly measured the extent to which the spatiotemporal structure of the receptive fields (RFs) in V1 and LL could be inferred using a linear reverse correlation approach, such as the *spike-triggered average* (STA) method (Schwartz et al., 2006; Sharpee, 2013). The second property was assessed by detecting the presence of multiple peaks in the orientation tuning curves (David et al., 2006; Cadieu et al., 2007) and by measuring their sharpness.

We found that, compared to V1 neurons, LL units displayed stronger phase-invariance of the response, while the linear structure of their RFs was much less defined. In addition, LL neurons showed weaker orientation tuning and a stronger tendency to respond to multiple orientations of the gratings. Critically, these findings are consistent with the processing that is expected to take place along the ventral stream, where nonlinear pooling of presynaptic inputs with either similar or different feature selectivity (e.g., orientation preference) is thought to mediate the emergence of, respectively, transformation tolerance and shape selectivity (Riesenhuber and Poggio, 1999; DiCarlo et al., 2012). These conclusions were confirmed by the agreement of our findings with the predictions derived from a hierarchical model of ventral computations and a meta-analysis of the monkey literature. As such, our results suggest a strong homology between the mechanisms that are responsible for supporting higher-order processing of shape information in rodents, primates and brain-inspired machine vision systems.

Materials and methods

Animal preparation and surgery

All animal procedures were in agreement with international and institutional standards for the care and use of animals in research and were approved by the Italian Ministry of Health: project N. DGSAF 22791-A, submitted on Sep. 7, 2015 and approved on Dec. 10, 2015 (approval N. 1254/ 2015-PR). 18 naïve Long-Evans male rats (Charles River Laboratories), with age 3-12 months and weight 300-700 grams, underwent extracellular recordings in either primary visual cortex (V1) or laterolateral (LL) extrastriate visual cortex. Each rat was anesthetized with an intraperitoneal (IP) injection of a solution of 0.3 mg/kg of fentanyl (Fentanest®, Pfizer) and 0.3 mg/kg of medetomidin (Domitor®, Orion Pharma). The level of anesthesia was monitored by checking the absence of tail, ear and hind paw reflex, as well as monitoring blood oxygenation, heart and respiratory rate through a pulse oximeter (Pulsesense-VET, Nonin). A constant flow of oxygen was delivered to the rat throughout the experiment to prevent hypoxia. A constant level of anesthesia was maintained through continuous IP infusion of the same anesthetic solution used for induction, but at a lower concentration (0.1 mg/kg/h Fentanyl and 0.1 g/kg/h Medetomidin), by means of a syringe pump (NE-500; New Era Pump Systems). Temperature was thermostatically kept at 37°C using a heating pad to prevent anesthesia-induced hypothermia.

After induction, the rat was secured to a stereotaxic apparatus (Narishige, SR-5R) and, following a scalp incision, a craniotomy was performed over the target area in the left hemisphere (typically, a 2x2 mm^2 window) and the dura was removed to allow the insertion of the electrode array. When targeting V1, the coordinates of penetration were ~6.5 mm posterior from bregma and ~4.5 mm left to the sagittal suture (i.e., AP 6.5, ML 4.5). When targeting LL, the coordinates were ~1 mm anterior from lambda and ~1 mm medial from the

cranial ridge (i.e., AP 8, ML 5). Throughout the procedure, the rat eyes were protected from direct light and kept hydrated by repeated application of an ophthalmic ointment (Epigel®, Ceva Vetem).

Once the surgical procedure was completed, and prior to probe insertion, the stereotax was placed on a rotating platform and the rat's left eye was covered with black, opaque tape, while the right eye (placed at 30 cm distance from the monitor) was immobilized using a metal eye-ring anchored to the stereotax. The platform was then rotated, so as to align the right eye with the center of the stimulus display and bring the binocular portion of its visual field to cover the left side of the display. During the recordings, the eye and cortex were periodically irrigated using saline solution to keep them properly hydrated.

Neuronal recordings

Extracellular recordings were performed using single-shank 32-channel silicon probes (NeuroNexus Technologies) with site recording area of 775 μm^2 and 25 μm of inter-site spacing. After grounding (by wiring the probe to the animal's head skin), the electrode was manually lowered into the cortical tissue using an oil hydraulic micromanipulator (Narishige, MO-10; typical insertion speed: ~ 5 μm/s), up to the chosen insertion depth (~800-1,000 μm from the cortical surface when targeting V1, and ~2,500 μm when targeting LL). To reach LL, the probe was tilted of 30° relative to the cortical surface (Fig. 1A), whereas it was inserted perpendicularly into V1. Extracellular signals were acquired using a system three workstation (Tucker-Davis Technologies) with a sampling rate of 25 kHz. Before insertion, the probe was coated with Vybrant® DiI cell-labeling solution (Invitrogen, Oregon, USA), to allow visualizing the probe insertion track *post-mortem*, through histological procedures. To this aim, at the end of the recording session, an electrolytic lesion was also performed by delivering current (5 μA for 2 seconds) through the 4 deepest channels at the tip of the shank.

Visual stimuli

During a recording session, two kinds of visual stimulation protocols were administered to the rat.

A 15 min-long receptive field (RF) mapping procedure was used to precisely identify the visual area each neuron was recorded from (see details below) and optimize the location of the RFs for the main presentation protocol (i.e., ensure that most RFs fell inside the monitor, by rotating the platform or repositioning the eye through adjustments of the eye-ring). Following (Niell and Stryker, 2008), during the RF mapping protocol, the animal was presented with 10°-long drifting bars with four different orientations (0º, 45º, 90º and 135º), tiling a grid of 66 different visual field locations (i.e., 6 rows, spanning vertically 50°, and 11 columns, spanning horizontally 100°). The bars were white over a black background. During presentation of these stimuli, multiunit spiking responses (MUA) were plotted as a function of screen position in real-time, so as to estimate the positions of the RF centers across the recording sites of the probe. This allowed identifying in real-time when area LL was reached during an oblique probe insertion. Specifically, area LL was identified by the third "rightwards" (i.e., from nasal to temporal) reversal of the retinotopy at a recording depth close to 2.5 mm DV (Tafazoli et al., 2017). The same analysis was applied off-line to the well-isolated single units obtained by spike sorting (see below) to precisely identify the neurons that were recorded from LL, as illustrated in Figure 1B.

Once the probe was positioned in the final recording location, the main presentation protocol was administered. The rat was presented with: 1) 1s-long drifting gratings, made of all possible combinations of 3 spatial frequencies (SF; 0.02, 0.04 and 0.08 cpd), 3 temporal frequencies (TF; 2, 4 and 8 Hz), and 12 directions (from 0° to 330°, in 30° increments); and 2) 30s-long movies of spatially and temporally correlated noise. To allow for a precise estimate of neuronal tuning properties, each grating stimulus was presented in 20 repeated

trials, while 80 distinct noise movies were shown for an overall duration of 40 minutes. All stimulus conditions were randomly interleaved, with a 1s-long inter stimulus interval (ISI), during which the display was set to a uniform, middle-gray luminance level (later used to estimate spontaneous firing rates; see below). To generate the movies, random white noise movies were spatially correlated by convolving them with a Gaussian kernel. The kernel full width at half maximum (FWHM) was chosen to match a 0.02 cpd SF, which was found to elicit a robust spiking response in a series of pilot experiments. For the same reason (i.e., to increase the chance of evoking spikes), temporal correlations were also introduced, by convolving the movies with a causal exponential kernel with a 33 ms decay time-constant.

Stimuli were generated and controlled in MATLAB (The MathWorks) using the Psychophysics Toolbox package and displayed with gamma correction on a 47-inch LCD monitor (SHARP PNE471R) with 1920x1080 pixel resolution, 220 cd/m^2 maximum brightness and spanning a visual angle of 110° azimuth and 60° elevation. Grating stimuli were presented at 60 Hz refresh rate, whereas noise movies were played at 30 Hz.

Histology

At the end of the recording session, each animal was deeply anesthetized with an overdose of urethane (1.5 gr/kg) and perfused transcardially with phosphate buffer saline (PBS) 0.1 M, followed by 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA) in PBS 0.1 M, pH 7.4. The brain was then removed from the skull, post-fixed in 4% PFA for 24 h at 4°C, and then immersed in cryoprotectant solution (15% w/v sucrose in PBS 0.1 M, then 30% w/v sucrose in PBS 0.1 M) for 48 h at 4 °C. The brain was finally sectioned into 30μm-thick coronal slices using a freezing microtome (Leica SM2000R, Nussloch, Germany). Sections were mounted immediately on Superfrost Plus slides and let dry at room temperature overnight. A brief wash in distilled water was performed, to remove the excess of crystal salt sedimented on the slices, before

inspecting them at the microscope. Each slice was then photographed with a digital camera adapted to a Leica microscope (Leica DM6000B-CTR6000, Nussloch, Germany), acquiring both a DiI fluorescence image (700 nm DiI filter) and a bright-field image at 2.5X and 10X magnification. Following the acquisition of this set of images, the sections displaying the electrode fluorescent track were further stained for Nissl substance using a Cresyl Violet Acetate solution, and new pictures were taken at 2.5X and 10X magnification. By superimposing the fluorescence, bright-field and Nissl-stained images, it was possible to reconstruct the tilt and the anteroposterior (AP) position of the probe during the recording session.

Selection of the single units included in the analyses

Responses of single units were isolated offline by applying the spike sorting package KlustaKwik-Phy (Rossant et al., 2016). Automated spike detection, feature extraction and expectation maximization (EM) clustering were followed by manual refinement of the sorting using a customized version of the "Kwik-GUI" interface. Specifically, the manual curation of the automatic output was performed by taking into consideration many features of the candidate clusters: 1) the distance between their centroids and their compactness in the space of the principal components of the waveforms (a key measure of goodness of spike isolation); 2) the shape of the auto- and cross-correlograms (important to decide whether to merge or not two clusters); 3) the variation, over time, of the principal component coefficients of the waveform (important to detect and take into account possible electrode drifts); and 4) the shape of the average waveform (to exclude, as artifacts, clearly non-physiological signals). Clusters suspected to contain a mixture of one or more single units were separated using the "reclustering" feature of the GUI (i.e., by rerunning the EM clustering algorithm on the spikes of these clusters only). At the end of the manual refinement step, only responsive,

well-isolated single units, with reproducible firing across repeated stimulus presentations, were included in the dataset used to perform all subsequent analyses. Specifically, such units were defined by having: i) less than 0.5% of "rogue" spikes within 2 ms in their autocorrelogram (i.e., units displaying a clear refractory period); ii) a mean stimulus response firing rate of 2 spikes/s above baseline (i.e., responsive units); and iii) responsiveness in at least 30% of the trials in one or more stimulus conditions (i.e., stable isolation during the recording and reproducible stimulus-evoked response). We also applied an additional, very loose screening on the reproducibility of the firing rate across repeated stimulus presentations, by including only neurons with a mean correlation coefficient of the direction-tuning curve across trials not lower than 0.03. The average baseline (spontaneous) firing-rate of each well-isolated unit was computed by averaging its spiking activity over every ISI condition. These criteria led to the selection of 105 units in V1 and 104 units in LL.

Analysis of the responses to drifting gratings

The response of a neuron to a drifting grating was computed by counting how many spikes the neuron fired (on average, across repeated presentations of the stimulus) during the whole duration of stimulus presentation, and then subtracting the spontaneous firing rate (see above). To quantify the tuning of a neuron for the orientation and direction of drifting gratings, we computed two standard metrics, the orientation and direction selectivity indexes (OSI and DSI), which are defined as: $\mathrm{OSI} = \left(R_{\mathrm{pref}} - R_{\mathrm{ortho}}\right)/\left(R_{\mathrm{pref}} + R_{\mathrm{ortho}}\right)$, and $\mathrm{DSI} = \left(R_{\mathrm{pref}} - R_{\mathrm{opposite}}\right)/\left(R_{\mathrm{pref}} + R_{\mathrm{opposite}}\right)$, where R_{pref} is the response of the neuron to the preferred direction, R_{ortho} is the response to the orthogonal direction, relative to the preferred one (i.e., $R_{\mathrm{ortho}} = R_{\mathrm{pref}} + \pi/2$), and R_{opposite} is the response to the opposite direction, relative to the preferred one (i.e., $R_{\mathrm{opposite}} = R_{\mathrm{pref}} + \pi$). Values close to one indicate very sharp tuning, whereas values close to zero are typical of untuned units.

The modulation of the spiking response to drifting gratings at the temporal frequency f_1 of the stimulus was quantified by a modulation index (MI) adapted from (Wypych et al., 2012) and defined as:

$$\mathrm{MI} = \left| \frac{PS(f_1) - \langle PS \rangle_f}{\sqrt{\langle PS^2 \rangle_f - \langle PS \rangle_f^2}} \right|,$$

where PS indicates the power spectral density of the stimulus-evoked response, i.e., of the peri-stimulus time histogram (PSTH), and $\langle\ \rangle_f$ denotes the average over frequencies. This metric measures the difference between the power of the response at the stimulus frequency and the average value of the power spectrum in units of its standard deviation. The power spectrum was computed by applying the Blackman-Tukey estimation method to the baseline-subtracted, 10ms-binned PSTH. Being MI a standardized measure, values greater than 3 can be interpreted as signaling a strong modulation of the firing rate at the stimulus frequency (typical of simple-like cells), whereas values smaller than 3 indicate poor modulation (typical of complex-like cells).

Bimodal tuning (i.e., the presence of two distinct peaks in the orientation-tuning curve) was quantified by the Bimodal Selectivity Index (David et al., 2006; Cadieu et al., 2007), defined as $\mathrm{BSI} = \left(R_{\text{2nd peak}} - R_{\text{2nd trough}}\right) / \left(R_{\text{1st peak}} - R_{\text{1st trough}}\right)$, where $R_{\text{1st peak}}$ and $R_{\text{2nd peak}}$ indicate the two largest peaks in the orientation-tuning curve (with $R_{\text{1st peak}} > R_{\text{2nd peak}}$), and $R_{\text{1st trough}}$ and $R_{\text{2nd trough}}$ indicate the deepest troughs (with $R_{\text{1st trough}} < R_{\text{2nd trough}}$). This index takes values close to one for tuning curves displaying two equally high peaks and close to 0 for tuning curves with a single peak.

Analysis of the responses to the noise movies

We used the spike-triggered average (STA) analysis (Schwartz et al., 2006; Sharpee, 2013) to estimate the linear RF structure of each recorded neuron. The method was applied to the spike trains fired by the neuron in response to the spatiotemporally correlated noise (see above). The method yields an ordered sequence of images, each showing the linear approximation of the spatial RF at different times before spike generation (see examples in Fig. 2). To take into account the correlation structure of our stimulus ensemble and prevent artifactual blurring of the reconstructed filters, we "decorrelated" the resulting STA images by dividing them by the covariance matrix of the whole stimulus ensemble (Schwartz et al., 2006; Sharpee, 2013), using Tikhonov regularization to handle covariance matrix inversion. Statistical significance of the STA images was then assessed pixel wise, by applying the following permutation test. After randomly reshuffling the spike times, the STA analysis was repeated multiple times (n = 50) to derive a null distribution of intensity values for the case of no linear stimulus-spike relationship. This allowed z-scoring the actual STA intensity values using the mean and standard deviation of this null distribution (Figs. 2 and 4). The temporal span of the spatiotemporal linear kernel reconstructed via STA extended till 330 ms before spike generation, corresponding to a duration of 10 frames of the noise movie played at 30 Hz (Fig. 2).

After estimating the linear spatiotemporal structure of a RF with STA, we used it as a filter in the input stage of a classical Linear-Nonlinear (LN) model of stimulus-response relationship (Schwartz et al., 2006; Sharpee, 2013). To obtain a prediction of the tuning of the neuron over the direction axis, the sequence of frames of each drifting grating was fed as an input to the STA-estimated linear filter. The output of the filter was then passed through a rectifying nonlinearity with unit gain to obtain the final response of the model to each stimulus frame. We finally integrated the response of the LN model through time to predict

the activity of the neuron for each direction of the tuning curve. The agreement between the LN-predicted and observed tuning curves (black vs. colored curves in Fig. 2.i) was quantified by computing the fraction of variance explained by the model prediction. In addition, we also quantified how well the time course of the neuronal response to the preferred grating was explained by the time course of the LN-model prediction (black vs. colored curves in Fig. 2.ii, bottom), again, in terms of explained variance.

We also estimated the amount of signal contained in a given STA image by defining a quality metric based on a measure of maximal local contrast. Specifically, we used MATLAB "rangefilt" function (MATLAB Image Processing toolbox) to compute the local contrast in a STA image over convolutional patches with size equal to one fifth of the total image size and stride 1 (the local contrast in every patch was measured as the difference between the maximum and the minimum image intensity values within the patch itself). From the resulting local-contrast map (Fig. 5A, middle plot), we obtained a distribution of contrast intensity values (Fig. 5A, rightmost plot), and we defined a contrast index (CI) by taking the 0.9 quantile of this distribution (dashed line; the 0.9 quantile was chosen, instead of simply using the maximum local-contrast value, to make this measure more noise-robust). This CI metric was then used to quantify the amount of signal contained in the STA image. A STA-based RF was considered as well defined if, among the sequence of STA images corresponding to each pre-spike-generation time lag (see examples in Fig. 2), the one with the highest contrast had CI > 5.5 (usually, such highest-contrast image was the third in the sequence, corresponding to 66-99 ms before the spiking event; see examples in Fig. 5C). It should be noted that, since the intensity values of the original STA images were expressed as z-scores (see above), the 5.5 threshold can be interpreted in terms of peak-to-peak (i.e. white-to-black) distance in sigma units of the z-scored STA values.

To further analyze the spatial structure of each well-defined, STA-based RF we automatically counted how many distinct lobes the highest-contrast STA image obtained for a unit contained. To this aim, the selected image was background-suppressed with the Perona-Malik algorithm (Perona and Malik, 1990) to enhance the high-intensity regions within the RF and reduce noise-driven false lobe detections. We then took the modulus of the resulting image and we set a threshold over its z-score values (ranging from 3 to 6 units of standard deviations; Fig. 5B). Based on such binarized image, we computed: i) the centroid position of each simply connected region (blue dots); and ii) the area-weighted center of mass (CM) of the image (green dot). Finally, we defined a "region of acceptability" for the centroids of the simply connected regions to be included in the lobe count. This region was a circle, centered on the CM, with a radius that was twice as large as the diameter of the largest simply connected region. Setting this acceptability circle allowed excluding spurious, simply connected (often very small) regions that were far away from the CM of the STA image (e.g., see the yellow dot in Fig. 5B), especially in the case of poorly defined RFs. The total number of accepted centroids at the end of this selection procedure is the lobe count reported in Figure 5F for the different binarization thresholds.

HMAX simulations

To obtain predictions about the evolution of the tuning properties of visual neurons along an object-processing pathway, we simulated ventral stream functional architecture using the HMAX model (Riesenhuber and Poggio, 1999). The structure of the model will be described at length in the Results (Fig. 3) and further motivated in the Discussion. Here, we provide some technical details about its specific implementation. For our application, we have chosen the version of the model described in (Serre et al., 2007b) and downloaded from the website http://maxlab.neuro.georgetown.edu/docs/hmax/hmaxMatlab.tar. Briefly, the model is a

feedforward neural network with alternating layers of units performing: 1) either a max-pooling (invariance-building) operation over input units with the same feature-selectivity, but RFs having different positions/scales (C1 and C2 units; dashed lines in Fig. 3); or 2) a template-matching (selectivity-building) operation over input units with different feature selectivity (S1 and S2 units; solid lines). As pointed out in the Discussion, the feature representations built by the model in the S-type layers are not learned, and there is no attempt to maximize classification accuracy in a given discrimination task. The S1 layer is simply a bank of Gabor filters with various orientations, spatial frequencies, positions and scales (similar to V1 simple cells), while the S2 units are tuned to random patches of images taken from various databases (e.g., Caltech 101), with different units having as a template the same image patch, but at different positions and scales. Such static, hardwired architecture makes the model very suitable to isolate the role of the max-pooling and template-matching computations in determining the tuning for oriented gratings along a ventral-like processing hierarchy.

To this aim, we fed as an input to the network (i.e., to the S1 layer) a set of drifting gratings spanning the same range of directions used in the neurophysiology experiment. Each drifting grating consisted of a sequence of progressively phase-shifted frames, and the activations of the units of the network in response to such frames were computed to simulate the dynamics of the neuronal responses during stimulus presentation. For each sampled unit, its preferred stimulus direction was selected and the power spectrum of its time-dependent (i.e., frame-dependent) response was computed to estimate the modulation index (MI), thus quantifying its phase sensitivity. We also integrated the activation of each unit over the whole stimulus presentation to compute its overall mean response for a given grating direction. By iterating this procedure for each stimulus direction, we built orientation and direction tuning curves and computed OSI and BSI values. All these indexes were computed for a randomly

selected subset of units (n = 250) in each layer. The resulting distributions are those shown in Figures 4C, 7C and 8C.

Experimental design and statistical analysis

To decide how many neurons to record in each of the two areas (V1 and LL) under investigation, we took inspiration from previous studies of rodent and monkey visual cortex (see Tables 1 and 2). In most of these studies, a good statistical assessment of the tuning properties of visual neurons (e.g., orientation tuning and phase sensitivity) was based on a sample size of > 100 units, although a few studies used less (~50 or fewer) and some used more (> 200). We thus set as a target for our study to collect at least 100 very well-isolate single-units (SUs) per area. Since the number of SUs obtained from each recording session was highly unpredictable, we performed multiple recording sessions from the same or different animals until our target number was reached in both areas. This required performing neuronal recordings from V1 of 12 different rats and from area LL of 6 different rats. In such a way, we obtained a total of 105 SUs in V1 and 104 in LL, with the average number of SUs per animal being 8.75 ± 8.49 in V1 and 17.33 ± 15.78 in LL, and the average number of recording sessions per animal being 1.2 ± 0.45 in V1 and 1.5 ± 0.54 in LL.

Throughout the study, differences between median values of two distributions were quantified using a Mann-Whitney U-test. Differences in the fraction of units above or below a certain threshold index value (for MI, OSI, BSI or CI) were quantified using the χ^2 test for homogeneity with one degree of freedom. When needed (i.e., in case of small sample size), Fisher exact test was used to compare two distributions (e.g., the lobe count distributions in Fig. 5F). Finally, in the meta-analysis shown in Figure 9, we statistically compared the mean fractions of modulated (Fig. 9A) and orientation-tuned (Fig. 9B) units across primate visual cortical areas V1, V4 and IT using a one-way ANOVA.

Results

We used 32-channel silicon probes to perform extracellular recordings from areas V1 and LL (Fig. 1A) of anaesthetized rats that were presented with drifting gratings of various orientations, spatial (SF) and temporal (TF) frequencies, as well as with 80 30s-long movies of spatially and temporally correlated noise (Materials and Methods). A total of 105 and 104 neurons were recorded, respectively, from V1 and LL. With "neurons" we refer here to well-isolated single units that were effectively and reproducibly driven by one or more of the grating stimuli across repeated presentations (Materials and Methods). In addition to the main stimulus presentation protocol, we also run a receptive field mapping procedure (Materials and Methods) to track the progression of the RFs recorded along a probe (Fig. 1B). Given that, in rodents, the polarity of the retinotopic map reverses at the boundary between each pair of adjacent visual cortical areas (Glickfeld and Olsen, 2017), tracking the retinotopy of the RFs, combined with the histological reconstruction of the probe insertion track (Fig. 1A), allowed a precise identification of the units that were recorded from LL.

Figure 1 near here

Examples of tuning curves and spatiotemporal receptive fields in V1 and LL

In both V1 and LL, neuronal responses to drifting gratings displayed a variety of tuning profiles that matched well the RF structures inferred through STA. This is illustrated in Figure 2, which reports, for each of two representative V1 (A-B) and LL (C-D) neurons: i) the tuning curve as a function of the direction of the grating, when presented at the most effective SF and TF; ii) the modulation of the firing rate elicited by the grating at the preferred direction; and iii) the sequence of STA images showing the spatiotemporal evolution of the RF structure. Each panel also reports the values of the metrics used to

quantify the tuning properties of the neurons (Materials and Methods). Orientation and direction tuning were measured using the *orientation* and *direction selectivity indexes* (OSI and DSI), whose values range from 1 (maximal selectivity) to 0 (no selectivity), depending on the difference between the responses to the preferred orientation/direction and the orthogonal/opposite one. We also computed a *bimodal selectivity index* (BSI) to assess whether the tuning curve for orientation had multiple peaks. This index ranges from 0 (perfectly unimodal curve) to 1 (equal responsiveness to two non-adjacent orientations), and can be taken as a measure of complexity of tuning, with large BSI indicating selectivity for multiple oriented features (David et al., 2006; Cadieu et al., 2007). Finally, we computed a *modulation index* (MI) to quantify the extent to which the firing rate of a neuron was entrained to the phase of the gratings (Movshon et al., 1978; Skottun et al., 1991; Wypych et al., 2012), with MI > 3 indicating responses that were strongly phase-locked to the stimulus temporal frequency. As for the spatiotemporal filter estimated via STA, we used it as the linear stage of a Linear-Nonlinear (LN) model of stimulus-response mapping (Schwartz et al., 2006; Sharpee, 2013) to predict the tuning curve of the neuron over the direction axis and the time course of its response to the preferred grating (in both cases, prediction accuracy was quantified as the fraction of response variance that was explained by the model).

Figure 2A shows an example V1 neuron with sharp orientation tuning, good direction selectivity, and a response that was strongly modulated at the temporal frequency (4 Hz) of the preferred grating (blue curves/dots). These properties match those of a *simple cell* (Hubel and Wiesel, 1968), detecting the presence of an oriented edge at a specific visual field location – hence, the modulation of the firing rate, produced by the phasic alternation of light and dark oriented stripes, while the preferred grating swept across the neuron's RF. Such position-dependent neuronal firing suggests that the response of the neuron to a visual pattern can be approximated as the sum of its responses to the individual constituent elements (the

"pixels") of the stimulus. Accordingly, the STA-reconstructed RF (Fig. 2A.iii) had a Gabor-like, double-lobed appearance, with an orientation matching the one corresponding to the peak of the tuning curve (Fig. 2A.i). When used as a filter in a LN model, the STA-based RF accurately predicted the tuning of the neuron over the direction and time axes (Figs. 2A.i and ii, respectively; black curves), thus confirming the linearity of the stimulus-response relationship. By contrast, the example unit shown in Figure 2B, while still being selective for a single orientation, displayed a highly non-linear behavior, which is typical of the class of neurons known as *complex cells* (Hubel and Wiesel, 1968). This is shown by the lack of modulation of the response to the preferred grating (Fig. 2B.ii), by the poorly defined spatiotemporal structure of the STA-based RF (Fig. 2B.iii), and by the failure of the latter to account for the tuning and time-modulation of the response (Fig. 2B.i-ii; compare blue and black curves).

Figure 2 near here

Interestingly, simple-like and complex-like units were also found in area LL. For instance, Figure 2C shows an LL neuron with a simple-like behavior, as indicated by the phase modulation of its response (Fig. 2C.ii; orange dots and curve), which was predicted with reasonable accuracy (black line) by the STA-reconstructed RF. This is consistent with the well-defined spatiotemporal structure of the RF (Fig. 2C.iii), which, however, was not able to explain as much variance of the direction-tuning curve (Fig. 2C.i; black vs. orange curve) as in the case of the example V1 simple cell (Fig. 2A.i). This could be due to the sensitivity of the neuron to multiple stimulus orientations, as shown by the large BSI value (0.52), which reflects the presence of two peaks (at 0° and 240°) in the direction-tuning curve (Fig. 2C.i; orange curve) – a behavior that cannot be captured by a RF with a linear, Gabor-like structure. Figure 2D shows instead an example LL unit that was sharply tuned for a

single orientation, but displayed a typical complex-like behavior: its response to the preferred grating was unmodulated (Fig. 2D.ii), and both the direction-tuning curve (Fig. 2D.i) and the response dynamics (Fig. 2D.ii) were poorly explained by the STA-reconstructed RF (orange vs. black curves), which, in turn, lacked any clear spatiotemporal structure (Fig. 2D.iii).

These examples illustrate how it is possible to compare the level of linearity of the stimulus-response relationship for the neuronal populations recorded in V1 and LL, along with the sharpness and complexity (e.g., bimodality) of their tuning for orientation. To guide such comparison, we derived predictions about the evolution of neuronal tuning along an object processing hierarchy, by assessing how our grating stimuli were represented in HMAX – a neural network model of the ventral stream that is able to account for several qualitative trends in the tuning properties of ventral neurons (Riesenhuber and Poggio, 1999; Serre et al., 2007b; Cadieu et al., 2007; Zoccolan et al., 2007; Cox and Riesenhuber, 2015; Leibo et al., 2017). In its simplest implementation, HMAX is a 4-layered, feed-forward network, with each layer consisting of either simple-like (S) or complex-like (C) units (Fig. 3). The first layer (S1) is a bank of Gabor filters that simulate V1 simple cells. In the second layer (C1), each unit performs a max pooling over a set of S1 afferents with the same orientation tuning, but slightly different RF positions or sizes. This yields orientation-tuned C1 units that are similar to V1 complex cells – i.e., they have larger RFs (dashed circles in Fig. 3), with increased position- and size-tolerance, as compared to their S1 afferents. In the third layer (S2), each unit performs a non-linear template-matching computation over a set of C1 afferent units with different preferred orientations. As a result, the S2 units are tuned for complex visual patterns, made of multiple oriented features, like the neurons in higher-level stages of the primate ventral stream, such as cortical area V4 and the inferotemporal cortex (IT) (DiCarlo et al., 2012). Finally, in the fourth layer (C2), each unit performs again a max pooling over S2 afferents that are tuned for the same visual pattern, but with slightly different

RF positions and sizes. This results in C2 units with complex shape selectivity and large tolerance to position and size changes. Here, we used this basic 4-layered architecture to predict how the build-up of shape tuning and invariance should affect neuronal sensitivity to the orientation and temporal frequency of the gratings. In our simulations, layers S1 and C1 correspond to the simple and complex cells of V1, while layers S2 and, above all, C2, correspond to a downstream, higher-level area (such as LL).

Figure 3 near here

The linearity of the stimulus-response relationship decreases from V1 to LL

To establish whether V1 and LL neurons differed in terms of the linearity of the stimulus-response relationship, we first compared the extent to which neuronal responses in the two areas were modulated by the phase of the drifting gratings. Despite the presence of both strongly phase-modulated and unmodulated units in both areas, the distributions of the modulation index (MI) were strikingly different in V1 and LL (Fig. 4A). In agreement with earlier studies of rat (Girman et al., 1999) and mouse (Niell and Stryker, 2008; Van den Bergh et al., 2010) primary visual cortex, the MI distribution obtained in V1 (blue curve) revealed the existence of two roughly equi-populated classes of neurons, falling, respectively, below and above the MI = 3 threshold that distinguishes complex-like from simple-like cells. By contrast, in LL, most MI values were lower than 3, following a distribution (orange curve) with a prominent peak at MI < 1, which is indicative of a strong prevalence of complex-like units. As a result, the median MI was much lower in LL than in V1 (1.28 vs. 2.55; orange vs. blue line) and this difference was highly significant ($p = 8.04*10^{-6}$; Mann-Whitney U-test). Similarly, the fraction of simple-like cells in LL was half as large as in V1 (Fig. 4B; $p = 1.93*10^{-4}$, χ^2 test).

As illustrated in Figure 2D.ii, the poor sensitivity to the phase of the drifting gratings observed in LL indicates that most neurons in this area respond to phasic stimuli with a sustained firing. This suggests that, in LL, most neurons are tolerant to position changes of their preferred visual stimuli. This interpretation was supported by the evolution of the modulation index observed in HMAX, where phase-sensitive cells were only found in the bottom layer (S1), corresponding to V1 simple cells. By contrast, from the C1 layer onward, all units displayed a fully phase-invariant behavior, because of the nonlinear max pooling that, in C1, implements position and size invariance. As a result, the combined distribution of MI values obtained in S1 and C1 was in qualitative agreement with the mixture of simple and complex cells observed in V1 (compare to Fig. 2A; blue curve). Similarly, the extreme phase invariance observed in S2 and C2 was qualitatively consistent with the stark prevalence of complex-like cells found in LL (> 80%; compare to Fig. 2A and B; orange curve/bar).

Figure 4 near here

To further assess the linearity of the stimulus-response relationship in V1 and LL, we evaluated the quality of the RFs inferred through the STA method. To this aim, each pixel intensity value in a STA image was z-scored, based on the null distribution of STA values obtained for that pixel, after randomly permuting the association between frames of the movie and spike times 50 times (Materials and Methods). This allowed expressing the intensity values of the STA image in terms of their difference (in units of standard deviation) from what expected in the case of no frame-related information carried by the spikes. We then computed a *contrast index* (CI; see Fig. 5A and a full description in Materials and Methods) to measure the amount of signal contained in the image and establish a conservative threshold (CI > 5.5), beyond which the linear RF structure of a neuron could be considered as well defined.

Figure 5C shows the 10 best STA-based RFs in each area, sorted according to the magnitude of their CI, from largest to smallest. In V1, most of these RFs featured equally prominent excitatory and inhibitory regions, often displaying a sharp, Gabor-like structure, while, in LL, the best STA images typically presented a single lobe, with much lower contrast. As a result, the median CI was higher for V1 than for LL neurons (blue vs. orange dashed line in Fig. 5D; $p = 8.09*10^{-10}$; one-tailed Mann-Whitney U-test), and the fraction of units with well-defined linear RFs (i.e., with CI > 5.5) was five times larger in V1 than in LL (Fig. 5E; $p = 6.48*10^{-10}$, χ^2 test).

We also observed a stark difference between the two areas in terms of the number of lobes contained in a STA image. To count the lobes, we binarized each image, by applying a threshold to the modulus of its intensity values (see Fig. 5B and a full description in Materials and Methods; also note that this analysis was restricted to the units with well-defined linear RFs). Regardless of the choice of the binarization threshold, the distribution of lobe counts peaked at 1 in both areas, but had a heavier tail in V1 than in LL (compare matching rows in Fig. 5F), resulting, in most cases, in a statistically significant difference between the two areas (Fisher's exact test; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; see legend for exact p values). Overall, this indicates that, in many cases, the responses of V1 neurons could be well approximated as a linear, weighted sum of the luminance intensity values falling inside their RFs – hence the sharp, multi-lobed STA images. By comparison, the lower-contrast, structurally simpler RFs yielded by STA in LL suggest a dominant role of non-linear computations in establishing the stimulus-response relationship in this area. In fact, in the case of a prevalently non-linear unit, the STA method would be able to reconstruct at most its linear sub-parts (Fournier et al., 2011, 2014; Sedigh-Sarvestani et al., 2014) – a sort of linear "residue" of the actual non-linear filter. Such linear residue would still show, in some cases, the position and main orientation of the underlying filter, but would fail short at accounting for the full richness and

complexity of its structure. This conclusion was supported by the tendency (although not significant) of the STA-based RFs to explain a lower fraction of variance of the orientation tuning curves in LL, as compared to V1 (Fig. 6). Taken together with the prevalence of complex-like units in LL (Fig. 4), these findings are consistent with the non-linear computations that are expected to build invariance along an object-processing hierarchy.

Figure 5 near here

Sharpness and complexity of orientation tuning follow opposite trends from V1 to LL

Next, we compared the V1 and LL neuronal populations in terms of the shape and sharpness of the orientation tuning curves obtained in the two areas. As shown in Figure 7A, in area LL most units had OSI lower than 0.5 (orange curve), with a median of 0.41 (dashed orange line), while in V1 the peak of the OSI distribution (blue curve) was in the 0.6-0.8 range, with a median of 0.53 (dashed blue line). The difference between the two OSI distributions was significant (p = 0.0029; Kolmogorov-Smirnov test), as it was the difference between their medians (p = 0.0084; one-tailed, Mann-Whitney U-test). Following a convention established in previous studies (Table 2) we classified as orientation-selective the units with OSI > 0.6, and we compared the fraction of units above such threshold in the two areas (Fig. 7B). In V1, the proportion of selective cells was twice as large as in LL (40% vs. 18%), and such difference was highly significant ($p = 8.15*10^{-4}$; χ^2 test).

To check the consistency of this finding with ventral-like processing, we looked at the evolution of orientation tuning in HMAX. As shown in Figure 7C, in the model, the OSI distribution underwent an abrupt shift towards much lower values in the transition from the C1 layer, corresponding to V1 complex cells, to the S2 layer, corresponding to a downstream area, where tuning for combinations of multiple oriented elements is achieved using a non-linear template matching operation (see Figure 3). The shape of the OSI distribution was then

maintained in the C2 layer, performing the max-pooling operation over the S2 afferents. This trend shows that, in HMAX, building tuning for complex visual patterns leads to a strong reduction of orientation tuning. As such, the drop of orientation selectivity observed from V1 to LL can be taken as indication that LL neurons are tuned to more complex combinations of visual features, as compared to V1 units.

Figure 7 near here

Support to this conclusion came from comparing the two areas in terms of the tendency of the orientation tuning curves to be bimodal (Fig. 8A). In V1, most units had BSI equal or close to zero (i.e., virtually perfect unimodal tuning), with the distribution dropping sharply at larger BSI values (blue curve). In LL, the BSI distribution also peaked at zero, but featured a heavier tail, with a secondary peak above 0.5 (orange curve). As a result, the two distributions and their medians were significantly different ($p = 0.044$; Kolmogorov-Smirnov and one-tailed, Mann-Whitney U-test, respectively) and the fraction of neurons with bimodal tuning (i.e., with BSI > 0.5) was more than twice as large in LL as in V1 ($p = 0.027$; χ^2 test; Fig. 8B). Once again, a similar trend was observed in HMAX (Fig. 8C), where the BSI distribution displayed a much heavier tail in the deeper layers (S2 and C2) than in the early ones (S1 and C1). This supports the interpretation that the decrease of OSI from V1 to LL, along with the concomitant increase of BSI, results from an increment of the complexity of tuning of LL neurons – a property that is consistent with their involvement in ventral processing. By contrast, no significant differences were found in terms of direction selectivity, with the median DSI in V1 and LL being, respectively, 0.42 and 0.45 ($p = 0.7$; Mann-Whitney U-test), which suggests a lack of specialization of LL for motion processing, as compared to V1.

Figure 8 near here

The evolution of the tuning properties from V1 to LL matches the one observed across the monkey ventral stream

As pointed out in the previous sections, the trends of variation of several tuning properties from V1 to LL are consistent with those observed across the layers of the HMAX model. This suggests the existence of specialized computations that builds up transformation tolerance and shape tuning along rat lateral extrastriate cortex. To further support this conclusion, we checked whether the same qualitative trends have been reported in the ventral stream literature. To this aim, we performed a simple meta-analysis of the evolution of orientation tuning and phase-sensitivity to drifting gratings across areas V1, V4 and IT of primates. In V1, the fraction of simple cells reported by various authors is quite variable (Hubel and Wiesel, 1968; Schiller et al., 1976; De Valois et al., 1982a, 1982b; Foster K H et al., 1985; O'Keefe et al., 1998; Ringach et al., 2002; Kagan et al., 2002; Aronov et al., 2003; Gur et al., 2005), ranging from ~16% to 63% (Table 1), with a mean across studies of ~41% (blue bar in Fig. 9A). According to the few studies that investigated the phase-dependence of neuronal responses to grating stimuli in downstream areas (Table 1), the proportion of simple-like cells diminishes to ~14% in V4 (Desimone and Schein, 1987; Gallant et al., 1993, 1996), to become zero in IT (Pollen et al., 1984) (brown and orange bars in Fig. 9A), resulting in an overall significant decrement along the ventral stream (p = 0.0098, $F_{2,13}$ = 7.25; one-way ANOVA). With regard to orientation selectivity (Table 2), most authors report a very large fraction of orientation-tuned cells in monkey V1 (Schiller et al., 1976; De Valois et al., 1982a, 1982b; Vogels and Orban, 1991; Zhou et al., 2000; Ringach et al., 2002; David et al., 2006), with a mean across studies close to 89% (blue bar in Fig. 9B). This proportion significantly decreases along downstream areas (p = $2.31*10^{-6}$, $F_{2,14}$ = 46.17, one-way

ANOVA), with ~65% and ~19% of orientation-tuned neurons reported, respectively, in V4 (Desimone and Schein, 1987; Pasupathy and Connor, 1999; Zhou et al., 2000; David et al., 2006) and IT (Desimone et al., 1984; Vogels and Orban, 1993, 1994; Sary et al., 1995) (brown and orange bars in Fig. 9B). These trends are confirmed by the few studies that applied the same experimental design to directly compare orientation tuning in V1 and either V4 (David et al., 2006) or IT (Vogels and Orban, 1991, 1993). Vogels and Orban found ~85% of orientation-tuned neurons in V1, compared to just ~14% in IT. David and colleagues reported a similar figure for V1, while in V4 they found that only 50% of neurons were orientation-tuned. In addition, they found that the fraction of cells with bimodal tuning was more than twice as large in V4 (~28%) as in V1 (~11%), in agreement with the increasing proportion of neurons that, in V4, are tuned for the combinations of oriented elements found in corners and curved boundaries (Gallant et al., 1993, 1996; Pasupathy and Connor, 1999, 2002).

Table 1 and Table 2 near here

Overall, this survey of the monkey literature clearly indicates that the reduction of sensitivity to the phase of drifting gratings, along with the decrease of orientation tuning and the increase of bimodal tuning, are strong markers of ventral stream processing. The fact that we found qualitatively similar trends, when comparing V1 to LL, support the involvement of rat lateral extrastriate cortex in building up selective, yet invariant, representations of visual objects.

Figure 9 near here

Discussion

In this study, we sought to understand which tuning properties are at the base of the specialization of rat extrastriate area LL for the processing of visual object information, as revealed by our previous investigation of this region and nearby visual cortical areas (Tafazoli et al., 2017). To be fully complementary with our previous study, we did not probe LL representations using visual objects. With the goal of targeting those core tuning processes that are responsible for building up transformation tolerance and feature selectivity, we deployed instead drifting gratings and noise movies, and we compared the V1 and LL neuronal populations in terms of: 1) the phase-sensitivity of their responses; 2) the goodness of the RF structures recovered through STA; and 3) the sharpness and complexity (i.e., bimodality) of their tuning for orientation. This approach required deriving clear predictions about how these properties should evolve along a ventral-like pathway. This was achieved through a careful survey of the monkey literature and by simulating the basic computational architecture of the ventral stream with HMAX.

HMAX is a feedforward neural network that was developed to explain the emergence of selective, yet transformation-tolerant representations of visual objects along the primate ventral stream (Riesenhuber and Poggio, 1999). Over the years, the model has provided useful computational insights about shape tuning in V4 and IT (Riesenhuber and Poggio, 1999; Serre et al., 2007b; Cadieu et al., 2007; Zoccolan et al., 2007; Cox and Riesenhuber, 2015; Leibo et al., 2017), and human perception of visual objects (Serre et al., 2007a; Cox and Riesenhuber, 2015). The model shares the same basic architecture of more recent deep convolutional networks (LeCun et al., 2015), with alternating layers of selectivity-increasing and tolerance-increasing pooling, but it is computationally simpler, since, in its basic instantiation, it has only 4 layers and does not involve learning any feature representations. While this can explain why HMAX has been surpassed by deep-learning networks as a state-

of-the-art machine vision system (Khaligh-Razavi and Kriegeskorte, 2014; Cadieu et al., 2014; Kheradpisheh et al., 2016), its simpler and static structure makes it an ideal conceptual model to isolate the role of the selectivity- and invariance-building operations in establishing the tuning properties of ventral neurons. In HMAX, because of the invariance-building operation, phase-sensitivity sharply decreases (Fig. 4C). At the same time, because of the selectivity-building computation, orientation tuning becomes smaller (Fig. 7C), while neurons acquire preference for multiple orientations (Fig. 8C). All these trends were matched by the empirical evidence gathered in our study, when comparing V1 to LL (Figs. 4A-B, 7A-B and 8A-B), thus suggesting that similar selectivity- and invariance-building computations are at work along the progression of lateral extrastriate areas that culminates with LL. The consistency among these trends and those observed across the primate ventral stream (Fig. 9) adds further, critical support to this conclusion.

Despite our recent report about the specialization of LL for the processing object information (Tafazoli et al., 2017), the agreement among our current results, the predictions of computational modeling and the ventral stream literature is far from obvious, given the variety of discordant findings about the tuning of rodent extrastriate neurons. In mice, area LL has not been identified, but areas LM (lateromedial) and LI (laterointermediate), which, as in rats, are located progressively more lateral to V1 (see Fig. 1A), have been attributed to the ventral stream based on anatomical considerations (Wang et al., 2011b, 2012b) and have been tested with drifting gratings in several electrophysiological and imaging studies, often along with other medial and parietal visual areas (Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Andermann et al., 2011; Marshel et al., 2011; Roth et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2017). Consistently with our findings (Fig. 4), the only study that measured the phase dependence of neuronal responses in V1 and lateral visual areas of the mouse found that the latter had a lower proportion of simple cells (15% vs. 38% in V1) (Van den Bergh et al., 2010). Conversely, the authors reported no

difference between the areas in terms of OSI. This result contrasts with the general increase of orientation tuning that was found in nearly all extrastriate areas (compared to V1) by (Marshel et al., 2011), although the increment of OSI was much larger in putative dorsal-stream areas than in LM and LI. A significant increase of OSI in LM, relative to V1, was also observed by (Tohmi et al., 2014), while other authors found no differences between V1 and some of the putative dorsal-stream areas in terms of orientation tuning (Andermann et al., 2011; Roth et al., 2012). As for rat cortex, (Vermaercke et al., 2014) found the opposite trend of that observed in our study – i.e., a progressive increase of OSI from V1 to LL and beyond.

Different causes can be at the root of such discrepancies among rodent studies. In mice, many experiments were based on calcium imaging, performed using different indicators [e.g., OGB-1 (Marshel et al., 2011) vs. GCaMP3 (Andermann et al., 2011)], which diverge from a perfectly linear relationship between fluorescence changes and underlying spiking activity in an-indicator specific way (Akerboom et al., 2012). As pointed out by (Niell, 2011), this could potentially distort the orientation tuning curves and bias the OSI measurements, as compared to approaches where well-isolated single-units are recorded with micro-electrodes, as in our study. Other important differences could concern the specific stimuli that were used by different authors. For instance, while we presented very large (60ºx110º), full-field gratings, (Vermaercke et al., 2014) used smaller (33º) circular gratings, shown at the RF center of each recorded neuron. Our presentation protocol ensured that, for most neurons in both areas, the stimuli covered the entire *classical* receptive field and, very likely, a large fraction of the *extra-classical* receptive field, where surround-suppression contributes to shape tuning both in monkey (Maunsell and Newsome, 1987; Orban, 2008) and rodent (Adesnik et al., 2012; Vaiceliunaite et al., 2013; Self et al., 2014; Pecka et al., 2014; Alwis et al., 2016) visual cortex. By contrast, the smaller and more localized gratings used in (Vermaercke et al., 2014) likely covered an increasingly smaller fraction of both the

classical and extra-classical receptive fields while progressing from V1 to LL, given that, as shown in our previous study (Tafazoli et al., 2017), RF size gradually increases along rat lateral extrastriate areas, being twice as large in LL as in V1. This, in turn, may have prevented the tuning for multiple oriented elements, located at different RF locations, to emerge in neurons with larger RFs, thus artificially boosting OSI in higher-order areas. Finally, another factor that is worth considering is whether neuronal recordings were performed in anesthetized or awake animals. However, as discussed at length in our previous study (Tafazoli et al., 2017), most authors comparing neuronal activity in mouse visual cortex under anesthesia and during active wakefulness found that several key tuning properties, both in V1 and extrastriate areas, were very similar in the two conditions (Niell and Stryker, 2008, 2010; Froudarakis et al., 2014; Juavinett and Callaway, 2015; Durand et al., 2016).

To summarize, it is difficult to reconcile the variety of findings about the tuning of rodent extrastriate neurons without performing dedicated experiments (e.g., imaging vs. micro-electrode recordings), which are beyond the scope of our study. Ultimately, the strength and reliability of our conclusions, as compared to those of previous studies of rodent extrastriate cortex, is supported by: 1) the full agreement with the predictions derived from computational modeling and the primate ventral stream literature; 2) the accord with our previous neurophysiological (Tafazoli et al., 2017) and behavioral (Alemi-Neissi et al., 2013; Rosselli et al., 2015; Djurdjevic et al., 2018) demonstration of advanced shape processing in rats; and 3) the self-consistency of our findings (e.g., the reduction of orientation selectivity from V1 to LL was matched by a concomitant increase of bimodal tuning).

In the light of these arguments, we believe that our results nicely complement, corroborate and extend those of our previous study (Tafazoli et al., 2017). In fact, they show how some key neuronal tuning properties, which are revealing of the build-up of transformation tolerance and shape selectivity along an object-processing pathway, naturally

evolve, from V1 to LL, in a direction that is consistent with the previously demonstrated ability of LL to support transformation-tolerant object recognition. In addition, being our experimental approach based on the presentation of widely-used parametric stimuli and the application of intuitive metrics, it provides a standardized and easily interpretable way to carry out a large-scale screening of ventral processing across rodent visual cortical areas. This could help optical imaging studies finding the yet missing functional signature of ventral processing in mouse visual cortex – e.g., by analyzing existing large datasets of stimulus-response associations, as the one made available by the Allen Brain Observatory (Hawrylycz et al., 2016). In this regard, having provided clear predictions about the evolution of neuronal tuning along an object-processing pathway will likely serve as a reference to guide future explorations of ventral functions in both mice ad rats.

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Figure and table legends.

Figure 1. Targeting rat laterolateral (LL) visual cortical area for multi-electrode recordings using a linear silicon probe. **A.** Representative Nissl-stained coronal slice showing the insertion track of a single-shank silicon probe aimed at area LL. The probe was inserted obliquely into visual cortex, crossing lateromedial (LM) and laterointermediate (LI) visual areas before reaching LL. The dashed lines depict the borders of the areas, as reconstructed by tracking the retinotopy of the receptive fields (RFs) recorded along the probe (see panel **B**). The position of the probe during the recordings is marked by the staining with the fluorescent dye (red) that was applied to it before insertion, and by the mechanical lesion produced by the penetration. Based on this information, it was possible to estimate the geometry of the probe (white lines) at the final recording depth (2.5 mm DV), along with the location of the recording sites (white dots), from the tip (site #1) to the base (site #32). **B.** Firing intensity maps displaying the RFs of the units recorded along the probe shown in **A.** The numbers refer to the sites each unit was recorded from. The reversal of the retinotopic progression (from leftward to rightward) at sites #13-14 marks the boundary between areas LI and LL.

Figure 2. Examples of neuronal tuning in V1 and LL. Representative V1 simple (**A**) and complex (**B**) cells are shown in the upper panels (blue lines). Representative LL simple-like (**C**) and complex-like (**D**) cells are shown in the lower panels (orange lines). In each panel, subpanels i-iii illustrate different aspects of neuronal tuning. (i) The polar plot reports the observed (colored curve) and predicted (black curve) tuning of the neuron for the direction of a drifting grating, when shown at the preferred spatial (SF) and temporal (TF) frequencies of the unit. Predictions were obtained using a linear-nonlinear (LN) model, derived from the

spike-triggered average (STA) images shown in iii. For ease of comparison, both the observed and predicted curves were normalized to their maximum. The plot also reports the fraction of variance of the tuning curve that was explained by the LN model, as well as the values of several metrics that quantify neuronal tuning: the orientation (OSI), direction (DSI) and bimodal (BSI) selectivity indexes. (ii) Raster plot (top) and peri-stimulus time histogram (PSTH; bottom; colored curve), showing the time course of the neuronal response to a drifting grating, when presented at the preferred SF, TF and direction. The bottom plot also reports the time course of the response, as predicted by the LN model (black curve), along with the fraction of variance explained by the model. For ease of comparison, both the observed and LN-predicted responses were normalized to their maximum. The top plot reports the value of the modulation index (MI), which measured the extent to which the neuronal response was time-locked to the phase of the drifting grating. (iii) Spatial structure and time-evolution of the STA-estimated RF of the neuron. In every STA image, each pixel intensity value was independently z-scored, based on the null distribution of STA values obtained through a permutation test (Materials and Methods). As such, all RF intensity values are reported as distances (in units of standard deviation σ; gray scale bar in panel D.iii) from what expected in the case of no frame-related, linear information carried by the spikes.

Figure 3. Sketch of the HMAX model implementation used in this study. The model is a feedforward, 4-layered neural network that processes arbitrary input images through a cascade of computations. The first layer (S1) consists of a bank of Gabor filters performing local edge detection on small input image patches (dark gray circles), similar to V1 simple cells. In the second layer (C2), each unit pools over many iso-oriented S1 units via a max-like operation (dashed lines), thus gaining some amount of position and scale tolerance, similar to V1 complex cells (such expansion of the invariance field is represented by the light gray

rings). In the third layer (S2), each unit acquires tuning for more complex visual patterns by combining the output of many C1 units with different orientation via a non-linear template-matching operation (solid lines). In the fourth layer, each C2 unit applies again the max-pooling operation to S2 units with the same shape tuning but different RF positions and sizes, in order to further gain tolerance to such transformations. In our application, the input images were drifting gratings, similar to those used in the neurophysiology experiment, so as to obtain predictions about the evolution of the relevant tuning indexes (MI, OSI and BSI) across consecutive stages of a ventral-like hierarchy.

Figure 4. The entrainment of the neuronal response to the phase of drifting gratings decreases from V1 to LL. **A.** Distributions of the modulation index (MI) for the populations of V1 (blue; $n = 105$) and LL (orange; $n = 104$) neurons. Medians are shown as dashed lines (***$p < 0.001$; one-tailed Mann-Whitney U-test). The gray-shaded area highlights the region of the MI axis (MI > 3) corresponding to strongly phase-modulated units, i.e., simple-like cells. **B.** Fraction of simple-like cells (i.e., units with MI > 3) in V1 (blue) and LL (orange; ***$p < 0.001$; χ^2 test). **c.** Evolution of the MI distribution across the layers of the HMAX model (Fig. 3). Note the different scale on the ordinate axis for the S1 layer, as compared to downstream layers.

Figure 5. Spike-triggered average yields better-defined and structurally richer receptive fields in V1 than in LL. **A.** Illustration of the procedure to compute the contrast index of an STA image. The z-scored STA image obtained for a representative V1 neuron (left) is shown along the corresponding local-contrast map (middle), obtained by computing the contrast of the STA image (i.e., peak-to-peak difference) in local convolutional patches, with size equal to one fifth of the total image size (both images are cropped around the RF center). The

contrast index (CI) associated to the STA image was computed by considering the resulting contrast distribution (right; bar plot) and taking its 0.9 quantile (dashed line; see Materials and Methods). **B.** Illustration of the procedure to count the lobes of an STA image. The output of the lobe counting algorithm is shown as a function of the binarization threshold (increasing from left to right) that was applied to the modulus of the z-scored STA image of the example neuron shown in **A**. Green dots show the centers of mass of the binarized images, whereas blue dots represent the centers of "valid" detected lobes (i.e., above-threshold, simply connected regions). Yellow dots mark "invalid" detected lobes (i.e., above-threshold, simply connected regions that were discarded for exceeding a distance limit from the center of mass of the binarized image; see Materials and Methods). For this example neuron, a very small spurious lobe was rejected at threshold = 3 (leftmost panel). **C.** Spatial structure of the ten best linear RFs obtained in V1 (top row) and LL (bottom row) using the STA method. The quality of each RF was assessed by computing the contrast index CI to quantify the amount of signal contained in a STA image (as illustrated in **A**). For each neuron, the RF shown here is taken at the time before the spike when CI was maximum (the corresponding CI value is reported above each STA image). As explained in Fig. 2, each pixel intensity value in a STA image was independently z-scored according to the null distribution yielded by a permutation test; the resulting z-scored values are reported here in units of standard deviation σ (gray scale bar). **D.** CI distributions for the populations of V1 (blue; $n = 105$) and LL (orange; $n = 104$) neurons. Medians are shown as dashed lines (***$p < 0.001$; one-tailed Mann-Whitney U-test). The gray-shaded area highlights the region of the CI axis (CI > 5.5) corresponding to units with well-defined linear RFs. **E.** Fraction of units with well-defined linear RFs (i.e., with CI > 5.5) in V1 (blue) and LL (orange; ***$p < 0.001$; χ^2 test). **F.** Heat maps showing the distributions of lobe counts (abscissa) for the units with well-defined linear RFs (i.e., with CI > 5.5) in V1 (blue; $n = 56$) and LL (orange; $n = 13$) as a

function of the binarization threshold (ordinate) used by the lobe-counting algorithm illustrated in B. Stars indicate threshold values for which the two distributions were significantly different (*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$; Fisher exact test).

Figure 6. The V1 population includes neurons, whose direction-tuning curves are well predicted by linear LN models. **A.** Distributions of the variance of the direction-tuning curves that was explained by STA-based LN models for the populations of V1 (blue; $n = 56$) and LL (orange; $n = 13$) neurons with well-defined linear RFs (i.e., neurons with STA images having CI > 5.5; see Fig. 5D). Although the medians of the two distributions were not significantly different ($p = 0.075$; one-tailed Mann-Whitney U-test), a heavier tail can be noticed in the blue curve, which highlights the presence of a subset of units, in V1, whose selectivity was highly predictable using a linear, STA-estimated RF. **B.** Fraction of neurons, whose direction-tuning curves were well predicted by the STA-based LN models (i.e., units for which at least one third of the variance was explained by the models; gray patch in **A**) in V1 (blue) and LL (orange). Although twice as many well-predicted tuning curves were found in V1, as compared to LL, the difference was only marginally significant ($p = 0.670$; Fisher exact test).

Figure 7. Orientation selectivity decreases from V1 to LL. **A.** Distributions of the orientation selectivity index (OSI) for the populations of V1 (blue; $n = 105$) and LL (orange; $n = 104$) neurons. Medians are shown as dashed lines (**$p < 0.01$; one-tailed Mann-Whitney U-test). The gray-shaded area highlights the region of the OSI axis (OSI > 0.6) corresponding to orientation-selective units. **B.** Fraction of orientation-selective cells (i.e., units with OSI > 0.6) in V1 (blue) and LL (orange; ***$p < 0.001$; χ^2 test). **C.** Evolution of the OSI distribution across the layers of the HMAX model (Fig. 3).

Figure 8. The tendency to be tuned for multiple orientations increases from V1 to LL. **A.** Distributions of the bimodal selectivity index (BSI) for the populations of V1 (blue; n = 105) and LL (orange; n = 104) neurons. Medians are shown as dashed lines (*p < 0.05; one-tailed Mann-Whitney U-test). The gray-shaded area highlights the region of the BSI axis (BSI > 0.5) corresponding to units with bimodal tuning. **B.** Fraction of cells with bimodal tuning (i.e., with BSI > 0.5) in V1 (blue) and LL (orange *p < 0.05; χ^2 test). **C.** Evolution of the BSI distribution across the layers of the HMAX model (Fig. 3).

Figure 9. Meta-analysis of the trends of variation of phase sensitivity and orientation tuning to drifting gratings across the primate ventral stream. **A.** Fraction of cells that have been reported as being strongly modulated by the phase of drifting gratings (i.e., simple-like cells) in areas V1 (blue; n = 10), V4 (brown; n = 3) and IT (orange; n = 1) of the monkey ventral stream (mean across n studies in each area ± SE; see Table 1). The drop of phase modulation across the three areas was statistically significant (p < 0.01, one-way ANOVA). **B.** Fraction of cells that have been reported as being orientation tuned in areas V1 (blue; n = 7), V4 (brown; n = 4) and IT (orange; n = 4) of the monkey ventral stream (mean across n studies in each area ± SE; see Table 2). The drop of orientation tuning across the three areas was highly significant (p < 0.001, one-way ANOVA). The full list of research papers included in the meta-analysis summarized by panel A is reported in Table 1. The full list of research papers included in the meta-analysis summarized by panel B is reported in Table 2.

Table 1. Full list of research papers included in the meta-analysis shown in Figure 9A. The first column lists all the articles used in the meta-analysis by the name of the first authors

and the publication dates. The second column indicates the cortical area that was studied in each individual article. The third column reports the neuronal sample size of each study. The fourth column shows the fraction of phase-modulated units reported in each article. The bars shown in Figure 9A were obtained by averaging the values in this column across studies within each individual cortical area. The fifth column specifies the criterion adopted in each study to define phase-modulated units (OI stands for Overlap Index, while F1/F0 is a classical measure of temporal modulation of the neuronal response to the frequency of drifting gratings, which is equivalent to the modulation index used in our study).

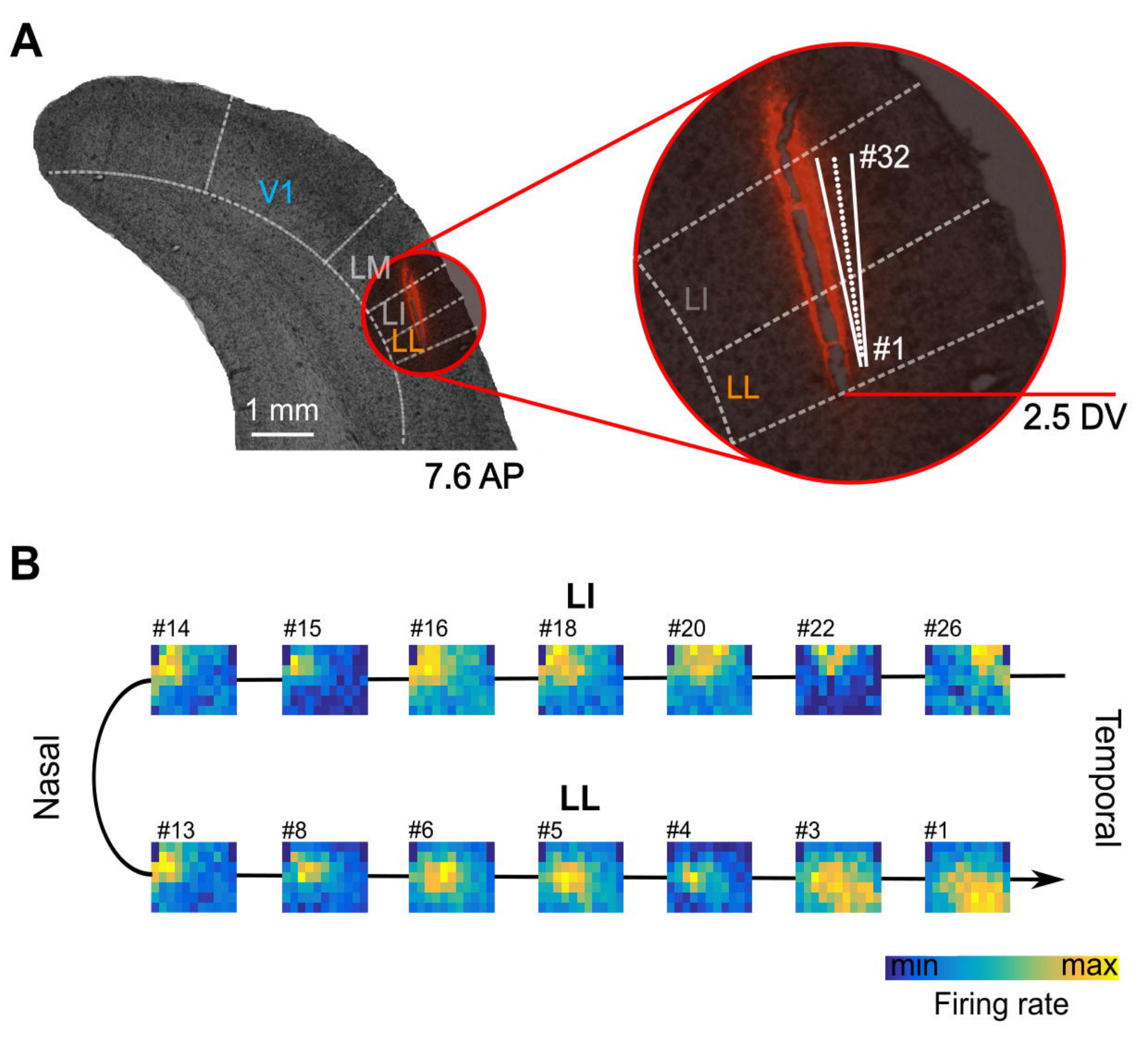
Table 2. Full list of research papers included in the meta-analysis shown in Figure 9B. First three columns: same description as in Table 1. The fourth column shows the fraction of orientation-tuned units reported in each article. The bars shown in Figure 9B were obtained by averaging the values in this column across studies within each individual cortical area. The fifth column specifies the criterion adopted in each study to define orientation-selective units (BW stands for the bandwidth of the orientation tuning curve, while OSI is the same orientation selectivity index used in our study).

Table 1. Full list of research papers included in the meta-analysis shown in Figure 9A

reference	area	number of units	fraction of modulated units	modulated units criterion
Hubel et al. 1968	V1	272	0.45	qualitative (overlap)
Schiller et al 1976	V1	654	0.42	qualitative (overlap)
De Valois et al. 1982a	V1	343	0.61	F1/F0 > 1
De Valois et al. 1982b	V1	222	0.63	qualitative (drift modulation)
Foster 1984	V1	122	0.28	qualitative (overlap)
O'Keefe et al. 1998	V1	210	0.46	F1/F0 > 1
Ringach et al 2002	V1	308	0.40	F1/F0 > 1
Kagan et al 2002	V1	114	0.22	OI < 0.3
Aronov et al. 2003	V1	70	0.53	F1/F0 > 1
Gur et al 2005	V1	339	0.16	OI < 0.3
DeSimone et al. 1987	V4	322	0.16	F1/F0 > 1
Gallant et al 1993	V4	28	0.11	phase effect (ANOVA)
Gallant et al 1996	V4	103	0.14	phase effect (ANOVA)
Pollen et al 1984	IT	43	0.00	qualitative (drift modulation)

Table 2. Full list of research papers included in the meta-analysis shown in Figure 9B

reference	area	number of units	fraction of tuned units	tuned units criterion
Schiller et al.1976	V1	654	**0.75**	BW < 90°
De Valois et al. 1982a	V1	343	**0.90**	BW < 90°
De Valois et al. 1982b	V1	222	**0.92**	BW < 90°
Vogels et al. 1991	V1	285	**0.85**	BW < 90°
Zhou et al. 2000	V1	63	**0.89**	OSI > 0.6
Ringach et al. 2002	V1	308	**1.00**	BW < 90°
David et al. 2006	V1	45	**0.90**	BW < 90°
DeSimone et al. 1987	V4	322	**070**	BW < 90°
Pasupathy et al. 1999	V4	152	**0.52**	orientation effect (ANOVA)
Zhou et al 2000	V4	45	**0.82**	OSI > 0.6
David et al. 2006	V4	87	**0.50**	BW < 90°
DeSimone et al. 1984	IT	66	**0.00**	qualitative
Vogels et al. 1993	IT	958	**0.13**	OSI > 0.7
Vogels et al. 1994	IT	1885	**0.34**	orientation effect (ANOVA)
Sary et al. 1995	IT	330	**0.27**	orientation effect (ANOVA)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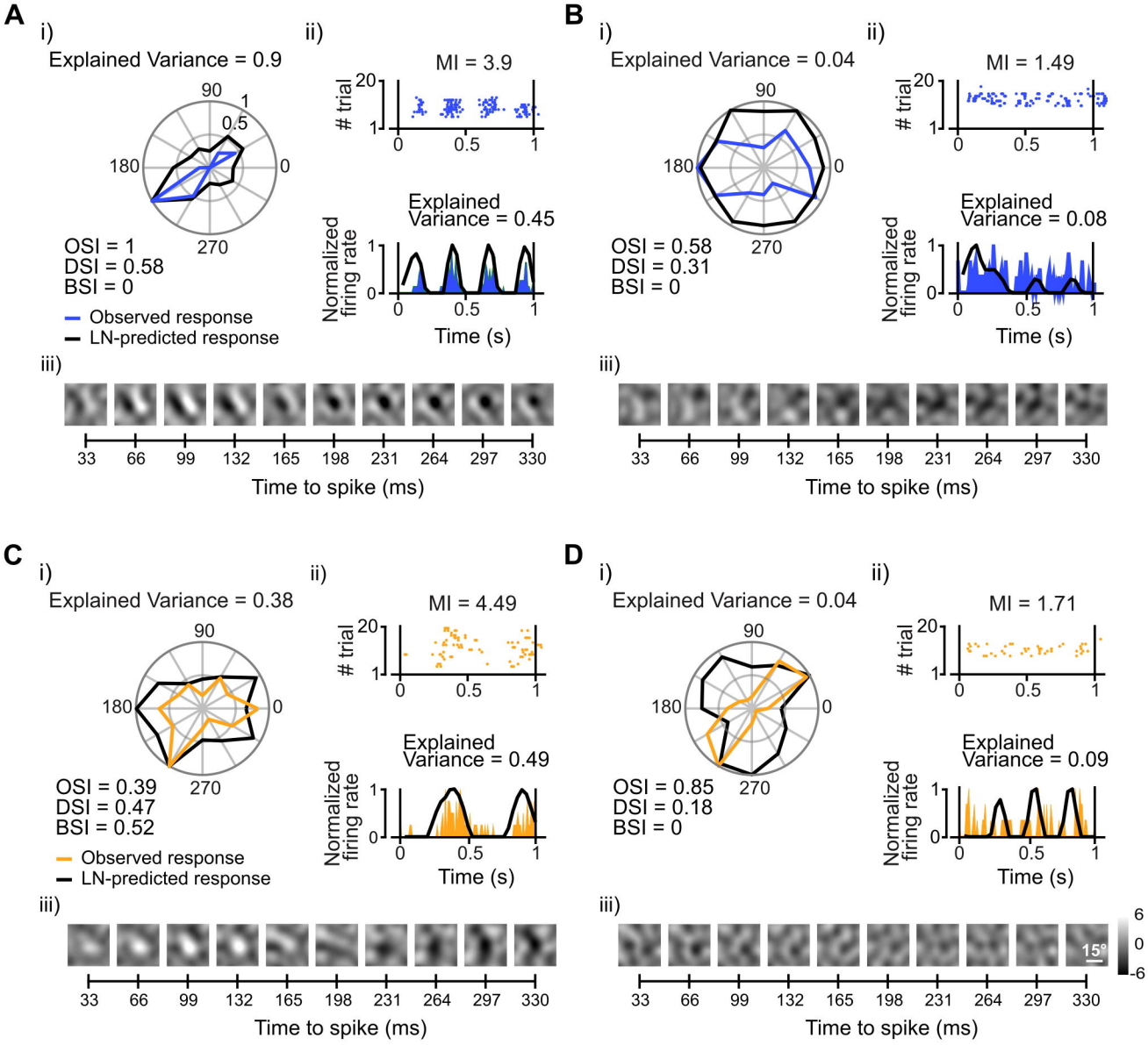
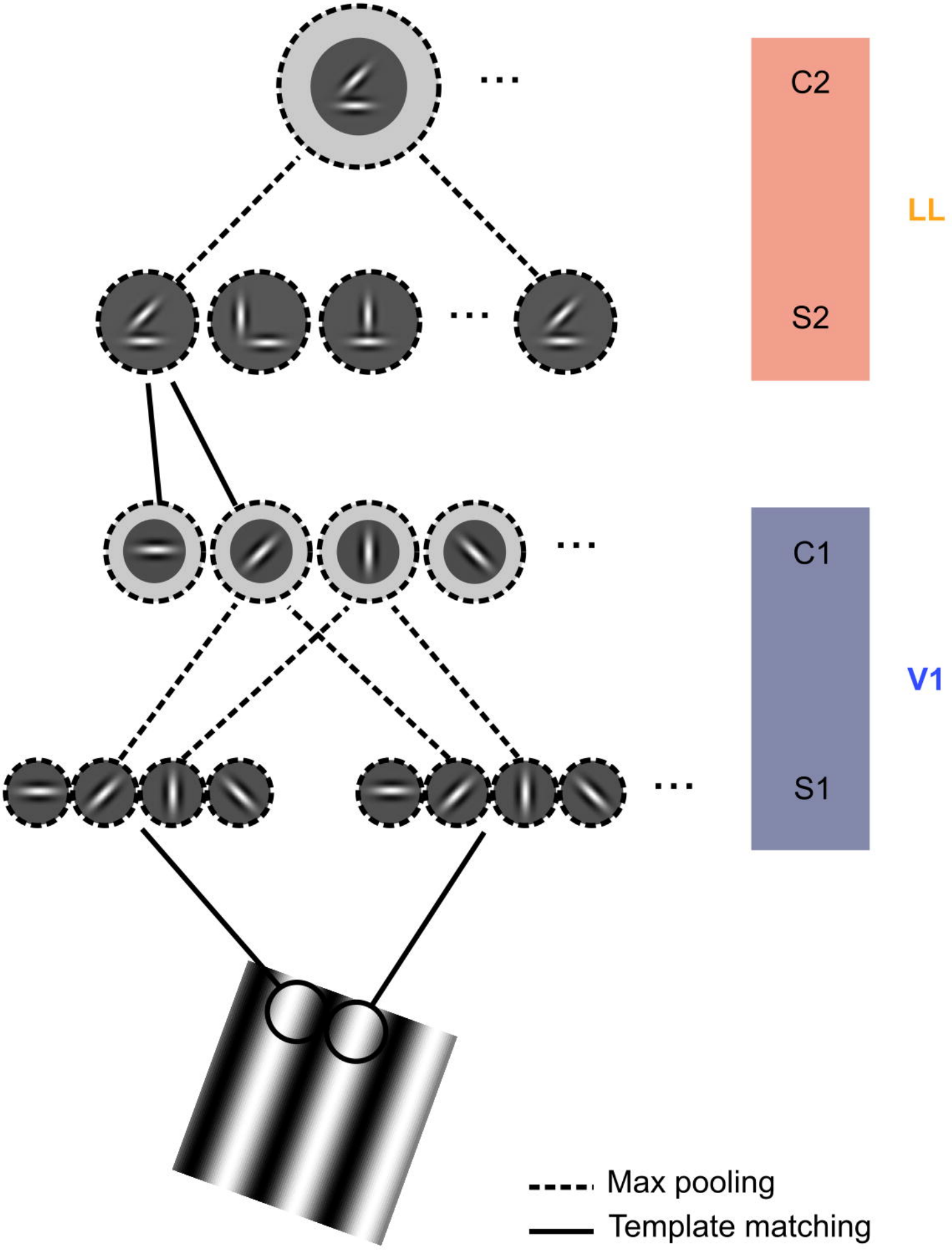
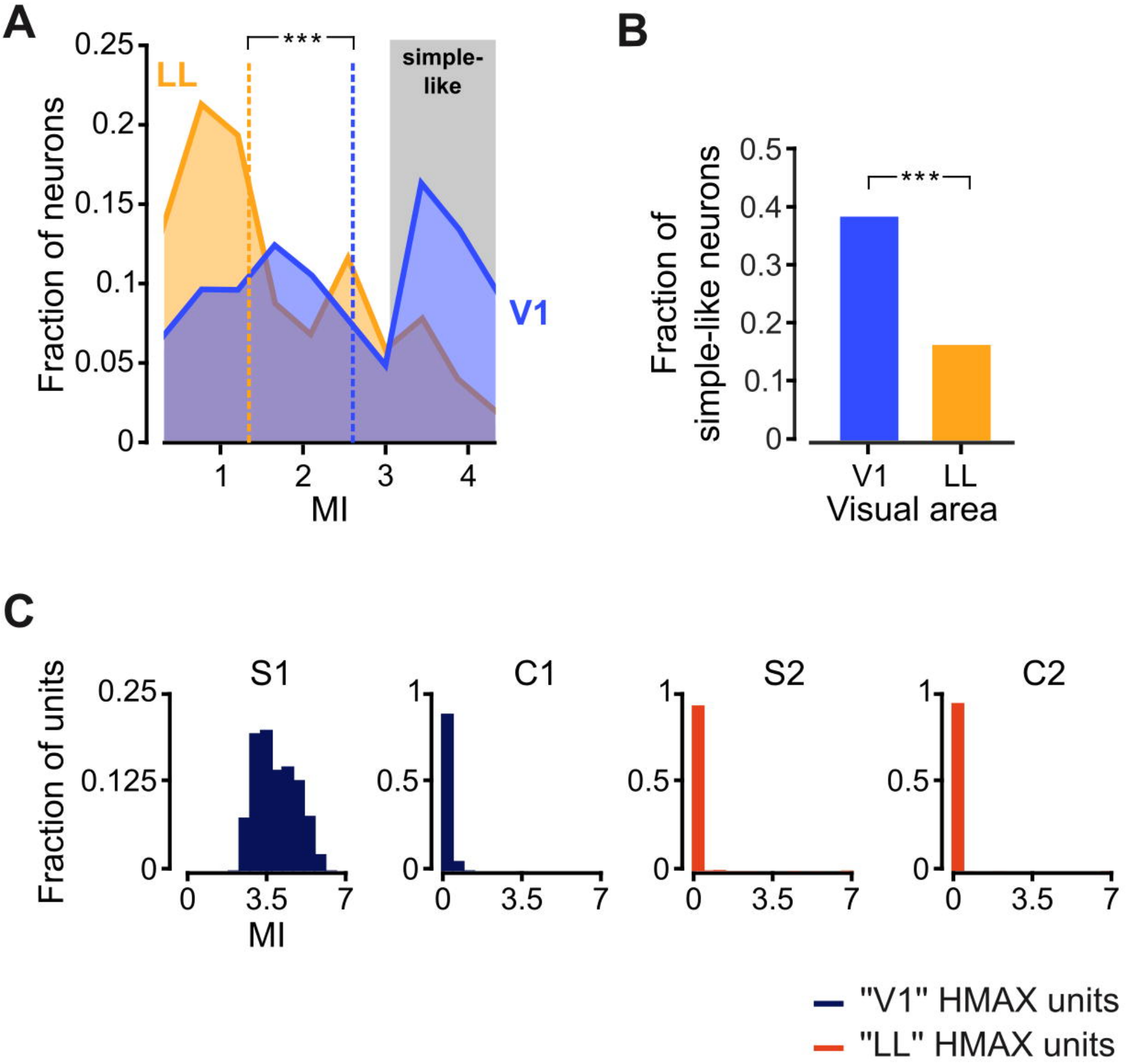
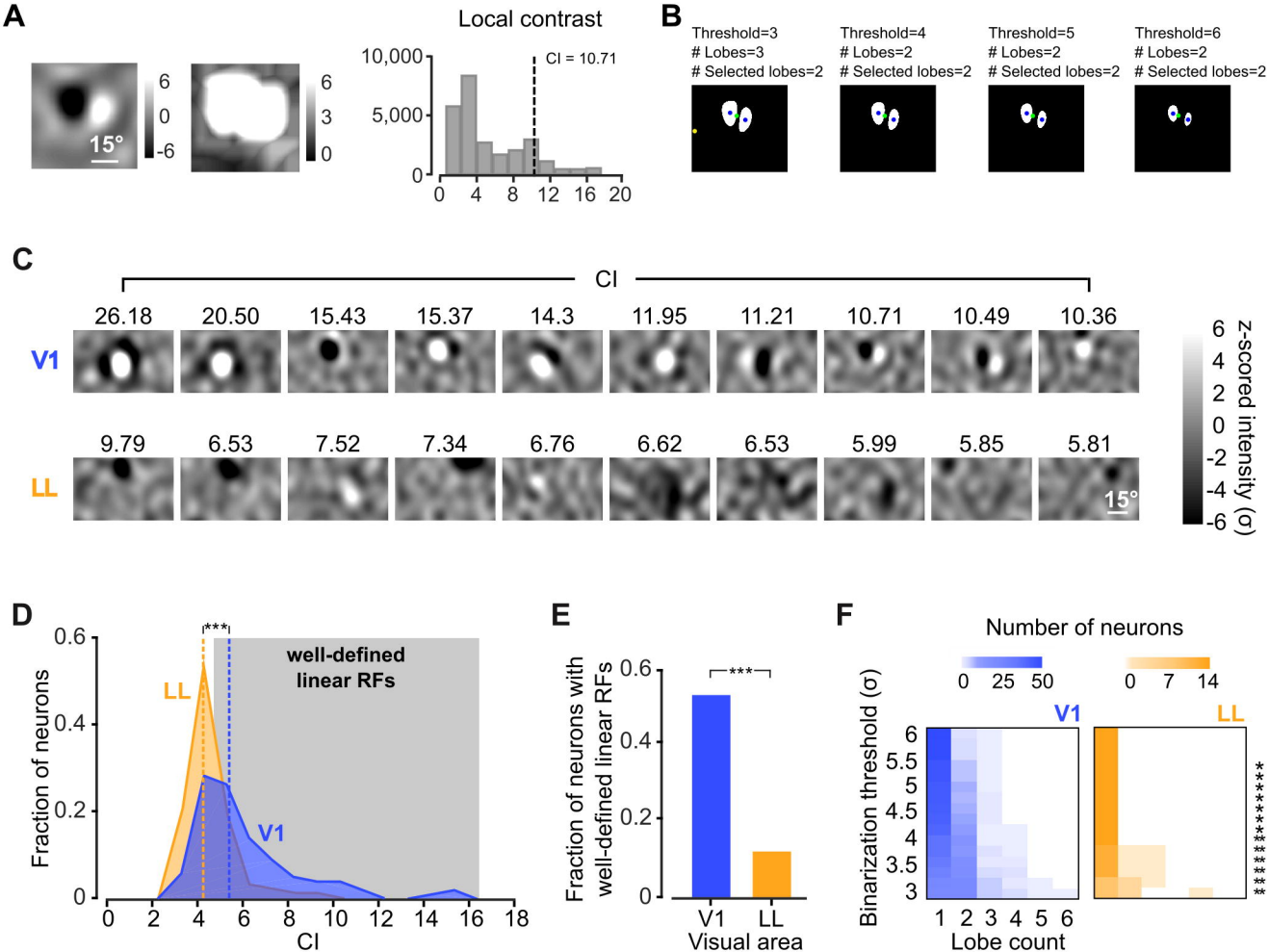
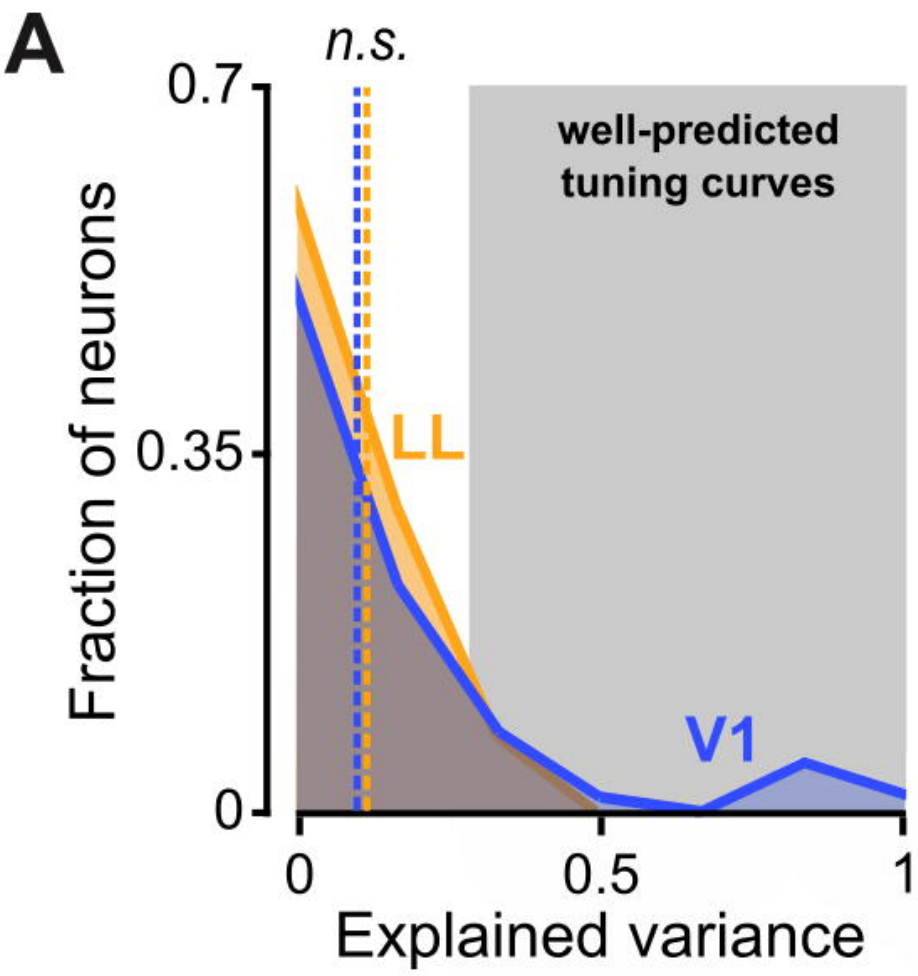
max
Firing rate

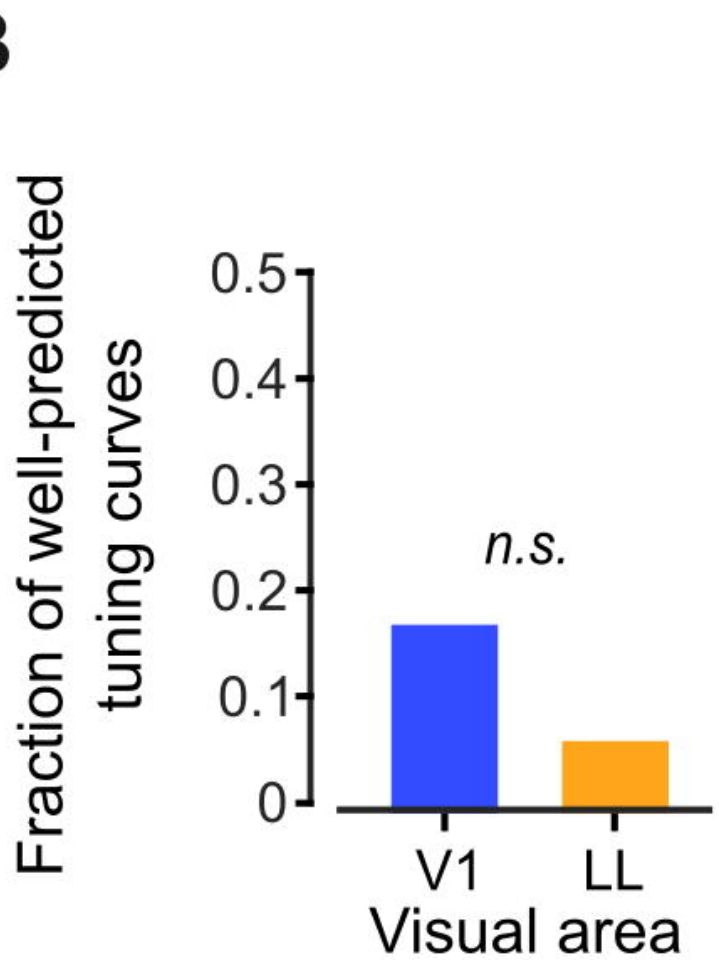

A
i)
Explained Variance = 0.9
90
1
0.5
180
0
270
OSI = 1
DSI = 0.58
BSI = 0
Observed response
LN-predicted response
ii)
MI = 3.9
# trial
20
1
0
0.5
1
Explained Variance = 0.45
Normalized firing rate
Time (s)
iii)
33 66 99 132 165 198 231 264 297 330
Time to spike (ms)
B
i)
Explained Variance = 0.04
OSI = 0.58
DSI = 0.31
BSI = 0
ii)
MI = 1.49
Explained Variance = 0.08
C
i)
Explained Variance = 0.38
OSI = 0.39
DSI = 0.47
BSI = 0.52
ii)
MI = 4.49
Explained Variance = 0.49
D
i)
Explained Variance = 0.04
OSI = 0.85
DSI = 0.18
BSI = 0
ii)
MI = 1.71
Explained Variance = 0.09
15°
6
0
-6

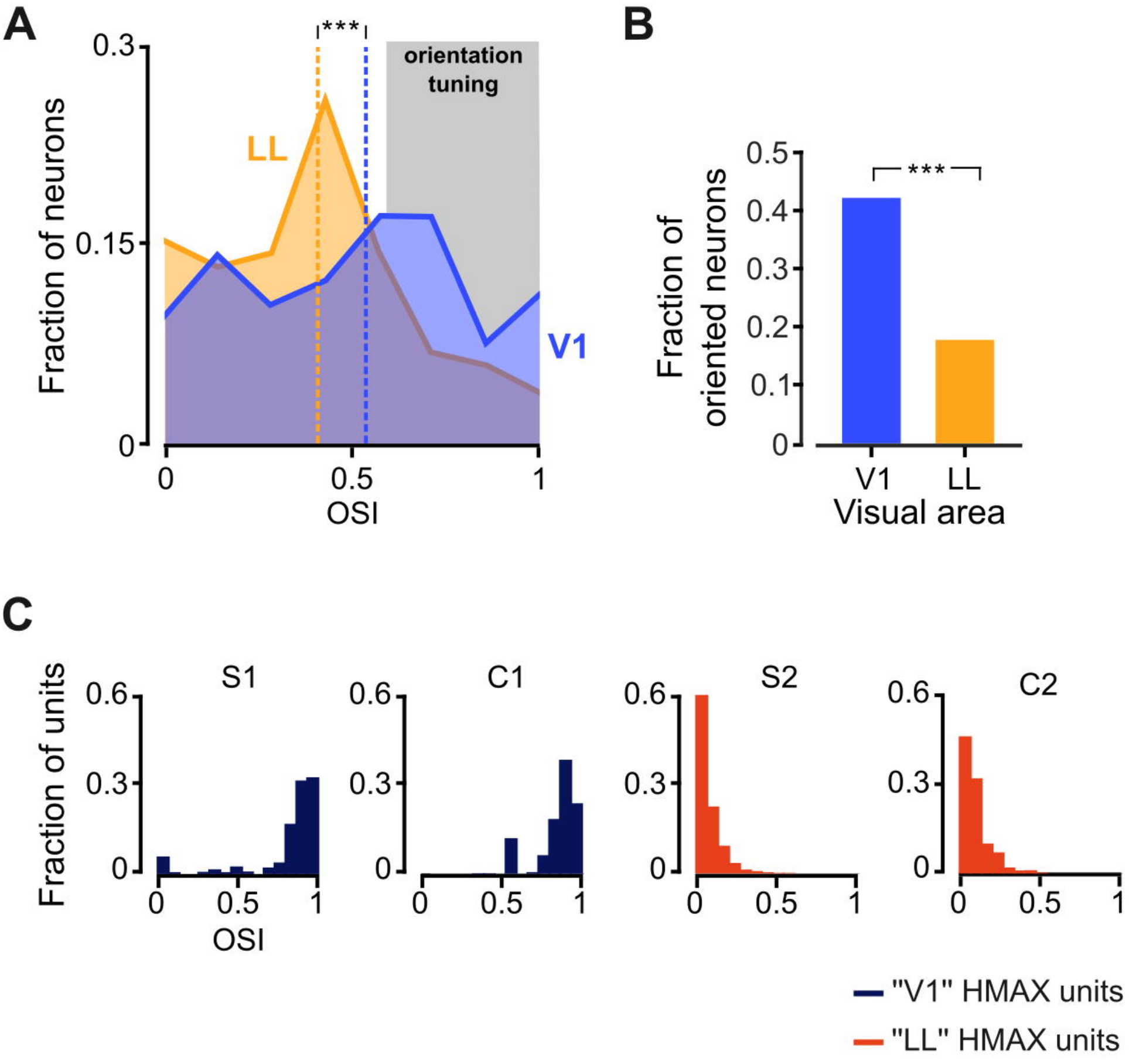

C2
LL
S2
C1
V1
S1
Max pooling
Template matching

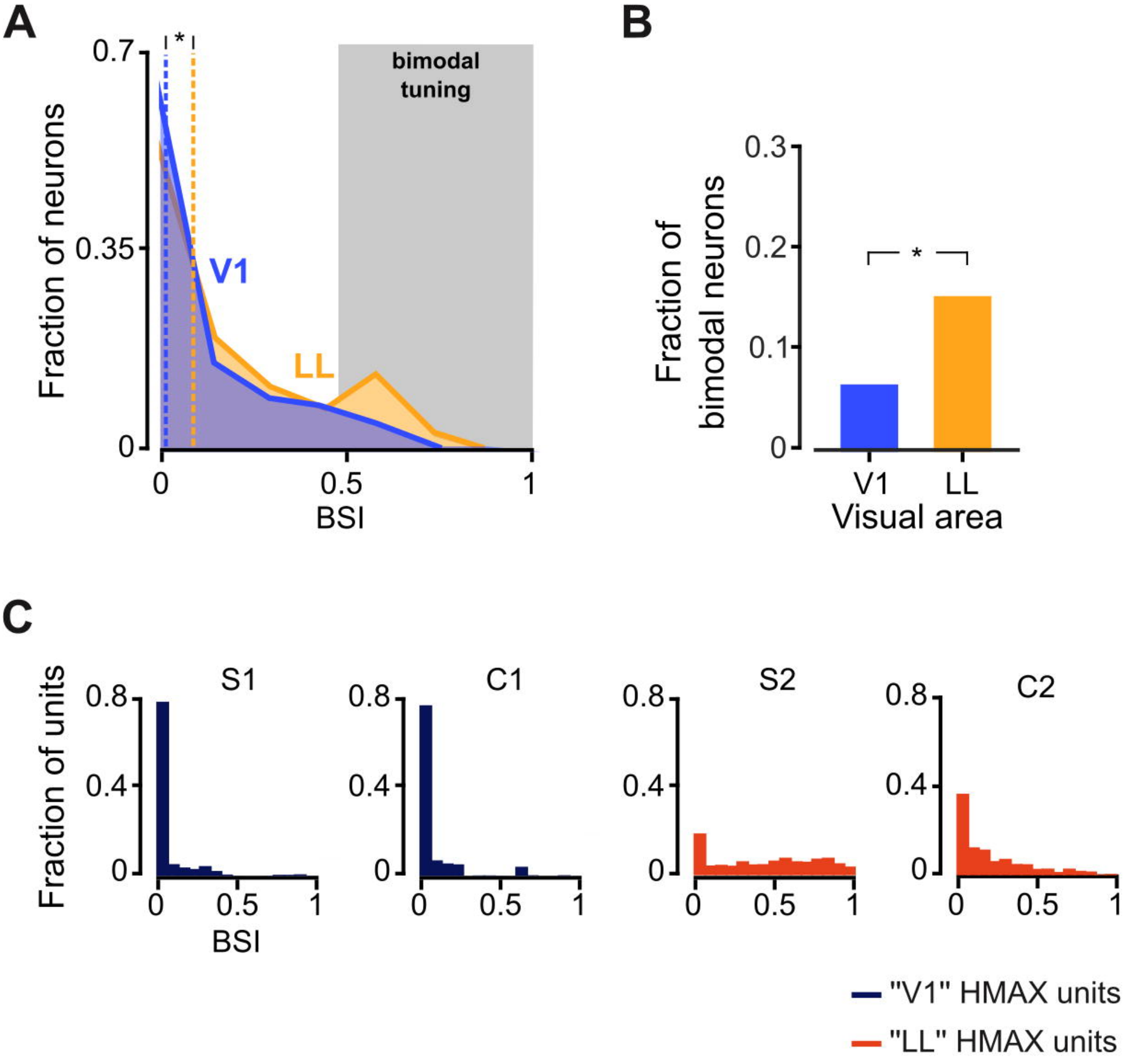

A
0.25
0.2
0.15
0.1
0.05
0
Fraction of neurons
***
LL
simple-like
V1
1
2
3
4
MI
B
0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
Fraction of simple-like neurons
***
V1
LL
Visual area
C
Fraction of units
S1
C1
S2
C2
0.25
0.125
0
1
0.5
0
0
3.5
7
MI
"V1" HMAX units
"LL" HMAX units

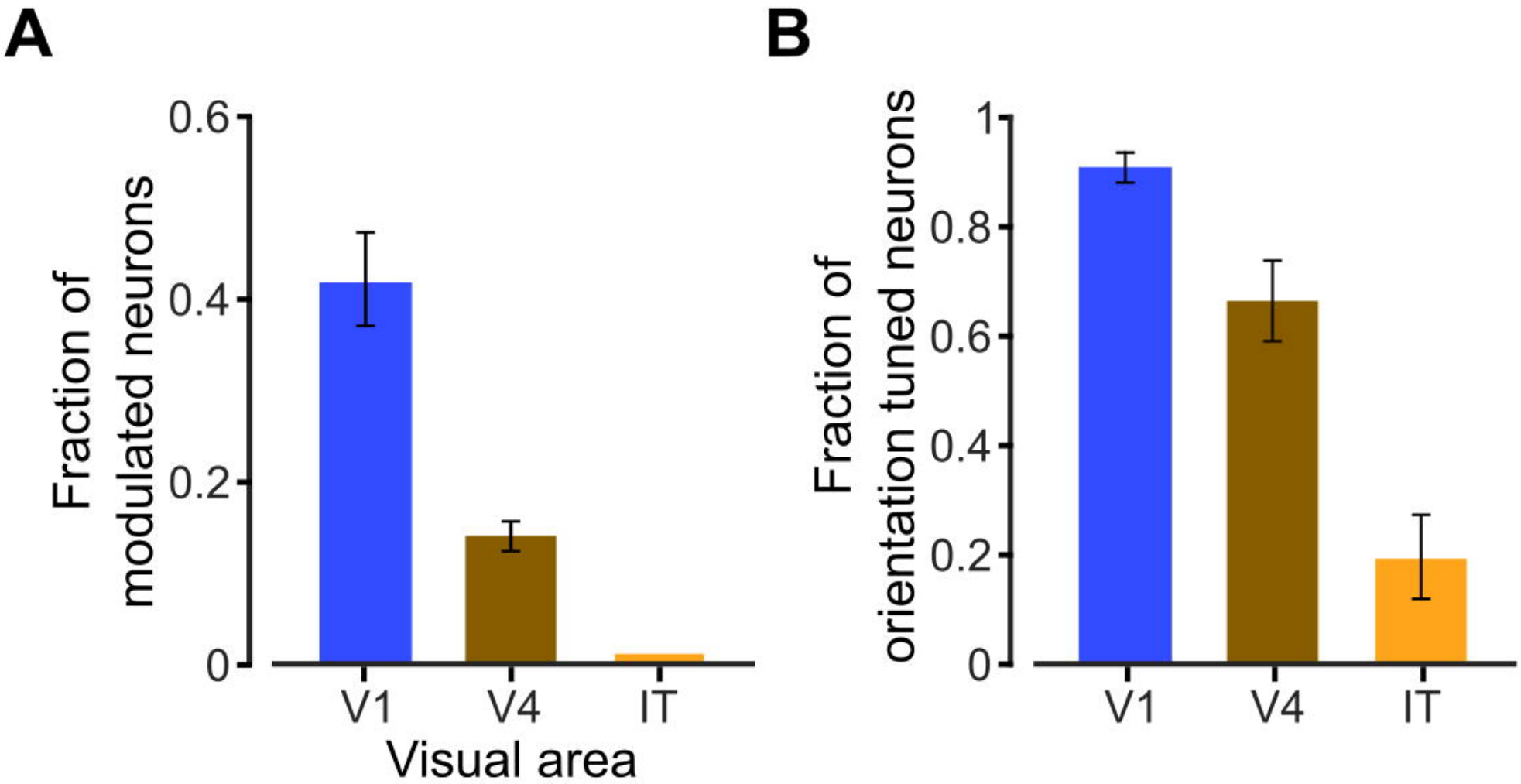

A
Local contrast
15°
6
0
-6
6
3
0
10,000
5,000
0
CI = 10.71
0 4 8 12 16 20
B
Threshold=3
# Lobes=3
# Selected lobes=2
Threshold=4
# Lobes=2
# Selected lobes=2
Threshold=5
# Lobes=2
# Selected lobes=2
Threshold=6
# Lobes=2
# Selected lobes=2
C
CI
26.18 20.50 15.43 15.37 14.3 11.95 11.21 10.71 10.49 10.36
V1
9.79 6.53 7.52 7.34 6.76 6.62 6.53 5.99 5.85 5.81
LL
15°
z-scored intensity (σ)
6 4 2 0 -2 -4 -6
D
***
well-defined linear RFs
LL
V1
Fraction of neurons
0.6 0.4 0.2 0
0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 18
CI
E
Fraction of neurons with well-defined linear RFs
0.6 0.4 0.2 0
***
V1 LL
Visual area
F
Number of neurons
0 25 50
0 7 14
V1
LL
Binarization threshold (σ)
6 5.5 5 4.5 4 3.5 3
1 2 3 4 5 6
Lobe count
****


A
n.s.
0.7
0.35
0
well-predicted
tuning curves
LL
V1
Fraction of neurons
0
0.5
1
Explained variance


B
Fraction of well-predicted
tuning curves
0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
n.s.
V1
LL
Visual area


A
***
orientation tuning
LL
V1
Fraction of neurons
0.3
0.15
0
0
0.5
1
OSI
B
***
Fraction of oriented neurons
0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
V1
LL
Visual area
C
S1
C1
S2
C2
Fraction of units
0.6
0.3
0
0
0.5
1
OSI
"V1" HMAX units
"LL" HMAX units


A
0.7
0.35
0
Fraction of neurons
*
bimodal tuning
V1
LL
0
0.5
1
BSI
B
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
Fraction of bimodal neurons
*
V1
LL
Visual area
C
Fraction of units
S1
C1
S2
C2
0.8
0.4
0
0
0.5
1
BSI
"V1" HMAX units
"LL" HMAX units


A
0.6
0.4
0.2
0
Fraction of modulated neurons
V1
V4
IT
Visual area
B
1
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0
Fraction of orientation tuned neurons
V1
V4
IT