Analysing linear multivariate pattern transformations in neuroimaging data

Alessio Basti[1]

Marieke Mur[2]

Nikolaus Kriegeskorte[3]

Vittorio Pizzella[1,4]

Laura Marzetti[1,4]

Olaf Hauk[2]

[1]Department of Neuroscience, Imaging and Clinical Sciences, University of Chieti-Pescara (IT)

[2]MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, University of Cambridge (UK)

[3]Department of Psychology, Department of Neuroscience, Department of Electrical Engineering, Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute, Columbia University (USA)

[4]Institute for Advanced Biomedical Technologies, University of Chieti-Pescara (IT)

Corresponding author:

Alessio Basti

Department of Neuroscience, Imaging and Clinical Sciences

University of Chieti-Pescara

31 Via dei Vestini

Chieti, IT, 66100

Phone: +39 0871 3556921

Email: alessio.basti@unich.it

Abstract

Most connectivity metrics in neuroimaging research reduce multivariate activity patterns in regions-of-interests (ROIs) to one dimension, which leads to a loss of information. Importantly, it prevents us from investigating the transformations between patterns in different ROIs. Here, we applied linear estimation theory in order to robustly estimate the linear transformations between multivariate fMRI patterns with a cross-validated Tikhonov regularisation approach. We derived three novel metrics that describe different features of these voxel-by-voxel mappings: goodness-of-fit, sparsity and pattern deformation. The goodness-of-fit describes the degree to which the patterns in an input region can be described as a linear transformation of patterns in an output region. The sparsity metric, which relies on a Monte Carlo procedure, was introduced in order to test whether the transformation mostly consists of one-to-one mappings between voxels in different regions. Furthermore, we defined a metric for pattern deformation, i.e. the degree to which the transformation rotates or rescales the input patterns. As a proof of concept, we applied these metrics to an event-related fMRI data set consisting of four subjects that has been used in previous studies. We focused on the transformations from early visual cortex (EVC) to inferior temporal cortex (ITC), fusiform face area (FFA) and parahippocampal place area (PPA). Our results suggest that the estimated linear mappings are able to explain a significant amount of variance of the three output ROIs. The transformation from EVC to ITC shows the highest goodness-of-fit, and those from EVC to FFA and PPA show the expected preference for faces and places as well as animate and inanimate objects, respectively. The pattern transformations are sparse, but sparsity is lower than would have been expected for one-to-one mappings, thus suggesting the presence of one-to-few voxel mappings. ITC, FFA and PPA patterns are not simple rotations of an EVC pattern, indicating that the corresponding transformations amplify or dampen certain dimensions of the input patterns. While our results are only based on a small number of subjects, they show that our pattern transformation metrics can describe novel aspects of multivariate functional connectivity in neuroimaging data.

1 Introduction

Functional connectivity between brain regions is usually estimated by computing the correlation or coherence between their time series. For this purpose, multivariate (MV) activity patterns within regions of interest (ROIs) are commonly reduced to scalar time series, e.g. by averaging across voxels, by selecting the directions which explain the highest variance (PCA), or by selecting the two directions (one per ROI) which are maximally correlated between them (CCA). This process leads to a loss of information and potentially to biased connectivity estimates (Marzetti et al. 2013; Geerligs et al. 2016; Anzellotti et al. 2017, 2018; Basti et al. 2018). Importantly, it also makes it impossible to estimate the transformations between patterns among different ROIs, and to describe possible functionally relevant features of those mappings. Here, we computed linear MV-pattern transformations between pairs of ROIs in fMRI data, and used them to derive three novel MV-connectivity metrics, i.e. goodness-of-fit, sparsity and pattern deformation.

Recent fMRI studies have explored MV-connectivity between brain regions. For instance, Geerligs et al (2016) applied multivariate distance correlation to resting-state data. This method is sensitive to linear and non-linear dependencies between pattern time courses in two regions of interest, but it does not provide information about the features of the transformation between the two. Anzellotti et al. (2016) reduced the dimensionality of their fMRI data per ROI using PCA over time, projecting data for each ROI onto their dominant PCA components. This resulted in a much smaller number of time courses per region than the original number of voxels. They then applied linear (regression) and non-linear (neural network) transformations to the projected low-dimensional data for pairs of brain regions, and found that the non-linear method explained more variance than the linear one. However, dimensionality reduction via PCA leads to a possible loss of information. Indeed, the patterns of the reduced data for different ROIs might not show the same relationships to each other as the original voxel-by-voxel representations. For example, if two regions show a sparse interaction, i.e. each voxel in the first ROI is functionally related only to few voxels in the other ROI, this might not be the case for their corresponding projections on the dominant PCA components. Thus, dimensionality reduction may remove important information about the pattern transformations.

Another approach is to ignore the temporal dimension of ROI data and use "representational connectivity", i.e. compare dissimilarity matrices between two regions (Kriegeskorte et al., 2008a). A dissimilarity matrix describes the intercorrelation of activity patterns for all pairs of stimuli within one region. In this approach, one can test whether the representational structure between two regions is similar or not. However, one cannot test whether the activity patterns of one region are transformations of another, possibly changing the representational structure in a systematic way.

In the current study, we used the original voxel-by-voxel patterns and estimated linear transformations between them. Although it is well-established that transformations of representations

between brain areas are non-linear (Naselaris et al. 2011; Khaligh-Razavi & Kriegeskorte 2014; Yamins et al. 2014; Guclu & van Gerven 2015), linear methods can capture a significant amount of the response variance (Anzellotti et al. 2016). Linear transformations are also easy to compute, to visualise, and can be analysed using the vast toolbox of linear algebra. Moreover, our work on linear transformations can serve as a basis for further investigations on MV-connectivity using non-linear transformations.

Linear transformations in the case of multivariate connectivity can be described as matrices that are multiplied by patterns of an "input ROI" in order to yield the patterns of an "output ROI". We can therefore use concepts from linear algebra to describe aspects that are relevant to the functional interpretation of the transformation matrices.

The first concept, similar to the one already used in Anzellotti et al. (2016), is that of goodness-of-fit. The degree to which activity patterns in the output region can be explained as a linear transformation of the patterns in the input region is a measure of the functional connectivity strength between the two regions.

The second concept is that of sparsity, i.e. the degree to which a transformation can be described as a one-to-one voxel mapping between input and output regions. Topographic maps, in which neighbouring neurons or voxels show similar response characteristics, are well established for sensory brain systems (Patel et al. 2014). It has been suggested that these topographic maps are preserved in connectivity between brain areas, even for higher-level areas (Thivierge & Marcus 2007; Jbabdi et al. 2013). Topography-preserving mappings should result in sparser transformations than those that result in a "smearing" of topographies, or that are random.

Third, we will introduce a measure for pattern deformation. Transformations between brain areas are often assumed to yield different categorisations of stimuli, based on features represented in the output region. The degree to which a transformation is sensitive to different input patterns is reflected in its spectrum of singular values. In the extreme case, where the transformation is only sensitive to one specific type of pattern of the input region but is insensitive to all other orthogonal patterns, it contains only one non-zero singular value. In the other extreme, a transformation which results in a rotation and scaling of all input patterns, would have the maximum number of equal non-zero singular values.

We applied our approach to an existing event-related fMRI data set that has been used in several previous publications to address different conceptual questions (Kriegeskorte et al. 2008a; Kriegeskorte et al. 2008b; Mur et al. 2012; Mur et al. 2013). Four human participants were presented with 96 photographic images of faces (24 images), places (8 images) and objects (64 images). We analysed regions that capture representations at different stages of the ventral stream, and that were also the focus of the above-mentioned previous publications, namely early visual cortex (EVC), inferior temporal cortex (ITC), fusiform face area (FFA) and parahippocampal place area (PPA).

Specifically, we focused on the transformation from EVC, a region involved at early stages of visual processing, to each of the three other ROIs, which are higher-level regions showing a functional selectivity for the recognition of intact objects (i.e., ITC), faces (FFA) and places (PPA) (Kanwisher et al. 1997; Epstein & Kanwisher 1998). We ran separate analyses for different sets of stimuli composed of all 96 images, one composed of the 24 faces and one composed of the 8 places stimuli.

The aim of our study is to find linear transformations between patterns of beta-values in pairs of ROIs, estimated for different types of stimuli from a general linear model. We here ignored the temporal dimension of the data for two reasons: 1) in fMRI, temporal relationships cannot easily be related to true connectivity unless an explicit biophysical model is assumed; 2) even if such an assumption is made, it would be difficult to estimate a meaningful temporal relationship at the single-trial level as required for this event-related analysis. We therefore focused on spatial pattern information, which in the pre-processing step is estimated from a general linear model. Using this approach, we addressed the following questions (see Fig. 1):

1) To what degree can the functional mappings from EVC to ITC (EVC->ITC), EVC->FFA and EVC->PPA be described as linear matrix transformations? For this purpose, we computed the cross-validated goodness-of-fit of these transformations.

2) To what degree do these transformations represent "one-to-one" mappings between voxels, indicating that they characterise topographical projections? For this purpose, we estimated the sparsity of the transformations.

3) To what degree does a transformation amplify or suppress some MV-patterns more than others? For this purpose, we investigated the degree of pattern deformation by analysing the singular value spectra of the transformations.

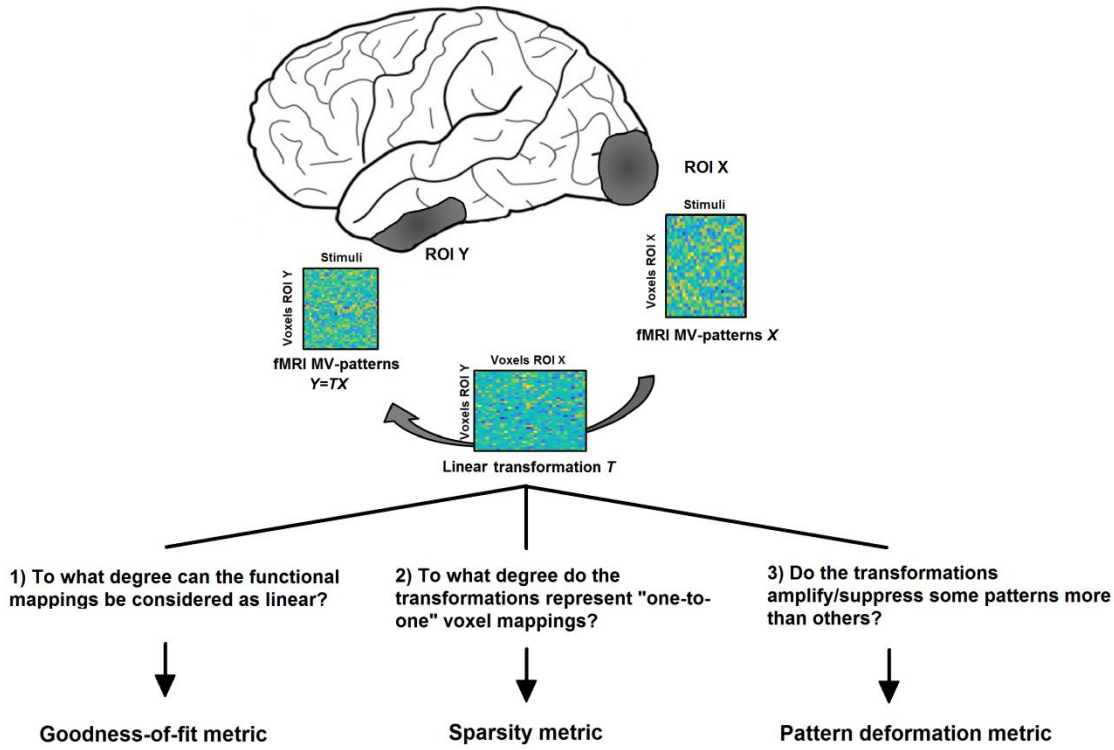

Fig. 1. The purpose of the current study is 1) to describe a computational approach for estimating linear transformations $\boldsymbol{T}$ between MV-pattern matrices X and Y (each matrix column contains the beta-values associated with a different stimulus type) of two ROIs, and 2) to derive three novel connectivity metrics describing relevant features of those functional mappings.

2 Methods

2.1 Estimating linear transformations using the Tikhonov regularisation method

Let us suppose we consider two ROIs X and Y composed of N_X and N_Y voxels, respectively. For each of those two ROIs, we have N_s MV-patterns of beta values obtained from the general linear models with respect to the N_s stimulus types. Let us call the corresponding matrices containing all the MV-patterns $\boldsymbol{X} \in R^{N_X \times N_s}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y} \in R^{N_Y \times N_s}$. We also assume that $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ are z-normalised across voxels for each stimulus. We are interested in estimating the transformation $\boldsymbol{T}$ from $\boldsymbol{X}$ to $\boldsymbol{Y}$ and in analysing the features of this transformation. Let us assume that the mapping from $\boldsymbol{X}$ to the pattern $\boldsymbol{Y}$ is linear, i.e.

$$\boldsymbol{Y} = \boldsymbol{T}\boldsymbol{X} + \boldsymbol{E}, \qquad (1$$

where $\boldsymbol{T} \in R^{N_Y \times N_X}$ is the transformation matrix and $\boldsymbol{E} \in R^{N_Y \times N_s}$ is a residual/noise term. The linearity assumption allows us to estimate $\boldsymbol{T}$ and to investigate its features, e.g. sparsity and singular values. In order to obtain an estimate of the transformation $\boldsymbol{T}$ we use a Tikhonov regularisation method

(Bertero et al. 1985; 1988) (also called "ridge regression" in statistics). Specifically, this method aims to find a suitable solution for $\boldsymbol{T}$ by minimising the norm of the residuals as well as the norm of the transformation itself. According to this method, the transformation is defined as the matrix

$$\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_{\lambda} := \operatorname{argmin}_{\boldsymbol{M}}\{\|\boldsymbol{MX} - \boldsymbol{Y}\|_F^2 + \lambda\|\boldsymbol{M}\|_F^2\}, \quad (2$$

where the parameter λ is a positive number which controls the weight of the regularisation term, $\boldsymbol{M}$ denotes a matrix of the same size of $\boldsymbol{T}$, and $\|\cdot\|_F$ is the matrix Frobenius norm. A unique solution for $\widehat{T}_{\boldsymbol{\lambda}}$ can be obtained using the Moore-Penrose pseudoinverse as

$$\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_{\lambda} = \boldsymbol{YX}'(\boldsymbol{XX}' + \lambda\boldsymbol{I}_{\boldsymbol{X}})^{-1}, \quad (3$$

where $\boldsymbol{I}_X \in R^{N_X \times N_X}$ is the identity matrix and ' denotes matrix transpose.

2.1.1 Regularisation parameter estimation via cross-validation

Several approaches can be used in order to select a suitable λ for Tikhonov regularisation in eq. (2). These strategies include different cross-validation methods, L-curve and restricted maximum likelihood. Here, we exploit a leave-one-out cross-validation method, which is often used in fMRI studies as a reliable procedure both at stimulus and subject levels (Misaki et al. 2010; Esterman et al. 2010). In our leave-one-stimulus-out procedure, the regularisation parameter is defined as the one which minimises the sum across stimuli of the ratio between the squared norm of the residual and of the (left out) MV-pattern, i.e. as

$$\lambda := \operatorname{argmin}_{\boldsymbol{\alpha}}\left\{\sum_{i=1}^{N_s} \frac{\|\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_{\alpha}^{\sim i}\boldsymbol{X}^{\cdot i} - \boldsymbol{Y}^{\cdot i}\|_2^2}{\|\boldsymbol{Y}^{\cdot i}\|_2^2}\right\}, \quad (4$$

where $\boldsymbol{X}^{\cdot i} \in R^{N_X \times 1}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}^{\cdot i} \in R^{N_Y \times 1}$ are the MV-patterns (beta vectors) associated with the i-th stimulus for the two ROIs and $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_{\alpha}^{\sim i} \in R^{N_Y \times N_X}$ is the transformation matrix obtained by using the MV-patterns of the $N_s - 1$ stimuli (all the stimuli except for the i-th), and with the regularisation parameter α (this approach is nested within the across-sessions cross-validation described in the section 2.5.3).

The calculation of the optimal λ value would require, for each tested regularisation parameter, the computation of N_s different transformation. However, the computation time can be reduced by using two different observations. Firstly, for demeaned and standardised data, it holds that $\|\boldsymbol{Y}^{\cdot i}\|_2^2 = \|\boldsymbol{Y}^i - \operatorname{mean}(\boldsymbol{Y}^{\cdot i})\|_2^2 = N_Y \cdot \operatorname{var}(\boldsymbol{Y}^{\cdot i}) = N_Y$. We can thus rewrite the previous formulation for λ without considering the denominator within the sum, i.e. the value of λ can be now obtained by minimising the sum of squared residuals. Secondly, as is shown in Golub et al. (1979), the λ value obtained in such a way is equivalent to that obtained by minimising the functional $\Lambda(\alpha) := \|\mathbf{A}(\alpha)(\boldsymbol{I}_X - \boldsymbol{H}(\alpha))\|_2^2$, where $\mathbf{A}(\alpha)$ is the diagonal matrix whose non-zero entries are equal to $1/(1 - h_{ii}(\alpha))$, being the $h_{ii}(\alpha)$ the ii-th elements of $\boldsymbol{H}(\alpha) := \boldsymbol{X}'(\boldsymbol{XX}' + \alpha\boldsymbol{I}_X)^{-1}\boldsymbol{X}$. Using the two previous observations, we can finally assess the value of λ as

$$\lambda := \operatorname{argmin}_{\alpha}\{\Lambda(\alpha)\}. \quad (5$$

This final formulation allows us to obtain the optimal value in a reduced computation time, thus also facilitating the calculation of the goodness-of-fit metric (see below).

2.2 Characterisation of the goodness-of-fit

In order to assess the goodness-of-fit of the MV-pattern transformations between ROIs, we compute the cross-validated percentage of pattern variance in the output region which can be explained using a linear transformation of patterns in the input region, with an optimal regularisation parameter λ obtained as above. Specifically, we define the percentage goodness-of-fit (GOF) as

$$GOF := 100\left(1 - \frac{\Lambda(\lambda)}{N_Y N_S}\right), \quad (6)$$

where $\Lambda(\cdot)$ is the functional which describes the sum of squared residuals (see section 2.1.1). This metric can be considered as a method to quantify the (linear) statistical dependencies among the MV-patterns by means of the explained output pattern variance. A value for GOF equal to 100 denotes a perfect linear mapping between the two MV-patterns. A value near zero indicates that the mapping between the two patterns cannot be explained via linear MV-regression methods (but may still be non-linear).

To assess the statistical significance of the observed GOF values, we compared the distribution consisting of the GOF values for the four subjects with a reference distribution, which was obtained from simulated data, according to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test. The reference (null) distribution represents the situation in which there is no interaction between the original input-region and the simulated output-region patterns. We consider the observed GOF as significant when the p-value is lower than 0.05. Each surrogate data is defined as having the same size of the output ROI. Thus, if the investigated transformation is EVC->ITC, we simulate 100 MV-pattern matrices whose sizes are equal to that of the original ITC MV-pattern matrix. Then, we compute the transformation from the original EVC to the simulated ITC patterns, and the GOF for the surrogate data as shown in eq. (6).

2.3 Characterisation of the transformation sparsity

A sparse matrix is defined as having the majority of its elements equal to 0 (Stoer & Bulirsch, 2002). In the case of MV-pattern transformations between ROIs, a sparse matrix could indicate, e.g., a one-to-one mapping between voxels in the two ROIs. However, even in the presence of a perfect sparse linear mapping, we cannot expect the majority of elements of the estimated $\hat{T}_{\lambda}$ to be exactly

zero (Fig. 2, panels A and B), because the Tikhonov regularisation method always leads to a smooth solution. However, other approaches, such as the so called least absolute shrinkage and selection operator (LASSO, Tibshirani 1996), may lead to the opposite problem, i.e. to obtain sparse solutions even in the presence of non-sparse linear mappings. We therefore need to define a strategy to reliably estimate the degree of sparsity of the transformation matrix.

The idea behind our approach is to take into account both the GOF value, taken as a measure of the level of noise (i.e. the higher the GOF value the lower the noise level), and the rate of decay of the *density* curve. The *density* curve describes the fraction of the entries of the estimated transformation which are larger than a threshold, as a function of this threshold. The steepness of the decay of this curve increases with the increase of the degree of sparsity of the original transformation, and it decreases with the increase of the level of noise in the interaction model.

Let us take the normalised $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_\lambda$ obtained by dividing its elements by its maximum absolute value. We define the density curve d as the function of the threshold $P \in [0,1]$ which describes the fraction of elements of $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_\lambda$ whose absolute value exceeds P. Specifically, d is defined as

$$d(P) := \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N_X}\sum_{j=1}^{N_Y} 1_{\left(\left|(\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_\lambda)_{ij}\right|>P\right)}}{N_X N_Y}, \quad (7$$

where $\mathbf{1}_a$ denotes the indicator function of a, which is equal to 1 if a holds, and 0 otherwise. The density curve d is a monotonically decreasing function of P, with a value of 1 for $P = 0$ and of 0 for $P = 1$.

The analysis of the rate of decay of the density curve of $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_\lambda$ as a function of the threshold P provides an estimate of the actual degree of sparsity of $\boldsymbol{T}$. Higher degrees of sparsity are associated with steeper decay. For instance, the panel C of Fig. 2 shows the d curve for five different toy cases in a noise free situation. For each case, we simulated 30 multivariate patterns $\boldsymbol{X}$ (of size 128 voxels x 96 stimuli) and 30 transformations $\boldsymbol{T}$ (128 voxels x 128 voxels) as following standard normal distributions. Each of the five cases in this toy example has a different true percentage of sparsity, i.e. 0%, 50%, 80%, 90%, obtained by randomly setting to 0 the corresponding percentage of elements of $\boldsymbol{T}$. We then calculate the MV-pattern matrix $\boldsymbol{Y}$ as $\boldsymbol{Y} = \boldsymbol{T}\boldsymbol{X}$. The density curves (average and standard deviation across 30 realisations for each case are denoted by solid lines and shaded areas) are clearly distinguishable from each other, thus allowing us to disentangle the five cases.

However, the rate with which a density curve decays from 1 to 0 depends on the noise level in the model. In particular, the steepness of the decay associated with a fixed degree of sparsity decreases with the increase of the level of noise, i.e. with the decrease of the GOF value (panel D, Fig. 2). Thus, by only analysing the density curve it is not possible to distinguish two different percentages of sparsity for which the noise levels are different, i.e. the curve d for a percentage of sparsity S_1 with noise level L_1 can be undistinguishable from the curve for a sparsity S_2 with noise level L_2. To overcome this problem, we take into account both the density curve d and the goodness-

of-fit GOF between the MV-patterns. As it is shown in the panel E of Fig. 2, by using 1) the rate of decay of the density curve (RDD), defined as the parameter b of an exponential function $aexp(bP)$ fitted to the d function with a non-linear least square fitting method, and 2) the value of GOF, it is possible to disentangle the simulated degree of sparsity even if the noise levels are different. Let us now describe step by step the Monte Carlo based approach that we use in order to estimate the degree of sparsity of the pattern transformations in our data set. We consider the transformations EVC->ITC, EVC->FFA and EVC->PPA for the sets of stimuli composed of the 96 images of all stimulus types, the one composed of 24 faces stimuli and the set composed of 8 places stimuli.

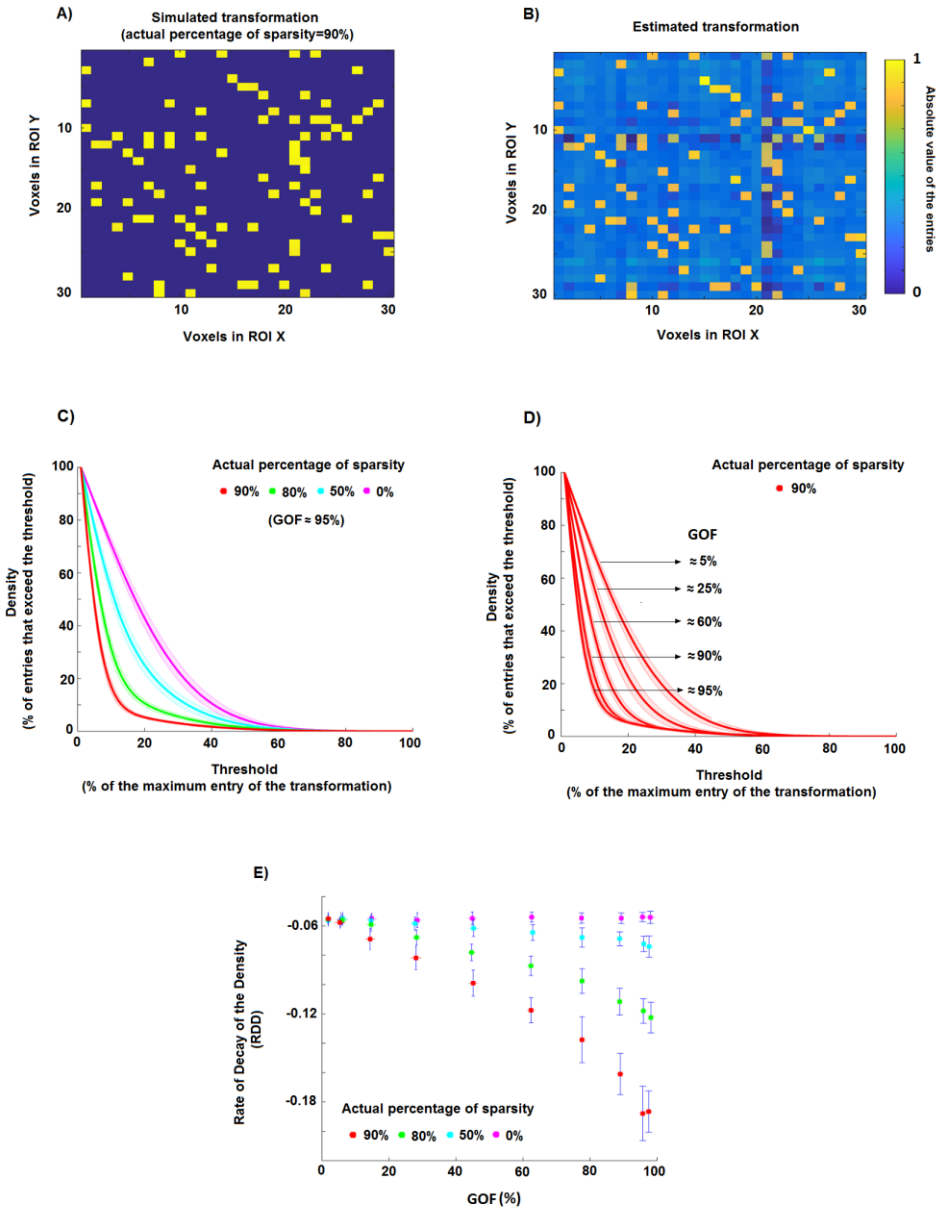

Fig. 2. Estimation of the percentage of sparsity by using a Tikhonov regularisation method. **A)** An example of a sparse simulated transformation. The 90% of the entries are equal to 0, while the other 10% of the entries are equal to 1. **B)** Estimate of the transformation in A obtained by using the

Tikhonov regularisation method. The lighter background indicates that the estimated elements are different from zero even if in the original transformations they are exactly equal to zero. **C)** Density of the thresholded estimated transformations, i.e. the percentage of matrix entries that exceed the threshold, as a function of the threshold. In this toy example, we generated 30 realisations for four simulated percentages of sparsity (0%, 50%, 80% and 90%). **D)** Density of the thresholded estimated transformations associated with a degree of sparsity of 90% and different GOF values (i.e. different level of noise in the model). **E)** Scatter plots of the rate of decay of the density curves (RDD) shown in panel C against goodness-of-fit GOF for the 30 simulation realisations of each of the four different cases. It is evident that simulated transformations of e.g. 90% sparsity are associated with a certain range of RDD and GOF values (red dots) which, at least for sufficiently large values of GOF, are different from those related to transformations with 80% of sparsity (green dots).

2.3.1 Monte Carlo approach to obtain the percentage of sparsity

Let us suppose we are interested in estimating the degree of sparsity of the pattern transformation between EVC (consisting of 224 voxels in our data) and ITC (316 voxels) by using the patterns obtained from the full set of 96 stimuli. All other cases (e.g., different ROIs or different sets of stimuli such as that obtained for faces only) will be analogously treated. The strategy described below can be considered as a Monte Carlo method. Specifically, we:

1) simulate, for each noise level and each percentage of sparsity, 100 transformations $\boldsymbol{T}$ (size 256 voxels x 224 voxels), the non-zero entries of which follow a standard normal distribution and the positions of the zero entries were randomly selected;

2) compute estimates $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_\lambda$ of each true $\boldsymbol{T}$ by using a Tikhonov regularisation method on the original EVC patterns $\boldsymbol{X}$ and the simulated ITC pattern $\widetilde{\boldsymbol{Y}} = (1-\gamma)\boldsymbol{TX}/\|\boldsymbol{TX}\|_F + \gamma\boldsymbol{E}/\|\boldsymbol{E}\|_F$ (the patterns were firstly demeaned and standardised for each stimulus), where $\boldsymbol{E}$ and γ denote the independent Gaussian noise/residual signal and its relative strength. Specifically, the estimated transformation is given by

$$\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_\lambda = \widetilde{\boldsymbol{Y}}\boldsymbol{X}'(\boldsymbol{XX}' + \lambda\boldsymbol{I}_{\boldsymbol{X}})^{-1}, \quad (8$$

where the λ value was estimated each time via the cross-validation procedure described in section 2.1.1;

3) calculate, for each $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_\lambda$, the density curve d, its rate of decay RDD, and the goodness-of-fit GOF;

4) calculate the average RDD and GOF across the simulation-realisations for each different simulated percentage of sparsity and noise level. In such a way, we obtain, for each simulated percentage of sparsity, a curve describing the mean RDD value as a function of the GOF.

5) estimate the percentage of sparsity for the real data by looking at the point of coordinates equal to the average (across subjects) RDD and GOF. For instance, if this point lies between

two curves representing the results for 50% and 60% of sparsity, the estimated sparsity of the transformation EVC->ITC would be 50-60%.

We simulate five different percentages of sparsity, which ranged from 50% to 90% with an incremental step of 10%. An estimated percentage of sparsity lower than 50% would indicate that the transformation is not sparse (indeed the majority of its elements would be different from 0) while, a higher value in the simulated range indicates the opposite. We use 10 different levels of noise strength: the γ value ranged from 0.20 to 0.65 with a step of 0.05. This range is chosen in order to obtain GOF values in simulations that are similar to those obtained on real data. For each different percentage of sparsity and set of stimuli (i.e. the sets composed of 96 images of all stimulus types, the set composed of 24 faces stimuli and the set composed of 8 places stimuli) the number of simulations is 1000.

2.4 Characterisation of the induced pattern deformation

A MV-pattern of each ROI can be considered as a point belonging to a vector space whose dimension is equal to the number of voxels in that region. A MV-pattern transformation thus corresponds to the linear mapping $\boldsymbol{T}: R^{N_X} \rightarrow R^{N_Y}$ between the two respective vector spaces. The aim of this section is that of: 1) explaining why the singular values (SVs) of the transformation $\hat{T}_{\boldsymbol{\lambda}}$ are important features of this mapping, and 2) describing the computational strategy used in order to understand how much the transformation deformed the original patterns, e.g. via asymmetric amplifications or compressions along specific directions.

Let us suppose that N_X is equal to N_Y, i.e. that the number of voxels in the ROI X is equal to the number of voxels in the ROI Y. By means of the polar decomposition theorem (Nigham 1986), which holds for every square matrix, we can consider the transformation $\boldsymbol{T}$ as the composition of an orthogonal matrix $\boldsymbol{R}$ multiplied by a symmetric positive-semidefinite matrix $\boldsymbol{P_1}$ or as the composition of a different symmetric positive-semidefinite matrix $\boldsymbol{P_2}$ followed by the same matrix $\boldsymbol{R}$, i.e.

$$\boldsymbol{T} = \boldsymbol{P_1}\boldsymbol{R} = \boldsymbol{R}\boldsymbol{P_2}. \quad (9$$

This factorisation has an useful heuristic interpretation (panel A of Fig. 3). It states that $\boldsymbol{T}$ can be written in terms of simple rotation/reflection (i.e. the matrix $\boldsymbol{R}$) and scaling pattern transformations (i.e. the matrices $\boldsymbol{P_1}$ and $\boldsymbol{P_2}$). Furthermore, even if the square matrix $\boldsymbol{T}$ is not a full rank matrix, $\boldsymbol{P_1}$ and $\boldsymbol{P_2}$ are unique and respectively equal to $\sqrt{\boldsymbol{T}\boldsymbol{T}'}$ and $\sqrt{\boldsymbol{T}'\boldsymbol{T}}$, where ' denotes the transpose. It is also evident that the eigenvalues of $\boldsymbol{P_1}$ and $\boldsymbol{P_2}$, which indicate the scaling deformation factors induced by $\boldsymbol{T}$, are equal between the two and coincide with the SVs of the pattern transformation $\boldsymbol{T}$ (Nigham 1986).

In order to investigate the pattern deformations, we analysed the SVs of the estimated transformation $\hat{\boldsymbol{T}}_{\lambda}$ (the panel B of Fig. 3 shows estimates of SVs for some simulated toy examples).

For this purpose, we defined a metric describing the average pattern deformation induced by the transformation $\boldsymbol{T}$. We computed the rate of decay of the SVs of the estimated transformation $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_{\lambda}$ ($RDSV$), defined as the parameter b of an exponential function fitted to the curve composed of all the SV (as in 2.3 for the *d* curve). For instance, a value of 0 for $RDSV$ corresponds to constant values for the SVs, i.e. the mapping induces the same deformation between the MV-patterns associated with each stimulus, while a larger $RDSV$ value is associated with a larger asymmetric deformation, i.e. the patterns are differently amplified/compressed before or after rotation depending on the stimulus.

Additionally, the rate with which the SVs of $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_{\lambda}$ decay depends on the degree to which the MV-patterns in the output region can be described by the linear mapping from the input region (panel C, Fig. 2). Therefore, as for the previously described strategy used for characterising the sparsity of the transformations, we also take into account the goodness-of-fit GOF between the patterns as a measure of the level of noise in the interaction (panel D of Fig. 3). In this way, we can understand if two transformations induce a different deformation on the MV-patterns in the presence of different levels of noise. The SVs of the estimated transformations can be also exploited for investigating the pattern deformation in the general case in which there is a different number of voxels in the two ROIs. Let us now describe step by step the Monte Carlo based approach that we use in order to estimate the average pattern deformation induced by the transformations between EVC and all the other three ROIs (i.e., EVC->ITC, EVC->FFA and EVC->PPA).

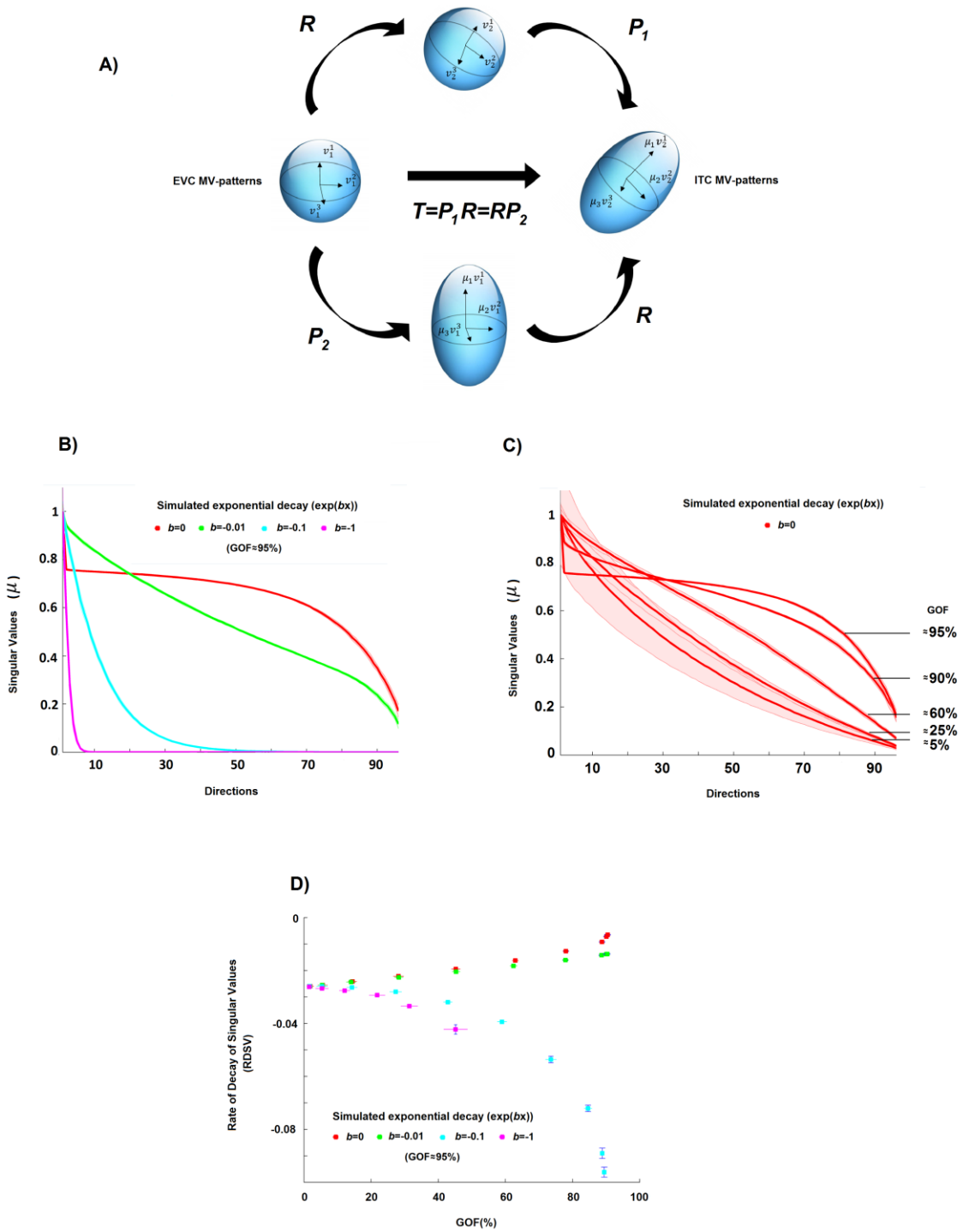

Fig. 3. Estimation of the pattern deformation. **A)** A geometric interpretation of a linear pattern transformation between patterns of equal dimension. Two MV-patterns of two ROIs, let us say EVC and ITC, can be seen as two points of two vector spaces, and the matrix transformation $\boldsymbol{T}$ between them can be seen as a linear mapping between these two vector spaces. In this panel, a sphere (representing for simplicity the MV-patterns of EVC for a set of stimuli) is transformed by T into the ellipsoid (representing the ITC MV-patterns for the same set of stimuli). The singular values (SVs) of T are important features of this mapping. For example, if the number of voxels is the same in both ROIs, the SVs (μ values in the figure) describe how much the EVC pattern is deformed by the transformation. For instance, constant values across all SVs can indicate an orthogonal

transformation, that is, a linear mapping in which the ITC pattern can be completely described as a rotation (or reflection) of the original EVC pattern. Similar **B)** The curves of the SVs (a monotonically non-increasing function with b as the rate of decay) of the estimated transformations for four different simulated rates of decay ($b = 0, -0.01, -0.1, -1$). **C)** The curves of the SVs of the estimated transformations associated with orthogonal transformations (i.e., $b = 0$) and different GOF values (i.e. different level of noise in the model). **D)** Scatter plot between goodness-of-fit GOF and the rate of decay of singular values $RDSV$, i.e. the estimated decay obtained by fitting an exponential curve to the SVs of the estimated transformation for the four different cases. By using both the $RDSV$ and GOF, it is possible to characterise the different induced pattern deformations, even if the original level of noise is not equal to 0%.

2.4.1 Monte Carlo approach to obtain the rate of decay of singular values curve

Let us suppose we are interested in investigating the pattern deformation for the same transformation for which we assessed sparsity in 2.3.1, i.e. between EVC and ITC by using the MV-patterns obtained from the full set of 96 stimuli. All other cases (e.g., different ROIs or different sets of stimuli such as that obtained for faces only) will be analogously treated. The Monte Carlo approach that we use consists of the following steps:

1) we simulate, for each noise level and each rate of exponential decay of the SVs, 100 transformations $\boldsymbol{T}$. For each realisation of $\boldsymbol{T}$:

$$\boldsymbol{T} := \boldsymbol{U}\boldsymbol{\Sigma}_b\boldsymbol{V}, \qquad (10$$

where $\boldsymbol{U}$ and $\boldsymbol{V}$ are two orthogonal matrices obtained by applying a singular value decomposition on a matrix whose entries follow standard Normal distributions, and $\boldsymbol{\Sigma}_b$ is a diagonal matrix whose non-zero entries follow an exponential decay with parameter b;

2) as in the section 2.3.1, we compute the estimates $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_\lambda$ of the true $\boldsymbol{T}$ by using a Tikhonov regularisation method on the original EVC patterns $\boldsymbol{X}$ and the simulated ITC pattern obtained as $\widetilde{\boldsymbol{Y}} = (1-\gamma)\boldsymbol{T}\boldsymbol{X}/\|\boldsymbol{T}\boldsymbol{X}\|_F + \gamma\boldsymbol{E}/\|\boldsymbol{E}\|_F$ (the patterns are firstly demeaned and standardised for each stimulus);

3) we then calculate, for each $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_\lambda$, the $RDSV$, i.e. the rate of decay of the SVs for the estimated transformation, and the goodness-of-fit GOF;

4) we calculate the average $RDSV$ and GOF across the simulation-realisations for each different simulated decay of the SV-curve and noise level. In such a way, we obtain, for each simulated decay, a curve describing the mean $RDSV$ value as a function of the GOF;

5) in order to allow the patterns to have the same number of voxels, we perform 30 different and independent subsampling of the original ITC voxels (representing different possible subspaces). For each realisation, we randomly choose (according to a discrete uniform distribution), among the 316 ITC voxels, a subset of voxels of size equal to the number of voxels in EVC (i.e., 224);

6) we estimate the pattern deformation for the real data by looking in the *RDSV-GOF* plane at the point of coordinates equal to the average (across subjects) $RDSV$ and GOF. Indeed, if e.g. this point lies between two curves representing the results for the rates of decay of $b = -0.1$ and $b = 0$, the estimated decay of the SVs curve would be $(-0.1, 0)$.

We use four different simulated rates of exponential decay of the SVs, which indicate four different orders of magnitude of the exponential decay: $0, -0.1, -1, -10$. We also use 10 different levels of noise strength γ, which ranged from 0.2 to 0.83 with an incremental step of 0.07. This range is chosen in order to obtain GOF values in simulations which are similar to those obtained on real data. For each different rate of exponential decay and set of stimuli, i.e. the set composed of the 96 stimuli of all types, of the 24 faces and of the 8 places, the number of simulation is 1000.

2.5 Real fMRI data

The fMRI data set has been used in previous publications (Kriegeskorte et al., 2008a; Kriegeskorte, et al., 2008b; Mur et al., 2012). Four healthy human volunteers participated in the fMRI experiment (mean age 35 years; two females).

The stimuli were 96 colour photographs (175 x 175 pixels) of isolated real-world objects on a gray background. The objects included natural and artificial inanimate objects as well as faces (24 photographs), bodies of humans and nonhuman animals, and places (8 photographs). Stimuli were displayed at 2.9° of visual angle and presented using a rapid event-related design (stimulus duration: 300 ms, interstimulus interval: 3700 ms) while subjects performed a fixation-cross-colour detection task. Each of the 96 object images was presented once per run in random order. Subjects participated in two sessions of six 9-min runs each. The sessions were acquired on separate days.

Subjects participated in an independent block design experiment that was designed to localise regions of interest (ROIs). The block-localiser experiment used the same fMRI sequence as the 96 images experiment and a separate set of stimuli. Stimuli were grayscale photos of faces, objects, and places, displayed at a width of 5.7° of visual angle, centered with respect to a fixation cross. The photos were presented in 30 s category blocks (stimulus duration: 700 ms, interstimulus interval: 300 ms), intermixed with 20 s fixation blocks, for a total run time of 8 min. Subjects performed a one-back repetition detection task on the images.

2.5.1 Acquisition and Analysis

Acquisition: Blood oxygen level-dependent (BOLD) fMRI measurements were performed at high spatial resolution (voxel volume: $1.95 \times 1.95 \times 2\mathrm{mm}^3$), using a 3 T General Electric HDx MRI scanner, and a custom-made 16-channel head coil (Nova Medical). Single-shot gradient-recalled echo-planar imaging with sensitivity encoding (matrix size: 128×96, TR: 2 s, TE: 30 ms, 272 volumes per run) was used to acquire 25 axial slices that covered inferior temporal cortex (ITC) and early visual cortex (EVC) bilaterally.

Pre-processing: fMRI data preprocessing was performed using BrainVoyager QX 1.8 (Brain Innovation). All functional runs were subjected to slice-scan-time correction and 3D motion correction. In addition, the localiser runs were high-pass filtered in the temporal domain with a filter of two cycles per run (corresponding to a cutoff frequency of 0.004 Hz). For the definition of FFA and PPA (see 2.5.2 below), data were spatially smoothed by convolution of a Gaussian kernel of 4 mm full-width at half-maximum. For definition of EVC and ITC, unsmoothed data were used. Data were converted to percentage signal change. Analyses were performed in native subject space (i.e., no Talairach transformation).

Estimation of single-image patterns: Single-image BOLD fMRI activation was estimated by univariate linear modeling. We concatenated the runs within a session along the temporal dimension. For each ROI, data were extracted. We then performed univariate linear modelling for each voxel in each ROI to obtain response-amplitude estimates for each of the 96 stimuli. The model included a hemodynamic-response predictor for each of the 96 stimuli. The predictor time courses were computed using a linear model of the hemodynamic response (Boynton et al., 1996) and assuming an instant-onset rectangular neuronal response during each condition of visual stimulation. For each run, the design matrix included the stimulus-response predictors along with six head-motion parameter time courses, a linear-trend predictor, a six-predictor Fourier basis for nonlinear trends (sines and cosines of up to three cycles per run), and a confound-mean predictor.

2.5.2 ROI definition

ROIs were defined based on visual responsiveness (for EVC and ITC) and category-selective contrasts (for fusiform face area, FFA, and parahippocampal place area, PPA) of voxels in the independent block-localiser task and restricted to a cortex mask manually drawn on each subject's fMRI slices (Mur et al., 2012).

The FFA was defined in each hemisphere as a cluster of contiguous face-selective voxels in ITC cortex (number of voxels per hemisphere: 128). Face-selectivity was assessed by the contrast faces minus places and objects.

Clusters were obtained separately in the left and right hemisphere by selecting the peak face-selective voxel in the fusiform gyrus, and then growing the region from this seed by an iterative process. During this iterative process, the region is grown one voxel at a time, until an a priori specified number of voxels is selected. The region is grown by repeatedly adding the most face-selective voxel from the voxels that are directly adjacent to the current ROI in 3D space, i.e., from those voxels that are on the "fringe" of the current ROI (the current ROI is equivalent to the seed voxel during the first iteration).

The PPA was defined in an identical way but then using the contrast places minus faces and objects, growing the region from the peak place-selective voxel in the parahippocampal cortex in each hemisphere (number of voxels per hemisphere: 128).

The ITC ROI was defined by selecting the most visually responsive voxels within the ITC portion of the cortex masks in each hemisphere (number of voxels for bilateral ITC region: 316).

Visual responsiveness was assessed by the contrast visual stimulation (face, object, place) minus baseline.

In order to define EVC, we selected the most visually responsive voxels, as for ITC, but within a manually defined anatomical region around the calcarine sulcus within the bilateral cortex mask (number of voxels: 224). EVC was not defined for left and right hemispheres separately.

For EVC and ITC, voxels were not constrained to be spatially contiguous.

2.5.3 Metrics calculation on real data

We exploited three different subsets of stimuli for estimating the linear pattern transformations: the whole set composed of the 96 stimuli, a subset composed of 24 faces and another subset composed of 8 places. In order to estimate and analyse the transformation between the input MV-patterns of EVC and the output MV-patterns of ITC, FFA and PPA, we relied on an across-sessions approach. We first estimated the transformation $\hat{T}_{\lambda,12}$, as well as the values of RDD_{12}, $RDSV_{12}$ and the cross-validated GOF_{12}, from the input patterns of session 1 and the output patterns of session 2. Second, we estimated $\hat{T}_{\lambda,21}$, and the values of the three metrics, by using the input/output patterns of the session 2/1. Then, we averaged the obtained values, i.e. we defined $GOF := (GOF_{12} + GOF_{21})/2$, $RDD := (RDD_{12} + RDD_{21})/2$ and $RDSV := (RDSV_{12} + RDSV_{21})/2$. The application of an across-sessions approach improves the interpretability of the measures by reducing possible confounds induced by the pattern fluctuations shared by the areas (Henriksson et al. 2015; Walther et al. 2016).

3 Results

3.1 Goodness-of-fit, explained variance

The results obtained by analysing the goodness-of-fit (GOF, Fig. 4) clearly show the presence of a linear statistical dependency between EVC and ITC, FFA and PPA for each of the three sets of analysed stimuli, i.e. the sets composed of all 96 stimuli, of the 24 faces and of the 8 places. The cross-validated average GOF value across the four subjects for each pair of ROIs and set of stimuli is statistically different with respect to the GOF values obtained by using independent simulated random data ($p < 0.05$, K-S test).

The GOF values achieved by EVC in estimating the ITC patterns show the largest values for every set of stimuli. For the sets of all 96 and the 24 faces stimuli, the EVC->ITC values are significantly larger ($p \leq 0.001$, t-test) than the GOF values associated with EVC->PPA (panels A and B, Fig. 4). For the set of 8 places stimuli, a significant difference ($p = 0.007$, t-test) can only be observed with respect to EVC->FFA (panel C, Fig. 4). No statistically significant differences can be

observed between EVC->ITC and EVC->FFA for the sets of 96 and 24 faces stimuli (p=0.061 and p-value=0.177, t-test), and between EVC->ITC and EVC->PPA for the 8 places stimuli (p-value=0.331, t-test).

Furthermore, the percentage of variance of FFA explained by EVC (i.e. EVC->FFA) is significantly (p-value=0.007, t-test) larger than that for EVC->PPA for the set of 24 faces stimuli (panel B, Fig. 4). No other statistically significant differences can be observed (p-value =0.069 and p-value =0.157, t-test) for the whole set of 96 and the set of 8 places stimuli (panels A and C, Fig. 4).

As an additional validation of our linear transformations, we present the dissimilarity matrices for real and estimated FFA activity patterns in Figure S1. The correlation coefficient between the two matrices is 0.29, and visual inspections shows that some patterns of the real dissimilarity matrix are preserved in the estimate (e.g. the structure for face stimuli in the top left part of the matrices).

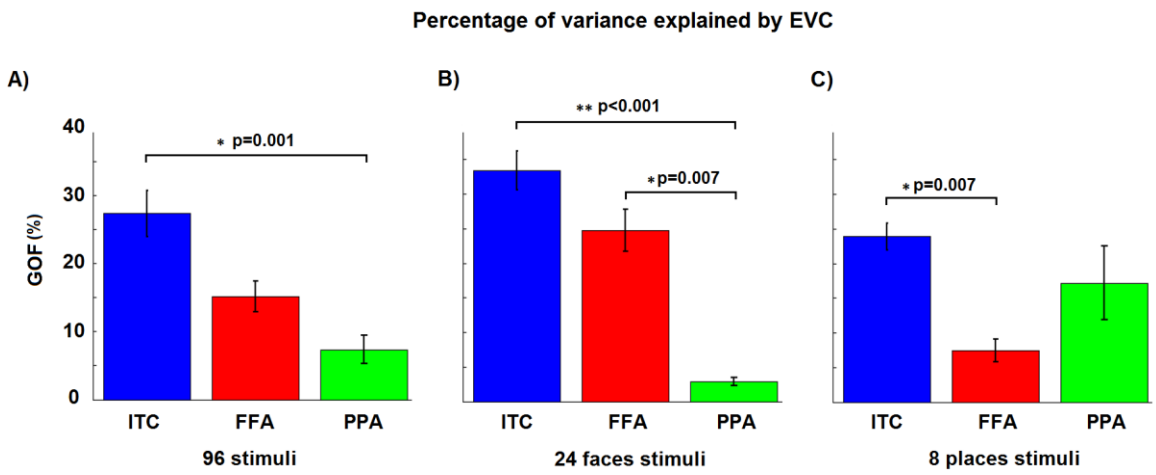

Fig. 4. The goodness-of-fit (GOF) values for the three sets of stimuli. **A), B)** and **C)** The average (and standard error) percentages of GOF by using the linear pattern transformations from EVC to the three output ROIs for the all 96 stimuli, the 24 faces stimuli and the 8 places stimuli, respectively. The p-values for the paired t-tests have been reported even if based on only four subjects.

Fig. 5 shows the GOF as a function of the stimulus. The first 48 stimuli are images of animate objects (including animal and human faces) while the last 48 stimuli are images of inanimate objects (including natural and artificial places). For ITC and FFA, the GOF is generally higher for the animate than inanimate objects, while the opposite is observed for PPA. For 39 of the 48 animate objects, the GOF for EVC->PPA is lower than the average GOF across the 96 stimuli, while for 35 of the 48 inanimate objects, the GOF is higher (p-values<0.001, Fisher exact test). Conversely, for 38 of the 48 animate objects, the GOF for EVC->FFA is higher than the average GOF across the 96 stimuli, while for 36 of the 48 inanimate objects, the GOF is lower (p-values<0.001, Fisher exact test). The results for EVC->ITC are similar to those for EVC->FFA: for 35 of the 48 animate objects, the GOF for EVC-

>ITC is higher than average, while for 27 of the 48 inanimate objects, the GOF is lower (p-values<0.01, Fisher exact test).

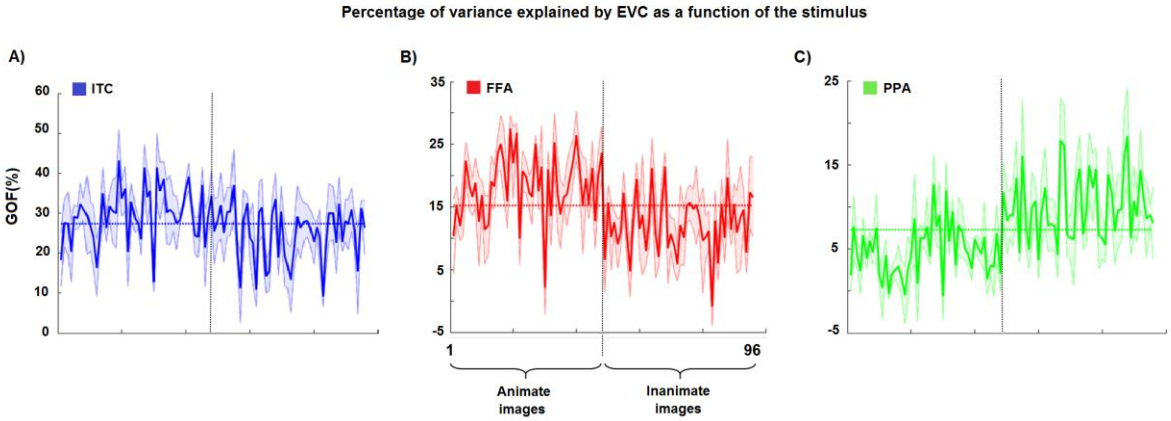

Fig. 5. Goodness-of-fit (GOF) as a function of the stimuli. **A)**, **B)** and **C)** The solid lines (and the shaded areas) denote the average percentages of GOF across the four subjects (and standard error), by using the linear pattern transformations from EVC to the three output ROIs, as functions of the stimuli. The first 48 stimuli are animate images while the last 48 stimuli are inanimate images. A higher GOF (with respect to the mean) is evident for the animate stimuli for ITC and FFA, and for the inanimate stimuli for PPA.

We also observe a general anticorrelation between the GOF and λ values (Pearson correlation coefficient for 96, 24 and 8 stimuli: -0.89, -0.88, -0.80, all p-values<0.001). As expected, the higher the variance explained by the estimated transformation $\widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_{\lambda}$, the lower the optimal value of the regularisation parameter λ.

3.2 Sparsity

Figures 6 and 7 show the results obtained for the rate of decay of the density curve (RDD) and the GOF values (as described in the section 2.3.1), in order to characterise the sparsity of the MV-pattern transformations.

We found a generally high level of sparsity for the transformations EVC->ITC, EVC->FFA and EVC->PPA. When all 96 stimuli were taken into account, all the transformations reach an estimated sparsity >80% (Fig. 6). The transformation EVC->FFA (panel B, Fig. 6) and EVC->PPA (panel C, Fig. 6) show the highest estimated levels of sparsity (>90%), followed by the transformation EVC->ITC (80-90%) (panel A, Fig. 6). Similar results can also be observed for the set of 24 faces (panels A, B and C, Fig. 7) and the 8 places (panels D, E and F, Fig. 7). For the faces set, the transformation EVC-

>FFA shows the highest percentage of sparsity (>90%, but <99%, denoted by the black dotted line, panel B Fig. 7), followed by the other two estimated transformations EVC->ITC and EVC->PPA (both $\geq 90\%$, panels A and C, Fig. 7). Conversely, for the set of 8 place stimuli, the transformations EVC->ITC and EVC->PPA show high sparsity (respectively, >90% and 80-90%, panels D and F, Fig. 7), while EVC->FFA is less sparse (<50%, panel E, Fig. 7).

All estimates show large standard errors that, in some cases (see panels E and F, Fig. 7), include both high and low estimated percentages of sparsity. This suggests that an accurate estimate of the actual sparsity for the pattern transformations may need a larger number of subjects and stimuli.

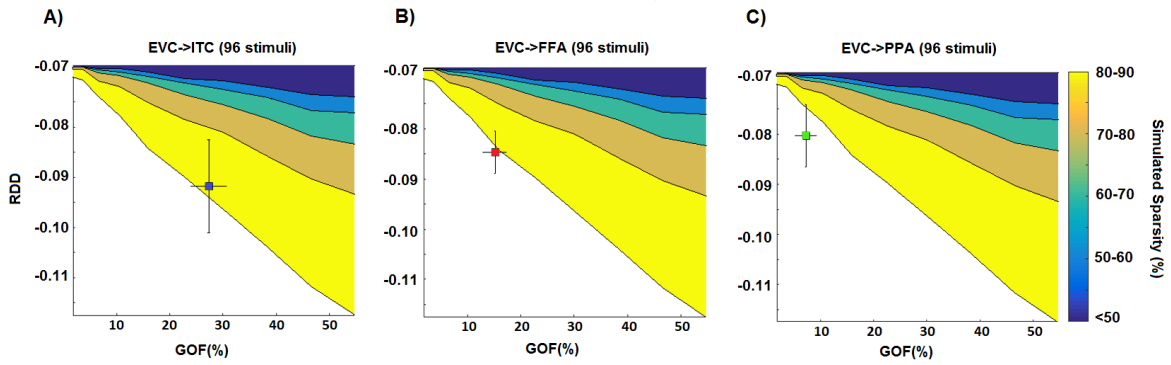

Fig. 6. Estimated sparsity for the pattern transformation with 96 stimuli. **A)**, **B)** and **C)** The estimates of the percentage of sparsity for the pattern transformations EVC->ITC, EVC->FFA and EVC->PPA, respectively. The solid lines between two coloured areas represent the mean RDD and GOF values across the simulations-realisations for each of the simulated percentages of sparsity, i.e. from 50% to 90% with a step of 10%. Each coloured area thus represents a fixed range for the percentage of sparsity, e.g. the blue area denotes a degree of sparsity <50% and the yellow represents a percentage between 80% and 90%. The blue, red and green squares (and their error bars in the panels A, B and C denote the mean (and the standard error) estimate of RDD and GOF across the four subjects. All the estimates show a high percentage of sparsity for all transformations (>80%). Slightly higher percentages are shown by the transformations EVC->FFA and EVC->PPA.

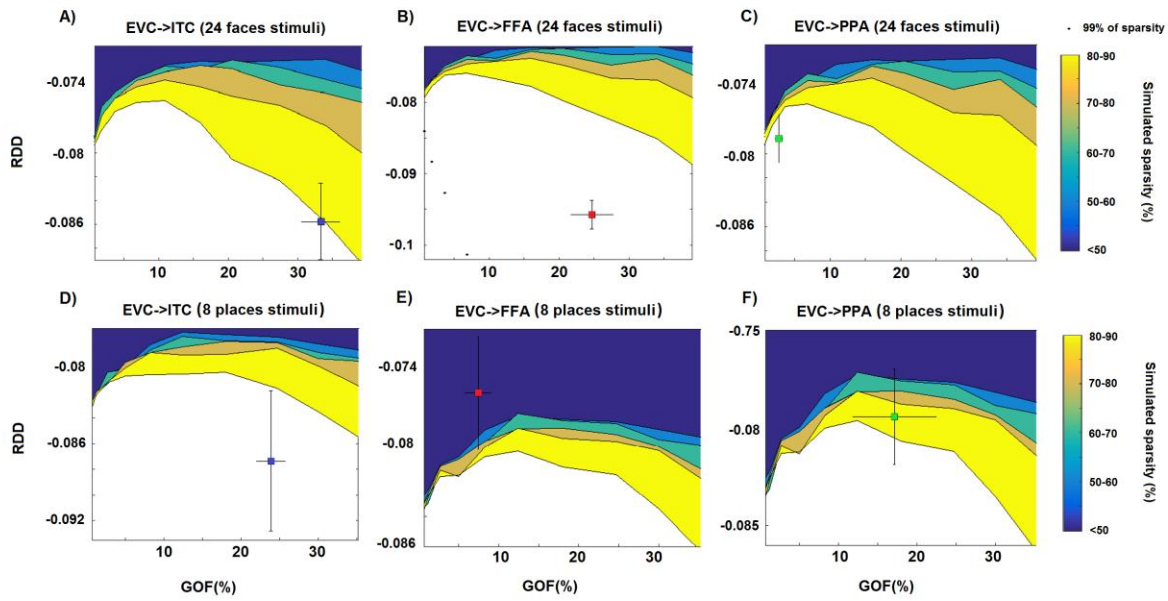

Fig. 7. Estimated sparsity for the pattern transformations for the sets of 24 face and 8 place stimuli, respectively. **A), B)** and **C)** The estimates of the percentage of sparsity for the pattern transformations EVC->ITC, EVC->FFA and EVC->PPA for the 24 faces stimuli. **D)**, **E)** and **F)** The same estimates for the 8 places stimuli. The solid lines between two coloured areas represent the mean RDD and GOF values across the simulations-realisations for each of the simulated percentages of sparsity, i.e. from 50% to 90% with a step of 10%. Each coloured area thus represents a fixed range for the percentage of sparsity, e.g. the blue area denotes a degree of sparsity <50% and the yellow represents a percentage between 80% and 90%. The blue, red and green squares (and their error bars) denote the mean (and the standard error) estimate of RDD and GOF across the four subjects. The results are in accordance to those obtained by using all the 96 stimuli. Indeed, almost all the transformations show a high degree of sparsity. The standard errors also show larger values with respect those obtained by using all the 96 stimuli, and the solid lines obtained by using the simulations show overlapping and unstable values. This suggests that an accurate estimate of the actual sparsity for the transformations may need a higher number of subjects and stimuli.

3.3 Pattern deformation

Figure 8 shows the results for the pattern deformation, i.e. for the estimated rate of decay of the SVs ($RDSV$) and the GOF values (see section 2.4.1), for the transformations EVC->ITC, EVC->FFA and EVC->PPA (panels A, B and C for the 96, 24 and 8 stimuli, respectively). For the set of 96 stimuli, all the transformations show high rates of decay of the SV-curve ($b < -10$). A simple rotation/reflection is associated with a rate of decay $b = 0$. Thus, all the three transformations do not uniformly deform the EVC MV-patterns, and the input and output MV-patterns are thus far from being considered as simple rotations of each other. However, for a lower number of stimuli (i.e. both for the 24 and for the 8 stimuli) the estimated rates of decay are lower ($-1 < b < -0.1$) than those obtained for the 96 stimuli. Thus, these transformations are characterised by a more uniform deformation of the EVC MV-patterns than the transformations obtained by using all the 96 stimuli. As a sanity check, we tested if these results are affected by the specific choice of voxels within ITC, FFA and PPA ROIs.

To this end, we repeated the analysis considering different voxels within each ROI but keeping the voxel number for each ROI equal to that of the previous analysis. The results do not change for different subsamples of the ITC, FFA and PPA voxels (p-value>0.05, t-test).

Although the error bars (standard error of the mean) show small values along the y-axis, the characterisation of the rate of decay of SV-curve would benefit from a larger number of subjects and stimuli.

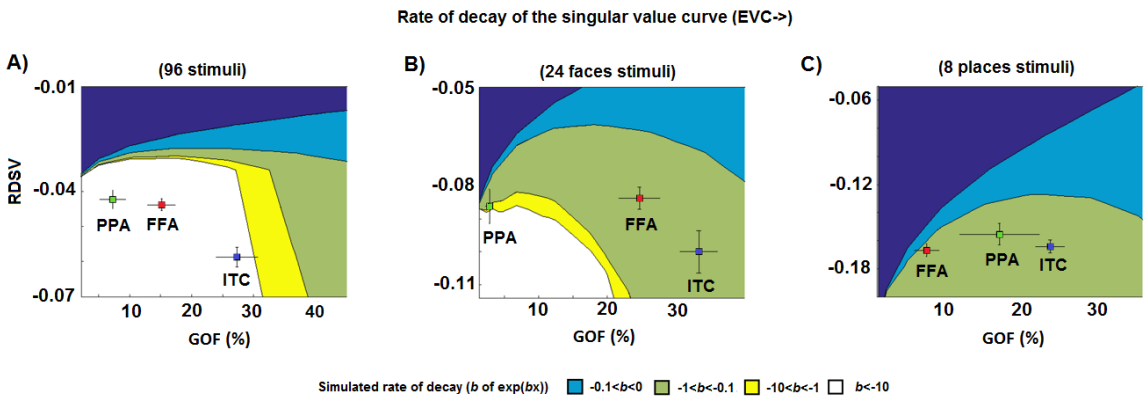

Fig. 8. Pattern deformation for each pair of ROIs and set of stimuli. **A)**, **B)** and **C)** The estimates of the rate of decay of SV-curve (RDSV), denoting the pattern deformation, of EVC->ITC, EVC->FFA and EVC->PPA for the three sets of stimuli. The solid lines between two coloured areas represent the mean $RDSV$ and GOF values across the simulations-realisations for each of the simulated rates of decay. Each coloured area thus represents a fixed range for the rate of decay. The blue, red and green squares (and their error bars) in the panels A, B and C denote the mean (and the standard error) estimate of $RDSV$ and GOF across the four subjects.

4 Discussion

In this study, we developed computational strategies for estimating and analysing linear transformations between multivariate fMRI patterns in pairs of ROIs. These methods allow investigating features of the voxel-by-voxel mappings between ROIs. We first described a cross-validated Tikhonov regularisation approach for robustly estimating the linear pattern transformation. Then, we described three different metrics to characterise specific features of these transformations, i.e. the goodness-of-fit, the sparsity of the transformation and the pattern deformation. The first metric describes to what degree the transformations can be represented as a matrix multiplication, i.e. it estimates the linear statistical dependency between two multi-voxel patterns. The second metric, sparsity, is closely related to the concept of topographic projections, i.e. one-to-one connections between voxels. The higher the percentage of sparsity, i.e. the higher the percentage of zero elements of the transformation, the higher is the degree to which the transformation represents a "one-to-one" mapping between voxels of the two ROIs. In order to estimate the percentage of sparsity, we relied on a Monte Carlo procedure to overcome the confounds induced by noise. The

third metric, pattern deformation, is a measure of the rate of decay of the singular value curve, describing the degree to which the transformation amplifies or suppresses certain patterns. For instance, a constant value for the singular values of the transformation is associated with two multivariate patterns which can be seen as rotated versions of each other, while a larger decay is associated with a larger deformation. We applied the Tikhonov regularisation method, and the three different metrics, to an event-related fMRI data set consisting of data from four human subjects (Kriegeskorte et al. 2008a).

The results obtained using the goodness-of-fit measure showed the presence of a statistically significant linear dependency between EVC and the other three ROIs. Among the regions considered, ITC showed the highest linear dependency with EVC. Furthermore, in accordance with the existing literature (Kanwisher et al. 1997; Epstein & Kanwisher 1998; Mur et al. 2012), FFA and PPA showed the expected preference for faces and places as well as for animate and inanimate objects, respectively (Fig. 5). These findings indicate that, even if the true pattern transformations between brain areas might be non-linear, linear transformations can provide a good approximation. Importantly, while non-linear methods (such as neural networks) may increase the goodness-of-fit compared to linear methods (Anzellotti et al. 2016), linear methods allow the investigation of meaningful features of the transformation, such as sparsity and pattern deformation.

Our Monte Carlo approach for analysing sparsity revealed that our estimated linear transformations can be considered as sparse. Almost all the pattern transformations showed an estimated percentage of sparsity higher than 80%. Nevertheless, although the observed percentages suggest the presence of a one-to-few voxels mapping, they are lower than those expected for a precise one-to-one voxel mapping. Such a mapping between two ROIs, of e.g. 200 voxels each, would imply a percentage of sparsity higher than 99.5%. Interestingly, for face stimuli sparsity was larger for the transformation EVC->FFA than for EVC->PPA, and vice versa for place stimuli, as expected based on the functional specialisation of these areas.

The results obtained by applying the third metric pattern deformation showed that the ITC, FFA and PPA patterns cannot be considered as simple rotations or reflections of the EVC pattern. The average deformation induced by the transformation from EVC to an output pattern is higher than the one expected from an orthogonal transformation. Thus, each of these transformations amplifies certain MV-patterns while dampening others.

Our results are based on data sets from only four subjects, and the face and place stimulus subsets containing only 24 and 8 stimuli, respectively. This is not sufficient for a reliable statistical analysis, and these results should therefore be seen mostly as a proof-of-concept of our novel approach. However, the functional specificity of the patterns of goodness-of-fit and the high degree of sparsity, which suggests the presence of one-to-few voxels mappings, are promising hints that these methods will be useful for the characterisation of neural pattern transformations in future studies.

Several variations and extensions of our approach are possible. In order to estimate the pattern transformations, we relied on Tikhonov regularisation (Bertero et al. 1985). This method aims at minimising the l^2 norm of the residuals as well as the l^2 norm of the transformation itself. This is not the only approach that can be used as a regression analysis method. For example, one can also apply the least absolute shrinkage and selection operator (LASSO, Tibshirani 1996), which is a least-squares method with an l^1 penalty term, or an elastic net approach, which contains a combination of both l^2 and l^1 penalties (Zou & Hastie 2005). However, these estimators may lead to obtain sparse solutions even in the presence of non-sparse linear mappings. Thus, in order to reliably estimate the degree of sparsity of the transformation, suitable strategies should be defined. Furthermore, classic algorithms (Boyd 2010) for solving these minimisation problems require the pattern transformation to be vectorised, and the input pattern to be transformed into a matrix composed of copies of the original pattern, thus requiring long computation times. Nevertheless, future work should compare pattern transformations estimated using different regression analysis approaches, and their effects on our novel transformation metrics. An advantage of our regression approach is that it produces explicit transformations, from which we can extract meaningful features. It remains to be seen if this is also the case for non-linear methods such as neural networks (Anzellotti et al. 2016) or multivariate kernel methods (O'Brien et al. 2016).

Furthermore, other computational approaches could be developed in order to further characterise the pattern transformations or the relation between the multivariate patterns. For instance, an approach similar to that of explained variance could be developed by comparing the actual and estimated representational connectivity (Kriegeskorte et al. 2008a). As an alternative to explained variance, it is possible to analyse the correlation between the dissimilarity matrix associated with a pattern $\boldsymbol{Y}$ and the matrix obtained using the output pattern $\widehat{\boldsymbol{Y}} = \widehat{\boldsymbol{T}}_{\lambda}\boldsymbol{X}$ (Fig. S1).

We found a high degree of sparsity for our estimated transformations, which is consistent with the presence of topographic mappings. In the future, one could define a metric for "pattern divergence" using information about spatial proximity of voxels, in order to test whether voxels that are close-by in in the output region project to voxels that are also close-by in the input region.

Finally, our method could be generalised to be applied to other neuroimaging modalities, such as electro- and magnetoencephalography (EEG and MEG). This would open up the possibility to study transformation across time, i.e. whether there are (non-)linear transformations that relate a pattern in an output region to patterns in an input region at different time points. While current approaches using RSA or decoding can test whether patterns or pattern similarities are stable over time (e.g. King & Dehaene 2014), our approach can potentially reveal whether there are stable or dynamic transformations among patterns of brain activity. In the linear case, this would be related to multivariate auto-regressive (MVAR) modelling (e.g. Stokes & Purdon 2017; Seth et al. 2015). So far, these methods have been used to detect the presence of significant connectivity among brain regions. Future work should investigate whether we can use the actual transformations to

characterise the spatial structure of these connections in more detail. Our study demonstrates that linear methods can be a powerful tool in this endeavour, and may pave the way for more biophysically informed approaches using non-linear methods.

References

Anzellotti, S., Fedorenko, E., Caramazza, A., & Saxe, R. (2016). Measuring and Modeling Transformations of Information Between Brain Regions with fMRI. bioRxiv, 074856.

Anzellotti, S., Caramazza, A., & Saxe, R. (2017). Multivariate pattern dependence. PLoS computational biology, 13(11), e1005799.

Anzellotti, S., & Coutanche, M. N. (2018). Beyond Functional Connectivity: Investigating Networks of Multivariate Representations. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 22(3), 258-269.

Baillet, S. (2017). Magnetoencephalography for brain electrophysiology and imaging. Nature neuroscience, 20(3), 327.

Basti, A., Pizzella, V., Chella, F., Romani, G. L., Nolte, G., & Marzetti, L. (2018). Disclosing large-scale directed functional connections in MEG with the multivariate phase slope index. NeuroImage, 175, 161-175.

Bertero, M., De Mol, C., & Pike, E. R. (1985). Linear inverse problems with discrete data. I: General formulation and singular system analysis. Inverse Problems, 1(4), 301-330.

Bertero, M., De Mol, C., & Pike, E. R. (1988). Linear inverse problems with discrete data: II. Stability and regularisation. Inverse Problems, 4(3), 573-594.

Boyd, S. (2010). Distributed Optimization and Statistical Learning via the Alternating Direction Method of Multipliers. Foundations and Trends in Machine Learning. Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 1–122.

Boynton, G. M., Engel, S. A., Glover, G. H., & Heeger, D. J. (1996). Linear systems analysis of functional magnetic resonance imaging in human V1. Journal of Neuroscience, 16(13), 4207-4221.

Esterman, M., Tamber-Rosenau, B. J., Chiu, Y. C., & Yantis, S. (2010). Avoiding non-independence in fMRI data analysis: leave one subject out. Neuroimage, 50(2), 572-576.

Deleus, F., & Van Hulle, M. M. (2011). Functional connectivity analysis of fMRI data based on regularized multiset canonical correlation analysis. Journal of Neuroscience methods, 197(1), 143-157.

Epstein, R., & Kanwisher, N. (1998). A cortical representation of the local visual environment. Nature, 392(6676), 598.

Geerligs, L., Cam-CAN, & Henson, R. N. (2016). Functional connectivity and structural covariance between regions of interest can be measured more accurately using multivariate distance correlation. NeuroImage, 135, 16-31.

Golub, G. H., Heath, M., & Wahba, G. (1979). Generalized cross-validation as a method for choosing a good ridge parameter. Technometrics, 21(2), 215-223.

Güçlü, U., & van Gerven, M. A. (2015). Deep neural networks reveal a gradient in the complexity of neural representations across the ventral stream. Journal of Neuroscience, 35(27), 10005-10014.

Henriksson, L., Khaligh-Razavi, S. M., Kay, K., & Kriegeskorte, N. (2015). Visual representations are dominated by intrinsic fluctuations correlated between areas. NeuroImage, 114, 275-286.

Higham, N. J. (1986). Computing the polar decomposition—with applications. SIAM Journal on Scientific and Statistical Computing, 7(4), 1160-1174.

Jbabdi, S., Sotiropoulos, S. N., & Behrens, T. E. (2013). The topographic connectome. Current opinion in neurobiology, 23(2), 207-215.

Kanwisher, N., McDermott, J., & Chun, M. M. (1997). The fusiform face area: a module in human extrastriate cortex specialized for face perception. Journal of neuroscience, 17(11), 4302-4311.

Khaligh-Razavi, S. M., & Kriegeskorte, N. (2014). Deep supervised, but not unsupervised, models may explain IT cortical representation. PLoS computational biology, 10(11), e1003915.

King, J. R., & Dehaene, S. (2014). Characterizing the dynamics of mental representations: the temporal generalization method. Trends in cognitive sciences, 18(4), 203-210.

Kriegeskorte, N., Mur, M., & Bandettini, P. (2008a). Representational similarity analysis - connecting the branches of systems neuroscience. Front Syst Neurosci, 2, 4.

Kriegeskorte, N., Mur, M., Ruff, D. A., Kiani, R., Bodurka, J., Esteky, H., Tanaka, K., Bandettini, P. A. (2008b). Matching categorical object representations in inferior temporal cortex of man and monkey. Neuron, 60(6), 1126-1141.

Marzetti, L., Della Penna, S., Snyder, A. Z., Pizzella, V., Nolte, G., de Pasquale, F., ... & Corbetta, M. (2013). Frequency specific interactions of MEG resting state activity within and across brain networks as revealed by the multivariate interaction measure. Neuroimage, 79, 172-183.

Misaki, M., Kim, Y., Bandettini, P. A., & Kriegeskorte, N. (2010). Comparison of multivariate classifiers and response normalizations for pattern-information fMRI. Neuroimage, 53(1), 103-118.

Mur, M., Ruff, D. A., Bodurka, J., De Weerd, P., Bandettini, P. A., & Kriegeskorte, N. (2012). Categorical, yet graded--single-image activation profiles of human category-selective cortical regions. Journal of Neuroscience, 32 (25), 8649-8662.

Mur, M., Meys, M., Bodurka, J., Goebel, R., Bandettini, P. A., & Kriegeskorte, N. (2013). Human object-similarity judgments reflect and transcend the primate-IT object representation. Frontiers in psychology, 4, 128.

Naselaris, T., Kay, K. N., Nishimoto, S., & Gallant, J. L. (2011). Encoding and decoding in fMRI. Neuroimage, 56(2), 400-410.

O'Brien, T. A., Kashinath, K., Cavanaugh, N. R., Collins, W. D., & O'Brien, J. P. (2016). A fast and objective multidimensional kernel density estimation method: fastKDE. Computational Statistics & Data Analysis, 101, 148-160.

Patel, G. H., Kaplan, D. M., & Snyder, L. H. (2014). Topographic organization in the brain: searching for general principles. Trends in cognitive sciences, 18(7), 351-363.

Seth, A. K., Barrett, A. B., & Barnett, L. (2015). Granger causality analysis in neuroscience and neuroimaging. Journal of Neuroscience, 35(8), 3293-3297.

Stoer, J., & Bulirsch, R. (2002). Introduction to Numerical Analysis (3rd ed.). Berlin, New York: Springer-Verlag.

Stokes, P. A., & Purdon, P. L. (2017). A study of problems encountered in Granger causality analysis from a neuroscience perspective. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 114(34), E7063-E7072.

Thivierge, J. P., & Marcus, G. F. (2007). The topographic brain: from neural connectivity to cognition. Trends in neurosciences, 30(6), 251-259.

Tibshirani, R. (1996). Regression Shrinkage and Selection via the lasso. Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series B (methodological). Wiley. 58 (1): 267–88.

Walther, A., Nili, H., Ejaz, N., Alink, A., Kriegeskorte, N., & Diedrichsen, J. (2016). Reliability of dissimilarity measures for multi-voxel pattern analysis. Neuroimage, 137, 188-200.

Yamins, D. L., Hong, H., Cadieu, C. F., Solomon, E. A., Seibert, D., & DiCarlo, J. J. (2014). Performance-optimized hierarchical models predict neural responses in higher visual cortex. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 111(23), 8619-8624.

Zou, H., & Hastie, T. (2005). Regularization and Variable Selection via the Elastic Net. Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series B: 301–320.

Supplementary material

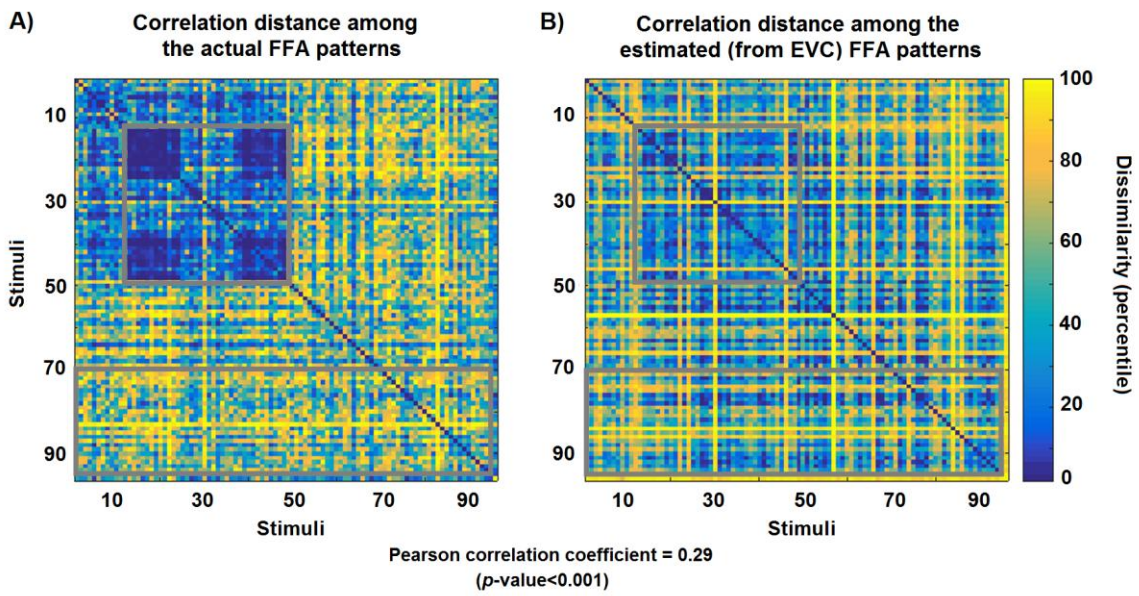

Fig. S1. Representational dissimilarity matrices for actual and estimated patterns. **A)** Percentile of the correlation distance (as a dissimilarity measure) among the multivariate patterns of the actual FFA. **B)** Percentile of the correlation distance among the estimated FFA from EVC. The estimate of the multivariate pattern of FFA was obtained by using the pattern transformation between EVC and FFA. While some information is lost, some characteristic patterns which are visible in the panel A (e.g., the patterns highlighted by the grey boxes) are also visible in the panel B. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the lower triangular portions of the two matrices is 0.29, p-value<0.001.