Morphology of the posterior superior temporal plane and language abilities in autism

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Summary
Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a prevalent developmental disorder characterized by social and communication impairments. Structures in the superior temporal plane, including Heschl's gyrus (HG) and planum temporale (PT) play key roles in social and linguistic communication. However, the morphology of the superior temporal plane is highly variable, and automated, curvature-based parcellations of HG and PT are notoriously inaccurate. Here, we manually labelled HG and PT to investigate whether the morphology or morphometry of these structures differs in ASD vs. neurotypical (NT) children, and how they related to language skills in ASD.

Our Findings:
1. HG is significantly larger bilaterally in ASD than NT (volume and surface area), but no group difference in cortical thickness.
2. Groups did not differ in volume, surface area, or thickness of PT.
3. There were few brain-behavior correlations in these regions:
   1. Cortical thickness in PT was negatively related to SCQ in ASD.
   2. More right-lateralized HG gray matter volume was associated with higher SCQ scores in ASD.

Methods

Subjects: Brain scans and neuropsychological assessments from N=109 children aged 5-18 years; are included in this study. Of these, n=70 were neurotypical controls (NT), and n=39 were diagnosed as autistic (ASD), confirmed by ADOS.

MRI Data Acquisition: T1-weighted MRI scans were collected via the 3T Siemens Trio MRI scanner at the Martinos Center at MIT. Data were deidentified prior to automatic and manual analyses, which were carried out blind to participant group.

MRI Data Analysis: Cortical reconstruction and parcellation were performed via the default stream in FreeSurfer 6.0.0. Manual corrections to the pial and white matter boundaries were performed based on the output of QuickT. Manual labelling of Heschl's gyrus (HG) and planum temporale (PT) was first performed on the inflated cortical surface. A complete posterior duplication (CPD) or the posterior half of a common stem duplication (CSD) were labelled as HG2. These labels were transformed into the volume, masked by the cortical ribbon, and manually corrected to conform to standard volumetric anatomical landmarks for the borders of these structures.

For statistical analyses, both HG1 and HG2 of a CSD were included in HG, whereas HG2 from a CPD was included as part of PT. Statistical models of group differences and within-group correlations included IQ (KBIT), Age, Sex, and Intracranial Volume (ICV) as covariates to control for the known effects of these factors on brain size and cortical thickness.

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Heschl's Gyrus Morphometry

HG was significantly larger bilaterally in ASD vs. NT (volume and surface area). Overall, HG tended to have greater cortical surface area in the left hemisphere, while being thicker on the right.

Brain–Behavior Relationships
Modelling the relationship between HG grey matter volume and SCQ in ASD children revealed a Thickness × Hemisphere interaction (p < 0.005). Higher SCQ scores were associated with greater rightward lateralization of HG volume (and surface area). Overall PT thickness was associated with SCQ scores in ASD (p < 0.05).

There were no correlations between neuroanatomy and CELF scores.