
The neurobiology of uncertainty: implications for statistical learning

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Summary

The capacity for assessing the degree of uncertainty in the environment relies on estimating statistics of temporally unfolding inputs. This in turn allows calibration of predictive and bottom-up processing, and signaling changes in temporally unfolding environmental features. In the last decade, several studies have examined how the brain codes for and responds to input uncertainty. Initial neurobiological experiments implicated fronto-parietal and hippocampal systems, based largely on paradigms that manipulated distributional features of visual stimuli. However, later work in the auditory domain pointed to different systems, whose activation profiles have interesting implications for computational and neurobiological models of statistical learning in language. This review begins by briefly recapping the historical development of ideas pertaining to the sensitivity to uncertainty in temporally unfolding inputs. It then discusses several issues at the interface of studies of uncertainty and statistical learning. Following, it presents several current treatments of the neurobiology of uncertainty, and reviews recent findings that point to principles that serve as important constraints on future neurobiological theories of uncertainty, and relatedly, statistical learning. This review suggests it may be useful to establish closer links between neurobiological research on uncertainty and statistical learning, considering particularly mechanisms sensitive to local and global structure in inputs, the degree of input uncertainty, the complexity of the system generating the input, learning mechanisms that operate on different temporal scales and the use of learnt information for online prediction.

The role of uncertainty in psychology: a story of waxing and waning (and waxing)

The status of uncertainty (also, entropy, disorder) as an explanatory construct in cognitive psychology has seen fluctuations since the 1950s. Catalysed by Claude Shannon's work and the subsequent advent of information theory, numerous studies from the late 1940s to the early 1960s relied on insights and formalisms of information theory to explain learning, memory and language (for review of early studies, see Ref. [1]). To name a few, such studies attempted to quantify the channel capacity of sensory systems by studying the relation between the information in the inputs and the information in behavioural responses, evaluate responses as a function of distributional uncertainty (entropy), or empirically examine stimulus surprise. Some of those studies' insights remain fundamental within computational neuroscience and certain subfields of psychology. However, the limitation of input uncertainty as an explanatory factor was soon realized. In particular, George Miller had already noted in the 1950s ([2]) that working memory is not constrained by stimulus uncertainty, but by a potential for chunking that depends on long-term familiarity. This in turn introduced a strong limitation on the explanatory power of uncertainty as a stand-alone construct in approaches to learning in memory (setting aside more limited applications in domains such as sensory discrimination). Luce [3] covers some of this historical progression and other limitations in his review, "Whatever happened to information theory in psychology", and Laming [4] offers a detailed critique of the linking hypotheses that underlie interpretations of behavior in relation to stimulus uncertainty.

However, the more recent use of non-invasive neurobiological methods, particularly functional MRI, allows a different type of understanding of how humans (and their brains) respond to uncertainty. Whereas the original behavioral studies necessarily relied on quantifying the relation between the information in a stimulus set and the information inherent in responses to that stimulus (e.g., to infer channel capacity),

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neurobiological studies do not need to rely on overt behavior. This allows, for example, to identify brain systems that track input uncertainty and study their capacity, while participants are engaged in behaviors that are unrelated to the stimuli or the manipulation of interest. Studying the neurobiology of uncertainty has become central in several domains, including sensory perception, rule learning (for review, see [5]), the adjustment of predictions [6, 7], and understanding anxiety from the perspective of uncertainty [8-10].

Importantly, neurobiological questions about the principles that organize the brain's responses to uncertainty do not necessarily align with, nor are they intended to test, functional accounts of how uncertainty impacts behavior. In this sense, neurobiological and functional approaches, while at times sharing common concerns, are also concerned with partially separate issues.

Neurobiological approaches to uncertainty and statistical learning: Interfaces and disconnects

Statistical Learning (SL) is a dynamic field that is itself changing in theoretical scope and emphasis. Nonetheless, as a working definition the current discussion adopts Aslin and Newport's [11] perspective where SL is defined as a mechanism that "*enables adults and infants to extract patterns embedded in both language and visual domains*". A similar view is seen in Schapiro and Turk-Browne's neurobiologically-focused discussion where SL "*refers to the ability to extract regularities from the environment over time*" ([12], p. 501).

This intersection between the interest in regularities on the one hand and temporally extended learning on the other delimits the SL domain. It also separates it from related questions such as the coding of instantaneous statistics [13] or distributional learning of continuous variables (e.g., learning the mean and variance of a distribution of certain sensory features [14]). This emphasis naturally leads to the study of nominal rather than continuous variables, which is also consistent with the historical context in which the study of SL was developed. Specifically, SL has been suggested to be a domain-general capacity that underlies language acquisition [15], with an emphasis on the ability to code for specific features of an input stream such as marginal frequencies, transition probabilities and mutual information.

The shared interest in nominal variables and their distribution constitutes an important formal, if not theoretical link between neurobiological approaches to SL and uncertainty (we henceforth focus on neurobiological approaches). At the end of the day, both approaches are interested in learning, but they put different emphasis on what might be learnt. Whereas theories of SL are focused on how particular regularities or associations between elements are encoded, theories of uncertainty focus on how the overall degree of input uncertainty may be encoded or used for various purposes. Input uncertainty is a multifaceted construct and can be captured by numerous information-theoretic quantities that differentiate random from non-random inputs. For instance, Shannon's measure of entropy captures (roughly speaking) the relative diversity of input tokens, and Markov entropy reflects the strength of their transition constraints. Other measures, many derived within the field of dynamic systems load in some way on serial autocorrelation (long-term memory) within the data (e.g., Hurst exponent, attractor dimensions etc'). Behaviorally, people have been shown to be highly sensitive to such long-term features that impact uncertainty [16, 17].

At times, manipulations of uncertainty or statistical structure (as implemented in SL paradigms) amount to a terminological difference. Simple artificial grammars (regular grammars) of the form often used in SL and artificial grammar learning (AGL) paradigms can be represented as a first order Markov process; one where the next step is conditional only on the current state. When represented this way, the fact that certain transitions are allowed while others are not produces a quantifiable reduction in uncertainty and distinguishes grammatical from random strings. For this reason, some manipulations used in neurobiological studies of SL are also manipulations of uncertainty. For instance, in an fMRI study, McNealy et al. [18] examined the blood-oxygen-level dependent (BOLD) response when participants heard either random syllable sequences, or syllable sequences generated by a grammar that effectively produced fixed "words" that could be freely combined. The latter (more regular) condition produced greater activity in lateral temporal cortex (see [19] for a similar paradigm and findings). Thus, most generally, manipulations of uncertainty can identify brain systems sensitive to the statistical structure of the input, and such manipulations may subsume ones pitting random strings against those generated by a grammar. The next sections discuss several theoretical and experimental trends in studying the neurobiology of uncertainty that have implications for studies of SL.

Distributions and associations: macro- and micro-scale aspects of learning

Manipulations of uncertainty impact *macro-scale* properties of a stimulus series (e.g., mean series uncertainty as quantified via Shannon or Markov entropy or any other summary feature related to long-term autocorrelation or embedding dimension of the input), and it has been suggested that there may exist brain systems that code for such "summary statistics" – ones that reduce uncertainty into a single value (see [5] for discussion in context of decision making under uncertainty). However, uncertainty is also reflected in *micro-scale* features at the scale of single stimulus tokens, such as how surprising is the appearance of a single token or how much information a certain token provides about what is likely to happen next (cue diagnosticity). In some formalisms, for example the Rescorla-Wagner model, updating occurs on the micro-scale – that of transition constraints between pairs of tokens. However, computations operating on both scales likely impact how people code for and respond to uncertainty. Consider a binary [1,0] series derived from the transition structures of the following two processes:

- a. Process 1: $P(1 | 1) = 70\%$; $P(0 | 1) = 30\%$; $P(1 | 0) = 50\%$; $P(0 | 0) = 50\%$
b. Process 2: $P(1 | 1) = P(1 | 0) = P(0 | 1) = P(0 | 0) = 50\%$

Series generated from the first process are more regular because transition constraints are stronger. On some theoretical approaches, brain systems sensitive to this macro-scale feature (a “summary statistic”) would differentiate the two series for this reason. Several neurobiological studies have modeled brain responses as function of such summary statistics [20-24].

Conjointly, on the micro-scale of single items, in the regular process the state marked ‘1’ has higher cue diagnosticity—it provides more information about the next state—than any token in the random process. For this reason, brain systems that establish associations between pairs of tokens may be more frequently engaged for series generated by the first process. And relatedly, systems signaling prediction error may also be more extensively engaged in this case, specifically, when 0 follows 1, which may signal a violated prediction. The hippocampus has been linked to associative learning in continuous series, showing greater activity for tokens highly predictive of a subsequent token ([12, 25, 26]). However, fronto-parietal systems have been implicated by studies that explicitly manipulated cue diagnosticity, with greater activity reported for more diagnostic cues [27, 28].

The macro/micro distinction has a parallel in the SL literature concerned with whether adults and children learn macro-scale distributional information or alternatively, knowledge of the bigrams or trigrams whose presence typically differentiates a grammar from random transition network. To illustrate, the fact that infants look longer at elements that make up random series could indicate they differentiate random from regular series due to sensitivity to a “global” distributional feature, or alternatively, because the regular series contain more frequent cases of particular sequences/transitions. Interestingly, recent work suggests that the latter is the case [29], and the use of neurophysiological measurements may shed further light on this issue in the future. Thiessen et al. [30] make a similar distinction between conditional transition probabilities and distributional statistics. Another approach that differentiates micro- and macro-level description levels within the context of SL is presented by Karuza et al. [31]. There, relations between items are considered as edges within a network, and summary features of the network are taken to correlate with the ability to learn and remember system of interest (in their terminology, these levels correspond to local statistics and complex-network features).

These statistics play an important role in contemporary neurobiological models of language. Understanding whether the brain tracks the information that a linguistic cue provides about potential upcoming ones is becoming increasingly important because of the hypothesis that certain brain systems are engaged in prediction (at the phonemic, morphemic and word level) during comprehension. In particular, it has been suggested that during language comprehension certain brain systems signal the uncertainty of what is likely to appear. This means their activity tracks the variance of the set of potential completions that can follow at each point (formally, Shannon’s entropy of set of immediate complements). There is some empirical support for this proposition, emerging from neuroimaging [32], ECoG [33], and MEG studies [34, 35], but these have typically implicated lateral temporal and dorso-lateral prefrontal cortex. Technically, it is often possible to dissociate the impact of macro- and micro-scale features on brain activity by including in explanatory models both the overall macro-state, as well as the micro-scale features of the stimuli (see, e.g., [23]). Nonetheless, the theoretical distinction between micro- and macro- scale features is one that requires more empirical investigation. It is unknown whether, in terms of computation, there is a difference between establishing the uncertainty associated with local (short-term) and global (long-term) patterns and whether they rely on different latent capacities. Furthermore, it is unknown whether the coding of local patterns is itself impacted by macro-state features.

This is not to say that studies of uncertainty necessarily carry direct implications for neurobiological models of SL. For instance, some studies have evaluated sensitivity to temporally unfolding features of tonal series such as their fractal properties [36], relative smoothness [37], or magnitude of pitch transitions [38]. Such paradigms do indeed impact the predictability of future stimuli over multiple scales. However they rely on manipulations of a physical feature (e.g., pitch-changes over time). Consequently, their impact on brain activity may be due not to the coding of statistics of informational features, but due to the way these manipulations impact lower-level sensory processing. For instance, series that consist of smoother or more gradual pitch changes [36, 37] could produce stronger neural repetition suppression, because auditory neurons tuned to a certain pitch bandwidth will be engaged for longer durations. To conclude, neurobiological studies of uncertainty and SL develop from largely separate theoretical backgrounds. Still, there are interfaces between the two domains, as computational/neurobiological models of uncertainty consider both macro- and micro-scale features that are of interest to neurobiological models of SL.

From learning to using

Traditionally, behavioural studies of SL have drawn inferences about the outcome of learning from participants’ responses to test trials presented after learning. This has led to sophisticated models of the process [39]. However, more recently, the emphasis on the process of learning has been brought to the fore, as shown for instance in Frost et al.’s [15] emphasis on the dynamic aspects of learning wherein internal representations are updated via interactions between current inputs and prior knowledge. In tandem behavioral studies of SL have begun examining online responses during presentation of the stimulus series

[40, 41]. Such examinations produce a more direct description of the learning process itself rather than inferring the learning process from responses to test items.

A similar trajectory had occurred in neurobiological studies of AGL, SL, and the coding of uncertainty, which have seen a shift from an initial interest in identifying a putative “learning system” to more dynamic “real time” models of how statistics are acquired and used. The initial emphasis on identifying statistical-learning systems is seen, for instance, in a study that used an AGL paradigm [42] to identify brain regions that differentiated grammatical from ungrammatical test items. The authors concluded that the right caudate tracked adherence to the grammatical rule, whereas hippocampal activity tracked “chunk strength” – the extent to which test items were similar to training items. A similar interest in identifying “distributional learning” systems was seen in early neurobiological studies of uncertainty. Strange et al. [23] focused on sensitivity to marginal frequencies and implicated the hippocampus, and two other studies examining sensitivity to transitional probability constraints had linked the hippocampus [21] and left posterior lateral temporal cortex [20] to these computations. Notably however, some of these earlier studies were already concerned with how distributional knowledge impacted responses to single items – Strange et al. [23] quantified the *surprisal* of each item ($-\log(P(x))$) in relation to the distribution of items to that point and found strong stimulus-surprise effects in a fronto-parietal regions, the thalamus and fusiform cortex (stimuli were visual). Other work [43] had partitioned between a putatively initial stage of acquiring statistical knowledge (“process of learning”) from later stages where that knowledge is used “result of learning” and showed they involve different brain systems.

A theoretical shift from learning statistics to “using statistics” necessarily foregrounds two interrelated processes that are of major interest in current cognitive neuroscience but are seldom studied within neurobiological studies of SL – that of the construction of predictions and their evaluations (for exceptions see [25, 26, 44, 45]). A very large body of neurobiological work is concerned exclusively with these issues, typically outside the context of SL, using paradigms where cue validity is manipulated [28] or where cues are used to indicate future stimuli in different modalities [46]. This work has been reviewed extensively [7] and we will not do so here. What is important is that during the process of SL, brain activity inevitably reflects a combination of computations related to updating of distributional knowledge, as well as the construction of predictions licensed by that knowledge and their evaluation. Construing SL from an integrative perspective that takes into account the implicit detection of patterns or distributional information, and the subsequent use of this knowledge for prediction offers multiple opportunities for theoretical advances and may likely lead to different conclusions than those drawn from work to date. To illustrate, in cue-target paradigms, cues with higher validity (i.e., ones more informative about a future target) evoke greater activity than less valid cues in fronto-parietal regions [28]. However, when regular and random inputs are presented for *passive* observation in tasks that do not demand executive function, then the converse pattern is found: stimuli series where (on average) transition constraints are higher are associated with *less* activity in fronto-parietal regions than random series [47]. It has also been shown that when a stimulus stream conveys predictable knowledge in separate dimensions (e.g., shape and color) then regularities are associated with less activity (than a random condition) for the non-attended dimension, but more activity than a random condition for the attended dimension [43]. In other work [48] it was shown that brain responses to predictable stimuli are themselves impacted by attention allocated to the input stream: when predictable stimuli were presented at an attended screen side they were associated with increased activity as compared to a condition where no prediction was possible. However, the opposite pattern was found for stimuli presented at an unattended screen side – there, predictable stimuli evoked less activity than ones for which predictions were not viable. Thus, the online coding of regularities, as computed in the context of implicit paradigms that are of interest to SL may shed new light on how learning and prediction occur in natural contexts.

The importance of temporal scope

At the present, one difference between neurobiological studies SL and uncertainty pertains to their theoretical emphasis on the temporal constants over which information is integrated during learning. SL developed as a potential explanation for language acquisition [15] and the two capacities are often seen as intertwined and potentially loading on the same latent capacities [49]. An important feature of language statistics (e.g., phonotactic frequencies or transition probabilities between phonemes or syllables) is that these form a relatively stationary system. In other words, it is unlikely that once phonotactic or syllabic-level transition constraints are acquired by an adult, those would need to be strongly modified as a result of subsequent exchanges in that language. In this respect, a language system is largely a ‘fixed target’ where an assumption of stationarity is licensed. (There may be few exceptions that prove the rule, for instance, circumstances of second language learning in contexts where L1 and L2 share a syllabic/phonetic inventory). This implicit assumption of stationarity is consistent with the finding that individuals show gradually increasing (or decreasing) responses to stimuli drawn from regular (but not random) series, which has been documented in several studies [18, 19], and with fMRI work [43] that separated an initial phase reflecting the “process of learning” from a later phase of “result of learning”.

The stationarity assumption was also implicit in earlier models of the coding of uncertainty, which assumed that individuals code statistics as an ideal Bayesian observer – one that weighs new information in relation to the history of *all* previous trials. In practice, this meant analyzing entire stimulus blocks as a single condition [20], or modeling brain activity on a current trial, Trial(*n*), in relation to the distribution of all input trials experienced to that point (Trial(1) .. Trial(*n*-1)) [21, 23]. However, the weakness of this assumption was soon

evident. First, even when events are drawn from a stationary distribution, people appear to attribute more weight to the most recent trials. This was elegantly demonstrated by Huettel et al. [50]. The authors reported fMRI data indicating that individuals tend to “perceive patterns in random series”. Specifically, when observing a binary pattern generated by a random process, individuals were sensitive to the interruption of ‘local streaks’ that were as short as 2–3 repetitions or 5–6 alternations. Thus, even though the system was stationary and random so that participants could not make any prediction of the future, they were still sensitive to statistical structure in the very recent past. Similarly examining stationary cases, work within a classical conditioning paradigm [51] has shown that different brain areas learn over different temporal constants as reflected in their activity profiles having different learning rates when modeled via a Rescorla–Wagner model. In another neuroimaging study, Harrison et al. [52] presented participants with visual stimuli generated by a stationary first-order Markov process. They modeled responses to each stimulus assuming there exists a limited memory capacity that constrains the ability to establish associative relations between token pairs (this capacity was estimated from a behavioral study). They found that frontal medial cortices (anterior cingulate) have longer integration windows than primary visual cortices, with the latter losing almost all traces of events beyond the last four trials. Bornstein and Daw [53] addressed a similar question, presenting participants with a stationary Markov process consisting of four unique images whose transition-probabilities were controlled. Their modeling of behavioral responses to these stimuli indicated two superimposed learning processes associated with two different learning rates (faster rate = 0.5 and slower rate = 0.1). Given these estimates, they constructed model-informed predictors of brain activity during series presentation that reflected, at each point in the series, the uncertainty about the next stimulus. They constructed such model-informed regressors assuming both slow and fast learning rates. The model with the fast learning rate accounted for activity in the ventral striatum and insula, whereas the model with a slower learning rate accounted for activity in the anterior hippocampus. To summarize, all these studies show that even in a stationary context where features of the sampling distribution do not change over time, people do not function as ideal observers, and as Bornstein and Daw wrote (p. 1014), “this pattern excludes models that do not incorporate forgetting of past experience”. The reliance on prior input can be directly linked to working memory capacity [44]: individuals with higher working memory capacity (WMC) benefit more strongly from the presence of regularities when performing a behavioral task. Furthermore, when comparing activity prior to appearance of stimuli in random and regular series, higher WMC is linked to stronger differentiation between these two conditions indicating greater sensitivity to the statistical context.

Complementary work on temporally-bounded integration has identified brain systems implicated in the coding for statistics of non-stationary streams. Initial work [54] conducted within a reward-based reinforcement learning paradigm (a task that strongly relies on an executive component) showed that individuals calibrate their learning rate – the degree to which they update prior information based on incoming one – to match the volatility of the environment. More volatile contexts produce faster learning rates, and neurobiologically, activity in the ACC tracked the volatility of the environment that itself changed over time. In another fMRI study that focused on passive perceptual learning [55], participants listened to tonal series where the transition constraints between 4 tones changed continuously over timescales of 10sec, following a preset profile of gradual increases and decreases. The study documented learning on two scales: some regions (mainly perisylvian) tracked the level of regularity in the recent 10sec, whereas other regions tracked a slower-scale process characterized by gradual increases or decreases in regularity over time.

All this suggests some incongruity between the computational demands involved in tracking the statistical nature of events in a continuously changing world and those involved in acquiring the statistics of more stationary linguistic systems. Formally, this distinction is similar to one made in the reinforcement learning literature between two types of uncertainty [56]: First, the *known uncertainty* of a set of potential outcomes given the current stimulus (e.g., the uncertainty captured by Shannon’s entropy of the set of known possible outcomes), assuming veridical knowledge of the contingency structure in a system. And second, the *unknown uncertainty*, which reflects lack of veridical knowledge about what the contingency structure in the environment actually is; this knowledge is reduced in volatile environments but can approach certainty in stationary ones. (These have also been referred to as outcome uncertainty and rule uncertainty [5]). Language learners may be justified in assuming that language statistics are associated with low volatility so that rule uncertainty is low, whereas understanding the environment may entail a different calibration of such parameters since rule-uncertainty is higher.

It may be that sensitivity to statistical structure on short timescales underlies a more general process of segmenting continuous inputs into different phases or events. As shown initially by Zacks et al. [57], there exists a brain network consisting of mainly occipital-parietal regions that shows transient activation increases at boundaries between naturally unfolding events. This network has been implicated in event segmentation during movie viewing and written text comprehension (see [58] for review). Yet, the same network has been implicated in tracking statistical structure in tonal series lacking any semantics [59].

To summarize, studies examining temporal integration windows suggest dissociable operations that occur, in parallel, over longer and shorter timescales. One possibility is that integration over short temporal constants is useful for monitoring changes in non-stationary environments, whereas integration occurring over longer epochs is useful for making more precise predictions in stationary environments. The similarity of networks linked to subjective changes in statistical structure and those found for event segmentation suggests that integration over short temporal constants is related to more general capacities of input segmentation.

The special status of patterns

As seen in the definitions of SL cited above, one of its main aims is understanding the computational and neurobiological mechanisms that allow for learning regularities or patterns. From this perspective, *structure* – instantiated either through statistical (stochastic) constraints or through (deterministic) sequences – stands in contrast to the ‘default’ or non-marked random case. In neurobiological studies of SL this is expressed in designs that contrast regular and random series [18, 19]. The contrast between item-pairs associated with high vs. low mutual information [26] can also be seen as reflecting similar interests at the micro-level. Most generally, this conceptual framework and the experimental paradigms it derives assume a monotonic relation between associative structure and brain activity. This assumption also underlies many neurobiological studies of uncertainty that set out from the premise that brain regions sensitive to uncertainty will track it monotonically. In practice, this means setting up binary contrasts between regular and random conditions in block designs [18, 20], or, in studies conducted in the Bayesian framework, modeling responses to each stimulus as a *linear* function of input entropy.

However, an emerging picture from both behavioral and neurobiological studies is that the a-priori assumption of a linear or monotonic relation between input structured-ness and brain activity results in a partial understanding of computations related to statistical processing and their neurobiological basis. Specifically, as reviewed below, some brain regions are involved in statistical computations but do not differentiate highly regular from random series.

Cognitive psychologists have already suggested that people may track uncertainty, though non-monotonically. An example is Loewenstein’s “information-gap” model of curiosity [60]. In this model, curiosity is a function of 1) a person’s assessment of the maximal uncertainty a system may exhibit [MaxU], 2) their current level of uncertainty [CurrentU], and 3) their target criterion for uncertainty [MinU; 0 if one aims for veridical knowledge]. On this formalization, curiosity, or the impetus for exploration, is defined as the information gap, $[(\text{CurrentU} - \text{MinU}) / (\text{CurrentU} - \text{MaxU})]$. Assuming that people strive to minimize uncertainty (fixing MinU = 0), this means that curiosity and its resulting actions will not directly track environmental uncertainty, as MaxU is equally important. Put differently, even given the same level of input uncertainty, people will show greater curiosity for inputs generated by systems whose maximal uncertainty is higher. On this account, there is no direct relation between input uncertainty and curiosity, though all else being equal, increased uncertainty should induce greater curiosity.

The connections between randomness, complexity and cognition have long been of interest in psychology (for recent treatment, see [61]). There are several psychological models that produce U-shaped responses as uncertainty increase; we have reviewed these in prior work [62] and will not do so here (see [63] for early, exemplary behavioral study and [1] for review of early work). Theoretical work within complexity science also suggests that some uncertainty-related computations produce the highest values for series that are neither highly ordered nor random, but are instead associated with mid-levels of uncertainty. This points to an important distinction between randomness and complexity. The basic premise of these approaches is that complexity is not a monotonic function of randomness and that these two concepts should be differentiated. The emphasis of some complexity theories on the systems that generate the input (rather than the input itself) is also sensible from a psychological perspective, as it speaks to a different level of generalization than is typically studied. Consider for instance a regular input that consists of four tokens with very strong transition constraints, which thereby differentiate it from a matched random process. There may exist cognitive systems that construct and maintain a representation akin to this 4 x 4 transition matrix, and update this model throughout learning (this assumption underlies several learning models, such as the Rescorla-Wagner model, or Bayesian approaches that assume a representation via multivariate distributions). But this level of description assumes that input frequencies are retained faithfully. Nonetheless, a more abstract, sparse description of the generating system can be formulated: namely, in the regular series *some tokens only follow other tokens*, whereas in the irregular series *each token follows all others equally often*. Representations at this abstraction level suffice for knowing when a regular state shifts to a random one and vice versa, but do not rely on veridically retaining quantitative distributional information such as which transitions are strong or weak, how many different tokens exist, or even summary statistics such as the exact uncertainty level of the more ordered series. And, as mentioned, such descriptions are lengthier and more difficult to formulate for inputs with mid-levels of regularity. Other formal approaches, conceptually similar to Loewenstein’s information-gap model treat complexity as a combined (weighted) function of a system’s distance from its completely ordered and completely disordered possible states, with certain weight-combinations producing a inverse-U output as function of uncertainty (see Ref [64] for accessible treatment).

Several neuroimaging studies have identified brain systems that track input uncertainty either quadratically (i.e., with a curvilinear, U-shaped profile) or non-linearly. In one study participants heard long tonal series that varied parametrically in regularity [62]. This study showed that whole-brain connectivity between the ACC and several brain regions followed regularity via a quadratic trend (a similar finding was shown for the hippocampus). Another study [55] found that activity in lateral temporal regions tracked the strength of transition constraints among auditory tones with a quadratic response profile. In another study [65] participants observed visual series where the location or semantic category of the next image was or was not predictable. This produced 3 levels of uncertainty: a baseline condition where neither dimension was predictable (maximum uncertainty), two “single-regularity” conditions where either location or category were predictable (medium uncertainty) and a “dual regularity” condition where both dimensions were predictable

(low uncertainty). Interestingly, the study identified several brain regions that tracked uncertainty quadratically; the conditions with medium-uncertainty produced less activity than either the low-uncertainty and maximal-uncertainty conditions.

While the discussion above focused on macro-scale features, quadratic responses may additionally reflect sensitivity to micro-scale features of a system. As already noted by Hebb (1949, p.149), “up to a certain point, lack of correspondence between expectation and perception may simply have a stimulating (or ‘pleasurable’) effect”. Developing this intuition within the SL approach, Kidd et al. [41] studied surprisal-correlated behavioral indices on the single trial level within continuous series. Analyzing children’s looking times throughout the series, they found that children were less likely to look away from images whose surprisal was intermediate—neither too low or too high. To the extent that series with moderate levels of regularity (on average) also contain a greater proportion of trials with moderate surprisal, this could also explain why such series are associated with greater activity.

Why should neurobiological theories of SL or uncertainty be concerned about non-monotonic responses to structured-ness, regularity or uncertainty? From a strictly neurobiological perspective, if the goal is to identify brain systems that are sensitive to statistical structure in the sense that they differentiate random from non-random series – then it is already clear that some brain areas may satisfy this criteria *even though they do not differentiate highly regular from random series*. This, practically, calls for using parametric modulations rather than binary contrasts between regular and random series. A similar argument for parametric manipulations has been made in studies of decision making under uncertainty [5] where it has been argued that the comparison between certain and (almost) certain states may load on brains states not directly related to the coding of uncertainty. However, the computational/functional concerns are equally important, as existing data show that computational models that explain how patterns or structures are identified and memorized (the SL perspective) cannot easily account for such trends. Monotonic responses are highly consistent with the perspective of compression and memory, because more random inputs are, by definition, less compressible, offer less opportunities for chunking [66], and therefore impose greater memory demands. They are also consistent with theories on which that anxiety scales linearly with uncertainty [10]. In contrast, quadratic brain responses with increasing uncertainty reflect different computations, and an important goal of future work is to expose their characteristics, which at the current point remain largely speculative.

Current explanatory principles meet challenges from data, and desiderata for future developments

The prior section reviewed topic issues that are of shared concern to computational/neurobiological approaches to uncertainty and SL. This section focuses more specifically on current neurobiological approaches to uncertainty, how they “carve up” the computations that need to be explained, and on their relation to neurobiological models of SL. It then highlights several challenges to such accounts from recent findings. Based on these, it outlines several requirements from future neurobiological frameworks focused on uncertainty.

Organizing principles of current approaches to neurobiology of uncertainty

There exists a substantial body of neurobiological research on uncertainty, developed mainly within reinforcement learning studies and research into decision making under uncertainty (particularly economic decisions). In a review of that literature, Bach and Dolan [5] proposed a useful distinction between several different types of uncertainty for guiding neurobiological work: *i*) sensory uncertainty which reflects uncertainty about physical features of the stimulus, *ii*) uncertainty about present state (e.g., are we in street *x* or street *y*), *iii*) outcome uncertainty; given the current state, what are the probabilities of the set of potential outcomes and *iv*) rule uncertainty; what is the uncertainty about state-outcomes contingencies in and themselves. Bach and Dolan suggest different regions are sensitive to different types of uncertainty. With relation to SL, one can say that typical statistical-learning challenges as examined in adult populations are associated with low sensory uncertainty as sensory stimuli are typically constructed to be unambiguous and easily discriminable amongst themselves. Furthermore, rule uncertainty is low in that contingencies are rarely changed throughout a study, and participants may be instructed in a way that conveys these contingencies do not change (see [67] for the difficulty of acquiring a second rule system). Outcome uncertainty, however, loads on the quantities of marginal frequencies, transition probabilities and mutual information that are core to SL. The applicability of research on outcome uncertainty within decision-making paradigms may be limited though; such neurobiological investigations are often strongly related to the monetary gain or loss associated with each possibility (where expected utility is defined as [value x probability]). This is an element tangential to the phenomena SL studies are typically interest in.

Ma and Jazayeri [68] present a computational/neurobiological approach to uncertainty that differs from that of Bach and Dolan’s in that it aims to explain one’s own actions and their potential utility. This framework also partitions between sensory and other types of uncertainty. Beyond sensory uncertainty (e.g., “is this liquid milk”) a different level of uncertainty pertains to the applicability of different sensorimotor contingencies (e.g., “if it is milk, then should I drink it”). This in turn is linked to a set of potential motor actions (with varying probabilities), and finally, an action-linked reward that is also assigned a probability. The authors discuss neurobiological systems that code for these sorts of uncertainties -- each is thought to be linked to a belief distribution, and the framework explains how neuronal populations can represent such prior

beliefs in a Bayesian framework. This work constitutes an important position on computational principles that may govern processing of incoming information given prior knowledge.

Other frameworks that inform work on uncertainty deal with the coding of sequential structures. Friston and Buzsaki [69] suggest that the hippocampus maintains information about sequential transitions (e.g., where/when, or what/when), and interacts with cortical systems to represent the content of the next event. Dehaene et al. [70] approach the related issue of coding for serial order. They partition between different types of sequential information and their putative neurobiological underpinnings. Particularly relevant are their explanations for coding transition structure and chunking. For transition structure, their model emphasizes the importance of different *sensory cortices*. They emphasize that sensory regions coding for physical features of a stimulus are implicated in anticipatory predictions and production of prediction-error terms. For instance, sensory cortices code for the surprisal of sensory stimuli – for tonal stimuli, the last “B” in ABABB evokes a surprise response in auditory cortex rather than one showing repetition-suppression, reflecting a violation of expectation. Chunking – the joining of elements into a fixed configuration -- is taken to be mediated by a different mechanism than the one mediating lower-level mismatch responses, with the prototypical case being ‘word chunks’ in typical SL paradigms (which are characterized by very high pointwise mutual information). The authors link these to left auditory association cortex or left IFG.

The importance of non-general processes

While computational models of uncertainty outline generic computations, they make no clear commitments about how these may be instantiated in neurobiological substrates. What is already evident is that “unified approaches” that posit single biological systems that code for sequential structure or prediction error are no longer viable. Setting aside the impact of sensory uncertainty, uncertainty about actions, or reward, even the core issue of outcome uncertainty – what are the potential future events given the present – is one whose neurobiology is poorly understood. As mentioned, prediction error appears to be generated in sensory-specific systems, and even within a single modality, the statistical structure of different sorts of dimensions (e.g., location, category) may be coded in partially different systems [65]. It is therefore very unlikely that a single brain system codes for the regularity of input streams in different sensory modalities or is generally involved in generating predictions for those. It may be, however, that different sensory systems implement similar computations over inputs with different features (see [71] for potential computational implementation). Indeed, a recent approach to SL by Frost et al. suggests that it is a “set of domain-general computational principles that operate in different modalities” and therefore reflect modality-specific constraints [15]. As outlined below, sensitivity to uncertainty appears to be strongly determined by constraints that are not only related to sensory features, but are fundamentally determined by the dimension being tracked, even within a sensory modality. Furthermore, a more difficult challenge arises when considering the brain as a functional network whose core features may change with the level of uncertainty. To make these issues concrete, the four points below exemplify the sort of data that future neurobiological theories of uncertainty would need to account for.

Lack of support for modality-independent or modality-encapsulated processing: An fMRI study [22] in which participants were presented with auditory or visual series that varied across four levels of uncertainty found that different neural systems were involved in tracking uncertainty in visual and auditory series. No region was sensitive to uncertainty in both modalities. Another fMRI study [72] examined sensitivity to uncertainty in auditory, visual and audiovisual inputs, and found that the audiovisual condition strongly altered sensitivity to regularity in bilateral primary auditory cortices; these regions tracked regularity in the auditory, but not audiovisual condition. Thus, conclusions drawn about the neurobiological basis of uncertainty that are based on studying inputs in one modality will not necessarily generalize to alternative modalities, or even multimodal contexts.

Fundamental role for input familiarity: Sensitivity to input-uncertainty is impacted by familiarity with the input tokens. In one study [24], auditory series that varied in uncertainty consisted of either familiar tokens or unfamiliar tokens (syllables in the participants’ native language, or bird chirps, respectively). In the syllable-streams, sensitivity to uncertainty was found within 4 s from series onset, but in this early period there was no sensitivity to disorder in the bird-chirp streams (these effects were limited to low-level auditory regions). Conversely, in other regions, brain activity after the series’ end (13 s from onset) tracked uncertainty for the bird-chirp series, but not the syllable series. Behavioral data suggested this might be related to more accurate segmentation of syllable streams into constituent units. The issue of segmentation may be a greater concern within auditory streams, where elements lack a natural physical boundary (between phonemes or words) as compared to visual streams where stimuli are typically separated by blanks.

Indications that future-uncertainty is a non-unitary construct: Outcome uncertainty refers to the overall uncertainty about a future event (or events) at a certain point. For instance, given a stream such as 11001110011110 one can ask what is the likelihood of the next event. In this specific example, two forms of information are evident. On the one hand, 1s are more frequent, but on the other hand, the first 0 after a 1 is always followed by a 0. Thus, marginals and transition constraints provides different sorts of information. Whether or not different systems track these sources of information was addressed by an fMRI study [55] where these forms of uncertainty were manipulated orthogonally within a single tone series. Participants listened to a 10 min tonal series that was constructed to satisfy three criteria: 1) the transition constraints between tones, quantified via Markov entropy, fluctuated over time via a predefined specification when quantified over 10 s windows; 2) the relative diversity of the tokens, quantified via Shannon entropy similarly

fluctuated over this timescale; 3) fluctuations in Markov entropy and Shannon entropy were orthogonal (i.e., uncorrelated) over the entire tonal series. The study found that different brain regions were sensitive to these two facets of uncertainty. The dissociation between systems sensitive to transition constraints between tokens and those sensitive to overall diversity is supported by computational models of statistical learning [73], which draw a similar distinction between two statistical processes that putatively govern statistical learning: extraction of patterns and integration of information to arrive at global features.

Evidence that whole-brain connectivity structure fundamentally changes with level of uncertainty. Current neurobiological approaches to uncertainty are ‘fixed’ in the sense that they assume that inputs/environments with different statistics are parsed by the same brain network (a “fixed organization” model). This holds also for the computational frameworks reviewed above, which assume that certain regions code for distributions of prior information, independent of those distributions’ parameters. A fixed organization view implicitly assumes that certain regions or local networks perform computations related to input statistics such as the representation of distributional features (e.g., summary statistics), associative binding, prediction, and updating of knowledge based on prediction error. Crucially, the operating characteristics or connectivity of these regions do not themselves change with input statistics. This perspective leads to a specific sort of description for brain activity, for example, focusing on a specific region’s activity over the course of learning of inputs that differ in statistical features [18, 19]. In contrast, a “network reorganization” perspective allows for qualitative changes in whole-brain organization as function of input statistics. There is some recent work suggesting that statistical context (and context more generally) can impact core organizational features of brain connectivity. An fMRI study that examined network connectivity while listening to tonal series that varied in regularity [74] found evidence for changes in core topological features of these networks. When contrasting network organization during listening to random vs. highly regular series, network modularity was lower for highly regular series, and that the actual network partition structure also differed significantly between these conditions. Other work has shown that, more generally, task demands very strongly impact the organization of functional networks [75], and documented a relation between the extent of such reorganization and behavioral efficiency. These are likely to be central themes in future work.

Summary and future directions

Neurobiological accounts of uncertainty originate from a different theoretical background than those of SL. Yet, they convey useful lessons for the development of neurobiological theories of SL. They suggest that a comprehensive understanding how the brain codes for statistics would benefit from the following: *i*) greater appreciation of modality-specific coding constraints, *ii*) reduced emphasis on pattern learning, accompanied by stronger focus on the import of non-monotonic responses to structure, *iii*) increased emphasis on the dynamics of the learning process itself including its interaction with mechanisms related to generation and evaluation of predictions, and *iv*) a more serious attempt to study the brain as a network whose configuration and mode of operation can change markedly with input statistics. One limitation of the current state of the art, which is likely due to the relative novelty of the fields of study in question, is the relative fragmentation of theoretical perspectives having to do with statistical learning, uncertainty, and online expectation and prediction. To demonstrate, consider 4 recent reviews of the neural basis of statistical learning [12], prediction and expectation [6], estimation of uncertainty [5], and the role of expectation in perception [7]. As a proxy for shared perspective, we calculated the overlap between cited references for each pair of reviews, quantified via the Jaccard index (shared references / total sum). The mean value of all 8 pairwise analyses was 1.7% (SD = 2%; range = 0% - 4%). A holistic approach that treats all these as components of a unified “statistical learning” or “uncertainty learning” computation and examines those conjointly may lead to exciting discoveries that cannot be predicted from approaches that deal with each computation separately.

Additional Information

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests

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