

Summary

The work in this thesis aims to study the way different regions in the central nervous system (CNS) interact during voluntary ankle movement and walking in humans. Our ability to walk, and precisely adapt our steps according to the environment, is a fundamental motor behavior for us as humans. The way the human CNS controls these behaviors is not well understood; a lot of what we know about the control of movement is based on studies of upper-limb movements like reaching or finger tapping, and prior work has focused on understanding contributions from CNS regions from an isolated rather than integrated perspective.

Understanding how CNS regions communicate during lower limb movements and walking will further our understanding of basic functional control mechanisms and in the long term may provide a basis for developing evidence-based rehabilitation strategies.

The five studies included in this thesis aim to investigate the communication and interaction between different regions of the human CNS during simple ankle movements and during more complex and functional stepping movements. We used frequency domain connectivity analysis and modelling approaches to study interaction between the brain and ankle muscle *tibialis anterior*, as well as among different brain regions using electroencephalography (EEG), magnetoencephalography (MEG), and electromyography (EMG).

Studies I-III provide evidence for functional and effective connectivity between the cortex and ankle muscle, and between different regions of the cortex, during simple, tonic contraction. The results suggest that the strength of connectivity is related to force control in a complex manner, which indicates

that it has functional significance. Further, connectivity strength exhibits age-related differences across childhood development and adult aging, suggesting that this connectivity may represent a maturational phenomenon.

Studies IV-V extended these studies of simple, tonic contraction to goal-directed stepping. In study IV, we found that planning of a step is accompanied by a strengthening of functional connectivity between brain regions, while execution of a step is accompanied by a weakening of connectivity. We further showed that adjusting a step based on visual information alters this connectivity.

In study V, we explored the feasibility of using a new type of MEG sensor, optically-pumped magnetometers, to record brain activity during goal-directed stepping. This study indicated that this type of experiment is technologically feasible. Moreover, the results we obtained were physiologically feasible, i.e., in line with functional connectivity results from other established neuroimaging modalities. This suggests that for the first time, we may be able to ask and answer scientific questions involving large scale, natural movement using MEG.

Together these results support the presence of age-, context-, and task-dependent modulations of functional and effective connectivity in the sensorimotor system during simple voluntary ankle contraction and more complex and functional stepping behavior. We argue that these results reflect a process of fine tuning communication in response to the changing functional demands of the network. These patterns of communication may facilitate functional integration to achieve precision control of the ankle joint.

Dansk resumé

Hovedfokus for denne afhandling er at undersøge, hvordan forskellige områder i centralnervesystemet (CNS) interagerer under viljestyrede ankelbevægelser og gang hos mennesker. Gangfunktion og evnen til at justere vores skridt i forhold til omgivelserne er fundamentale for os som mennesker, men vi mangler en grundig forståelse af måden, hvorpå CNS styrer disse bevægelser. Dette skyldes, at meget forskning er baseret på studier der undersøger hånd- og armbevægelser, og at denne tidligere forskning i høj grad har fokuseret på at forstå bidragene fra områder i CNS fra et isoleret, frem for integreret, perspektiv.

Det er vigtigt at forstå, hvordan CNS-områder kommunikerer for at koordinere viljestyrede ankelbevægelser og gang fra et grundforskningsperspektiv, dvs., for at kunne forstå grundlæggende, funktionelle kontrolmekanismer i nervesystemet. På lang sigt vil denne viden også kunne bidrage til udviklingen af nye, evidensbaserede rehabiliteringsstrategier.

De fem studier der udgør denne afhandling har til formål at undersøge netop kommunikation og interaktion mellem forskellige CNS-områder under simple ankelbevægelser og mere komplekse, funktionelle skridtbevægelser. Vi brugte frekvensdomæneanalyse af funktionel konnektivitet og modelleringstilgange til at studere interaktioner mellem hjerne- og muskelaktivitet, såvel som aktivitet mellem forskellige hjerneområder, ved brug af elektroencefalografi (EEG), magnetoencefalografi (MEG) og elektromyografi (EMG).

I studie I-III påviste vi funktionel og effektiv konnektivitet mellem hjernebarken og ankelmusklen *tibialis anterior*, og mellem forskellige områder i hjernebarken, under simpel, tonisk kontraktion af musklen. Resultaterne viste,

at styrken af konnektivitet er associeret med finstyring af kraftudviklingen på en kompleks måde, hvilket indikerer at denne konnektivitet har adfærdsmæssig relevans. Desuden viste konnektivitetsstyrken aldersrelaterede forskelle under udvikling og aldring, hvilket kan være udtryk for aldersrelateret plasticitet, der ses som ændringer over lange tidsskalaer.

I studie IV-V udvidede vi vores undersøgelser fra at fokusere på simple, toniske kontraktioner til mere komplekse og funktionelle skridtbevægelser. I studie IV påviste vi, at planlægning af et skridt er ledsaget af en stigning i funktionel konnektivitet mellem forskellige hjernebarksområder, mens udførelse af et skridt er ledsaget af et fald i konnektivitet. Derudover viste vi, at justering af skridt ud fra visual information ændrer denne konnektivitetsmønster.

I studie V undersøgte vi, om det er gennemførligt at bruge et nyt, flytbart MEG system til at registrere hjerneaktivitet under skridtbevægelser. Dette studie viste, at forsøgene var teknologisk gennemførlige, og at resultaterne var fysiologisk plausible, dvs. i overensstemmelse med resultater fra andre etablerede metoder. Dette indikerer, at vi, ved brug af MEG, nu kan foretage videnskabelige undersøgelser af naturlige bevægelser i fuld skala.

Generelt tyder vores resultater på at der forekommer alders-, kontekst-, og opgave-afhængige moduleringer af funktionel og effektiv konnektivitet i det sensorimotoriske system under toniske kontraktioner af anklemuskulaturen og under mere komplekse og funktionelle skridtbevægelser.

Vi foreslår, at disse resultater afspejler den process, hvorved kommunikation i CNS finjusteres som respons på de dynamiske krav der stilles til netværket. Disse kommunikationsmønstre kan tænkes at facilitere funktionel integration for at opnå præcisionsstyring af ankelledet.

Overview of studies

Study I: Spedden, M. E., Jensen, P., Terkildsen, C. U., Jensen, N. J., Halliday, D. M., Lundbye-Jensen, J., Nielsen, J. B., & Geertsen, S. S. (2019). The development of functional and directed corticomuscular connectivity during tonic ankle muscle contraction across childhood and adolescence. *NeuroImage* 191.

Study II: Spedden, M. E., Nielsen, J. B., & Geertsen, S. S. (2018). Oscillatory Corticospinal Activity during Static Contraction of Ankle Muscles Is Reduced in Healthy Old versus Young Adults. *Neural Plasticity*.

Study III: Spedden, M. E., Beck, M. M., Christensen, M. S., Dietz, M. J., Karabanov, A. N., Geertsen, S. S., Nielsen, J. B., & Lundbye-Jensen, J. (2020). Directed connectivity between primary and premotor areas underlying ankle force control in young and older adults. *NeuroImage* 218.

Study IV: Spedden, M.E., and Beck, M.M., West, T.O., Farmer, S.F., Nielsen, J.B., & Lundbye-Jensen, J. (2022). Dynamics of cortical and corticomuscular connectivity during planning and execution of visually guided steps in humans. *Cerebral Cortex*.

Study V: Spedden, M.E., Tierney, T.M., O'Neill, G.C., Mellor, S., West, T.O., Barnes, G.R., Lundbye-Jensen, J., Nielsen, J.B. & Farmer, S.F. Optically-pumped magnetometry evidence for oscillatory cortical, spinal, and cerebellar interactions during human stepping. *Unpublished ongoing pilot work*.

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