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1                   **A review on the electroencephalography markers of**  
2                                   **Stroop executive control processes**

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1 **Abstract**

2 The present article on executive control addresses the issue of the locus of the Stroop effect  
3 by examining neurophysiological components marking conflict monitoring, interference  
4 suppression, and conflict resolution. Our goal was to provide an overview of a series of  
5 determining neurophysiological findings including neural source reconstruction data on  
6 distinct executive control processes and sub-processes involved in the Stroop task.  
7 Consistently, a fronto-central N2 component is found to reflect *conflict monitoring* processes,  
8 with its main neural generator being the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). Then, for cognitive  
9 control tasks that involve a linguistic component like the Stroop task, the N2 is followed by a  
10 centro-posterior N400 and subsequently a late sustained potential (LSP). The N400 is mainly  
11 generated by the ACC and the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and is thought to reflect *interference*  
12 *suppression*, whereas the LSP plausibly reflects *conflict resolution* processes. The present  
13 overview shows that ERP constitute a reliable methodological tool for tracing with precision  
14 the time course of different executive processes and sub-processes involved in experimental  
15 tasks involving a cognitive conflict. Future research should shed light on the fine-grained  
16 mechanisms of control respectively involved in linguistic and non-linguistic tasks.

17

18

19 **Keywords: Stroop<sup>1</sup>, executive control<sup>2</sup>, conflict monitoring<sup>3</sup>, interference suppression<sup>4</sup>,**  
20 **conflict resolutions<sup>5</sup>, neurophysiological components<sup>6</sup>.**

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## 1    **1.    Introduction**

2    Executive control (EC), also called executive function or cognitive control, is constituted of a  
3    set of relatively heterogeneous cognitive processes that are involved in many high level  
4    functions of human cognition. EC is defined as the ability to flexibly adjust thoughts, actions  
5    and the processing of information to the challenges of a task at hand (Braver, 2012; Diamond,  
6    2013; Ridderinkhof et al., 2004). For example, this function allows human beings to flexibly  
7    adapt to task demands during goal-directed behavior. EC is thought to be a complex cognitive  
8    function composed of relatively separable processes, such as *inhibition*, *shifting* and *updating*  
9    (Miyake and Friedman, 2012) and their respective sub-processes, which are recruited to  
10    varying degrees in several tasks in order to provide the control required. EC is a core capacity  
11    of human cognition notably due to its domain-general nature, i.e. it is involved in numerous  
12    cognitive, affective/emotional and motoric processes. For instance, the relevance of executive  
13    control has been demonstrated for language processing (Fedorenko, 2014; Hagoort, 2016,  
14    2017; Lambon Ralph et al., 2016), and in particular, for bilingual language use (Green and  
15    Abutalebi, 2013; see also the notion of *bilingualism advantage* in tasks involving executive  
16    functions), for motor and oculomotor coordination (Aron, 2007; Munoz and Everling, 2004),  
17    and for emotion processing and regulation (Ochsner and Gross, 2005), among others.  
18    Moreover, the executive control capacity and its neural bases are of considerable plasticity.  
19    On the one hand, over the lifespan, the frontal cortex – among other regions that are part of  
20    the neurocognitive executive control network – undergoes considerable developmental  
21    change from early childhood until young adulthood as well as with age-related alterations in  
22    neural processing. These neural changes are related to important functional variations not  
23    only in the capacity of executive control itself, but, due to the close interaction with various  
24    cognitive domains, such as language, motricity, or emotion, also in the capacity of domain-  
25    specific processing (Diamond, 2013; Liu et al., 2014; Zelazo et al., 2004). On the other hand,

1 it has been shown that not only developmental changes shape EC capacity, but also activities  
2 that engage EC can strengthen it in the long run. As an example, a rapidly growing body of  
3 research has provided evidence that challenging neurocognitive activities, such as  
4 bilingualism, musical practice or sportive activity that requires a high degree of coordination,  
5 can in the long run lead to an activity-dependent strengthening of EC (Aparicio et al., 2017;  
6 Diamond, 2011; Dye et al., 2009; Green and Abutalebi, 2013; Heidlmayr et al., 2015). In  
7 contrast, individual differences in EC capacity cannot be fully explained by activity-  
8 dependent variation, but they are also largely determined by genetic factors (Anokhin et al.,  
9 2004; Friedman et al., 2008).

10 Over the past decades, in cognitive neuroscience a rapidly growing literature has  
11 improved our understanding of the neurodynamics of executive control processes. The Stroop  
12 task (Stroop, 1935) is one of the paradigms that allowed gaining most valuable insight.  
13 However, a clear-cut picture of the neurophysiological signatures associated with the  
14 different sub-processes constituting the core of executive functioning has still not emerged in  
15 this field, certainly in part due to methodological issues, as it is sometime difficult to compare  
16 results of studies using different paradigms, tasks and populations, but also different  
17 typological distances between the first and second languages, in case bilingualism was under  
18 investigation. Given the importance of executive functions in various cognitive domains (e.g.  
19 language, emotion, motricity), the aim of the present review is to provide a state-of-the-art  
20 overview of the neurophysiological studies that have examined the electroencephalographical  
21 (EEG) signatures associated with the most discussed domain-general control processes – i.e.,  
22 *conflict monitoring*, *interference suppression*, and *conflict resolution* – and their respective  
23 neural generators in the Stroop task. Here, we mainly concentrate on the Stroop effect, i.e.,  
24 one of the most used tasks in cognitive sciences for approaching the issue of executive  
25 functioning in human beings. The question concerning the locus of the Stroop effect will be

1 discussed by taking into consideration the neurodynamics as well as the neural bases of the  
2 different control processes thought to be involved for performing this experimental task. Our  
3 ultimate goal is to propose a precise description of the time course of these different  
4 executive processes. This description will be illustrated by a schematic presentation  
5 displaying for each process its electrophysiological signature and their possible neural  
6 generators.

7         In the Color Word Stroop task (Stroop, 1935), decision making is based on task-  
8 relevant information in the face of distracting information. Indeed, “two conflicting mental  
9 representations are active, each associated with a different response, and attention must be  
10 paid to only relevant cues” (Bialystok et al., 2006, p. 1342). Specifically, an ink color must be  
11 identified while ignoring the written word itself. Since word reading is more automatic than  
12 color naming, executive control is required to override the tendency to respond on the basis  
13 of the word rather than the ink color. The need of such control is reflected in slower  
14 responses when the word name is competing with the ink color (i.e. incongruent condition  
15 like the word green written in red ink) than when it is not (i.e. congruent condition like the  
16 word green written in green ink; see Heidlmayr et al., 2013).

17         EEG recordings of event-related brain potentials (ERPs) allow us to follow with a  
18 high temporal resolution, i.e. millisecond by millisecond, the electrical responses of the brain  
19 to time-locked events (Coles and Rugg, 1995). ERP data completed by a localization of their  
20 neural sources are particularly valuable for learning about the fine-grained spatio-temporal  
21 pattern of neural activity in different cortical areas sustaining the executive control network.  
22 Moreover, an improved neuro-functional understanding can be obtained when these findings  
23 are related to data on a spatially much more fine-grained scale obtained in the neuroimaging  
24 literature. For this reason, we refer to this literature in different parts of the current review. To  
25 the best of our knowledge, the present review is the first attempt to present a state-of-the art

1 overview of electroencephalographical studies examining a set of specific executive control  
2 processes including but extending beyond inhibition, their ERP markers and neural  
3 generators. In the first section, theoretical accounts and neurocognitive models of executive  
4 control are presented. Then, some of the most discussed executive control processes that play  
5 a role in managing conflict in linguistic (but also, marginally in non-linguistic) tasks in  
6 particular in the Stroop task, i.e. *conflict monitoring*, *interference suppression*, and *conflict*  
7 *resolution* will be characterized.

8

## 9 **2. Executive control: Theoretical accounts and neurocognitive models**

10 The emergence and crystallization of research on cognitive control historically coincided  
11 with the development of connectionism, with both domains undergoing considerable progress  
12 since the 1980s (Botvinick and Cohen, 2014). However, the initial theoretical foundations of  
13 the two fields are substantially different, in that initial research on cognitive control was  
14 grounded in principles of symbolic representation, sequential hierarchical processing, and  
15 modularity, and strongly focused on the ‘top-down’ processes of control. Subsequently,  
16 computational modelling had a strong influence on theories of cognitive control. Modelling  
17 in this phase took into consideration the role of learning and environmental constraints, and  
18 consequently was interested in ‘bottom-up’ processes and in the way how adaptation takes  
19 place in the cognitive control system. Current research is, among others, interested in the  
20 reasons why the structure of cognitive control, involving its architecture, representations and  
21 operations, and its underlying neural substrate are shaped the way they are. An important yet  
22 unresolved question is how the structure of cognitive control reflects the structure of the task  
23 environment, which is of core interest given the role of cognitive control in the interaction  
24 with naturalistic environments (for a review, see Botvinick and Cohen, 2014). Currently,  
25 most psychological and neurobiological theories do not conceptualize cognitive control either

1 as an unitary instance or as a system fractioned into different sub-processes, but mostly it is  
2 attempted to integrate elements of both approaches, unity as well as diversity of executive  
3 functions. In this vein, one of the most influential models has been put forward by Miyake et  
4 al. (2000). This model postulates a distinction of three main executive functions, namely  
5 inhibition of dominant responses (“inhibition”), shifting of mental sets (“shifting”) and  
6 monitoring and updating of information in working memory (“updating”; see also the  
7 “*unity/diversity* framework” by Miyake and Friedman, 2012). Miyake and Friedman (2012)  
8 claim that according to the level executive functions are looked at, one may find shared  
9 characteristics amongst the three of the main executive functions (i.e. *inhibition*, *shifting* and  
10 *updating*) or one may be able to subdivide each of the functions into more specific control  
11 processes. The different executive functions may be involved to varying degrees according to  
12 the experimental task at hand, in order to enable for *optimal* coordination of control (see also,  
13 Diamond, 2013; Miyake and Friedman, 2012). Experimentally, Stroop task is considered to  
14 tap *interference suppression* (Color words are presented in different ink colors; in case of  
15 incongruency between color word and ink color, the automatic reading of the color word  
16 produces interference on the controlled task of responding to the ink color; Stroop, 1935; see  
17 also, Figure 1; other tasks like the Simon task, Simon and Ruddell, 1967) or the Eriksen  
18 Flanker task (Eriksen and Eriksen, 1974) also involve interference suppression). Here, we  
19 will particularly focus on the Stroop task. *Interference suppression* and *response inhibition*  
20 are generally considered to be reactive control processes, i.e. control processes that are active  
21 in reaction to an exogenous stimulus or signal.

22 - Insert Figure 1 about here -

23

### 24 3. Executive functions: Subprocesses



1 In the following, some of the most discussed subprocesses of domain-general executive  
2 control that play a role to manage conflict in linguistic or non-linguistic tasks will be  
3 discussed: *conflict monitoring*, *interference suppression*, and *conflict resolution*. Following  
4 the description of each of these control processes, a review for the ERP markers that are  
5 frequently associated with the respective process is given, i.e. the N2 component for *conflict*  
6 *monitoring* and *overcoming of inhibition*, the N400 component and the late sustained  
7 potential for *interference suppression* and *conflict resolution* respectively.

8  
9

### 10 **3.1. Conflict monitoring and overcoming of inhibition: the N2 component**

11 In this section two control processes, i.e. *conflict monitoring* and in the N2 section also the  
12 switching-related *overcoming of inhibition* will be discussed. In electroencephalographical  
13 studies, the ERP marker that is most robustly associated with these control processes is the  
14 N2 component and a review over these studies will be presented subsequently.

15

#### 16 **3.1.1. Conflict monitoring**

17 *Conflict monitoring* has been defined as the process of monitoring for the occurrence of  
18 conflict in information processing and is on the evaluative side of cognitive control. Conflict  
19 monitoring serves to translate the occurrence of conflict into compensatory adjustments in  
20 control, i.e. the conflict monitoring system evaluates the levels of conflict and communicates  
21 this information to systems responsible for control implementation (Botvinick et al., 2001).  
22 However, conflict monitoring is in most cases one of several control processes involved for  
23 realizing a task. Most theoretical frameworks of cognitive control distinguish conflict  
24 monitoring from inhibitory control and their respective underlying sources and  
25 electroencephalographical markers. However, a strong relation between the two control

1 processes as well as their neural underpinnings is usually assumed. The conflict monitoring  
2 theory of cognitive control proposed by Botvinick (2007) as well as by Carter and Van Veen  
3 (2007) postulates a primordial role of the ACC in detecting conflicts while the dorsolateral  
4 prefrontal cortex is thought to modulate cognitive control over the suppression of task-  
5 irrelevant information. In the same vein, MacDonald et al. (2000; see also, Green and  
6 Abutalebi, 2013) suggest that a widely distributed neural network may be activated in  
7 cognitive control processes but that specific subprocesses of control are reflected by spatially  
8 and temporally distinguishable activations, i.e. the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) shows  
9 activation in conflict monitoring while the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) is active in  
10 control implementation. Several fMRI studies lend support to the hypothesis that ACC plays  
11 a crucial role in (1) detecting conflict (i.e. conflict monitoring) and processing cognitive  
12 conflict as well as in monitoring action outcomes (Botvinick, 2007; Botvinick et al., 2001;  
13 Carter et al., 2000; Chen et al., 2013; Gruber et al., 2002; Kerns et al., 2004; Leung et al.,  
14 2000; Pardo et al., 1990; Peterson et al., 2002; van Veen and Carter, 2005, 2002a; Yeung,  
15 2013; for a review on the controversial findings in neuropsychological studies, see Yeung,  
16 2013) and (2) attentional control in cognitive and emotional processes (Bush et al., 2000;  
17 Ochsner et al., 2009).

18

### 19 **3.1.2. N2**

20 The N2 (or N200) component is a negative-going component peaking at around 200 ms after  
21 stimulus onset. According to task-specificity and topographical distribution at the surface of  
22 the scalp, a distinction of three different subcomponents of the N2 has been suggested  
23 (Folstein and Van Petten, 2008). These subcomponents vary in scalp distribution and are  
24 thought to reflect different cognitive processes: (1) a fronto-central component reflecting

1 novelty or mismatch (i.e. mismatch negativity (MMN); tasks: e.g. oddball task), (2) another  
2 fronto-central component reflecting cognitive control (e.g. conflict monitoring, response  
3 inhibition, response conflict and error monitoring; tasks: Eriksen Flanker task, Stop-Signal  
4 task, Go/Nogo task), and (3) a posterior component reflecting some processes of visual  
5 attention (for a review, see Folstein and Van Petten, 2008).

6 In the present review, we will only focus on the control-related N2 component, and  
7 more specifically on the N2 to reflect *conflict monitoring*. The control-related N2 effect  
8 thought to reflect specifically *conflict monitoring* has previously been found in studies using  
9 a Stroop task (Boenke et al., 2009), Simon task (Chen and Melara, 2009), Eriksen Flanker  
10 task (van Veen and Carter, 2002a), and the Go/Nogo task (Donkers and van Boxtel, 2004;  
11 Jonkman, 2006), with a large consensus of the ACC, as well as IFC and PFC, as the main  
12 neural generators of the N2; for a review, see Table 1. However, even within the control-  
13 related N2 effects functional distinctions can be found, e.g. despite a large similarity between  
14 the control-related N2 reflecting *conflict monitoring* and an error-related fronto-central  
15 negativity (ERN) - which is elicited by participants' errors and by negative feedback about  
16 task performance – the two components show a clearly distinct functional sensitivity and are  
17 distinguishable by principal component analyses (Nguyen et al., 2016) and can thus be  
18 considered as two distinct subcomponents (Nguyen et al., 2016). The main neural generator  
19 of the control-related fronto-central N2 is the medial frontal cortex, more specifically the  
20 anterior cingulate cortex (ACC; Folstein and Van Petten, 2008; van Veen and Carter, 2002a).  
21 Importantly, the ACC is the main neural generator in both, the N2 reflecting *conflict*  
22 *monitoring* as well as the ERN, though future research may possibly identify specific  
23 subregions of the ACC to be involved in each of these processes (Folstein and Van Petten,  
24 2008). In contrast, the main neural generators of the auditory MMN include fronto-temporal  
25 regions, i.e. among others superior temporal regions including the primary auditory cortex;

1 interestingly, in MMN paradigms involving a linguistic component, left hemispheric regions  
2 are more strongly involved (for reviews, see Garrido et al., 2009; Pazo-Alvarez et al., 2003).

3 To sum up, in electroencephalographical studies, the N2 component is the main ERP  
4 marker associated with *conflict monitoring* and with some complex processes involving  
5 inhibition, such as the switching-related *overcoming of previously applied inhibition*, which  
6 is required in tasks such as negative priming or in tasks that involve language switching or  
7 non-linguistic switching of tasks or task rules. In Table 1, an overview of studies  
8 documenting an N2 effect in cognitive control tasks is proposed.

9 - Insert Table 1 about here -

## 3.2. Interference suppression: The N400 component and the Late sustained potential (LSP)

In this section, we will focus on the control process called *interference suppression*. The ERP marker usually associated with this process is the N400 component, and in the Stroop literature sometimes also the late sustained potential (LSP). Now, a review of the literature on the functional role of these components will be presented.

### 3.2.1. Interference suppression

The resistance to distractor interference is the ability to prevent interferences from information in the external environment that is irrelevant to the task at hand and which could disrupt ongoing processes (Friedman and Miyake, 2004). The capacity to suppress distractor interference is usually assessed using tasks such as the Stroop task (Stroop, 1935; see also, Figure 1), the Simon task (Simon and Ruddell, 1967) or the Eriksen Flanker task (Eriksen and Eriksen, 1974). For example, in a Stroop task, color words printed in an incongruent ink colors are presented to the participant (e.g. GREEN), who usually has to manually or verbally indicate the ink color of the stimulus. In this condition, a conflict arises between the automatic language process of word reading, which disturbs another process, of a more controlled nature, i.e. ink color naming. Hence, the interfering automatic process needs to be inhibited for correct performance in the task. Alternative accounts claim that Stroop is not necessarily to be considered as a task on interference suppression, but that it is rather a task involving prepotent response inhibition, i.e. the capacity to deliberately inhibit dominant, automatic, or prepotent responses when necessary (Miyake et al., 2000; for a review, see Friedman and Miyake, 2004). Concerning neuroanatomical localization of executive processes, some fMRI studies have also demonstrated the involvement of dorsolateral

1 prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) activation in tasks evoking cognitive conflict, such as the Stroop  
2 task (Chen et al., 2013; MacDonald et al., 2000; Milham et al., 2003; Peterson et al., 2002;  
3 van Veen and Carter, 2005). Moreover, ERP source localization analyses have identified the  
4 ACC (Liotti et al., 2000; Markela-Lerenc et al., 2004) and/or the PFC (Bruchmann et al.,  
5 2010; Qiu et al., 2006) as potential neural generators involved in interference suppression. In  
6 ERP studies, interference suppression is frequently associated with an effect on the N400  
7 component (cf. section 3.2.2) and a late sustained potential (cf. section 3.2.3).

8

### 9 **3.2.2. N400**

10 The N400 (or N4, N450 or N<sub>inc</sub>) component is a negative-going component at posterior sites  
11 peaking at around 400 ms after stimulus onset. In psycholinguistics, this ERP component has  
12 first been shown by Kutas and Hillyard (1980; see also Federmeier and Laszlo, 2009; Kutas  
13 and Federmeier, 2011, 2000) as reflecting difficulties of lexical semantic integration (e.g., *He*  
14 *spread the warm bread with \*socks.*) during the visual integration of words in English  
15 sentences. (for reviews, see Kutas and Federmeier, 2011; Lau et al., 2008).

16 However, beyond the sensitivity of the N400 to semantic anomalies, an N400 effect  
17 has also been observed in cognitive control tasks involving a linguistic (semantic)  
18 component, and it has been interpreted to reflect of inhibitory processes and interference  
19 suppression. For example, in language switching tasks, an N400 effect has been suggested to  
20 reflect inhibitory processes. More precisely, in semantic comprehension tasks, e.g. a bilingual  
21 semantic categorization task (Alvarez et al., 2003; Chauncey et al., 2008) or a task involving  
22 the evaluation of the semantic expectedness of sentence-final words (Proverbio et al., 2004),  
23 a larger N400 was found for language switching compared to repetition conditions, either in

1 one switching direction (L1 to L2; Alvarez et al., 2003) or in both directions (L1 to L2 and  
2 L2 to L1; Chauncey et al., 2008; Proverbio et al., 2004). Furthermore, an N400 effect was  
3 also observed in several EEG studies examining temporal dynamics underlying the  
4 interference arising in the Stroop task (Stroop, 1935) and has been argued to reflect inhibitory  
5 processes or interference suppression. This effect reflects a larger negativity in the  
6 incongruent condition in comparison to the congruent condition or a neutral condition (a non-  
7 color word or a string of characters written in one of the ink colors; Appelbaum et al., 2009;  
8 Badzakova-Trajkov et al., 2009; Bruchmann et al., 2010; Coderre et al., 2011; Hanslmayr et  
9 al., 2008; Liotti et al., 2000; Naylor et al., 2012; Qiu et al., 2006; West, 2003; for a review,  
10 see Table 2). However, it remains unclear whether this component does reflect partially  
11 shared cognitive processes with the classic N400 first identified by Kutas and Hillyard (1980;  
12 Siltan et al., 2010). The so-called N400 Stroop effect usually mirrors the behavioral Stroop  
13 effect, i.e. longer response times in the incongruent compared to the congruent condition,  
14 response times to neutral stimuli lying in between. A larger negative deflection in the  
15 incongruent compared to the congruent and neutral conditions in the time window 400-500  
16 ms post stimulus onset (N400 effect) is interpreted to sign the higher cognitive cost in  
17 responding to stimuli in the incongruent condition – usually causing a conflict between the  
18 two sources of information, the color word and the ink color. Some studies investigating the  
19 localization of the main neural generators of the N400 Stroop interference effect have shown  
20 that the difference of N400 amplitude between the incongruent and congruent conditions  
21 mainly originates in the ACC (Badzakova-Trajkov et al., 2009; Bruchmann et al., 2010;  
22 Hanslmayr et al., 2008; Liotti et al., 2000; Markela-Lerenc et al., 2004) and the prefrontal  
23 cortex (PFC; Badzakova-Trajkov et al., 2009; Bruchmann et al., 2010; Hanslmayr et al.,  
24 2008; Liotti et al., 2000; Markela-Lerenc et al., 2004; Qiu et al., 2006). In contrast, the typical  
25 semantic N400 is mainly generated by superior and middle temporal, anterior temporal,

1 medial temporal and dorsolateral frontal regions (for a review, see Kutas and Federmeier,  
2 2011). Table 2 displays a review of the functional interpretation of the N400 effect in the  
3 Stroop task and related tasks requiring cognitive control. The largely differing but partially  
4 shared (e.g. frontal) localization of the neural generators of the semantic and executive N400s  
5 suggests that the underlying processes of these ERP components may be considerably  
6 different but also share some aspects of control.

7 – Insert Table 2 about here –

8 -

### 9 **3.2.3. Late sustained potential (LSP)**

10 In several electroencephalographical studies using a Stroop task – i.e. a cognitive control task  
11 considered as involving a linguistic (semantic) component -, a further ERP component was  
12 found in the time window of about 550 – 800 ms, that is a sustained fronto-central negative-  
13 going potential, i.e. a late sustained potential (LSP; Hanslmayr et al., 2008; Heidlmayr et al.,  
14 2015; Naylor et al., 2012; West, 2003; note that this component has varying names with the  
15 different authors, e.g. late negativity (LN; Hanslmayr et al., 2008), sustained negativity (SN;  
16 Naylor et al., 2012), conflict sustained potential (SP; West, 2003), or late positive complex  
17 (LPC; Donohue et al., 2016)). It is to be noted that some studies also found an additional  
18 centro-parietal positive deflection in the incongruent compared in the congruent condition  
19 (Appelbaum et al., 2009; Coderre et al., 2011; Hanslmayr et al., 2008; Liotti et al., 2000;  
20 West, 2003). The sustained centro-parietal positivity and/or frontal negativity was discussed  
21 to reflect either engagement of executive processes (Hanslmayr et al., 2008), conflict  
22 resolution processes (Coderre et al., 2011; Heidlmayr et al., 2015; Naylor et al., 2012; West,  
23 2004), semantic reactivation of the meaning of words following conflict resolution



1 (Appelbaum et al., 2009; Liotti et al., 2000) or response selection (West, 2003, 2004). Source  
2 localization has rarely been done for the late sustained negative-going potential but there is  
3 some evidence of its main neural generators in the middle or inferior frontal gyrus and the  
4 extrastriate cortex (West, 2003). West (2003) suggests that the left middle frontal gyrus and  
5 extrastriate cortices are responsive to the presence of conflict, while the right middle frontal  
6 gyrus may be sensitive to conflict arising from the less dominant dimension (i.e. color) and  
7 may support some aspect of conflict resolution. In Table 3, a brief overview of studies  
8 documenting a late sustained potential in tasks involving cognitive control is given.

9 - Insert Table 3 about here -

10 -

#### 11 **4. A unified neurocognitive model of the executive control time course**

12 The aim of the present article is to provide an overview of the electroencephalographical  
13 studies that targeted the examination of ERP signatures associated with the most discussed  
14 domain-general control processes (i.e., *conflict monitoring*, *interference suppression*, and the  
15 switching-related *overcoming of inhibition*) and their respective neural generators. Figure 2  
16 displays a description of the time course of these different executive processes and their ERP  
17 signatures and neural generators. The selection of these specific control processes is justified  
18 by the fact that these processes were considered most relevant in the literature, and therefore  
19 the most discussed. We agree that further control processes beyond those reported  
20 presumably also play an important role and should obtain more focus in future research.

21 Moreover, it is important to note that there is no single explanation of the control mechanisms  
22 in cognition, in particular in bilingual mind, which is characterized by joint activation of the  
23 two languages. In a recent review on bilingual adaptation, Bialystok (2017) claimed that

1 attention system should also be considered to better understand the underlying mechanisms  
2 enabling bilingual mind to select the appropriate language and avoid interference from an  
3 unwanted language. Interestingly, Sholes et al. (2007) by investigating neurochemical basis  
4 of attentional control showed that acute serotonin and dopamine depletion are able to  
5 improve attentional control in healthy individuals as behaviorally attested by a significant  
6 Stroop interference decrease. Beyond the neurochemical issue, this study clearly showed that  
7 variations of attentional control influence the performance of a cognitive test involving  
8 interference control. More recently, Laeng, Ørbo, Holmlund and Miozzo (2011), using  
9 pupillometry (i.e., the measurement of changes in pupillary diameter) also demonstrated a  
10 link between visual attention and control of interferences in a Stroop task. Laeng et al.  
11 reported that pupil diameters increased for color distractors that differed from color  
12 responses, while they reduced for color distractors that were identical to color responses. The  
13 replication of the Stroop effect with recording of pupillary diameter, i.e. a marker of  
14 attention-grabbing stimuli (for a review, see Loewenfeld, 1993) reinforces the idea that  
15 attentional resources (here, visual attention) may play a role in interferences control.

16

17 - Insert Figure 2 about here -

18

19 To sum up, the fronto-central N2 component is robustly found in tasks requiring  
20 conflict control, e.g. the Stroop, Simon or the Eriksen Flanker task, and is interpreted to  
21 reflect conflict monitoring processes as well as switching-related overcoming of previously  
22 applied inhibition, as in negative priming or in tasks that involve language switching. The  
23 neural generator of the N2 is thought to be the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), the inferior  
24 frontal cortex (IFC) and the prefrontal cortex (PFC). Next, the posterior N400 has also been

1 found in tasks requiring conflict control and has been suggested to reflect different processes,  
2 involving conflict monitoring and control implementation, i.e. interference suppression.  
3 However, intriguingly, the N400 effect has mainly been found in cognitive control tasks  
4 involving a linguistic (lexical) component, e.g. the Stroop task (see detailed discussion  
5 below), whereas for non-linguistic interference control tasks, e.g. the Simon or Eriksen  
6 Flanker task, mostly P3 effects have been reported. As the main neural generators of the  
7 N400 have been identified the ACC and the prefrontal cortex (PFC). Moreover, in several  
8 electroencephalographical studies using a Stroop task – i.e. a cognitive control task involving  
9 a linguistic (lexical) component -, a further ERP component was found in the time window of  
10 about 550 – 800 ms, that is a sustained fronto-central negative-going potential, i.e. a late  
11 sustained potential (LSP). However, the functional attribution of this component is less  
12 univocal and it has been thought to reflect the engagement of conflict resolution processes,  
13 semantic reactivation of the meaning of words following conflict resolution, or response  
14 selection. As neural generators for this component have been identified the middle or inferior  
15 frontal gyrus and the extrastriate cortex, which have been argued to respond to the presence  
16 of conflict and to underlie some aspect of conflict resolution.

17 From the present review we can draw inference about the following neurocognitive  
18 time courses of cognitive control as reflected in ERP patterns (see Figure 2). Based on the  
19 present review, a fronto-central N2 component is consistently found to reflect *conflict*  
20 *monitoring* processes or *overcoming of inhibition*, with its main neural generator being the  
21 anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). Interestingly, three distinct neurocognitive patterns emerge  
22 for the subsequent ERP components. On the one hand, for cognitive control tasks that involve  
23 a lexical component, the N2 is followed by a centro-posterior N400 and subsequently a late  
24 sustained potential (LSP). The N400 is mainly generated by the ACC and the prefrontal  
25 cortex (PFC) and is thought to reflect *interference suppression*, whereas the LSP is probably

1 generated by the middle or inferior frontal gyrus and the extrastriate cortex and plausibly  
2 reflects *conflict resolution*. Moreover, in some studies and paradigms specific ERP  
3 components and their functional attribution cannot be unambiguously disentangled (e.g.,  
4 Donohue et al., 2016). This is partially due to a certain heterogeneity in the literature  
5 concerning the identification of ERP components and the role that is attributed to them. With  
6 the present review article, we hope to have provided a contribution to a clearer  
7 characterization of ERP components and the cognitive functions that they have been  
8 suggested to reflect.

9         To conclude, the present review on electroencephalographical markers of executive  
10 control processes is intended to provide a comprehensive overview of our current knowledge  
11 on ERP markers of control and their neural generators in Stroop task (i.e. *conflict monitoring*,  
12 *interference suppression*, *conflict resolution*). Future research should shed light on the fine-  
13 grained mechanisms of control respectively involved in linguistic and non-linguistic tasks.  
14 But they should also look in to oscillatory activity and their functional significance with  
15 respect to cognitive control processes. Recently there has been much progress in our  
16 understanding of the functional significance of specific frequency bands with respect to  
17 cognitive and motor control, with theta (4-7 Hz) emerging as a marker of cognitive control  
18 (e.g., Cavanagh and Frank, 2014; Hanslmayr et al., 2008; Mückschel et al., 2016), alpha (8-  
19 12 Hz) as a marker of inhibition (e.g., Jensen and Mazaheri, 2010; Klimesch, 2012;  
20 Waldhauser et al., 2012), or beta (13-30 Hz) as a marker of the maintenance of the current  
21 sensorimotor or cognitive state (e.g., Engel and Fries, 2010; Heidlmayr et al., 2016).

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1 **6. Figure captions**

2 **Figure 1. The six most common tasks to study conflict monitoring, interference**  
3 **suppression and response inhibition.** For each task, the most commonly used configuration  
4 and mechanistic interpretation of the underlying control processes is presented, but different  
5 variants of the tasks do exist in the literature. **Stroop task (Stroop, 1935).** The task is to  
6 respond to the ink color of the stimulus. In the critical, i.e. incongruent, condition the  
7 automatic process of reading the incongruent color word interferes with the more controlled  
8 process of responding to the ink color, which is not the case in the control, i.e. congruent,  
9 condition where the color word and ink color refer to the same color. **Simon task (Simon**  
10 **and Ruddell, 1967).** The task is to respond to the direction (left, right) coded by the color of  
11 the stimulus. In the critical, i.e. incongruent, condition the automatic process of responding to  
12 the physical position of the stimulus interferes with the more controlled process of  
13 responding to the direction as coded by the stimulus color, which is not the case in the  
14 control, i.e. congruent, condition where the physical position of the stimulus and the direction  
15 coded by the stimulus color are identical. **Eriksen Flanker task (Eriksen and Eriksen,**  
16 **1974).** The task is to respond to the direction (left, right) indicated by the middle arrow that is  
17 positioned within a string of arrows. In the critical, i.e. incongruent, condition responding to  
18 the direction indicated by the middle arrow suffers from the inference from the incongruent  
19 direction indicated by the surrounding (flanking) arrows, which is not the case in the control,  
20 i.e. congruent, condition where the direction indicated by the flanking arrows is identical with  
21 the target arrow direction. **Go/Nogo task.** The task is to respond to a specific type of stimulus  
22 (e.g. circle) but to withhold the manual response when a different type of stimulus is  
23 presented (e.g. cross). In the critical, i.e. nogo, condition withholding the manual response  
24 requires the suppression of a prepotent response tendency, which is not the case in the usually  
25 much more frequent (e.g. 75% of trials) control, i.e. go, condition where the manual response

1 can be executed. **Stop-Signal task (Logan, 1994)**. The task is to respond to a specific type of  
2 stimulus (e.g. circle) but to stop the manual response when a specific signal is presented (e.g.  
3 beep). In the critical, i.e. stop, condition stopping the manual response requires the  
4 suppression of an already initiated response, which is not the case in the usually much more  
5 frequent (e.g. 75% of trials) control, i.e. go, condition where the manual response can be  
6 executed. **Antisaccade task (Hallett, 1978)**. The task is to make an eye movement (saccade)  
7 towards or opposite the direction (left, right) of a target stimulus presented on the screen,  
8 depending on a preceding color cue. In the critical, i.e. antisaccade, condition the color cue  
9 (e.g. fixation cross in the middle of the screen) is red which indicates that a saccade in the  
10 direction opposite to the upcoming target needs to be executed, which requires the  
11 overcoming of a prepotent response tendency towards the target and a change of the motor  
12 program towards the opposite direction. This is not the case in the control, i.e. prosaccade,  
13 condition where the color cue is green, indicating that a saccade towards the target can be  
14 executed.

15

1 **Figure 2. A unified neurocognitive model of the executive control time course in the**  
2 **Stroop task.** A fronto-central N2 component is consistently found to reflect conflict  
3 monitoring processes or overcoming of inhibition, with its main neural generator being the  
4 anterior cingulate cortex (ACC).For cognitive control tasks that involve a linguistic  
5 component, such as the Stroop task, the N2 is followed by a centro-posterior N400 and  
6 subsequently a late sustained potential (LSP). The N400 is mainly generated by the ACC and  
7 the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and is thought to reflect interference suppression, whereas the  
8 LSP plausibly reflects conflict resolution.

9



1 **7. Tables**

1 **Table 1. The functional significance attributed to the N2 effect in tasks involving cognitive control.** Time window indicates the time  
 2 window in which an N2 effect was observed. Included were ERP studies that found a conflict-monitoring related N2 for which source  
 3 localization analyses were conducted and/or which made use of a paradigm that allows to functionally specify the function of the N2. Studies are  
 4 presented in alphabetical order of author names. ACC, anterior cingulate cortex; IFC, Inferior-frontal cortex; ITC, Inferior-temporal cortex;  
 5 MCC, midcingulate cortex.

**N2 effect in tasks involving cognitive control**

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Paradigm</b>	<b>Time window</b>	<b>Surface topography</b>	<b>Functional attribution</b>	<b>Neural generator</b>
Boenke et al. (2009)	Stroop	268–360	Fronto-central	Cognitive control processes involved in conflict detection and monitoring	Medial frontal cortex, including ACC
Chen et al. (2008)	Partially incongruent categorization task	240-300	Fronto-central	Conflict detection	ACC
Chen & Melara (2009)	Simon	360-400	Central	Working memory; disruption in working memory due to Stimulus-Response (S-R) conflict; conflict in information held in working memory	-
Donkers & van Boxtel (2004)	Go/Nogo	200-350	Fronto-central	Conflict monitoring	
Enriquez-Geppert et al. (2010)	Combined Go/Nogo - Stop-Signal task	20 ms around peak in window 200-350;	Fronto-central	Conflict monitoring	IFC, MCC
Frings & Groh-Bordin (2007)	Negative priming	170-270 (P2/N2 complex)	Frontal, fronto-polar	Selection of previously inhibited stimulus against incompatible distractors	-
Gajewski et al. (2008)	Response-cueing task	200-320	Fronto-central	Response selection	

Groom & Cragg (2015)	Flanker	250-350	Fronto-central	Response conflict processing	
Heidlmayr et al. (2016)	Antisaccade task	160–200	Frontal	Conflict monitoring	ACC, PFC
Heidlmayr et al. (2015)	Negative priming	200-300	Fronto-central	Overcoming of inhibition	ACC, IFG
Huster et al. (2011)	Stop-Signal	150-250	Fronto-central	Conflict monitoring	MCC
Iannaccone et al. (2015)	Flanker	223-323	Fronto-central	Conflict monitoring	Pre-SMA, bilateral IFC, right ITC
Jackson et al. (1999)	Go/Nogo	~150-200	Frontal	Associated with the withholding of a manual response	IFC
Jackson et al. (2001)	Language switching	Peak at 320 ms after stimulus onset	Fronto-central	Inhibitory processes (response suppression similar to inhibition in a Go/Nogo task) during language switching	-
Jonkman (2006)	Go/Nogo	240-260	Fronto-central	Conflict monitoring/detection	
Kopp et al. (1996)	Flanker	250-350	Fronto-central	Avoidance of inappropriate action and selection of appropriate action	
Koussaie & Phillips (2012)	Stroop	220-360	Fronto-central	Conflict monitoring	-
Koussaie & Phillips (2012)	Flanker	260-420	Central	Conflict monitoring	-
Krämer et al. (2011)	Flanker – Stop/Change-Signal	220-280	Frontal	Inhibition (N2 effect absent in change trials)	-
Lavric et al. (2004)	Go/Nogo	235–256	Fronto-central	Inhibition	vPFC, dIPFC; vPFC-dIPFC connectivity, ACC-PFC

					connectivity
Maguire et al. (2009)	Go/Nogo involving conceptual-semantic component	150-300	Frontal	Inhibitory processing	-
Melara et al. (2008)	Simon	175-325	Fronto-central	Attentional disruption caused by S-R conflict in working memory	-
Moreno et al. (2014)	Go/Nogo	270-320	Fronto-central	Conflict detection or inhibition	-
Mueller et al. (2009)	Antisaccade task	180-244	Parietal	Current inhibition	-
Naylor et al. (2012)	Between-within language Stroop	200-350	Fronto-central	A stage in conflict processing/inhibitory control parallel to N400 that facilitate the resolution of conflict at the LSP (late sustained potential, cf. section 3.2.3)	-
Nguyen et al. (2016)	Go/Nogo	200-350	Fronto-central	Error monitoring	-
Nieuwenhuis et al. (2003)	Go/Nogo	250-350	Fronto-central	(Response) conflict monitoring	ACC
Siemann et al. (2016)	Flanker	240-260, 280-300 (relative positivity)	Central	(Response) conflict monitoring	ACC
van Veen & Carter (2002b)	Flanker	340-380	Fronto-central	Conflict detection	ACC
Yeung & Nieuwenhuis (2009)	Flanker	Negative peak ~300 ms after stimulus onset	Fronto-central	Conflict monitoring	Medial frontal cortex, including ACC

1 **Table 2. The functional significance attributed to the N400 effect in tasks involving cognitive control.** Time window indicates the time  
 2 window in which an N400 effect was observed. Included were ERP studies that found a control-related N400 for which source localization  
 3 analyses were conducted and/or which made use of a paradigm that allows to functionally specify the function of the N400. Studies are  
 4 presented in alphabetical order of author names. ACC, anterior cingulate cortex; IFC, inferior frontal cortex; IPS, intraparietal sulcus; PFC,  
 5 prefrontal cortex.

**N400 effect in tasks involving cognitive control**

Reference	Paradigm	Time window	Surface topography	Functional attribution	Neural generator
Appelbaum et al. (2009)	Stroop	450-500	Centro-parietal	Central executive control processes (detection and/or resolution of response conflict); semantic incongruency	ACC (posterior part), left parietal regions
Badzakova-Trajkov et al. (2009)	Stroop	370-480	Centro-parietal	Attentional allocation/conflict identification and resolution	ACC
Brass et al. (2005)	Task-switching	440-520	Central	Task-set updating, incongruency between task meanings conveyed by current vs preceding cue	IFC, IPS
Bruchmann et al. (2010)	Stroop	396-576	Centro-parietal	Conflict monitoring and processing	ACC, right PFC
Coderre et al. (2011)	Stroop	400-500	Centro-parietal	Conflict detection	ACC
Donohue et al. (2016)	Stroop, Flanker	323-621 (Stroop) 303-479 (Flanker)	Fronto-central	Response conflict processing	-
Feroz et al. (2017)	Emotional Stroop	326-426	Fronto-central	Task/stimulus (task-irrelevant emotional meaning) conflict processing	Dorsal and rostro-ventral ACC
Frings & Groh-Bordin (2007)	Negative priming	330-420	Left-lateralized	Enhanced semantic processing	-

Hanslmayr et al. (2008)	Stroop	400-500	Fronto-central	Interference detection and elicitation of central executive processes (rather than semantic incongruency)	ACC
Heidlmayr et al. (2015)	Stroop	400-500	Centro-parietal	Interference suppression	ACC, PFC
Larson et al. (2009)	Stroop	Voltage at the most negative peak between 350 and 500 ms (420-440)	Fronto-medial	Conflict monitoring processes	-
Liotti et al. (2000)	Stroop	350-500	Medial-dorsal	Suppression or overriding the processing of the incongruent word meaning	Dorsal ACC
Markela-Lerenc et al. (2004)	Stroop	350-450	Left fronto-central	Conflict monitoring, control implementation	Left inferior PFC, ACC
Naylor et al. (2012)	Between-within language Stroop	350-550	Medial-central	A stage in conflict processing/inhibitory control parallel to N2	-
Qiu et al. (2006)	Stroop	350-550	Fronto-central	Conflict processing, response selection	PFC
West (2003)	Stroop	450-500	Parietal	Conflict detection	ACC, left frontal cortex
West et al. (2005)	Stroop, counting, digit-location tasks	400-450	Negative deflection: central	Conflict processing	-

1 **Table 3. The functional interpretation of the LSP (late sustained potential) effect in**  
2 **tasks involving cognitive control.** In the column presenting surface topography, it is  
3 indicated at which sites the incongruent condition shows a positive or a negative deflection  
4 relative to the congruent condition. Time window indicates the time window in which an LSP  
5 effect was observed. Included were ERP studies that found a control-related LSP for which  
6 source localization analyses were conducted and/or which made use of a paradigm that  
7 allows to functionally specify the function of the LSP. Studies are presented in alphabetical  
8 order of author names. ACC, anterior cingulate cortex; PFC, prefrontal cortex.

**LSP effect in tasks involving cognitive control**

Reference	Paradigm	Time window	Surface topography	Functional attribution	Neural generator
Appelbaum et al. (2009)	Stroop	850-900	Positive deflection: parieto-occipital	Processing of semantic meaning of words	-
Brass et al. (2005)	Task-switching	600-800	Positive deflection: Centro-parietal (after 680 also frontal)	Integrating the new contextual information to activate the relevant task set in case of incongruency between task meanings conveyed by current vs preceding cue	-
Chen & Melara (2009)	Simon	480–520	Positive deflection: parietal	Maintenance of current stimulus-response relations in working memory rather than conflict resolution	-
Coderre et al. (2011)	Stroop	600-900	Positive deflection: Centro-parietal	Conflict resolution or post-resolution processes	-
Donohue et al. (2016)	Stroop, Flanker	630-1000 (Stroop) 566-1000 (Flanker)	Positive deflection: Centro-parietal	Allocation of attention, conflict resolution	-
Feroz et al. (2017)	Emotional Stroop	626-726	Negative deflection: fronto-central	Response conflict processing; also: emotional arousal involved in late attentional processes that engage higher-order cognitive control to overcome interference	Dorsal and rostro-ventral ACC
Hanslmayr et al. (2008)	Stroop, Negative	600-800	Negative deflection: fronto-	Engagement of central executive processes	ACC

	priming		central; Positive deflection: parieto-occipital		
Heidlmayr et al. (2015)	Stroop	540-700	Negative deflection: fronto-central	Conflict resolution	PFC
Larson et al. (2009)	Stroop	650-850	Positive deflection: parietal	Conflict processing (conflict resolution processes)	-
Liotti et al. (2000)	Stroop	500-800	Negative deflection: anterior frontal;  Positive deflection: Left superior temporo-parietal scalp	Reactivation of the meaning/ Retrieval of semantic meaning of the incongruent word	Left posterior generator(s) (left temporo-parietal cortex)
Markela-Lerenc et al. (2004)	Stroop	600-1000	Positive deflection: parietal	-	-
Naylor et al. (2012)	Between-within language Stroop	550-700	Negative deflection: fronto-central	Conflict resolution (possibly facilitated by efficient N2 inhibitory control processes)	-
West (2003)	Stroop	750-850	Negative deflection: lateral-frontal; Positive deflection: centro-parietal	Conflict processing	Middle or inferior frontal gyrus, left extrastriate region
West et al. (2005)	Stroop, counting, digit-location tasks	600-700	Negative deflection: lateral-frontal; Positive deflection: parietal	Response selection rather than conflict resolution	-



**Stroop task**

critical

**GREEN**

control

**RED****Go/NoGo task**

critical



control

**Simon task**

critical



control

**Stop-Signal task**

critical



control

**Eriksen Flanker task**

critical



control

**Antisaccade task**

critical



control



Conflict monitoring /  
Overcoming of inhib.

N2



Interference  
suppression

N400



Conflict resolution

LSP

