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Synchronization of acquisition devices in neuroimaging:

An application using co-registration of eye movements and electroencephalography

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**Abstract**

Interest in applications for the simultaneous acquisition of data from different devices is growing. In neuroscience for example, co-registration complements and overcomes some of the shortcomings of individual methods. However, precise synchronization of the different data streams involved is required before joint data analysis. Our article presents and evaluates a synchronization method which maximizes the alignment of information across time.

Synchronization through common triggers is widely used in all existing methods, because it is very simple and effective. However, this solution has been found to fail in certain practical situations, namely for the spurious detection of triggers and/or when the timestamps of triggers sampled by each acquisition device are not jointly distributed linearly for the entire duration of an experiment. We propose two additional mechanisms, the "Longest Common Subsequence" algorithm and a piecewise linear regression, in order to overcome the limitations of the classical method of synchronizing common triggers.

The proposed synchronization method was evaluated using both real and artificial data. Co-registrations of electroencephalographic signals (EEG) and eye movements were used for real data. We compared the effectiveness of our method to another open source method implemented using EYE-EEG toolbox. Overall, we show that our method, implemented in C++ as a DOS application, is very fast, robust and fully automatic.

**Keywords**

Co-registration, Synchronization, Clock drift, Drift correction, Electroencephalography, Eye movements.

**Synchronization of acquisition devices in neuroimaging:**

**An application using co-registration of eye movements and electroencephalography**

**Introduction**

In neuroimaging, simultaneous recordings are a powerful way of investigating brain activity. All experimental modalities have their own advantages and limitations. They also have a certain degree of complementarity, mainly in the temporal domain (e.g. for EEG + eye movements, and in both the temporal and spatial domains (e.g., for EEG + fMRI), which has motivated intense efforts towards their combination (Jorge et al., 2015; Rosenkranz & Lemieux, 2010). Two main approaches coexist. The first approach - data integration - uses one modality to improve another, for example, when the high spatial resolution of functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) is used to constrain electroencephalography (EEG) inverse solutions for source localization (Liu, Ding & He, 2006). The second approach - data fusion - requires synchronous acquisition, and refers to the idea of using both modalities in a combined joint analysis, for example for the simultaneous recording of EEG and near-infrared spectroscopy (Shin, von Lühmann, Kim, Mehnert, Hwang & Müller, 2018), or for EEG and eye movements (Nikolaev, Meghanathan & van Leeuwen, 2016).

Ideally, one single data acquisition system would record all necessary data types, inherently time-synchronizing all measurements. In many cases however, multiple data acquisition systems are involved, and efficient data synchronization is needed to harmonize data continuously over time. Off-line synchronization methods rely on matching information from two or more simultaneous measurements (Hoozeboom, 2003). As a result of the synchronization, all data are sampled in the same time referential and share the same events.

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In this context of data fusion, we propose a solution for the synchronization of data from different acquisition devices, and we compare it to a currently existing solution in terms of limitations and advantages. We illustrated our method by testing it on real research data obtained during the co-registration of EEG signals and eye movements. In this type of experimental setup, the EEG signal is segmented based on eye movement events, by using the temporal and spatial positions of specific eye events (e.g., fixations or saccades) as markers for brain signals. These EEG analyses, triggered by eye events, are called Eye Fixation or Saccade Related Potentials (EFRP / ESRP), and can be analyzed using efficient methods of estimation (Kristensen, Guerin-Dugué & Rivet, 2017; Kristensen, Rivet & Guérin-Dugué, 2017; Ehinger & Dimigen, 2019). This co-registration technique is an effective way of delving into cognitive processes (Frey, Lemaire, Vercueil & Guérin-Dugué, 2018). It also allows for more ecological experimental protocols, which are not constrained by "external" markers, such as the onset of a word or image, and in which participants can perform fixations at their own pace (Dimigen, Sommer, Hohlfeld, Jacobs, & Kliegl, 2011; Körner, Braunstein, Stangl, Schlögl, Neuper & Ischebeck, 2014; Van Humbeeck, Meghanathan, Wagemans, van Leeuwen & Nikolaev, 2018).

It is being used increasingly to study attention, memory encoding, visual scene processing, reading, and responses to emotional visual information (for reviews, cf. for example (Dimigen, et al., 2011; Nikolaev, Pannasch, Ito & Belopolsky, 2014; Nikolaev et al., 2016). This type of joint acquisition therefore has a strong added value for the understanding of the time course of neural activity during cognitive tasks requiring a high degree of accuracy in the synchronization of timings.

Where systems of acquisition are concerned, suppliers of both eye-trackers and EEG systems have recently proposed additional modules which permit the importation and synchronization of co-registered data streams. The EEG analysis software 'BrainVision Analyzer' (Brain Products GmbH) proposed a first

93 version of the “Add Channels” module, supporting four types of eye-tracker data: Tobii (TobiiStudio223  
94 and TobiiStudio301), ASL (ASLEyeTrac6 and ASLResults243), SMI (SMIBeGaze300) and SR Eye Link  
95 1000 Plus. The whole process is based on common triggers, found by the module, for the drift correction.  
96 Gaze positions are then resampled and added to EEG channels (Brain Products Press Release, 2013<sup>1</sup>). The  
97 Tobii system proposed the Pro Lab software which uses Transistor-Transistor Logic (TTL) technology to  
98 send events from the parallel port to the other devices for synchronization<sup>2</sup>. Finally, iMotions combined  
99 Eye Tracking glasses with a wireless EEG device. In addition to these corporate solutions, which need to be  
100 purchased separately, the open source EEGLab environment (Delorme & Makeig, 2004) has developed a  
101 plug-in for the joint analysis of EEG signals and eye-tracker data (EYE-EEG<sup>3</sup>, Dimigen et al., 2011). This  
102 plug-in also resolves the synchronization issue between these devices thanks to common triggers in the two  
103 data flows.

104 Thus, although several solutions exist, no consensus on an effective synchronization process seems  
105 to have emerged, and in general, each study attempts to find its own solution. However, it appears that in  
106 most cases, common triggers are sent as TTL pulses, on a parallel port, typically at the beginning of each  
107 trial (Dimigen et al., 2011; Guérin-Dugué, Roy, Kristensen, Rivet, Vercueil, & Tcherkassof, 2018; Van  
108 Humbeeck et al., 2018). Moreover, due to several potential problems, which will be discussed in this  
109 article, this synchronization procedure requires realignment precautions, and it is important to ensure its  
110 effectiveness. As mentioned above, the point of these co-registration methods is often to obtain good

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brainproducts.com/analyzer203.php?tab=4>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tobii.com/learn-and-support/learn/steps-in-an-eye-tracking-study/design/solutions-for-co-registration-of-eye-tracking-and-other-biometric-measures/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/eyetracking-ecg/>

111 temporal resolution and a few milliseconds of lag can be very damaging to the analysis and understanding  
112 of the results.

113 As an example, Kamienkowski, Ison, Quiroga, and Sigman (2012) evaluated the synchronization procedure  
114 by comparing the onset of saccades detected by electro-oculography (EOG) channels to the onset of  
115 saccades detected by the Engbert and Kliegl (2003) algorithm in the eye-tracking recording, which showed  
116 lags between saccade onsets of under 20 ms in all trials. In the latest version of the EYE-EEG<sup>3</sup> toolbox,  
117 synchronization accuracy can be checked by cross-correlation of eye positions and EOG channels for both  
118 horizontal and vertical movements. For successful synchronization, the lag that maximizes the cross-  
119 correlation must be close to zero.

120 In the following sections, we describe the framework for synchronizing independent acquisition devices  
121 and the practical difficulties that can be encountered. We implemented the proposed method in a software  
122 named “GazeEEGSynchro”, written in C++ and implemented as a DOS application, that is provided and  
123 available in the Zenodo repository (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5554071>) with examples on real data.  
124 We thus describe our proposed approach, validated with simulated and real data -acquired by our research  
125 team and by a team from another laboratory-, in order to evaluate its effectiveness, and we compare it with  
126 the EYE-EEG toolbox.

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### **Trigger-based synchronization**

130 When processing recorded signals off-line, it is essential to readjust these signals into the same time  
131 referential because of the inaccuracy of the crystal-based clock of each individual device (clock drift issue).  
132 Trigger-based synchronization is the simplest and most commonly used solution for the synchronization of  
133 devices working at the same or at different sampling rates. In this section, we begin by describing the clock

134 drift issue between the oscillators of each acquisition device, and the synchronization principle usually  
135 employed to resolve this.

136

137 **Clock drift issue**

138 In an acquisition system with several acquisition devices, each device's clock is controlled by its  
139 own crystal oscillator. Even when two quartz crystals come from the same batch, oscillators can exhibit a  
140 variety of instabilities related to aging, frequency, changes in temperature, power supply inaccuracy, and  
141 wire interconnection lengths. The phenomenon whereby a clock does not run at the same nominal speed as  
142 an ideal clock is called clock drift (Pak, 2017). In practice, quartz crystals are manufactured for frequencies  
143 ranging from a few tens of kHz to tens of MHz, and are often designed around standard frequencies<sup>4</sup> such  
144 as 3.579545 MHz adopted by the National Television System Committee, 10 MHz for low-power  
145 microcontrollers, 33.33 MHz or 40 MHz for computers. A programmable frequency divider is also  
146 necessary, because in acquisition systems the desired sampling frequency should be programmable in a  
147 range of tens of Hz to several tens of kHz. Therefore, the clock drift of the operating frequency also has an  
148 impact on these frequency dividers. Consequently, efficient synchronization is needed to compensate for  
149 the relative differences in timing generated by acquisition systems affected by different degrees of clock  
150 drift.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crystal\\_oscillator\\_frequencies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crystal_oscillator_frequencies)

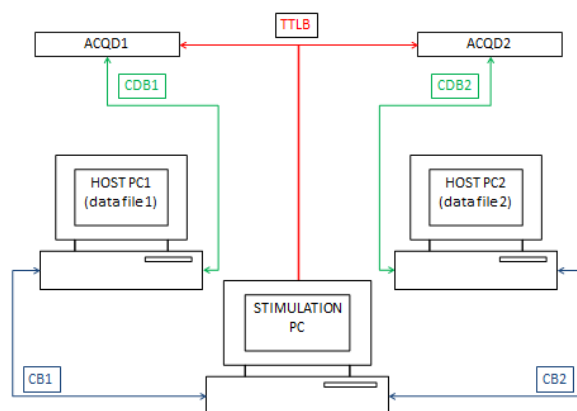


## 152 Principle of trigger-based synchronization

153 We describe the trigger-based synchronization aimed at solving the clock drift issue using a very  
 154 simple and generic experimental design which involves two acquisition devices and a master computer, as  
 155 depicted in *Figure 1*.

156 The STIMULATION PC (master) is used to present external stimuli (visual, auditory or both) to the  
 157 participant, to record if necessary their response, and send triggers through a logical bus (TTLB). The  
 158 triggers are used to tag the different stages of the experiment (start, end, visual display, sound emission,  
 159 etc.), and they are received instantly by all acquisition devices. Two acquisition devices (ACQD1 and  
 160 ACQD2), controlled by two independent PCs (HOST PC1 and HOST PC2), complete this set-up. The  
 161 STIMULATION PC communicates with the two HOST PCs through two control buses (CB1 respectively  
 162 CB2; i.e. Ethernet, USB, etc.). Likewise, the two HOST PCs communicate with the acquisition devices  
 163 through two control/data buses (CDB1 and CDB2, i.e. Ethernet, USB or PCI). These buses are used to  
 164 control the acquisition devices and to transfer the acquired data (digitized analog signals and TTL triggers).  
 165 In this way, data are continuously stored in two different files on the corresponding HOST PCs.

166



167

168 *Figure 1*. Example of an acquisition system with two acquisition devices: ACQD1 and ACQD2; three PCs:  
 169 STIMULATION PC (master), HOST PC1 and HOST PC2 (acquisition devices); two bidirectional

170 control/data buses CDB1 and CDB2 (communication between each host PC and the acquisition device);  
 171 two bidirectional control buses CB1 and CB2 (communication between the STIMULATION PC and the  
 172 two HOST PCs); a logical bus TTLB (trigger support).  
 173

174 A synchronization procedure requires at least two common triggers to be registered by both  
 175 acquisition devices. One trigger is sent just after the beginning of the experiment (“start trigger”) and  
 176 another trigger is sent just before the end of the experiment (“end trigger”), and both are recorded by  
 177 acquisition devices ACQD1 and ACQD2. A time reference is needed for synchronization purposes. This  
 178 time reference can be provided either by one of the acquisition devices or by the master computer. Once the  
 179 reference device has been selected, the other devices are called “secondary devices”. The timestamps of the  
 180 triggers of each secondary device are then linearly interpolated between the “start trigger” and the “end  
 181 trigger” to align with the timestamps of the triggers from the reference device.

182 If we consider that  $N_T$  triggers were sent throughout the whole experiment, the formula applied for  
 183 the transformation of the sample index of the trigger is:

$$184 \quad s_{j1}^{(k)} = \left( s_j^{(k)} - s_j^{(1)} \right) \frac{s_1^{(N_T)} - s_1^{(1)}}{s_j^{(N_T)} - s_j^{(1)}} + s_1^{(1)} \quad (1)$$

185 where  $\in \{2, 3, \dots, N_D\}$  is the index of the secondary acquisition devices for a set-up with  $N_D$   
 186 devices (index 1 is reserved for the reference device), and  $k \in \{1, 2, \dots, N_T\}$  is the trigger index with  $N_T$  the  
 187 number of common triggers detected by the acquisition devices. Then, for the reference device and the  $j^{th}$   
 188 device,  $s_1^{(k)}$  and  $s_j^{(k)}$  are the trigger indexes of the  $k^{th}$  trigger in each respective data acquisition flow  
 189 expressed in number of samples. In this context,  $s_{j1}^{(k)}$  represents the new position of the  $k^{th}$  trigger from the  
 190  $j^{th}$  device after its alignment with  $s_1^{(k)}$  in the data acquisition flow of the reference device (index 1). In this  
 191 context, the alignment error  $\varepsilon_s^{(k)}$  that affects the  $k^{th}$  trigger transformation, expressed in number of  
 192 samples (subscript "  $s$  ") can be computed as:

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$$\varepsilon_s^{(k)} = \text{round}(s_1^{(k)} - s_{j_1}^{(k)}). \quad (2)$$

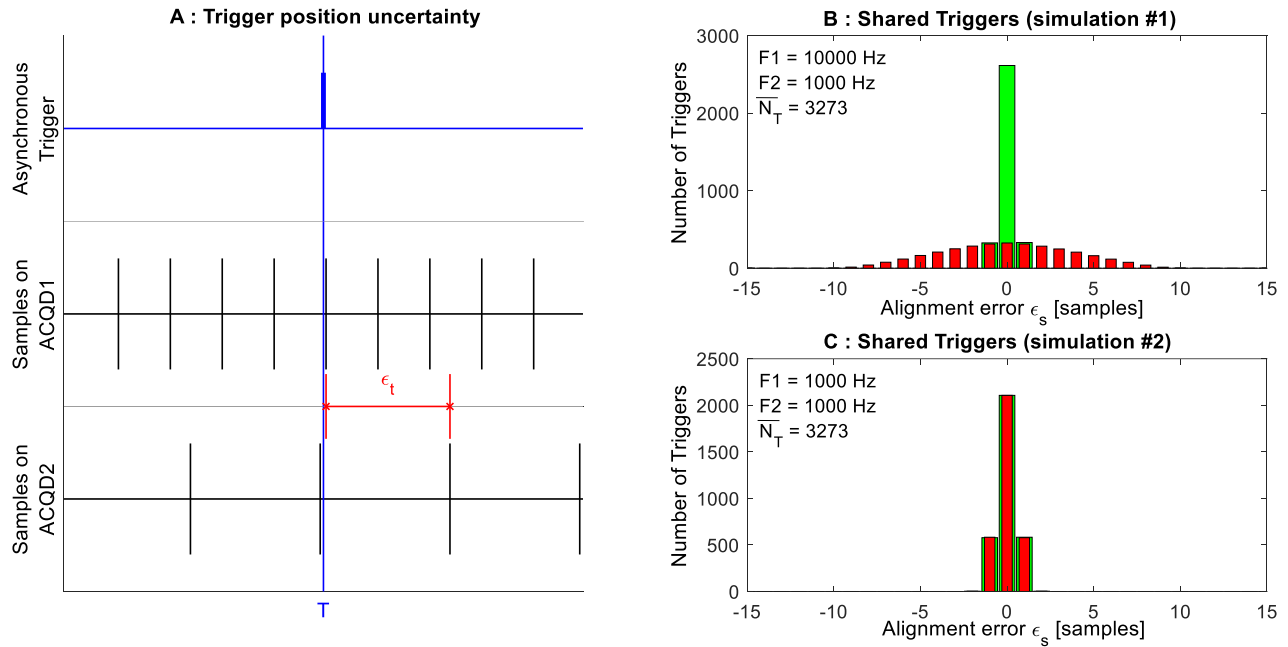
193  
194 The errors  $\{\varepsilon_s^{(k)}, k = 2, \dots, N_T\}$  are theoretically bound by the ratio between the sampling periods of the  
195 acquisition devices. In *Figure 2A*, the sampling mechanism is schematized for an extreme case: an  
196 asynchronous trigger  $T$  (top line) appears slightly before the sampling time of the reference device (middle  
197 line), and slightly after the sampling time of a secondary device (bottom line). Thus, the maximum  
198 uncertainty, expressed in time (subscript "  $t$ "), is  $\varepsilon_t = \pm \max(T_i)$  where  $T_i$  is the sampling period of the  
199  $i^{\text{th}}$  acquisition device. By introducing  $R_T$  as the sampling ratio so that  $R_T = \max(T_i)/\min(T_i)$ , the  
200 maximum uncertainty can be rewritten as  $\varepsilon_t = \pm R_T \cdot \min(T_i)$ . For the faster device, the same error,  
201 expressed in terms of number of samples ( $\varepsilon_s$ ) can then be written as  $\varepsilon_s \in [-R_T, R_T]$ .

202

203 To illustrate the performance of this synchronization procedure, we simulated ten thousand  
204 experiments of about one hour using two independent acquisition devices. Each device had its own time  
205 referential, its own nominal sampling frequency and its own random clock drift. With a 1‰ clock drift  
206 value being considered as usual, a random clock drift chosen in the interval  $[-\frac{F}{1000}, \frac{F}{1000}]$  was added to the  
207 nominal sampling rate  $F$  of the corresponding acquisition device. Two situations were simulated. In the  
208 first one, the reference device had a sampling frequency ten times greater than the secondary device ( $F1 =$   
209  $10 \text{ kHz}, F2 = 1 \text{ kHz}, R_T = 10$ ). In the second case, both devices had the same sampling frequency  
210 ( $F1 = 1 \text{ kHz}, F2 = 1 \text{ kHz}, R_T = 1$ ). The nominal sampling rates were affected by random clock drifts,  
211 as explained previously. For each simulation, the asynchronous triggers were added into recorded signals  
212 from both devices by an independent uniform random generator. On average there were  $N_T = 3273$   
213 asynchronous triggers per experiment. The transmission delay towards the acquisition devices was not

214 considered. The only uncertainty was, therefore, the date at which trigger signals were sampled according  
 215 to the sampling clock of each acquisition device (*Figure 2A*).

216



217

218 *Figure 2*. Trigger-based synchronization. A. Trigger uncertainty overview in an extreme case when the  
 219 trigger  $T$  arrives just before and just after the sampling fronts. The vertical black segments represent the  
 220 samples acquired by the ACQD1 and ACQD2 devices working at different sampling rates. B. Averaged  
 221 histogram of alignment errors in samples ( $\epsilon_s$ ) with  $R_T = 10$ . C. Averaged histogram of alignment errors in  
 222 samples ( $\epsilon_s$ ) with  $R_T = 1$ . The red histogram illustrates errors from the fastest acquisition device  
 223 compared to the slowest one, while the green histogram represents the reciprocal situation. Keys:  $F1$   
 224 - ACQD1 sampling rate -;  $F2$  - ACQD2 sampling rate -;  $\bar{N}_T$  - average number of triggers detected by  
 225 ACQD1 and ACQD2 -.

226

227 The range of the synchronization errors must be  $\epsilon_s \in [-10,10]$  in the first case, and  $\epsilon_s \in [-1,1]$  in  
 228 the second case. These expected results are confirmed by the histograms of alignment errors ( $\epsilon_s$ ), averaged  
 229 across all simulated experiments. These histograms are shown in *Figure 2B* ( $R_T = 10$ ) and in *Figure 2C*  
 230 ( $R_T = 1$ ). The observed range is slightly larger when round-off errors are taken into consideration.

231

232 This simple synchronization procedure is an effective solution, but it must be based on three  
 prerequisites: (1) all acquisition devices must be turned on before the first trigger is sent, and turned off

233 after the last trigger is sent, so that the start and end of the acquisitions are unambiguously specified by  
234 unique triggers; (2) all triggers must be sampled and shared by each acquisition device; and (3) the  
235 acquisition must be continuous, without any interruption, so that drifts are distributed linearly throughout  
236 the entire experiment.

237 In this ideal experimental situation, linear alignment of all triggers with the reference time is  
238 effective. However, because of handling errors, transient recording failures, false trigger detections and  
239 pauses during acquisition to cite some examples, an ideal situation is not always attained. Our procedure,  
240 which resolves these difficulties, is presented in the next section.

241

## 242 **Description of the proposed synchronization procedure**

243 The synchronization procedure proposed in this article efficiently corrects the clock drift even when  
244 the experimental situation is not ideal. The procedure allows correction when missing and/or spurious  
245 triggers are observed (“*Processing missing and spurious triggers*” section), and when interruptions in  
246 acquisition occur (“*Processing Pause/Resume mode*” section).

### 247 **Processing missing and spurious triggers**

248 The causes of missing or spurious triggers between different trigger streams are many and  
249 multifactorial. Triggers identified in the experimental design and sent by the “Stimulation PC” (*Figure 1*)  
250 but not recorded by all devices, are called “missing” triggers, as they are missing from at least one device.  
251 Triggers recorded by at least one device but not sent by the “Stimulation PC” are called spurious triggers.  
252 Configurations with missing triggers can be observed in a number of situations. If one device is switched  
253 on too late, or switched off too early, the first common trigger or the last common trigger determining the  
254 beginning or the end of acquisition is lost. This handling error can also result in a loss of data, when data

255 and triggers recorded on one acquisition device are not recorded on the others. Transient recording failure  
256 can have the same consequence. For example, a “buffer overflow” can occur in one system while the others  
257 continue recording. Configurations with spurious triggers can be observed in a number of situations. The  
258 detection of triggers is based on the electronic device that samples the signals on the parallel bus, and on  
259 the configuration mode of the parallel port. The name of a trigger is based on the decimal value  
260 corresponding to these sampled binary digits. We observed that the occurrence of additional spurious  
261 triggers depended on the electronic device used to sample and lock the logic levels on the parallel port. For  
262 example, in the analyzed recordings (cf. below the “*Validation on real data*” section), three different EEG  
263 systems were used. For two of these, no spurious triggers were observed, and for the other, up to 20% of  
264 the total number of triggers observed were spurious (*Table 1*). The spurious triggers observed corresponded  
265 to transient states on one sampling period before the expected trigger. Because the rise times and fall times  
266 can differ, their occurrence depended on the up or down transitions of logic levels on the parallel bus from  
267 one value (the previous trigger) to another (the subsequent trigger). Consequently, these spurious triggers  
268 appear in one trigger flow for a given device but not in the other trigger flows and have to be ignored. The  
269 proposed procedure resolves all of these issues.

270 String comparison is a central operation in a number of situations such as: in the comparison of two  
271 DNA sequences or in gene identification searches in molecular biology; in spelling error correction  
272 programs aimed at finding the dictionary entry which most resembles a given word; in the detection of  
273 plagiarism, and in pattern recognition (Needleman & Wunsch, 1970; Pearson & Lipman, 1988; Altschul,  
274 Gish, Myers & Lipman, 1990). As mentioned previously, when trigger flows from different devices are  
275 being compared, the alignment procedure may be deficient in situations featuring missing or spurious  
276 triggers. Before beginning the synchronization procedure, the common triggers in both acquisition flows  
277 must be matched specifically. This allows the triggers that mark the beginning and the end of acquisition to

278 be defined in a unique way. The “Longest Common Subsequence” (LCS) algorithm is proposed here as a  
279 way of resolving this problem (see Bergroth, Hakonen & Raita (2000) for a review). The LCS of two  
280 sequences X and Y constitutes a common subsequence of maximal length, i.e. the maximum number of  
281 identical symbols in both sequences when the common order in which these symbols occur in both  
282 sequences is maintained. The traditional implementation of the LCS between two sequences X and Y is by  
283 dynamic programming with a computation time proportional to the product of the lengths of the two  
284 sequences. The output is the longest sub-sequence with common triggers between the two sequences; the  
285 position of the common triggers may not be contiguous.

286 *Figure 3* illustrates two trigger sequences, based on real acquisitions, used as inputs to the LCS  
287 algorithm (a first sequence recorded by the reference device called the reference Trigger sequence, *RT*, and  
288 a second sequence recorded by a secondary device called the secondary Trigger sequence, *ST*), and a  
289 unique trigger sequence (*ALL*) as output of the LCS algorithm. Each trigger is identified by a name which  
290 is based on the value transmitted in 8 bits by the parallel port to the acquisition devices. The two input  
291 sequences were recorded during a short real acquisition session with only 32 triggers in the *RT* sequence.  
292 The algorithm, based only on the triggers’ position in the sequence, allowed us to obtain the longest  
293 subsequence of common triggers (*ALL*). The first and the last of these common triggers, which mark the  
294 beginning and the end of the synchronization procedure respectively, are of particular importance to the  
295 subsequent application of drift correction using *equation 1*. In the end, all the non-common (spurious)  
296 triggers were removed (green trigger in the *RT* flow and red triggers in the *ST* flow), and the output  
297 subsequence contained only the common triggers which were matched by the LCS algorithm, in which the  
298 first and last triggers of these subsequences were the “start trigger” (120) and the “end trigger” (96)  
299 respectively.

#	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
RT	100	120	201	110	10	11		161		90	94	110	10	11		165	90	95	110	10	11		166		90	95	110	10	11	164	90	96
ST		120	201	110	10	11	171	161	251	90	94	110	10	11	175	165	90	95	110	10	11	175	166	254	90	95	110	10	11	164	90	96
ALL		120	201	110	10	11		161		90	94	110	10	11		165	90	95	110	10	11		166		90	95	110	10	11	164	90	96

Figure 3. Illustration of the “Longest Common Subsequence” algorithm. *RT* is the reference sequence of triggers from the reference device. *ST* is a secondary sequence of triggers from a secondary device. *ALL* is the longest common subsequence of triggers obtained at the output of the algorithm. The trigger in green is the trigger “missed” by the secondary acquisition device, and triggers in red correspond to the spurious triggers introduced by the secondary acquisition device.

### Processing Pause/Resume mode

As already listed above, in some experimental situations pauses are needed during recording.

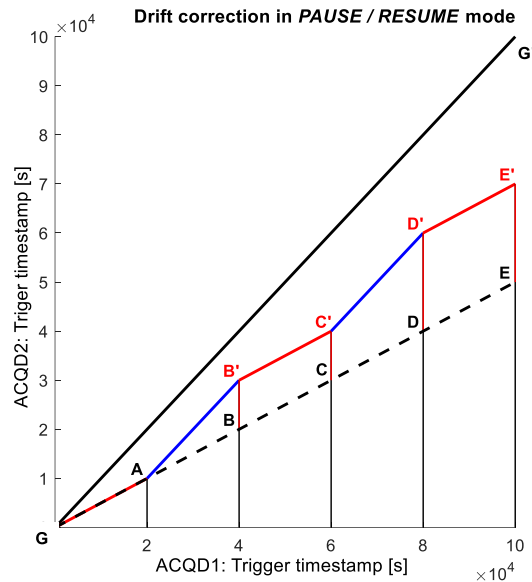
Acquisition phases are therefore separated by pauses which ensure that synchronization errors do not have a theoretical bound situated between  $[-R_T, R_T]$  (in practice, it is slightly more, so that round-off errors can be taken into account).

Most acquisition devices have a Pause/Resume function to allow acquisition to be turned off when the recording of the analog signals is not useful, significantly reducing the size of stored files, and consequently shortening data processing time. These pauses can either be scheduled between each part of the experiment to allow participants to rest, or when a technical problem occurs. However, this very useful function can also generate unwanted effects: for instance, if acquisition includes one or more pauses, clock drift will no longer be linear. Consequently, a unique linear regression to fit the alignment of trigger timestamps from beginning to end of acquisition is not efficient. Instead, a piecewise linear regression is required, and a *shift correction* is introduced, as will be explained below.

Figure 4 below represents a simulated acquisition, containing three acquisition phases (segments *GA*, *B'C'* and *D'E'*), separated by two pauses (segments *AB'* and *C'D'*). In this figure, the drift between the two clocks has been deliberately oversized for clarity. The ideal regression line for the time conversion between the two devices is the segment *GG'* (solid black plain line) with a slope equal to the nominal



325 unitary ratio ( $R_T = 1$ ) of the sampling rates. Assuming that the secondary device (ACQD2) is slightly  
 326 slower than the reference device (ACQD1), the segment  $GE$  (dotted black line) is situated below the ideal  
 327  $GG'$  segment with a unitary slope ( $R_T = 1$ ), and the gap between the slopes of these two segments  
 328 expresses the amount of clock drift between the two acquisition devices.



329

330 *Figure 4.* Clock drift correction when the Pause / Resume mode is used. Illustration of the theoretical  
 331 alignment of the trigger timestamps [s] in a simulation with three acquisition phases ( $GA$ ,  $B'C'$ ,  $D'E'$  in red)  
 332 and two pause phases ( $AB'$ ,  $C'D'$  in blue). The segment  $GG'$  corresponds to the ideal regression line, with  
 333  $F_1 = F_2$ , and the segment  $GE$  below illustrates the clock drift between the two devices when pauses are not  
 334 taken into consideration.

335

336 Our reconstruction procedure is based on two assumptions. Firstly, during the acquisition phases,  
 337 the timestamps of samples and triggers are linearly distributed following the slope of the segment  $GE$ .  
 338 Consequently, segments  $GA$ ,  $B'C'$  and  $D'E'$  representing the acquisition phases are parallel to the segment  
 339  $GE$ . Secondly, during the pause phases, only the duration of the pause and the nominal sampling rate ( $R_T$ )  
 340 of the acquisition devices are known. Because synchronization is carried out off-line, the duration of each  
 341 pause is easily estimated from the timestamp of the last sample before each pause and the timestamp of the  
 342 first sample after each pause. Consequently, segments  $AB'$  and  $C'D'$  representing the pause phases are

343 parallel to segment  $GG'$ . Thus, the principle of the supplementary mechanism of *shift* correction is as  
344 follows:

- 345 - The segments representing the acquisition phases after the first pause (i.e.,  $B'C'$  and  $D'E'$ ) should be  
346 translated vertically to match the global acquisition segment  $GE$ .
- 347 - If the secondary acquisition device is slower (as it is the case in the illustration), a number of  
348 samples corresponding to segments  $BB'$  and  $DD'$  should be subtracted to correct this effect  
349 (conversely a number of samples should be added if the secondary device is faster).

350

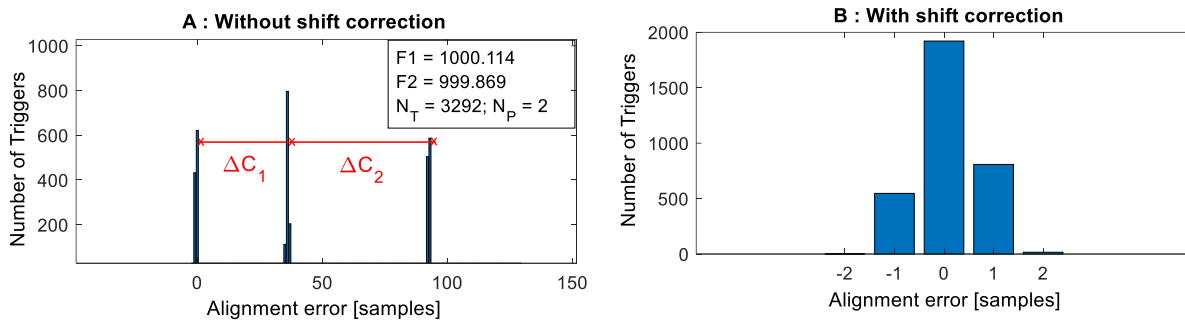
351 Consequently, the amount of shift correction (length of  $BB'$  and  $DD'$ ) does not depend on the pause  
352 position in the acquisition session but is only proportional to pause durations.

353

354 A one-hour acquisition was simulated, with three acquisition phases, separated by two pauses with  
355 position and duration randomly chosen (147 s and 230 s respectively). In this simulation, there were 3252  
356 common triggers with 1071, 1085 and 1096 triggers respectively for the first, second and third acquisition  
357 phases. The acquisition devices had the same nominal sampling rate (1 kHz,  $R_T = 1$ ) and were affected  
358 individually by a random clock drift of under 1‰ ( $F1 = 1000.114$  Hz for the first device and  $F2 =$   
359  $999.869$  Hz for the second one). By applying a unique alignment of the timestamps, the histogram of  
360 alignment errors ( $\epsilon_s$ ) was multimodal (*Figure 5A*) with three modes corresponding to the three acquisition  
361 phases. To compensate for the gaps after each pause, the 2nd and 3rd acquisition segments must be shifted  
362 by a certain number of samples, which have to be estimated by the shift correction procedure. In this  
363 example, the clock drift between the two devices was  $F1 - F2 = 1000.114 - 999.869 = 0.245$  Hz.  
364 This would theoretically provide a shift of  $0.245 \times 147 = 36.015$ , rounded down to 36 samples after the  
365 first pause (duration 147 s), and a shift of  $0.245 \times (147 + 230) = 92.365$  rounded down to 92 samples

366 after the second pause (duration 230 s). These results are supported by the fact that these shift values (36  
 367 samples and 92 samples) corresponded exactly to the shift between the modes' positions in the histogram in  
 368 *Figure 5A*:  $\Delta C_1 = 36$  samples and  $\Delta C_1 + \Delta C_2 = 92$  samples.

369



370

371 *Figure 5*. A. Histogram of alignment errors ( $\epsilon_s$ ) before shift correction. B. Histogram of alignment errors  
 372 ( $\epsilon_s$ ) after shift correction. Key:  $F1$  - ACQD1 sampling rate-;  $F2$  - ACQD2 sampling rate-;  $N_T$  - number of  
 373 triggers-;  $N_P$  - number of pauses-.

374

375 We will now describe in greater detail the implemented algorithm for the drift and shift corrections  
 376 linked together. The regression line for the first acquisition phase is represented by the segment  $GA$ . For the  
 377 subsequent acquisition phase, the value of the correction for the pause shift is found iteratively to vertically  
 378 shift the acquisition phase (segment  $B'C'$  for the second acquisition, and then segment  $D'E'$  for the third  
 379 acquisition phase) toward the real regression line. Two objective criteria stop this iterative process. The  
 380 first one is the value of the coefficient of determination  $R^2$  of the regression. It reaches its maximum when  
 381 the acquisition segments are aligned. The second criterion is derived from the shape of the distribution of  
 382 alignment errors. This means that the corresponding histogram should be as narrow as possible (not more  
 383 than  $2 \cdot R_T + 1$  bins), as symmetrical as possible, and centered on bin 0. The value of the correction is found  
 384 at the end of the iterations. This correction value shifts all the trigger indexes belonging to this second  
 385 segment of acquisition. This process is repeated for the third acquisition phase to estimate the second  
 386 correction value, and all the way through to the last acquisition phase. After shift correction, a last linear

387 regression is performed, and the slope of the final regression line corresponds to the average slope of  
388 segments  $GA$ ,  $B'C'$  and  $D'E'$ . Assessment of the procedure is carried out from the final coefficient of  
389 determination  $R^2$  and from the observed histogram of alignment errors.

390 The coefficient of determination  $R^2$  was very close to 1 and the estimated value of the shift  
391 correction after the first pause was 43 samples (exactly the expected value). After the second pause, the  
392 estimated value of the shift correction was 110 samples (the expected value was 109 samples). The  
393 positions of the triggers for the secondary device were then linearly aligned on the time positions given by  
394 the sampling of the reference device. This was confirmed by the histogram of alignment errors (*Figure 5B*),  
395 which was, at this point, mainly described by three bins (positions -1, 0, 1). The theoretical bounds were  
396  $[-R_T, R_T]$  given  $[-1, 1]$  for  $R_T = 1$ . We also observed non-null values in the extreme bins of the histogram  
397 (positions -2 and +2). These values were due to the unavoidable jitters of the sampling rates and to the  
398 round-off errors.

399  
400 In short, the proposed synchronization is composed of three steps: (i) the LCS algorithm, as  
401 described in the “*Processing missing and spurious triggers*” section, used to obtain the sequence of all  
402 common triggers detected by the acquisition devices, (ii) the clock drift correction with a piecewise linear  
403 regression for temporal alignment during each acquisition segment and the shift estimation for each pause  
404 phase, and finally (iii) a linear regression for complete temporal alignment after the application of shift  
405 corrections.

#### 406 **Validation on real data**

407 In order to verify the effectiveness of our synchronization procedure, we tested it on real data (see  
408 “Datasets” section below). The assessment of its quality is illustrated in the “Synchronization procedure

409 quality assessment” section, and the comparison with another available implementation (EYE-EEG  
410 toolbox) in the “Comparison with the EYE-EEG toolbox” section.

411

## 412 **Datasets**

413 Data came from three different experiments (Frey, Ionescu, Lemaire, Lopez-Orozco, Baccino & Guérin-  
414 Dugué, 2013; Devillez, Guyader & Guérin-Dugué, 2015; Van Humbeeck, Meghanathan, Wagemans,  
415 Leeuwen & Nikolaev, 2018). The first two datasets came from our own records, and the third was provided  
416 by another laboratory, in order to validate our method using an independent dataset.

417 All three experimental designs used an eye-tracker (ACQD1) and EEG system (ACQD2) with the  
418 same setups shown in Figure 1. The eye-tracker was the same in all experiments (Eyelink 1000; SR  
419 Research), with a 1000 Hz sampling rate for the first two, and 250 Hz for the third. EEG signals were  
420 sampled at 1000Hz in the first experiment (32-channel BrainAmp™ system, Brain Products GmbH), at  
421 1200 Hz in the second experiment (32-channel GAMMAsys gtec system, G.tec, Inc.), and at 250 Hz in the  
422 third (256-channel Electrical Geodesics System, Electrical Geodesics Inc., Eugene, OR). The eye-tracker  
423 was the reference device for the synchronization procedure, and the EEG system was the secondary device.

424 In Frey et al. (2013), nineteen participants took part in the experiment, with 180 trials per  
425 participant. For nine participants, the whole acquisition phase was carried out without using the  
426 Pause/Resume mode (one acquisition segment). For eight participants, the Pause/Resume mode was used  
427 once (providing two acquisition segments), and for two participants, there were two pauses (three  
428 acquisition segments). These three situations are synthesized in *Table 1* and labeled scenarios 1.1, 1.2 and  
429 1.3 respectively. The Devillez et al. (2015) experiment consisted of a visual search experiment, with thirty-  
430 nine participants and two conditions, and sixty trials per condition. Among the seventy-eight available  
431 datasets, forty-eight (labeled scenario 2 in Table 1) were randomly selected in order to have the same order

432 of magnitude of the total number of triggers recorded as with scenario 1 datasets. Finally, one dataset was  
 433 extracted from the third experiment (Van Humbeeck et al., 2018), in which twenty-three participants  
 434 carried out a contour integration task. This dataset appears in *Table 1*, and is entitled scenario 3. In  
 435 scenarios 2 and 3, the Pause/Resume mode was not used and there was only one acquisition segment per  
 436 recording.

437

Scenario	1.1	1.2	1.3	2	3
EEG system	BrainAmp	BrainAmp	BrainAmp	GTec	EGI
EEG sampling rate [Hz]	1000	1000	1000	1200	250
ET sampling rate [Hz]	1000	1000	1000	1000	250
# Datasets	9	8	2	48	1
# Segments (# Pauses)	1(0)	2(1)	3(2)	1(0)	1(0)
# Common triggers	11235	9916	2413	26578	482
# Missing triggers	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	968 (66.8%)
# Spurious triggers	2678 (19.2%)	2359 (19.2%)	622 (20.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

438 *Table 1.* Dataset description. Keys: The five different datasets are labeled scenarios 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2 and 3.  
 439 Each is described with the type of EEG system, the EEG sampling rate, the eye-tracker (ET) sampling rate,  
 440 the number of datasets, the number of acquisition segments, the number of pauses, the cumulative number  
 441 of the common triggers for all datasets, of the missing triggers and of the spurious triggers detected in the  
 442 EEG data flow. The percentages in parentheses were computed in relation to the total number of triggers.  
 443

444 These datasets enabled us to assess the quality of the proposed synchronization procedure in various  
 445 situations for  $R_T = 1$  (scenarios 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 3) and  $R_T = 1000/1200$  (scenario 2), including the  
 446 problem of spurious triggers (scenarios 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3), the problem of missing triggers (scenario 3) and  
 447 the use of the Pause/Resume mode (scenarios 1.2 and 1.3). A dataset illustrating each of these scenarios is

448 available (Zenodo repository: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5554071>). The datasets were synchronized  
449 using our software, named “GazeEEGSynchro”, which implements our synchronization proposal and  
450 which is also available in the Zenodo repository. A tutorial showing how to use the “GazeEEGSynchro”  
451 software is provided in the “Supplementary Material”. After synchronization, data from the EEG and eye-  
452 tracker recordings were grouped together, and as such became the synchronized data. The synchronized  
453 data came from the EEG channels, the vertical and horizontal eye positions, and a “blink” logic signal  
454 identifying the onset and the offset of each blink. When the data from the eye tracker were added to the  
455 EEG channels from EEG recording, there were, therefore, either three extra channels when recording of  
456 ocular data was in monocular mode, and five extra channels when recording of ocular data was in binocular  
457 mode.

458

### 459 **Synchronization procedure quality assessment**

460 In the following sections, we evaluate the quality of our synchronization procedure in two ways.  
461 The first section, "Trigger alignment", is based on the distribution of the alignment errors. The second  
462 section, "Blink alignment", is based on blinks, which are easily detected on the eye-tracker, and on EEG  
463 signals. This was done to estimate the time delay between blink onsets from the two modalities, throughout  
464 the experiment, with and without clock drift correction. Two implementations were performed, one on all  
465 scenario 1 datasets, and the other on all scenario 2 datasets. In the latter case, an additional step of  
466 resampling the synchronized data was required, as the two devices did not initially have the same sampling  
467 rate.

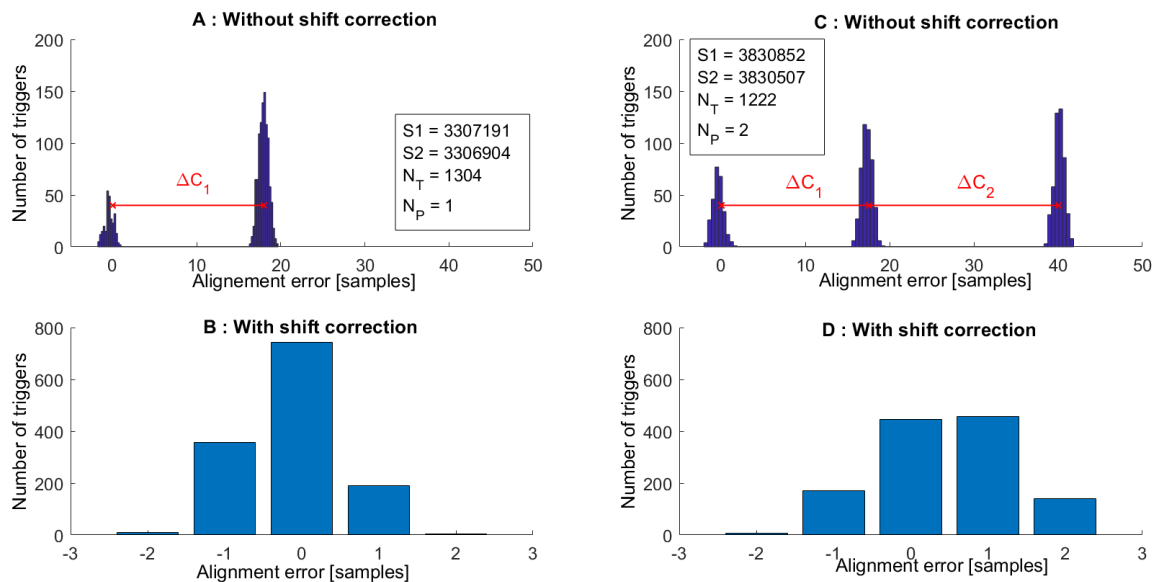
#### 468 **Trigger alignment**

469 In this section we present the distribution of the alignment errors on the trigger timestamps after clock  
470 drift correction from acquisitions using the Pause/Resume mode (scenarios 1.2 and 1.3). To do so, we selected

471 two random datasets, the first from scenario 1.2 with one pause (two acquisition segments), and the second  
 472 from scenario 1.3 with two pauses (three acquisition segments). The synchronization was applied separately  
 473 to the two datasets. We expected to observe multimodal distributions of the alignment errors when clock drift  
 474 correction was applied overall, on the complete acquisition, and monomodal distributions when the shift  
 475 correction was incorporated into the clock drift correction.

476 *Figure 6A* presents the observed histograms of alignment errors for the first dataset, without shift  
 477 correction, i.e. when the clock drift correction was applied once on the complete acquisition. The number  
 478 of alignment errors in this histogram represents the number of common triggers after application of the  
 479 LCS algorithm. There were 1304 common triggers distributed over two acquisition phases, respectively  
 480 271 for the first phase, and 1033 for the second. As explained previously (“*Processing Pause/Resume*  
 481 *mode*” section), this histogram is composed of two modes corresponding to the two acquisition phases  
 482 separated by one pause phase. *Figure 6B* presents the observed histogram of alignment errors, with a shift  
 483 correction included into the clock drift correction.

484



485



486 *Figure 6.* Alignment errors on real data from acquisitions using the Pause/Resume mode, (left plots  
487 scenario 1.2; right plots scenario 1.3). A. Histogram of alignment errors ( $\epsilon_s$ ) without shift correction (one  
488 pause, two acquisition phases). B. Histogram of alignment errors ( $\epsilon_s$ ) with shift correction (one pause). C.  
489 Histogram of alignment errors ( $\epsilon_s$ ) without shift correction (two pauses, three acquisition phases). D.  
490 Histogram of alignment errors ( $\epsilon_s$ ) with shift correction (two pauses). Key: S1 - number of eye-tracker  
491 samples-; S2 - number of EEG samples-; N<sub>T</sub> - number of common triggers-; N<sub>P</sub> - number of pauses-.  
492

493 Similarly, for the second dataset, the graph presented in *Figure 6C* illustrates the observed  
494 histogram of alignment errors after clock drift correction but without shift correction. For this dataset, there  
495 were 1222 common triggers distributed as follows: 273 triggers during the first acquisition phase, 469  
496 during the second one and 480 during the third one. This histogram is composed of three modes, one for  
497 each acquisition phase. See *Figure A1* in the Appendix for the joint representation of the trigger timestamps  
498 in both modalities showing the three acquisition phases and the time shifts between them. *Figure 6D*  
499 presents the observed histogram of alignment errors with a shift correction included into the clock drift  
500 correction. The shift value for each pause was estimated by the shift correction procedure as explained in  
501 the “*Processing Pause/Resume mode*” section. For the first dataset with one pause, the estimated applied  
502 shift was equal to 17 samples. As *Figure 6A* shows, this value corresponds to the shift  $\Delta C_1$  between the two  
503 modes. For the second dataset, with two pauses, the estimated applied shift for the second acquisition  
504 segment was equal to 17 samples, and for the third acquisition segment, a last estimated shift was equal to  
505 22. As *Figure 6C* shows, these two values were in line with the shifts observed between the histogram  
506 modes ( $\Delta C_1, \Delta C_2$ ). Finally, after clock drift correction with shift correction, the  $R^2$  coefficient was very  
507 close to one 1 for the final linear regression. This meant that the trigger positions of the reference and  
508 secondary devices were very well aligned in each synchronized dataset. This was confirmed by the  
509 histogram of alignment errors after clock drift correction and with shift correction (*Figure 6B, Figure 6D*),  
510 where the non-null values of the extreme bins of the histogram (position  $\pm 2$ ) were due to the unavoidable  
511 jitters of the sampling periods and to errors due to rounding.

**Blink alignment**

In order to assess the overall quality of our procedure throughout the entire experiment, we analyzed the temporal delay between common events which were almost simultaneous and easily detectable in both modalities. Using the notation presented in the “Principle of trigger-based synchronization” section,  $t(s_1^{(i)})$  and  $t(s_2^{(i)})$  represent the onset of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  event extracted from the dataset of the first acquisition device (the reference device), and from the dataset of the second acquisition device, respectively. The difference  $t(s_1^{(i)}) - t(s_2^{(i)})$  is the temporal delay for the onset of the same event  $i^{\text{th}}$  in both acquisitions. After synchronization,  $t(s_{21}^{(i)})$  represents the onset of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  event extracted from data recorded by the second acquisition device in the synchronized dataset using the first device as reference. After synchronization  $t(s_1^{(i)})$  becomes the reference time for the onset of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  event. The difference  $t(s_1^{(i)}) - t(s_{21}^{(i)})$  represents the temporal delay for the onset of the same  $i^{\text{th}}$  event in the synchronized dataset. The former difference is denoted by  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(i)})$ , which corresponds to the delay without clock drift correction represented by  $\Delta t_{YES}(s^{(i)})$ , which corresponds to the delay with clock drift correction. Without clock drift correction, the delay  $|\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(i)})|$  in absolute value should increase along acquisition as the accumulated amount of clock drift. However, since the event is assumed to be almost simultaneous in both modalities, when clock drift correction is applied, the delay  $\Delta t_{YES}(s^{(i)})$  should be relatively small, and in the same order of magnitude as alignment errors.

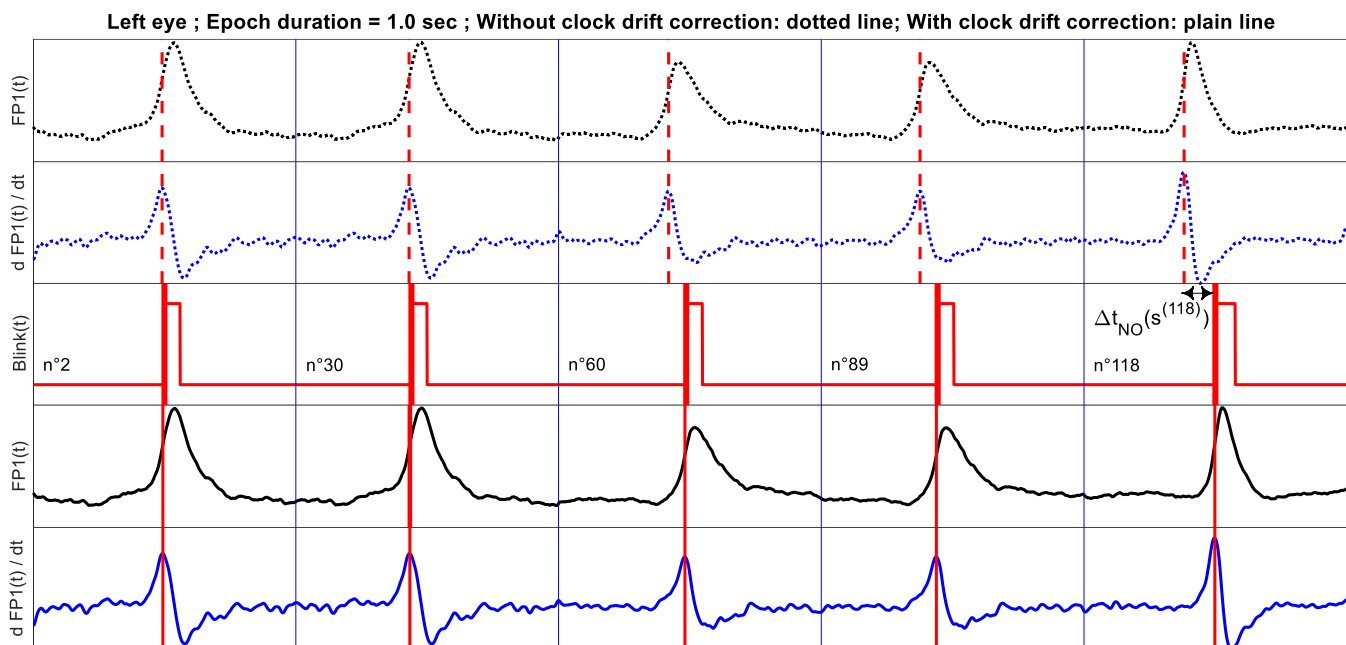
Eye blinks were the ideal candidate for this “almost simultaneous and easily detectable common events” in both modalities. Blinks are generally involuntary acts of shutting and opening the eyelids, and this interrupts the saccade-fixation series. Both blinks and saccades can mask brain activity, because they elicit larger electric potentials than baseline signals (Picton et al., 2000). For our purposes, we used the

534 blinks detected by the eye-tracker as a reference, and those estimated from the EEG signals, throughout the  
535 experiment. The time delays between the blink onset in each modality, with and without clock drift  
536 correction ( $\Delta t_{YES}(\cdot)$ ,  $\Delta t_{NO}(\cdot)$ ) were computed. For all datasets from scenarios 1 and 2, and without clock  
537 drift correction, the two trigger flows were only aligned on the same first common trigger to set the same  
538 timestamp (0) for the beginning of recording in both modalities. After that, the synchronization with the  
539 complete clock drift correction was applied from the first common trigger up to the last common trigger.  
540 This synchronization included a resampling step at 1000 Hz for EEG signals from scenario 2 (initial EEG  
541 sampling rate at 1200 Hz, see *Table 1*) in order to obtain the same sampling rate as the reference device  
542 (eye-tracker at 1000 Hz). Resampling was not performed on datasets from scenario 1 because the two  
543 devices had the same sampling rate of 1000 Hz (see *Table 1*). The scenario 3 was not used for this  
544 assessment because there was only one dataset and the configuration with the same sampling rate was  
545 already considered with scenario 1 datasets.

546 The logic Blink signal (True during blink, False otherwise) was used to time-lock the EEG signal on  
547 the FP1 channel which was epoched within a temporal window of  $[-0.5; 0.5]$  seconds on each side of the  
548 blink onset. The number of epochs was therefore equal to the number of blinks. Blink duration was  
549 estimated from the duration of the logic Blink signal, and only epochs with blinks lasting between 100 and  
550 400 ms were retained for analysis: 2507 epochs from scenario 1 and 4919 from scenario 2, which on  
551 average corresponded, respectively to 132 and 102 epochs per participant. On the EEG signal, blinks were  
552 detected on the FP1 channel (Jung, Makeig, Westerfield, Townsend, Courchesne & Sejnowski, 2000), and  
553 were related to the local maximum value of the first derivative, computed with a Canny-Deriche Filter  
554 (Deriche, 1990). The parameter  $\alpha$  of the filter was calculated so that:  $\alpha \cdot \sigma = 2.5/\sqrt{\pi}$  where  $\sigma$  is the width  
555 of the Gaussian filter. To ensure accurate detection, the following values were empirically set:  $\sigma = 10$  and  
556  $\alpha = 0.14$ .

557 *Figure 7* illustrates five epochs (index 2, 30, 60, 89, 118) distributed across the experiment (towards  
 558 the beginning for the first epochs, and towards the end for the last epochs), for a given participant. The first  
 559 two dotted lines represent the FP1 signal and its derivative without clock drift correction. The Blink signal  
 560 is represented on the third line. The fourth and the fifth plain lines represent the same FP1 signal and its  
 561 derivative after clock drift correction.

562



563

564 *Figure 7*. Illustration of the clock drift correction observed on eye blink events. The vertical blue lines  
 565 delimit the end of each epoch. Selected channel: FP1 from EEG data and left eye blink from eye-tracker  
 566 data. Upper two signals: channel FP1 and its first derivative without clock drift correction. Middle signal:  
 567 logic Blink signal. Lower two signals: channel FP1 and its first derivative after clock drift correction. The  
 568 vertical dashed red markers indicate blink detection on the EEG signal ( $FP1(t)$ ) from the first derivative  
 569  $d FP1(t)/dt$  on the dotted line without clock drift correction. For epoch number 118 (i.e. the 188<sup>th</sup> blink),  
 570  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(118)})$  is the delay for the 188<sup>th</sup> blink onset between both modalities without clock drift correction.  
 571 The vertical plain red markers indicate blink detection on the EEG signal ( $FP1(t)$ ) from the first derivative  
 572  $d FP1(t)/dt$  in plain line with clock drift correction.

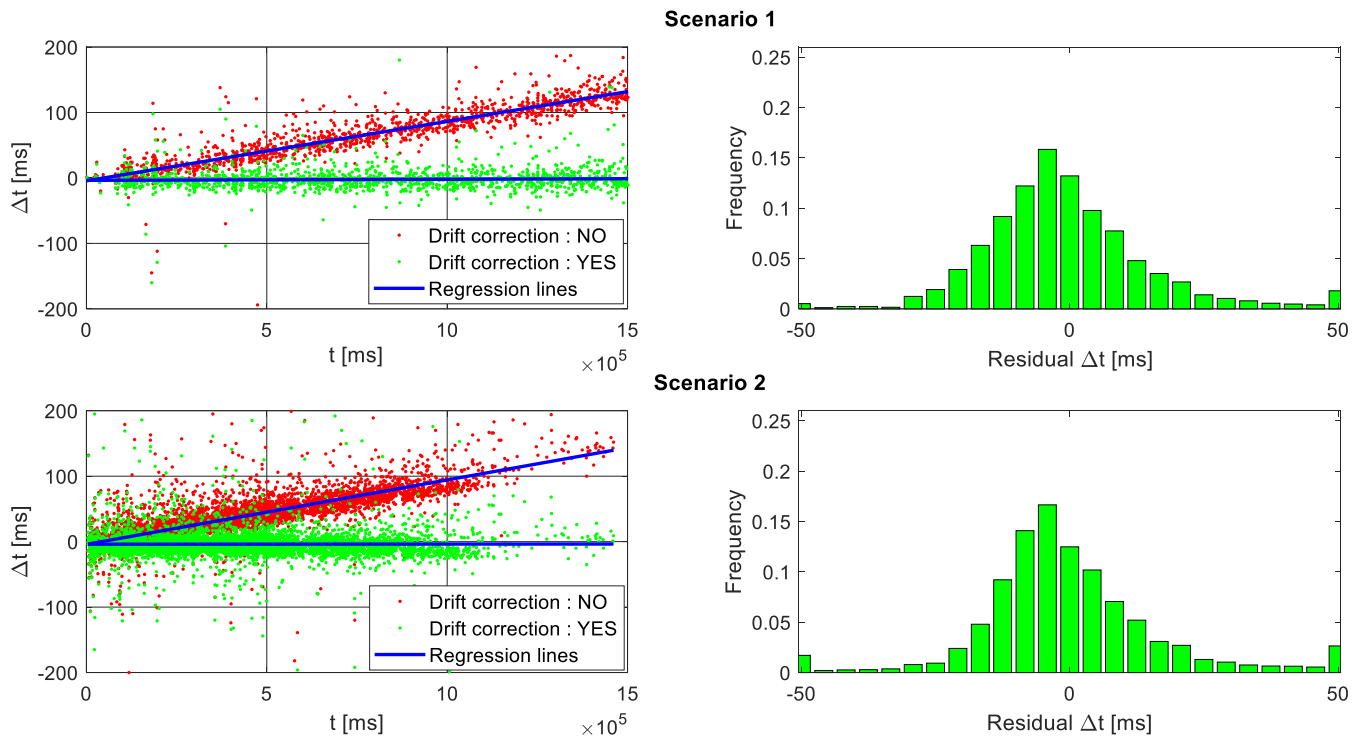
573

574 In *Figure 7*, in the absence of correction, clock drift is clearly visible from the increasing length of  
 575 delay between the blinks detected by the eye-tracker (vertical plain red line third on the Blink signal) and

576 the blinks detected on the EEG signal (the vertical dashed red line indicates the maximum value of the first  
 577 derivative on the dotted line). These delays are represented by  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(2)})$ ,  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(30)})$ ,  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(60)})$ ,  
 578  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(89)})$ ,  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(118)})$ <sup>5</sup> and qualitatively  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(2)}) < \Delta t_{NO}(s^{(30)}) < \Delta t_{NO}(s^{(60)}) < \Delta t_{NO}(s^{(89)}) <$   
 579  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(118)})$ . However, when clock drift correction is applied, these delays (i.e., delay between the vertical  
 580 plain red lines on the Blink signal, and the vertical plain red line indicating the maximum value of the first  
 581 derivative in plain line) are so short that they are not visible in *Figure 7*.

582 In order to quantify these delays in scenarios 1 and 2, without and with clock drift correction, we  
 583 computed the delays  $\Delta t_{NO}(s^{(i)})$  and  $\Delta t_{YES}(s^{(i)})$  for all epochs. In this way, each blink was characterized by  
 584 three features (all in ms): (1) its absolute timestamp in the experiment, i.e. its onset given by the eye-tracker  
 585  $t(s_1^{(i)})$  as the reference, (2) the corresponding delay  $\Delta_{NO}(s^{(i)})$  without clock drift correction, and (3) the  
 586 corresponding delay  $\Delta_{YES}(s^{(i)})$  with clock drift correction. *Figure 8* left shows the joint distributions of  
 587  $\Delta_{NO}$  vs  $t$  (red dots) and  $\Delta_{YES}$  vs  $t$  (green dots) for data from scenario 1 (Top) and for data from scenario 2  
 588 (Bottom).

<sup>5</sup> Because this delay is quite long, it is visible in *Figure 7*.



589

590 *Figure 8.* Statistical analysis of blink detection delay. Left: joint representation of the eye blinks collected  
 591 from scenario 1 (Top) and from scenario 2 (Bottom). The red dots represent the  $\Delta_{NO}$  data (without drift  
 592 correction) while the green dots represent the  $\Delta_{YES}$  data (with the drift correction procedure). Time on the  
 593 horizontal axis is expressed in milliseconds. Right: Histogram of the residual errors between  $\Delta_{YES}$  and the  
 594 values predicted by the linear regression, from scenario 1 (Top) and from scenario 2 (Bottom). The extreme  
 595 bins of the histograms correspond to “less than -50 ms” and “more than 50 ms”.  
 596

597 As expected, and plotted separately for the two scenarios on *Figure 8* left, a linear regression model  
 598 attempts to fit the linear relationship between the  $\Delta_{NO}$  or  $\Delta_{YES}$  delays as a function of the absolute  
 599 timestamp  $t$  of the blink onset. The two regression lines are represented in blue on *Figure 8* left, and their  
 600 slope ( $a$ ) and intercept ( $b$ ) are given in Table 2. *Figure 8* right shows the histograms of residual errors, i.e.,  
 601 the differences between the observed values of delay  $\Delta_{YES}$  and the values predicted by the linear regression  
 602 line. The mean and standard deviation (in brackets) of these distributions were -1.34 (39.83) ms for the first  
 603 scenario, and -3.83 (35.07) ms for the second one.

604

	Epoch number	$\Delta_{NO}$	$\Delta_{YES}$
		Without clock drift correction	With clock drift correction
Scenario 1	23564	$a = 8.8901 \cdot 10^{-5}$ $b = 0.1291$ ms	$a = 3.3520 \cdot 10^{-7}$ $b = 0.2268$ ms
Scenario 2	26578	$a = 9.5372 \cdot 10^{-5}$ $b = 0.8523$ ms	$a = -2.2652 \cdot 10^{-6}$ $b = 0.7970$ ms

605 Table 2. Slope ( $a$ ) and intercept ( $b$ ) of the linear regression between the dependent variable ( $\Delta_{NO}$  or  
606  $\Delta_{YES}$ ) and the independent variable  $t$  representing the blink onset given by the eye-tracker.  
607

608 We observed similar values for the slopes ( $a$ ) in scenarios 1 and 2, whereas the synchronization for  
609 the latter included a supplementary resampling step at 1000 Hz for EEG signals. More importantly, we  
610 observed a decrease of two orders of magnitude between the slopes ( $a$ ) without and with drift correction.  
611 Interpretation of slope  $a$  seems straightforward. In both scenarios, for example, the two slopes were  
612  $8.8901 \cdot 10^{-5}$  and  $9.5372 \cdot 10^{-5}$  ie. about  $10 \cdot 10^{-5}$ , when clock drift was not corrected. With such a value,  
613 and for an acquisition time of  $15 \cdot 10^5$  ms, the synchronization delay is about 150 ms (*Figure 7*). Thus, for  
614 a one-hour experiment ( $36 \cdot 10^5$  ms), the progressive desynchronization time between the two data flows  
615 would come to 360 ms at the end of the experiment. This shift value is clearly not negligible, and in the  
616 context of our EFRP data, could lead to overlapping and/or misinterpretation of the resulting EEG  
617 components. After synchronization, a slope of around  $10^{-6}$  can be expected. Consequently in a one-hour  
618 experiment, progressive residual desynchronization would be reduced by 100 (around 3.6 ms), which  
619 corresponds to a negligible number of samples.

620

621 **Comparison with the EYE-EEG toolbox**

622 We applied our method implemented in GazeEEGSynchro software, and the synchronization  
623 method implemented in the EYE-EEG environment (Dimigen et al., 2011), to datasets from scenarios 2 and  
624 3 in order to compare their respective main functionalities, overall quality and time processing capacities.  
625 Indeed, the scenario 2 had the largest number of datasets.

626

627 **Input/Output information**

628 Both procedures require the eye-tracker and the EEG files as inputs. However, for the EYE-EEG  
629 method, the names of the two common synchronization triggers have to be entered, one indicating the  
630 beginning of acquisition, and the other the end. These inputs are not necessary with our solution because of  
631 the alignment of triggers provided by the LCS algorithm (cf. “*Processing missing and spurious triggers*”  
632 section).

633 Regarding output, the interface can be used to select which ocular channel needs to be added with  
634 the EYE-EEG method. With our implementation, all ocular channels are added, and after synchronization,  
635 users can remove unnecessary channels as required.

636 In the EYE-EEG method, the reference device is always the EEG device. This means that  
637 synchronized data and triggers are sampled at the same frequency as the EEG device. As a result, only the  
638 ocular channels are interpolated on the EEG sampling timestamps. With our implementation, users can  
639 choose the reference device.

640

641 **Common triggers: selection and regression**

642 In our method, common triggers are automatically detected by the LCS algorithm. The start and end  
643 triggers are directly identified as the first and last common triggers, respectively. Only data from EEG and



644 eye-tracker recordings between these two timestamps are synchronized, either on the EEG timeline or on  
 645 the eye-tracker timeline, depending the user's choice of reference device.

646 In the EYE-EEG method, users have to provide the start and end triggers. Common triggers are then  
 647 searched for between these two triggers, and are determined in two steps. The first step is the intersection  
 648 of the trigger lists in each modality. Spurious triggers and missing triggers are therefore naturally excluded  
 649 from this common list. The second step consists of finding which of these triggers can be matched in both  
 650 modalities according to their timestamps. The eye-tracker timestamps of the start and end triggers are  
 651 arranged linearly to match with the corresponding triggers in the EEG timeline. After this linear  
 652 transformation from the eye-tracker timestamps to EEG timestamps, the matching of each common trigger  
 653 is performed if the gap between the original timestamp on the EEG timeline and the transformed timestamp  
 654 is smaller than a given tolerance (four samples, default value of this parameter). One single linear  
 655 regression is performed on the timestamps of each common trigger in order to globally optimize the  
 656 timestamps of the common triggers and to find the linear relationship between the EEG timeline and the  
 657 eye-tracker timeline.

658 We have shown that a piecewise linear regression needs to be carried out for acquisition in  
 659 Pause/Resume mode, and this functionality is not implemented in the EYE-EEG toolbox. Consequently,  
 660 synchronization of a scenario 1.3 dataset containing two pauses (*Table 1, Figure 6 C D*) was not successful  
 661 with the Eye-EEG method (*Figure A2* in the Appendix).

662 Finally, *Table 3* summarizes the main differences between both methods according to their  
 663 functionalities.

	Proposed synchronization method	EYE-EEG
Implementation	DOS application written in C++	Matlab® functions integrated into EEGLab

Eye-tracker	SR Research	SR Research, SMI, Tobii, Tobii Pro
EEG	Converted to BrainVision format <sup>6</sup>	EEG format supported by EEGLAB
Reference device	Eye-tracker or EEG	EEG
Ocular channels	All	Selected by user
Trigger identification:		
begin / end recording	Automatic	Selected by user
Recording with Pause/Resume mode	Yes	No
Evaluation from alignment errors		
- Alignment errors for all common triggers	In text format (log file)	Not directly provided, but can be computed from available variables
- Global histogram	In text format (log file)	
- Specific histogram for each trigger type	In text format (log file)	In stored variables and in graphic Not provided
- Overview of event latencies in output datasets	Not provided	Graphic
- Regression between event latencies	Coefficient of determination	Graphic and coefficient of determination
- Trigger and event counting	Provided	Provided
Evaluation from cross-correlation	Must be implemented by user in their preferred environment	In stored variables and in graphic

664 *Table 3.* Comparison of the main functionalities of both methods.  
665

666 <sup>6</sup> Use converter functions provided by different environments (EEGLAB, BrainStorm, MNE-Python, etc.)

667 **Overall quality**

668 The quality assessment was performed on the scenario 3 dataset for illustration, and on scenario 2  
669 datasets to provide statistical comparisons.

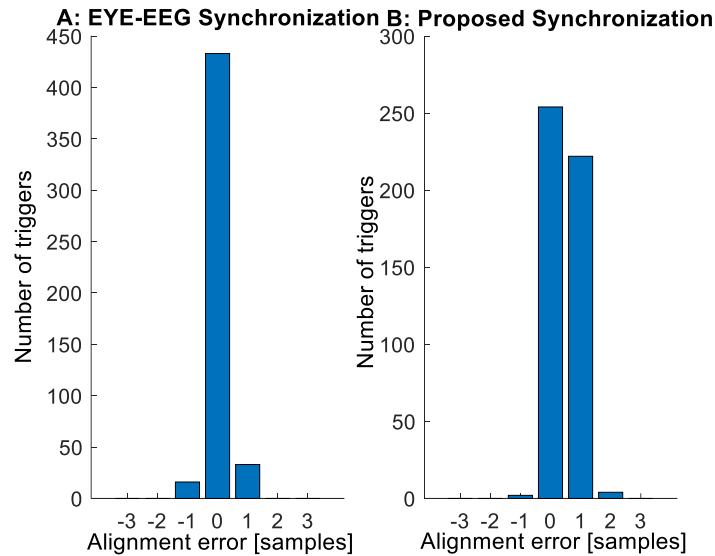
670 Each type of synchronization software provided a histogram of alignment errors after  
671 synchronization, expressed in number of samples. Each histogram (*Figure 9*) was computed on 11 bins,  
672 from -5 samples up to 5 samples. For each histogram, the following statistical features were computed:

- 673 - Position: mean (best when close to zero),
- 674 - Spread: standard deviation (best when close to zero),
- 675 - Flatness: Kurtosis coefficient (best when high),
- 676 - Asymmetry: Skewness coefficient (best when close to zero).

677

678 The EYE-EEG method provided better alignment errors for the scenario 3 dataset than our proposed  
679 method, according to the statistical features computed on the distribution of alignment errors. The  
680 corresponding histograms are illustrated in *Figure 9*: “position” closest to zero (0.035 vs 0.475), better  
681 “spread” (0.317 vs 0.449), better “flatness” (9.663 vs 4.436) and better “asymmetry” (0.111 vs 1.058).

682



683

684 *Figure 9.* Histogram of alignment errors after synchronization for the scenario 3 dataset, for (A) the EYE-  
 685 EEG synchronization and (B) the proposed synchronization. The counts for bins -5, -4, 4 and 5 were zero  
 686 and were not represented.  
 687

688

Dimigen et al. (2011) first introduced cross-correlation to assess the quality of ocular artefact

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reduction in EEG signals, and of synchronization. For this later, the cross-correlation was computed

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between the horizontal position of the eye, and the difference between the amplitudes recorded on the right

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and left electro-oculogram (horizontal EOG) channels. Segments featuring blinks and signals that were too

692

noisy were removed beforehand. The cross-correlation was computed with the “xcorr” function provided

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by the “Signal Processing” toolbox in Matlab®.

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*Figure 10* A B illustrates the two signals obtained from a randomly-selected trial, and *Figure 10* C

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D shows the cross-correlation result. The position of the maximum value of the cross correlation must be

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close to zero, and lag is defined by the time position of this maximum value. A positive lag means that the

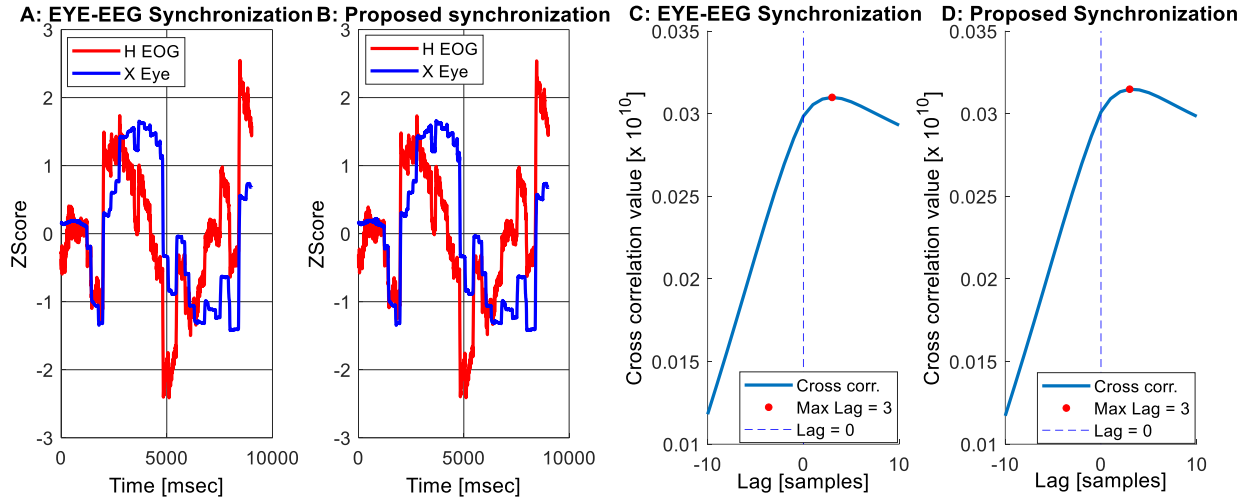
697

transition of the horizontal eye position occurs later than the transition in the EOG signals. For this dataset,

698

the cross-correlation reached its maximal value for the same lag length (3 samples) in both methods.

699



700

701 *Figure 10:* For the scenario 3 dataset, (A, B) evolution of the horizontal eye position and the horizontal  
 702 EOG (H EOG) signals obtained from a randomly-selected trial, after centering and reduction (ZScore) to  
 703 enable superposition on the same scale, (C, D) cross correlation between these two signals, for (A, C) the  
 704 EYE-EEG synchronization and (B, D) the proposed synchronization  
 705

706 All these features based on alignment errors and cross-correlation were computed on scenario 2 datasets for  
 707 each method of synchronization. *Table 4* shows the statistical summary for each feature and each  
 708 implementation.  
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	Proposed synchronization method	EYE-EEG	Student test
Mean [samples]	-0.015 (0.062)	-0.020 (0.036)	$t(47) = 0.030, p = 0.977$
Standard dev. [samples]	0.551 (0.007)	0.699 (0.005)	$t(47) = -4.220, \mathbf{p < 0.001}^{***}$
Kurtosis	2.604 (0.024)	2.695 (0.030)	$t(47) = 13.619, \mathbf{p < 0.001}^{***}$
Skewness	0.110 (0.116)	-0.064 (0.050)	$t(47) = 1.393, p = 0.170$
Cross corr. lag [samples]	-0.875 (0.151)	-1.313 (0.196)	$t(47) = 2.445, \mathbf{p = 0.018}^*$

710 *Table 4.* Statistical summary. Keys: average (standard error) of the quality features for both  
 711 implementations (column 2, 3); results of the Student tests (column 4), for four statistical moments (Mean,  
 712 Standard deviation, Kurtosis and Skewness) and the cross-correlation lag. \* $p < 0.5$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , bold:  
 713 significant effect.

714 Results for the spread feature (std) and the cross-correlation lag<sup>7</sup> were significantly better with our  
 715 synchronization method, whereas the flatness (Kurtosis) was significantly better with the EYE-EEG  
 716 synchronization method.

### 718 **Processing time**

719 On average, our implementation ran 7.5 times faster than the EYE-EEG synchronization for  
 720 scenario 2 datasets, on the same computer. This result is mainly due to the fact that programming languages  
 721 are different in both implementations (C++ for ours and Matlab® for EYE-EEG). More interestingly, *Table*  
 722 *5* shows the percentage of time spent on data loading compared to synchronization computation. In our  
 723 implementation, most of the time was devoted to data loading and implementation of the synchronization  
 724 algorithm was optimized, making it extremely fast.

725

	Eye tracking data [%]	EEG data [%]	Synchronization [%]
Proposed			
synchronization method	55.2	44.5	0.3
EYE-EEG	79.2	14.1	6.7

726 *Table 5.* Comparison of the percentage of time spent on data loading (eye-tracker data and EEG data) and  
 727 on synchronization.

728

<sup>7</sup> EOG signals were not recorded for scenario 2 datasets. For cross-correlation estimation, EEG channels closest to the external canthus of the right/left eye were therefore chosen: F8 (right) and F7 (left) channels.

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### Conclusion

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In this article, we present an original method of data synchronization, generated by acquisition devices working independently. The core of the method rests on a classical synchronization paradigm using external triggers. However, we have shown that this paradigm alone does not provide a sufficiently robust synchronization when dealing with a wide range of problematic situations. We therefore proposed a complete procedure, which we tested and compared with the open source EYE-EEG toolbox on simulated data and on real data from co-registrations of eye movements and EEG.

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Our procedure specifically aimed to compensate in situations with missing/spurious triggers in the different data flows, and for use of the Pause/Resume mode by the experimenter during acquisition. Common triggers marking the beginning and the end of acquisition must be accurately detected. If synchronization is based only on the detection of these two common triggers, results can be inconsistent when these triggers are missing, for example, if the experimenter starts the acquisition of the secondary device too late or stops it too early. In such situations, the EYE-EEG toolbox requires a manual search in raw files in order to choose other common triggers. Our procedure has the advantage of automatically rectifying errors generated by the experimenter. In addition, if electronic circuits are relied on to sample trigger signals, spurious triggers corresponding to transient states on one sampling period can appear and render the matching process ambiguous. For this reason, we proposed the use of the LCS algorithm for the matching of trigger sequences. We showed that this flexible matching algorithm is a very useful first step before clock drift correction.

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Moreover, as we have pointed out, there is a growing interest in co-registration experiments using complementary experimental modalities. However, these experiments are often fairly long, and may require pauses, which can either be pre-planned to allow participants to rest for example, or unplanned, when

752 technical problems occur on one or other of the recording devices. In both cases, the use of the  
753 "Pause/Resume" mode makes it possible to limit the size of the recorded files, and to facilitate subsequent  
754 processing on samples/files that contain only informative data. It is therefore important to have a  
755 synchronization procedure which takes these pauses into consideration and manages them correctly. To this  
756 end, we implemented a piecewise linear regression between the common triggers expressed in number of  
757 samples in each data flow. Drift correction was not, therefore, carried out across all trigger sequences and  
758 was instead done locally on each acquisition phase between the successive pauses. Shift values were  
759 automatically calculated by the algorithm to compensate for pauses. By executing our procedure on real  
760 data corresponding to an acquisition of around one hour, we observed very few samples of residual drift.

761 After synchronization, quality can be assessed from the distribution of alignment errors, and from  
762 cross-correlation between horizontal EOG and eye position. The spread of the distribution of alignment  
763 errors is on average larger when synchronization is carried out with the EYE-EEG toolbox. However, this  
764 distribution spread which is larger than in our method, is compensated for, on average, by a better shape  
765 with a sharper distribution with EYE-EEG synchronization. For the cross-correlation, the lags between  
766 horizontal EOG and eye positions, are on average longer when synchronization is carried out using the  
767 EYE-EEG toolbox. It should be noted that even if the differences between the lags are significant for both  
768 methods, they remain small with EYE-EEG synchronization (around one sample on average). However, it  
769 is still essential to have the lowest possible number of errors and a small lag in order to limit any potential  
770 bias when interpreting the results, especially in experiments using methods aimed at obtaining high-quality  
771 temporal resolution. Based on these qualitative criteria, the two synchronization methods are of similar  
772 overall quality, ideally when no pauses occur. The EYE-EEG method relies on only one regression,  
773 whereas many regressions can be implemented in our method (i.e., the number of regressions is equal to the



774 number of recordings separated by pauses). This limits the use of the EYE-EEG method to experiments  
775 without pauses.

776 Finally in keeping with current trends, and with the demands of science, the proposed  
777 synchronization algorithm was implemented in C++ language. Consequently, it has a very rapid execution  
778 time (about 15 s for one hour of acquisition). The resulting software in the form of a DOS application has  
779 been extensively and successfully tested in a number of situations. The software provided is easy to handle  
780 -a tutorial with instructions for users is provided in the “Supplementary Material”- and it does not require  
781 any graphical environment. Moreover, it can be easily extended by developing in front-end, data  
782 conversion functions which enables it to deal with the increasingly large number of manufacturers.

783 The development of robust procedures of synchronization is very important, because joint analysis  
784 of multimodal datasets aims to combine the complementary aspects of each modality in such a way that  
785 there is an added benefit compared to analyzing and interpreting each dataset separately. In addition, and in  
786 view of the growing number of EFRP experiments, this could create substantial added value for  
787 neuroscience applications. Multimodal data integration could lead to a more comprehensive view of brain  
788 processes and structures (Uludağ & Roebroek, 2014), and the next step could be to develop an online  
789 solution with the same qualities of flexibility and robustness in the near future.

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### **Acknowledgments**

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With a great deal of emotion, we dedicate this article to Gelu Ionescu, research engineer at the GIPSA-Lab, who was at the origin and the development of the vast majority of this work, and who died in a climbing accident a few days after his retirement. May this manuscript be a reflection of our eternal gratitude for his investment in his daily work and his kindness.

801

### **Funding**

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### **Open Practices Statement**

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The executable program and code as well as datasets (coming from eye-tracker and EEG acquisition devices, according to the examples explained in this article) are available in the Zenodo repository: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4897128>

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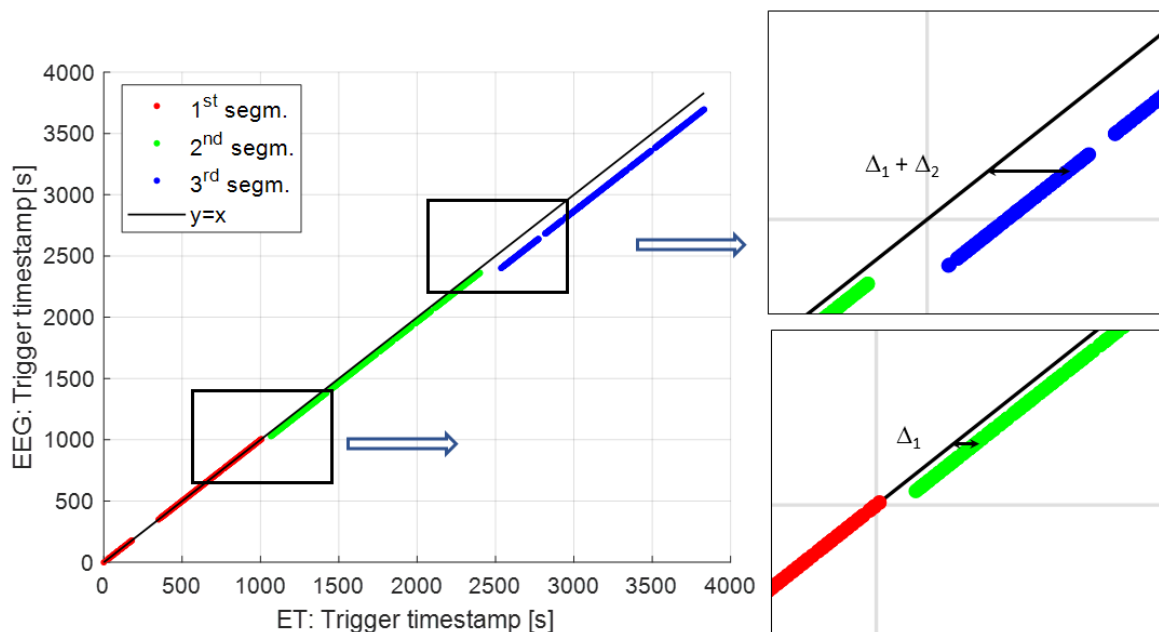
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## 889 Appendix

### 890 Synchronization of a dataset containing two pauses (scenario 1.3)

891 For a scenario 1.3 dataset containing two pauses, *Figure A1* shows the joint representation of the  
 892 timestamps of each common trigger in both modalities before synchronization.



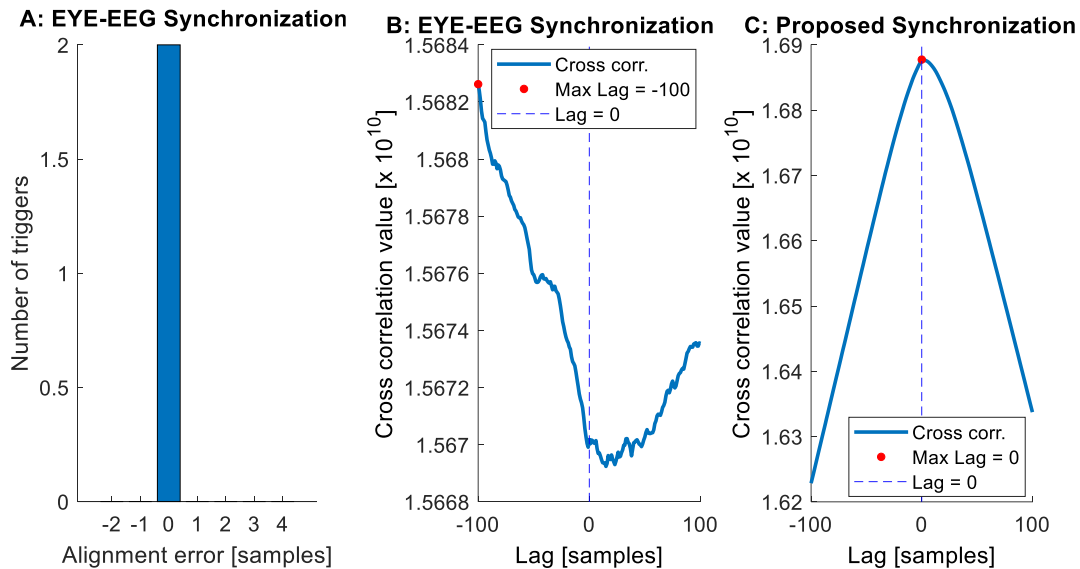
894 *Figure A1.* Joint representation of the timestamps of each common trigger in both modalities before  
 895 synchronization.  $\Delta_1$  and  $\Delta_2$  are the observed time shifts that must be corrected by the drift and shift  
 896 corrections.  
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898 The histogram of alignment errors after synchronization using the EYE-EEG method is shown in

899 *Figure A2 A.* Only two common triggers (the start and end triggers) were matched. For all other triggers,

900 the gap between their timestamps in each modality was larger than the tolerance parameter (by default, 4  
 901 samples). Only one regression was performed and the additional shifts resulting from the two pauses could  
 902 not be compensated. This synchronization default was confirmed by the cross correlation between the  
 903 horizontal eye position and the differential EEG signal computed from the F8 channel and the F7 channel  
 904 (*Figure A2 B*). The histogram of alignment errors, using the proposed method on the 1222 common  
 905 triggers, is shown in *Figure 6 D*. The additional shifts were found by performing the piecewise linear  
 906 regression (shift correction). The cross correlation is shown in *Figure A2 C*.

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908

909 *Figure A2*. Synchronization of a scenario 1.3 dataset containing two pauses. (A) Histogram of alignment  
 910 errors on the common triggers found by the EYE-EEG method. (B) Cross correlation between the  
 911 horizontal eye position and the F8-F7 EEG signals, for the EYE-EEG synchronization and (C) for the  
 912 proposed synchronization  
 913