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Neuronal Population Responses in the Human Ventral Temporal and Lateral Parietal Cortex During Arithmetic Processing with Digits and Number Words

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Abstract

Past research has identified anatomically specific regions in the posterior inferior temporal gyrus (PITG) and the intraparietal sulcus (IPS) that are engaged during arithmetic processing. In the current study, we explore whether the responses in these regions depends on the number format (i.e., numerical digits vs. number words). We collected intracranial EEG (iEEG) data from the areas surrounding the PITG in eight subjects who performed two experimental tasks containing arithmetic equations with either digits or number words. Our findings confirmed an increase in the high frequency broadband (HFB) activity in both PITG and IPS regions for equations presented in either digits or in number words compared to their respective baselines. In the PITG the HFB activations were similar for digits and number words in the time of activation but differed in magnitude. In the IPS the activity was significantly delayed for number words in comparison to digits regardless of the hemisphere. The results support the extant evidence for the engagement of the PITG during arithmetic processing regardless of input format while also revealing differences in the magnitude of power in response to the formats. The results also reveal that the IPS region becomes engaged regardless of input format but with different temporal signatures. The results add to our understanding of the temporal profile of engagement between discrete populations of neurons within the human brain during arithmetic processing with numerals versus number-words.

Introduction

The Triple Code model for numerical processing predicts the existence of three forms of representing numbers—symbolic, verbal, and analog—encoded in different brain regions (Dehaene, 1992; Dehaene and Cohen, 1995). Two of the brain regions implicated in the Triple Code Model were the intraparietal sulcus (IPS) within the Lateral Parietal Cortex (LPC) for analog or abstract quantity processing (Dehaene et al., 2003), and the Ventral Temporal Cortex (VTC) for symbolic numerical representations (Dehaene, 1992)

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In line with this model, past research has established the involvement of IPS with abstract quantity processing in healthy control populations (Dehaene et al., 2003; Piazza et al., 2007; Wei et al., 2014) and in patients with parietal lesions (Cipolotti et al., 1991; Takayama et al., 1994; Martory et al., 2003; Koss et al., 2010). It followed that IPS would display “supramodal interpretation of numbers”(Eger et al., 2003), and it was indeed shown that this region was activated independent of input notation of the numbers (Naccache and Dehaene, 2001; Pinel et al., 2001).

While the involvement of IPS in mathematical processing has been well-established for several decades, strong evidence for the involvement of VTC was lacking until recently. Corroborating Triple Code model’s hypothesized role of VTC, we recently found a small site within the posterior inferior temporal gyrus (PITG) in the VTC that respond selectively to visual numerals compared to number words and stimuli morphologically similar to numerals such as letters and false fonts (‘Number form area’ or ‘NFA’) (Shum et al., 2013). We later discovered that a larger region of the PITG, including and surrounding the NFA, becomes engaged during active arithmetic processing (Hermes et al., 2017), and interacts dynamically with the IPS region during not only arithmetic processing but also during the resting state (Daitch et al., 2016).

To date, it remains unknown whether the profile of neuronal population activities in the PITG and IPS that are induced during arithmetic processing, such as simple calculations, are different when different formulations of numbers are presented. To this end, we designed the current intracranial electroencephalography (iEEG) study to measure neuronal population activities in response to differential visualizations of numbers in patients with intracranial electrodes in the PITG, IPS, or both. *High frequency broadband (HFB)* responses in the PITG and IPS during these two conditions were quantified in terms of time and magnitude of response. HFB is understood to reflect non-oscillatory broadband signals as an electrophysiological correlate of the average of the spiking neuronal activities (Parvizi and Kastner, 2018). Using the temporal precision afforded by iEEG as well as the precise localization of the electrodes in each subject’s native anatomical space (Groppe et al., 2017), the moderating effect of time, anatomical region, and the type of visual representation of numbers on the resulting power of the HFB signal were explored.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Eight subjects (2 female and 6 male) were implanted with subdural intracranial EEG (iEEG) over the regions surrounding the intraparietal sulcus (IPS), the posterior-inferior temporal gyrus (PITG), or both. The subdural electrodes were implanted to localize the source of each subject’s refractory epilepsy, and thus the location and the number of electrodes was determined solely based on clinical needs. None of the subjects’ focal seizure area was near the IPS or PITG according to the results of intracranial monitoring. The Stanford Institutional Review Board approved the experiments and the subjects provided written informed consent to participate. The results from Task 1 in six of our eight subjects has been used in a previous publication (Daitch et al., 2016). In this report, we extend the findings by adding two subjects and present novel data from all subjects in Task 2.

Electrode Localization

High-resolution T1-weighted MRI scans of the pre-implant brains were acquired on a GE 3-Tesla scanner at Stanford University using SPGR pulse sequence in 0.9 mm axial slices. The slices were resampled to 1mm isotropic voxels, and then reconstructed into 3-dimensional brains. Each patient's electrodes were localized onto his or her own 3D brain using the iElvis method (Groppe et al., 2017): the reconstructed brain and post-implant computed tomography (CT) scans were co-registered (Jenkinson and Smith, 2001; Jenkinson et al., 2002) onto which electrodes were localized using BioImageSuite (Papademetris et al., 2006) and corrected for brain shift (Dykstra et al., 2012).

Intracranial EEG Data Acquisition and Initial Processing

Data were collected using a Tucker Davis Technologies multichannel recording system at a sampling rate ranging from 1525.88 to 3051.76Hz. Pathological channels identified by physicians as well as channels with prominent non-physiological artifacts were excluded from subsequent analyses. During the initial processing, channels were notch-filtered at 60Hz and harmonics and re-referenced to the common average of all non-excluded electrodes of each subject to reduce noise. Signals were bandpass-filtered to the range of High Frequency Broadband (HFB) of 70 to 180Hz with finite impulse response (FIR) filters, and an estimated band-limited power was calculated by a Hilbert transformation. To partially correct for the 1/f decay of spectral power inherent to neural signals, the amplitude of each 10Hz sub-band within HFB (non-overlapping bins of 10-Hz bandpass windows ranging from 70 to 180Hz) was normalized by its own mean and standard deviation, and these normalized amplitude signals were finally averaged together to result in one amplitude time series for the HFB band. For task-related analyses, The HFB power at each time point was normalized relative to the HFB power during the 200ms inter-trial interval across all trials.

Experimental Design and Statistical Analysis

Task 1.—Subjects were asked to make *true or false* judgments on either arithmetic problems (e.g. "12 + 7 = 25") or non-math statements (e.g. "I drank coffee today"). The stimuli were presented on a laptop computer using MATLAB Psychotoolbox (Brainard, 1997). Each statement was presented until a true/false button was pressed, followed by a 200ms inter-trial interval. *Task 2*. Subjects were asked to make *true or false* judgments on arithmetic problems visually presented. The two conditions were number word condition (e.g. "Two plus one equals six") and digit condition ("2 + 5 = 7"). The math problems in *Task 2* were simpler in comparison to the more complex problems presented in *Task 1* in terms of operand size. Each problem was presented until a true/false button was pressed, followed by a fixation period of 200ms. Details regarding the designs of the two tasks can be found in Table 1 and Figure 1a.

Response Time to Task 1 and Task 2.—Behavioral data were analyzed using ANOVA and a follow-up post-hoc Tukey's HSD test was used to examine differences in reaction time among the four conditions listed in Table 1.

Identification of Electrodes in ROI.—Regions surrounding PITG and IPS were chosen as our regions of interest (ROI). Out of all the implanted electrodes in 8 subjects, electrodes in our ROI were chosen based on anatomical location for the first set of analyses. This selection resulted in 38 electrodes in the PITG region across 7 subjects and 41 electrodes in the IPS region across 7 subjects.

HFB activation in PITG and IPS.—To find out whether the two regions previously indicated with mathematical processing, PITG and IPS, were indeed activated more strongly during mathematical context than not, we plotted the time-course of HFB activation in all electrodes within the ROIs in response to Task 1. We compared the neural responses to the math condition to the non-math condition using a permutations test.

Identification of Math-Selective Electrodes in ROI.—For the next set of analyses, we further restricted the analyses to only the electrodes that showed math-selectivity during Task 1 to ensure that the neural activation was truly related to the mathematical content rather than other visual features. For each electrode and condition, HFB power time course during the 400 to 600ms window after stimulus onset was selected and compared to the 200ms pre-stimulus period as baseline activity. Math-selective electrodes were defined as those significantly active during the math condition (relative both to baseline and to the non-math condition). To compare between the two conditions, we used a 10,000-repetition permutation test and corrected for multiple comparisons using false discovery rate (FDR) based on the number of electrodes on each subject's brain (Benjamini and Yekutieli, 2001). We tested whether any of the electrodes showed significantly greater HFB activation for math in comparison to both its pre-stimulus baseline and the non-math condition at the $p = 0.05$ level. Using these criteria resulted in 9 math-selective electrodes in the PITG across 5 subjects and 16 math-selective electrodes in the IPS across 5 subjects. Given the small number of electrodes in each patient in each region, possible subject-effect was ignored. Regrettably, given that only 1 electrode in the left PITG and 2 electrodes in the left IPS were math-selective, inter-hemispheric differences could not be adequately compared.

HFB activation in math-selective electrodes within the PITG and IPS.—Similar to the previous group of all electrodes in the ROI, we plotted each time-course of individual electrodes after stimulus onset and compared the neural responses to math and non-math conditions.

Exploration of differences in the magnitude and timing of activation.—Using the response time calculated for each subject, we computed the average HFB power of activation to each condition, each task, and each region in the 200ms time window shortly after stimulus onset (400 to 600ms after stimulus onset) and shortly before response time (400 to 600ms before RT). The activation levels were compared between math and non-math conditions, between formats, and between time windows.

Results

Demographics.

Data were collected from eight subjects. Five subjects received right-hemisphere implantations and three received left-hemisphere implantations. Further demographic information for each subject is presented in Table 2.

Behavioral Data.

We compared the reaction times (RT) between the conditions in each task (Figure 1c). The details of the two tasks and their conditions can be found in Table 1. ANOVA results showed a significant difference among the reaction time (RT) across conditions [$F(3,24) = 5.51$, $p = 0.005$]. Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons test indicated that the RT for the number word condition in Task 2 ($M = 4.695 \pm 1.643$) was significantly higher than the digit condition in Task 2 ($M = 2.354 \pm 0.480$) and the non-math condition in Task 1 ($M = 3.030 \pm 0.821$) at the 0.05 level of significance. RT for the digit condition in Task 2 and math condition in Task 1 were not significantly different.

Electrophysiological Data.

The location of electrodes on each subject's native anatomical space is shown in Figure 1b. We chose a total of 79 electrodes in or near the PITG and IPS across 8 subjects for analyses. Information regarding the number and location of electrodes for each subject is detailed in Table 3.

Electrophysiological analysis revealed that HFB responses were contextually selective and consistent across subjects. The activations for Task 1 showed a trending preference for math condition in comparison to non-math in the PITG ($p = 0.084$, $n = 38$ electrodes) and a significant preference for math condition in the IPS ($p = 0.001$, $n = 41$ electrodes) in a 10,000-repetition permutations test on the activation from 200 to 600ms after stimulus onset (figure 1d).

Restricting our analyses to only the electrodes revealed a high level of anatomical precision and, again, consistency across subjects. Nine of the 39 PITG electrodes and 16 of the 41 IPS electrodes showed significant math-selectivity (see Materials and Methods for more details on selection criteria for math selectivity). These math-selective sites were clustered tightly around the PITG and the IPS (Figure 1b). The finding of math-selectivity around the PITG and IPS follow previous math cognition literature and provide support for the anatomical specificity of the arithmetic functions within the human brain. In these math-selective clusters, the activations for Task 1 showed a significant preference for math condition in comparison to non-math both in the PITG ($p = 0.001$, $n = 9$ electrodes) and in the IPS ($p < 0.001$, $n = 16$ electrodes) in a 10,000-repetition permutations test on the activation from 200 to 600ms after stimulus onset (Figure 1e).

The main question posed once the anatomically specific math-selective regions were identified in the PITG and IPS was if, when, and how the regions activate in response to digits and number words in the context of an arithmetic equation. Therefore, in Task 2, we measured HFB responses to mathematical statements using different visual formats of numbers (digits versus number words) in the math-selective sites defined in Task 1. Math-selective regions in the PITG and IPS showed heterogeneity in their responses to the two formats of arithmetic equations.

While both representations prompted responses in PITG and IPS, the timing and the magnitude of the elicited HFB power were different. In the PITG, the HFB response to digit equations was significantly larger than to number word equations ($p = 0.012$, $n = 9$, permutations test with 10,000 reps, 200 to 400ms after stimulus onset) soon after the onset of stimulus. However, the HFB response to the number word equations was still greater than baseline ($p < 0.001$, $n = 9$, permutations test with 10,000 reps, 200 to 400ms after stimulus onset). The results indicate that both formats evoke an early response in the PITG, though the numerical format evokes a stronger response in terms of magnitude.

Conversely, neither of the two formats evoked early activation in the IPS electrodes ($p > 0.10$, $n = 16$, permutations test with 10,000 reps, 200 to 400ms after stimulus onset). Instead, the activation in IPS was slower. The digit format evoked a significant response as late as 500 to 700ms after stimulus onset ($p = 0.032$, $n = 16$). The number word format was even slower, showing a steady and slow increase until the end of each trial (*Fig 1e, bottom right panel*).

To further explore the magnitude and temporal differences between the responses to the two formats in the regions of interest, we calculated the average activation to each condition, each task, and each region (PITG and IPS) in the brief time window shortly after stimulus onset (hereby referred to as “early window”) and shortly before response time (hereby referred to as “late window”) (Figure 1f). Given that these analyses were restricted to electrodes that showed preferential activation to math condition in comparison to non-math, the activation to the math condition was significantly higher than non-math in PITG in both the early window ($p = 0.001$, $n = 9$, FDR corrected) and late window ($p = 0.009$, $n = 9$, FDR corrected) as expected (*Fig 1f, top left panel*). Likewise, the activation to the math condition was significantly higher than non-math in IPS in both the early window ($p = 0.026$, $n = 16$, FDR corrected) and late window ($p < 0.001$, $n = 16$, FDR corrected) as expected as well (*Fig 1f, top right panel*).

Corroborating the previous results, the evoked responses in the PITG were different for two formats of mathematical equations in Task 2 in terms of magnitude. In both the early window ($p = 0.012$, $n = 9$) and the late window ($p = 0.0348$, $n = 9$), activation for digits were higher than for number words. Further corroborating the previous results, the evoked responses for the two formats in the PITG were also early in terms of temporal onset. Both digits ($p = 0.012$, $n = 9$) and number words ($p = 0.026$, $n = 9$) showed higher activation in the early window in comparison to the late window. These results indicate that while the electrodes in the PITG show a preferential activity to digits in comparison to number words, both are activated significantly and early.

In the IPS, the evoked responses to the two formats were not different early on. However, the activation in response to number words increase steadily and slowly over the entire trial length ($M = 4.695 \pm 1.643$). The late window of 200ms shortly before response time is shown to be significantly higher than both the activation during the early period to the same condition ($p = 0.019$, $n = 16$) and to its baseline ($p = 0.023$, $n = 16$). These results indicate that the math-selective electrodes in the IPS do not show a preferential activity to digits or number words in terms of magnitude, but activation to number words are much slower than to digits and that the activations to both are slower in the IPS than are in the PITG.

Our findings converge to the conclusion that the neural responses to the mathematical statements made in digit and number word formats show heterogeneity in terms of magnitude and temporal onset in both regions previously found to be involved with mathematical processing. While both formats evoke responses in both areas, there are clear differences both between and within the regions.

Discussion

The present study sought to investigate the involvement of PITG and IPS in arithmetic processing involving quantities presented in different formats (numerals versus number words). Comparing the neural activity between these conditions provides insight into whether quantity representations in different brain regions are format-specific or format-independent.

Behaviorally, we report longer reaction time for number words than digits, in line with previous research (Campbell, 1994; Campbell and Fugelsang, 2001; Faulkenberry, 2017). On the neuronal population level, we report significant responses for both arithmetic equations presented with digits and those presented with number words in not only the IPS but also the PITG. Arithmetic equations presented with digits invoke earlier HFB responses than those presented with number words: the magnitude of activation, measured by the amplitude of z-scored HFB power, is stronger for digits than for number words in the initial phase of processing in the PITG though both activations are still significantly higher than baseline activity. In contrast, HFB activation levels in the IPS are statistically similar for the two formats and non-significant in this phase. It is not until later, shortly before reaction time, that the activation for the formats in the IPS reach significance. The results indicate that both PITG and IPS show responses during calculation, but that PITG responds quickly to both digits and number words while IPS responds comparatively slowly and with differential temporal profile for the two formats.

Our data suggests that the relatively large region of the PITG may be implicated in cognitive processes beyond simple digit recognition (Daitch et al., 2016). However, we remind the reader that the PITG occupies a relatively large extent of the VTC, and as our previous findings have suggested, there is clearly a heterogeneity of functions within this region of the brain. While a small region of the PITG (i.e., the NFA) is selectively implicated in the processing of numerals (Shum et al., 2013), a larger surrounding area of the NFA is activated during both digit and number word processing (Shum et al., 2013; Daitch et al., 2016; Hermes et al., 2017). This is in line with the findings that the area lateral to the NFA, i.e., the Visual Word Form Area (VWFA) (Nobre et al., 1994; Cohen et al., 2000), is involved in processing word form symbols.

Our findings are compatible with, and might add novel information relevant to, models of mathematical cognition (Colomé et al., 2011). For instance, Encoding-Complex Model (Campbell and Clark, 1992; Campbell, 1994; Campbell and Epp, 2004) proposes that different formats will call for different calculation strategies. Our findings are partially in line with this model as we found differential power of activation to the two formats in both regions. Abstract Code Model (McCloskey, 1992; McCloskey and Macaruso, 1995) posits that numerical inputs of different formats are converted into an abstract code before being manipulated. This model hypothesizes the conversion of digit and number word formats into one representation before the calculation stage. Our finding of different timing of IPS responses to digits versus number words might be explained by different times that are needed in the encoding stage. The conversion from number words to analogue or abstract code could take longer time than a conversion from digit number would, thus explaining the delayed activation for number words in the IPS. This is still a hypothetical conclusion that needs further exploration with more targeted experiments in the future.

Triple Code Model (Dehaene, 1992; Dehaene and Cohen, 1995) postulates that arithmetic facts do not necessarily need to be converted into analog magnitudes; rather, simple calculations may involve a direct verbal route from memory retrieval. Previous neuroimaging studies have implicated the left angular gyrus in the direct route of verbal memory retrieval (Dehaene et al., 2003). In contrary to the expectations, we found that both difficult (math condition in Task 1) and simple (Task 2) math problems evoke the activation of the IPS region. However, given the limitations of our study, further research may be necessary to ascertain the existence or lack of such a direct route for simple calculations.

One of the limitations of our study is that Task 1, which we used to localize math-selective electrodes, only used digits in the math condition. This could have possibly resulted in a slight bias to the digits in the subsequent analyses, such that the responses to digits are stronger than the number words in many electrodes regardless of location. However, our main finding remains unchanged: Despite the fact that the response to digits may be overrepresented across many electrodes due to the selection criteria used, we still found significant differences between the different regions of interest (i.e. VTC and LPC) in terms of the neural activation in response to the two formats.

Another limitation is that the exact process reflected in the delay in of activation is unclear. On one hand, the faster activation for digit than number words in the IPS might reflect faster conversion stage to magnitude from digits than from number words. On the other hand, the delay may instead reflect that number word conditions require much more attention. In other words, the delay may reflect any of the many coding mechanisms, and not necessarily the delay in encoding stage. However, our study still provides valuable insight into the existence of temporal differences in the neural activation in response to different formats of numbers. The mechanism that causes such temporal differences should be explored further in future studies.

Despite the limitations of our study, our findings are still bolstered by the convergent conclusions from previous literature surrounding the mathematical processing in the human brain. The activation of the IPS across stimulus type has been supported in an array of fMRI literature including across audio and visual cues of magnitude (Damarla et al., 2016), across numerical distance and visual numbers (Notebaert et al., 2010), and across species (Eger et al., 2009). Our findings replicate the previously established activation of the IPS regardless of visual input notation while providing an additional nuance of temporal specificity. We also provide additional support to and dissociation between the number-processing hubs in the parietal magnitude area (Nieder, 2016) and the inferior-temporal number area (Srihasam et al., 2012) in terms of magnitude and time.

In conclusion, PITG and IPS are both engaged in processing number forms regardless of input format, but with a different power and temporal signature. These findings provide new information that might be useful to the current models of mathematical cognition and highlights the hitherto unexplored dimension of temporal dynamics across regions of the human brain during arithmetic processing. The exploration of the similarities and difference between the responses of the PITG and IPS regions provide a more detailed look into the overall arithmetic processing within the human brain.

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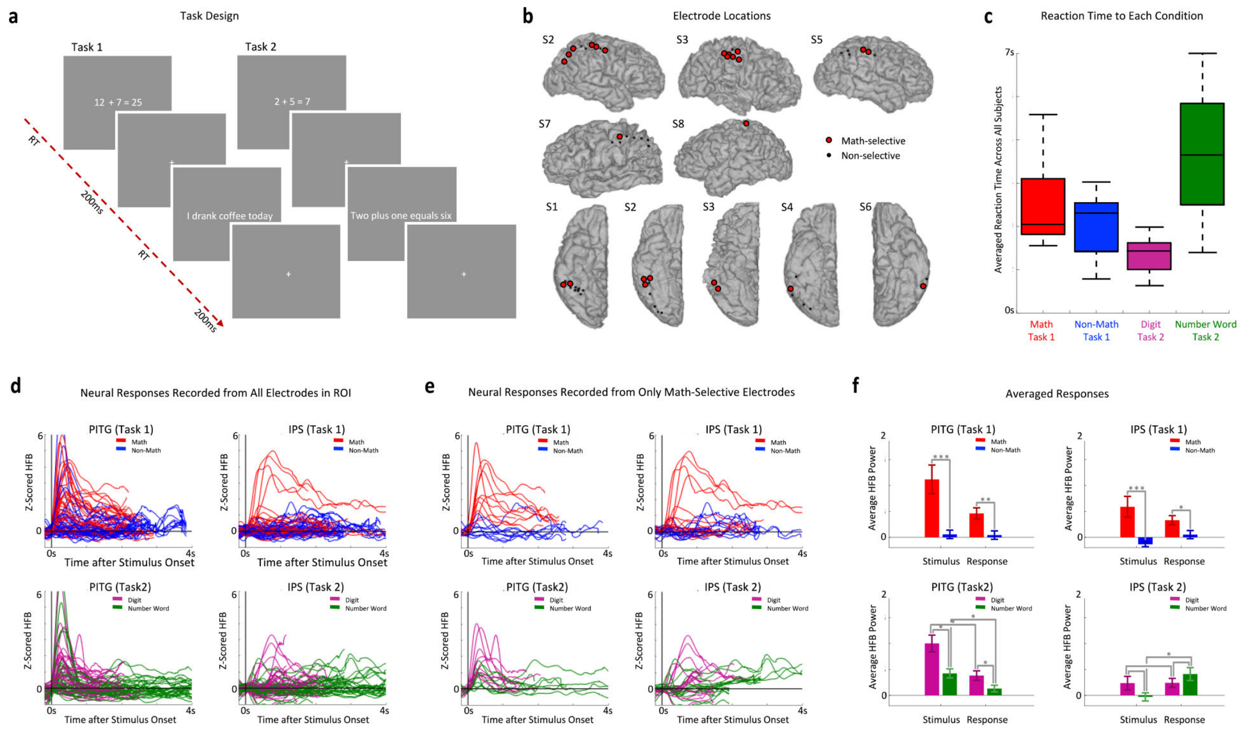

Figure 1:

a For task 1, subjects were asked to verify mathematical statements in digits (e.g. “12 + 7 = 25”) or non-math statements in English alphabets (e.g. “I drank coffee today”) by pressing either “1” for true or “2” for false on a keypad. For Task 2, subjects were asked to verify mathematical statements in digits (e.g. “2 + 5 = 7”) or number words (e.g. “Two plus one equals six”) by pressing either “1” for true or “2” for false on a keypad. The statements were shown until a button was pressed or until 15 seconds elapsed, whichever was shorter. Between each statement screens, a fixation cross was shown for 5 or 10 seconds. **b** Eight subjects (5 right hemisphere; 3 left hemisphere) were tested using electrocorticography (ECoG). 79 electrodes (41 near IPS; 38 near PITG) were chosen for further analysis based on anatomical location across 8 patients. Out of these, 16 electrodes near the IPS and 9 subjects near the PITG showed significant selectivity for math condition during task 1 across 5 subjects each. The math-selective electrodes are shown in red, and the non-selective electrodes are shown in black. The top two rows show the right hemispheres (S2, S3, S5) and left hemispheres (S7, S8) in lateral view, while the bottom row shows 4 right hemisphere (S1, S2, S3, S4) and 1 left hemisphere (S5) in ventral view. **C** Reaction time to the four conditions across two tasks are shown. Subjects took between 1 to 7 seconds to respond to each condition. **d** The four panels show the z-scored HFB time course of every math-selective electrode in the anatomical ROI. The left two panels show neural responses from electrodes in the PITG (top left) and right two panels show responses from the IPS (top right). The top two panels show responses to Task 1, while the bottom two panels show responses to Task 2. The time courses are plotted until 4 seconds after stimulus onset or until neural response could not be averaged reliably (fewer than 20 trials), whichever is shorter. **E** The four panels show the z-scored HFB time course of only the math-selective electrodes, as chosen by the selective response to Math condition during Task 1. These follow the same convention as 1d. **f** The neural responses to the math condition (red bar) and the non-math condition (blue bar) during Task 1 are averaged across all math-selective electrodes in the PITG (top left) and IPS (top right). Likewise, the responses to the digit condition (magenta bar) and the number word condition (green bar) during Task 2 are averaged across all math-selective electrodes in the PITG (bottom left) and IPS (bottom right).

Table 1:

Task	**Task 1**		**Task 2**	
Condition	**Math**	**Non-Math**	**Digit**	**Number Word**
# of Trials	40	40	40	40
Operation	Addition	N/A	Addition	Addition
Problem Size	Large (1–2 digits)	N/A	Small (1 digit)	Small (1 digit)
Example Stimulus	"12 + 7 = 25"	"I drank coffee today"	"2 + 5 = 7"	"Two plus one equals six"
Response Options	True/False	True/False	True/False	True/False

Table 2:

Subject #	Age	Gender	Dominant Hand at Birth	Implanted Hemisphere	IQ
1	24	Male	Right	Right	65
2	41	Male	Right	Right	129
3	23	Female	Right	Right	N/A
4	56	Male	Right	Right	N/A
5	46	Male	Right	Right	71
6	47	Female	Right	Left	77
7	29	Male	Right	Left	N/A
8	25	Male	Right	Left	92

Table 3:

Subject #	**PITG electrodes**	**IPS electrodes**	**PITG electrodes (math-selective)**	**IPS electrodes (math-selective)**
1	10	4	2	0
2	5	9	3	6
3	2	7	2	6
4	5	5	1	0
5	0	6	0	2
6	3	0	1	0
7	5	8	0	1
8	8	2	0	1
Total	38	41	9	16