The more-or-less morphing face illusion: 
A case of fixation-dependent modulation

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Abstract. A visual illusion is presented in which the perceived changes in a morphing sequence 
depend on eye movements. The phenomenon is illustrated using face morphs: when tracking a moving 
dot superimposed on a face morphing sequence, the changes in the morphing sequence seem rather 
small, but when the dot stops moving, the perceived extent of morphing suddenly becomes much 
larger. We explore this phenomenon further and discuss the observed effects.

Keywords: eye movements, face perception

It is well known that eye movements affect our perceptions. For example, during saccades we 
may be blind to considerable changes in the visual display (known as saccadic suppression; 
for an overview see Henderson & Hollingworth, 1998), and during smooth pursuit the human 
visual system seems less sensitive to transient signals (eg Schütz, Delipetkos, Braun, Kerzel, 
& Gegenfurtner, 2007). Recently, Suchow and Alvarez (2011) showed that motion on the 
retina caused a diminished awareness of featural changes of the moving pattern (referred to 
as ‘silencing’). Here, we demonstrate the effect of eye movements on the extent of perceived 
changes in face morphing sequences, by contrasting fixation on a stationary dot with following 
a moving dot using smooth pursuit movements. An example is given in movie 1 (http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/p7704). The reader is invited to follow the instructions in the movie where 
a morphing between two faces is presented. Superimposed on the face morphing sequence, 
there is a red dot that has to be fixated. This red dot may move in a circle between the 
eyes and nose, in which case the dot has to be tracked, or it can be stationary. It should be 
observed that the degree of change in the morphing sequence appears to differ substantially 
between the two conditions. When the moving dot is tracked, the extent of morphing appears 
to be rather small. However, when the dot stops moving but is continued to be fixated, the 
degree of morphing appears to increase dramatically. Movie 2 shows a second example with 
different faces.

To investigate these effects further in an exploratory experiment, we created 7 basic 
faces (FaceGen modeller®), of which facial properties differed with approximately equal 
steps (eg the position of the eyebrows was altered systematically) (see figure 1a). Next 
we created morphing sequences between three pairs of these 7 basic faces (in figure 1a, 
faces 2 and 4, faces 3 and 5, and faces 4 and 6). Each sequence consisted of 50 frames 
(going from one face to the other and back). For each face pair the first/last frame in the 
sequence was balanced. Each presentation started with the observer fixating a red dot, which 
could be either stationary or moving (in a figure-of-eight trajectory). Next, while the red dot 
remained visible, a morphing sequence was shown (see figure 1b). A morphing sequence 
took approximately 5 s to complete a full cycle, and lasted for 8 cycles. Eight naive observers 
judged 12 morphing sequences presented in a random fashion (gif animations subtending a 
visual angle of ~7 deg). Following each presentation, observers had to indicate the range of 
faces that appeared to make up the morphing sequence. They could choose from the 7 basic
faces that appeared on the screen (as in figure 1a). For example, after seeing a morphing sequence between faces 2 and 4, they could respond that the morphing sequence appeared to range from, let’s say, face 2 to face 5. In that case the selected morphing range would be $\Delta_{\text{faces}} = 3$. Note that the observers were told that all possible extents given these 7 faces could occur during the experiment. A repeated-measures ANOVA with fixation (2) and face pair (3) as independent variables and ‘selected morphing range’ ($\Delta_{\text{faces}}$) as the dependent variable showed only an effect of fixation ($F_{1,7} = 23.729, p = 0.002, \eta^2 = 0.77$), with a larger morphing range chosen when fixating a stationary dot as compared with fixating a moving dot (on average $\Delta_{\text{faces}} = 2.85$ versus $\Delta_{\text{faces}} = 1.19$, respectively; see figure 1c). Testing the selected morphing range against the actual morphing range ($\Delta_{\text{faces}} = 2$) revealed significant differences for both fixation and tracking conditions ($t_7 = 4.837, p = 0.002, d = 1.710$, and $t_7 = -3.052, p = 0.019, d = 1.079$, respectively).

What might be the mechanism(s) behind these differential effects? We suggest that the effects in part reflect a modulation of transient signals. For example, the decrease in the apparent morphing range while tracking the moving dot is likely to be due to a reduced sensitivity to transient signals during pursuit eye movements (eg Schütz et al., 2007). We further speculate that the observed increase of the morphing range when fixating the stationary dot might additionally be related to the figural face aftereffect (Carbon & Ditye, 2011; Tangen, Murphy, & Thompson, 2011; Webster & MacLin, 1999). To illustrate the effect of prolonged fixation, the reader may use movie 3 to compare the different percepts interactively. With prolonged and careful fixation of the stationary dot, one might notice that the difference between various properties of the two faces (pale and wrinkly skin together with dark and thick eyebrows versus dark and smooth skin together with light and thin eyebrows) seems to increase with viewing time. In addition, the age gap between the faces may appear to increase (for instructions see the movie caption).
In sum, we speculate that at least two different mechanisms might be responsible for the reported observations. One involves the attenuated sensitivity to transient signals during pursuit eye movements, and the other involves the amplification of perceptual differences during steady fixation at a single location. Future research, however, is needed to confirm and disentangle these separate effects, by having more variability in the morphs and a more fine-grained response measure, and it may also focus on the face-specificity versus generality of the observed effects. It seems reasonable to expect that similar effects might be obtained for morphs between images other than faces. The relative strength of these effects may then be dependent on the level of familiarity (e.g., variations in colour may have larger effects for more familiar objects) or expertise. So far, our morphing face illusion shows that perceived face differences can change depending on the way of looking—more or less.

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References