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► **To cite this version:**

Rachel Degrande, Benoît Piégu, Plotine Jardat, Fabien Cornilleau, Léa Lansade, et al.. Cognitive mechanisms of transitive reasoning in the adult domestic hen. Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour (ASAB) Spring Conference, Mar 2023, Bangor, United Kingdom. 10.5281/zenodo.8377061 . hal-04217384

HAL Id: hal-04217384

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-04217384v1>

Submitted on 25 Sep 2023

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Cognitive mechanisms of transitive reasoning in the adult domestic hen

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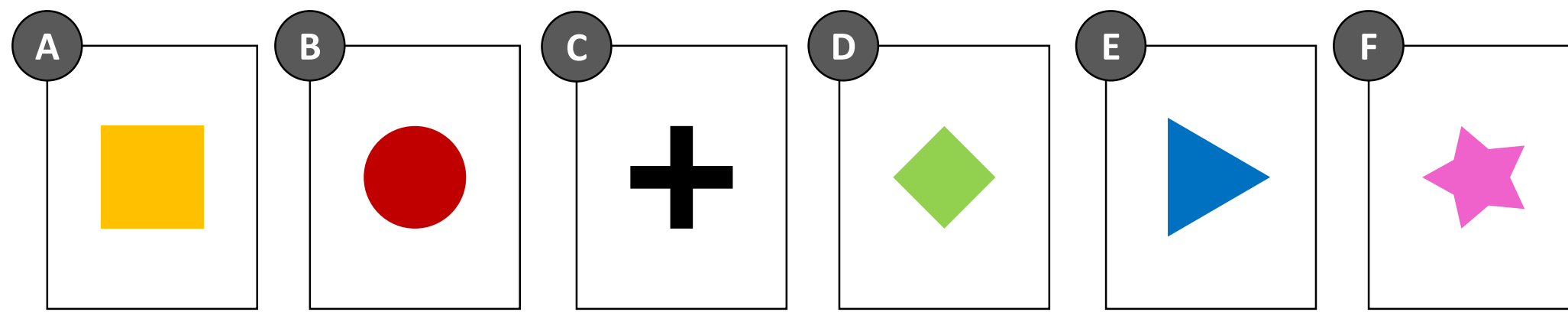
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AIM

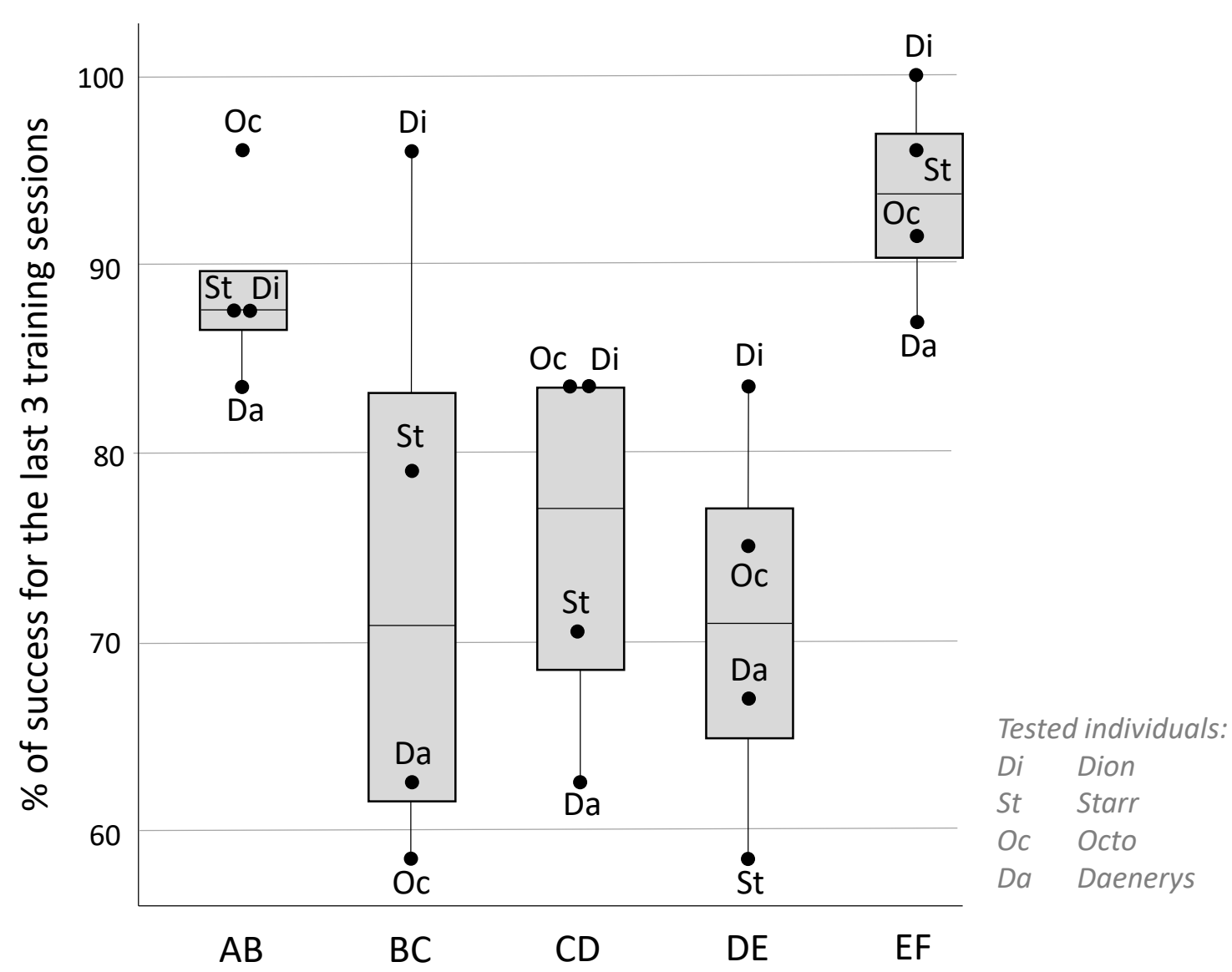
Transitive inference (TI) is the logical ability that allows to link some elements indirectly through their relations with some others (**if A>B and B>C then A>C**). In *Gallus gallus domesticus*, three research works suggested they possess such complex cognitive capacity (Hogue et al. 1996; Daisley et al. 2010; Daisley et al. 2021). However the mechanisms underlying TI in hens are still unknown. To answer this question, the common 5-terms arbitrary series task is not sufficient. Moreover, to our knowledge, in birds, only 2 studies in pigeons have investigated the cognitive mechanisms underlying TI at stake with a 5+ terms task so far.

METHOD

Five hens were tested on a **6-terms series** task that was composed of 6 arbitrary items printed on cards, with different colours and shapes. Items were presented to the hens in pairs. In a **hybrid training procedure** (successive pair training + inter-mixed sessions), hens were trained to learn the reinforcing scheme for each of the pairs containing successive items: AB, BC, CD, DE and EF (in AB, choose A, in BC, choose B, etc). This way, **3 inference trial types** could be presented during the test sessions that followed: BD, BE and CE. Test trials were unrewarded (in extinction). We measured the **percentage of success** and the **response latency** at the individual level for training pairs and for test pairs.

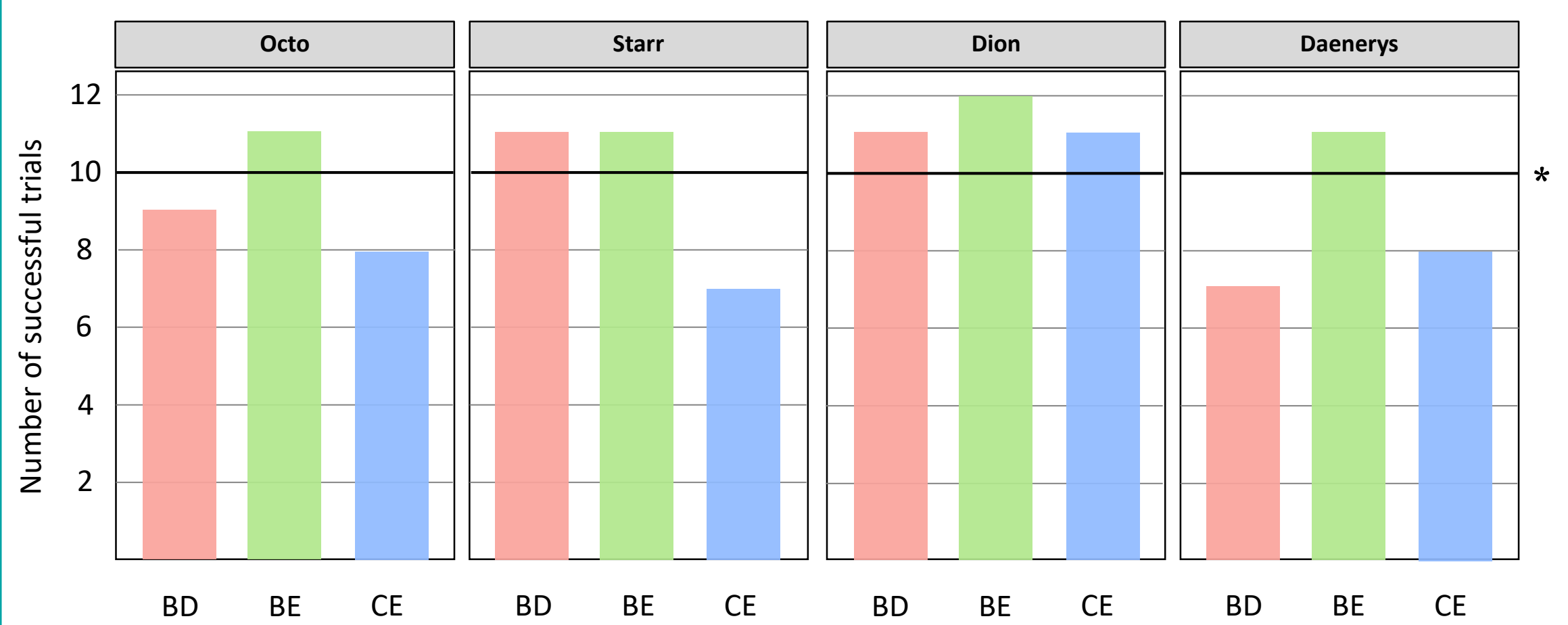


RESULTS : TRAINING



- 4 out to 5 hens succeeded all learning stages *
- Mean number of trials to reach the learning criterion for a pair = 70 trials
- Final performance: greater than chance for every pair of the 6-terms series *
- A better final performance for end-pairs AB and EF

RESULTS : TESTING



- Over all 36 TI trials: median group performance of 81,94 % of success *
- First 12 TI trials for each individual: Dion=12/12*..... Daenerys=10/12*..... Starr=8/12..... Octo=7/12
- Performance above the 50% level for each TI trial type (BE, BD and CE)
- A difference in transitive performance between TI trial types: BE > BD > CE
- Higher mean response latency for CE(2,93sec) > BE(2,31sec) = BD (2,27sec)

* means a performance above the chance level

CHECKS

- ✓ Understanding of the associative value of end-items with the control trials: AC, AD, AE, BF, CF, DF
- ✓ No effect of the number of presentations of the items during training on TI performance
- ✓ No effect of the reinforcement ratio of the items on TI performance
- ✓ No effect of the configuration of the previous training pair trial on the choice behaviour in TI trials
- ✓ No effect of the side constraints and of the configuration of the session during test sessions on TI performance

PERSPECTIVES

Our results suggest that adult domestic hens show a **declarative relational memory** as they are capable of **transitive inference**, and put the emphasis on the **cognitive mechanisms** that could be at stake.

The preference for the transitive response (e.g., B>D), the serial position effect (symmetrical U-shaped performance for training pairs) and the symbolic distance effect (perf.: BE>BD and response latency: BE<BD) **align with a cognitive resolution of the task, i.e., transitive reasoning**. In parallel, the better performance for BD over CE aligns with the idea of an additional first-item effect (value transfer theory, von Fersen et al., 1991).

Current mathematical models show that these results can be explained by the **reinforcement history theory**, that is the main current accepted theory for TI in non-human – and even human in certain conditions – animals (see: Vasconcelos, 2008). The latter match does not rule out the possibility of a mental linear representation of the series. How to dissociate these theories, knowing that the task used to test for TI in non-verbal animals is based on a differential reinforcement learning between the terms of the series ?

Financial support:



Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour

