Highly Resolved MR Imaging of Arbitrary Subregions in Large Objects by a Whole-Body Imager

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Highly resolved images of defined regions of interest within extended objects were obtained with a 1.5 T whole-body imager and standard hardware. The high-resolution spin echo imaging sequence avoids aliasing and allows pixel resolutions down to 39 μm which are confirmed by phantom measurements. The application of the sequence to large biological objects such as, for example, an amaryllis bulb results in images which provide much detail which could not be resolved with standard sequences.

Introduction

Magnetic resonance imaging of biological objects provides insight into morphological and functional properties without causing destruction of the organisms. Small objects up to the size of e.g. a rat can be investigated in microscopic units with high spatial resolution. Large objects must be examined using whole-body imagers designed for medical applications. Such whole-body magnetic resonance scanners are constructed to image objects with dimensions of up to 50 cm in diameter.

If a 256 square matrix is used to represent a field of view (FOV) of 500 mm × 500 mm, FOV 500 mm, the pixel resolution is 1.95 mm. The pixel resolution depends on the integral of the gradient over time. The spatial resolution can be increased by increasing the gradient strengths until the hardware limit of the imager is reached. Further improvement of the resolution is only obtained by increasing the duration of the gradients. However, signals from the periphery of the region of interest (ROI) are in this case folded back into the image using standard imaging techniques. Furthermore, by increasing the gradient integrals only images with a fixed center can be obtained, where the center is defined by the point in the 2 D space where the influence of the gradient is zero. To avoid aliasing different approaches exist: one is simply to use a volume restriction determined by the sensitivity of the rf-coil, e.g. using a surface coil, e.g. [1, 2]. An other method is to saturate the signals from the area surrounding the ROI [3–6] or to perform a selective excitation of the ROI only [7–12].

We report on a high-resolution imaging method which permits observation of a ROI at arbitrary positions within an extended object with a commercial whole-body imager without hardware change. Small surface coils are not necessary.

Method

The high-resolution spin echo sequence is shown in Figure 1 a. The 90° pulse selects the slice to be imaged. Directly after the 90° pulse the phase encoding gradient (gradient 3) is switched. To avoid folded signals from outside the volume of interest, a 180° selective pulse inverts the magnetization within a broad stripe orthogonal to the excited slice. Therefore the spin echo signal only stems from the intersection of the excited slice and the inverted stripe, i.e. two dimensions of the desired ROI are selected. The restriction in the third direction is obtained during the readout time by the receiver lowpass filter. The lowpass filter eliminates all signal components outside the desired region. This concept of aliasing-free imaging is schematically illustrated in Figure 1 b.

However, there is only one frequency to be varied in the whole-body imager. This frequency constitutes the carrier frequency of the transmitted pulses, serves as the reference frequency for the receiver, and determines the center of the frequency band selected by the lowpass filter. Thus, to select an ROI in readout direction the frequency must be changed. Changing the frequency results in a shift of the origin of the coordi-

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Table 1. Comparison of high-resolution sequences and the standard spin echo sequence with a FOV of 83 mm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOV/*/mm</th>
<th>40</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>83 (SE)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TE/ms</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TR/ms</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase encoding time/ms</td>
<td>7.68</td>
<td>15.36</td>
<td>30.72</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readout time/ms</td>
<td>15.36</td>
<td>30.72</td>
<td>61.44</td>
<td>7.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pixel resolution*/μm</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>324 b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a) With a 256 x 256 matrix.
b) Assuming the dimension of the object is less than or equal to the FOV and in the center of the magnet.

Experimental and Results

All experiments were performed on a 1.5 T Siemens Magnetom whole-body imager with a maximum gradient strength of $10 \cdot 10^{-3}$ T/m. The matrix size for all images was set to 256 x 256. The smallest FOV, achieved with a standard spin echo sequence from the manufacturer using maximum gradient strength, is 83 mm, resulting in a pixel size of 0.32 mm x 0.32 mm.

The high-resolution spin echo sequence shown in Fig. 1 a provides a FOV down to 10 mm. The 90° pulse has a length of 5.12 ms so as to get a good slice profile for thin slices. It is followed by the 2.56 ms rephasing pulse with 180° flip angle. For a FOV of 40 mm the phase encoding gradient has a length of 7.68 ms and the readout time is set at 15.36 ms. Gradient 2 and the prolongation of the readout gradient serve as spoil gradients.

Different phantoms [13] have been used to test the sequences for different FOV's. To demonstrate the high spatial resolution, Fig. 2 shows an image of a phantom used to determine the resolution quality of sequences (top left). It consists of a polymethylmethacrylate (PMMA) cylinder (outer diameter 200 mm) filled with an isotonic solution of NaCl and with different inserts made of PMMA. As ROI, the part marked with the square was selected (zoomed by software on the top right). A high-resolution image of this region obtained with the 40 mm FOV sequence is shown on the bottom left of Figure 2. The bar on the right indicates 1 cm. On the bottom right a part of the high-resolution image is magnified by software after recording the image. The two PMMA bars with a length of 160 mm and a breadth of 5 mm form an angle of 2.1°. The wedges are clearly resolved up to a distance of 2 mm from the apex corresponding to a...
Three high-resolution sequences were developed with different properties with regard to the minimal echo time (TE) and pixel resolution. The properties of the sequences are summarized in Table 1 in comparison with a standard spin echo sequence of the manufacturer. The minimum FOV of the different high-resolution sequences are demonstrated in Figure 3. On the top left an overview image with a standard gradient echo sequence shows the phantom which was filled with CuSO₄ doped water. In this case the headcoil of the imager was used. The steps of the stairs to be imaged with the high-resolution sequences are 5 mm long and 2 mm high. The FOV's are: 40 mm (top right), 20 mm (bottom left), and 10 mm (bottom right). The corresponding pixel sizes with the 256 square matrix used were 156 μm × 156 μm, 78 μm × 78 μm,
and $39 \mu m \times 39 \mu m$, respectively. All images were taken with 8 acquisitions. The loss in S/N due to volume reduction and echo time prolongation is obvious.

The 40 mm FOV sequence was applied to biological objects. As one example, a planted Amaryllis bulb measuring about 10 cm in diameter was examined. A fast overview image is given in Figure 4. The high-resolution image in Fig. 5 was obtained from a cross-section at slice position $+72$ mm (indicated with a bar in Figure 4). In the middle of the high-resolution image in Fig. 5 four fresh leaves and on the left and on the right growing blossoms can be seen with four flower buds each. The pixel resolution in this image is $156 \mu m \times 156 \mu m$, the slice thickness is 1.5 mm. The structures with high signal intensity in the leaves have a distance of around 850 $\mu m$. Although some resolution loss occurs due to partial volume effects this image is of high quality and reflects the usefulness of the method for biological applications.

Further prolongation of the phase encoding and readout time to 61.44 ms and 122.88 ms, respectively, results in a sequence with only 5 mm FOV. But there
are severe limitations of the resolution using large receiver coils: the signal/noise ratio (S/N) [14, 15] deteriorates for smaller picture elements and the structures of the object cannot be resolved any more even if they are much larger than the pixel size. Some loss in S/N can be balanced by the number of acquisitions, e.g. for a 40 mm FOV, high-resolution images with a slice thickness of 1.5 mm and a satisfactory S/N, 16 acquisitions are necessary. This needs a measuring time of 68 min when a repetition time (TR) of 1 s is used (as in Figure 5). A FOV of 20 mm yields only 1/4 of the signal per pixel. To achieve the same S/N, the 16-fold number of acquisitions and therefore the 16-fold measuring time are necessary. However, the useful maximum measuring time depends on the time stability of the technical components of the imager [16, 17].

Dependent on the properties of the sample other limitations may occur: molecular diffusion [18–25], which is the main resolution limit in high field microscopy, partial volume effects [26] as already mentioned, and the natural linewidth of the substances [16, 27–31] can worsen the resolution obtained. Some further resolution limiting effects are distortions through changes in magnetic susceptibility [32–35] and displacement through chemical shift [16].

In conclusion, it has been shown that sequences with a small FOV and high resolution can be successfully applied on whole-body imagers. The application of the 180° rephasing pulse in presence of a gradient in phase encoding direction completely avoids aliasing problems. It was shown that arbitrary ROI’s in large objects can be selected and imaged. So the advantage of a whole-body imager in imaging large objects is connected with the ability to obtain highly resolved images. The method is only applicable for sequences with more than one rf pulse, e.g. spin echo sequences. Prolonged measuring times of more than an hour must be allowed for in order to obtain a suitable S/N in images with high resolution better than 0.1 mm.

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Fig. 5. High-resolution image of the inner part of an Amaryllis bulb from above with growing leaves in the middle and two blossoms, recorded by the headcoil. FOV = 40 mm, pixel resolution 156 μm × 156 μm, TE = 27 ms, TR = 1 s, slice thickness 1.5 mm, 16 acquisitions, measuring time 68 min.