Commendation for James Hutson

Supervised by Professor Markus Damien

PhD project: Exploring the Nature of Lexical Selection and Spoken Word Production: Competition and the Response Exclusion Hypothesis

Description written by project supervisor:

In his thesis, James Hutson investigated how humans produce spoken words. Educated individuals have access to knowledge about tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of words, and when we produce fluent language, we typically retrieve words at a rate of several words per second from this internal memory store, with only relatively few errors. As a consequence, psychologists of language are highly interested in how the mind/brain can achieve such efficiency. One common assumption is that when the speaker aims to select a word, other words which are related in meaning (and perhaps in sound) are temporarily activated, and the way in which the final target word is then selected from this activated cohort could be characterised as competitive. More recently this assumption of competition has been disputed, and other mechanisms have been suggested by which speakers could select words for spoken production, without assuming competition among them. James’ thesis tackled the issue via a range of experimental methods focusing on the speed with which speakers initiate articulation of a word (“mental chronometry”, a method with at least a century of history). His findings made a number of key contributions to suggest that it is probably premature to abandon the principle of competition in spoken word production.

Biography:

I grew up in Devon and went to secondary school at Chulmleigh Community College. I got a bachelor’s degree in Psychology at the University of the West of England before going on to complete a master’s degree in psychology research methods and a PhD in psycholinguistics at the University of Bristol. The close-knit working environment in the School of Experimental Psychology and the excellent facilities made the University of Bristol the perfect place to complete my
postgraduate studies while developing shared research interests and getting involved in the many social activities. My current plans involve finishing off an ongoing research project related to my doctoral research before seeking post-doctoral employment in the field of psycholinguistics or a related discipline with the more long-term goal being to follow an academic career.