

PhD Studentship Position – Research project on changes in language abilities due to healthy ageing

We are inviting applications for a PhD studentship (start date January 2023) in the School of Psychology at the University of Birmingham. This is a funded studentship which covers a stipend and home fees (details below). The successful candidate will do their project at the University of Birmingham, under the supervision of Dr. Katrien Segaert (University of Birmingham, UK), Dr. Evelien Heyselaar (Radboud University, The Netherlands) and Prof. Linda Wheeldon (University of Agder, Norway).

Research focus: Research on language decline in ageing is important and timely: language is a core aspect of human cognition and our research has already demonstrated that healthy older adults experience decline in language function. The PhD project will focus on the effects of ageing on sentence production: older adults use shorter and simpler structures when speaking, resulting in less diverse language. The aim of the PhD project is to examine the mechanisms underlying this language decline. A first component of the project will focus on language priming. Theories of language production currently link the mechanisms for sentence production to implicit learning. When we speak, we tend to repeat recently experienced sentence structures; this ‘structural priming’ effect is argued to represent implicit learning in how to express ourselves. Current theories on language production will be tested by comparing structural (or, syntactic) priming in young and older adults, investigating key features of the persistence and generalizability of learned (re-activated) sentence structures. For a representative paper on language priming in older adults, please see: <https://psyarxiv.com/9gdqr/>. In a second component of the project we plan to use language samples which are more ecologically valid approximations to everyday language use, and code these for different measures of language complexity. Data-collection will be conducted using an online app we have already developed.

Essential skills: This studentship is most suited for a researcher with a masters level degree in psychology or linguistics, though we will consider equivalent or related degrees. An interest in language and healthy ageing is what is most important. In addition, we are ideally looking for someone with some previous research experience (i.e. collecting and/or analysing data). Strong organisation and time-management skills, a positive problem-solving attitude, and strong teamwork skills are also important.

Desired skills: We would prefer candidates with some knowledge on statistics (e.g. mixed models using R) and/or some experience with programming. However, we will also consider applicants who do not yet have these skills and are highly motivated to learn them with our help and guidance during the project.

Funding: Funding is available from The Leverhulme Trust, to cover University of Birmingham PhD fees at £4500 per year (i.e. fees for Home/UK students only) for 3 years, as well as a stipend at the standard rate of £15,609 per year for 3 years. We can only consider applicants who are eligible for home fees.

To let us know you are interested, please email k.segaert@bham.ac.uk to send in a cover letter and your CV (including the names of two referees. You can also contact us with questions -Dr. Katrien Segaert: k.segaert@bham.ac.uk, Dr. Evelien Heyselaar: evelien.heijselaar@ru.nl, and Prof. Linda Wheeldon: linda.r.wheeldon@uia.no