Queen's Psychology professor receives Steacie Fellowship

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Psychology professor Ingrid Johnsrude is one of six Canadian researchers to receive a prestigious 2009 E.W.R. Steacie Memorial Fellowship.

Presented annually by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), the fellowships are intended to enhance the careers of outstanding and highly promising university faculty who are earning a strong international reputation for original research.

“I am delighted with Professor Johnsrude’s success in the competition for this highly prestigious award,” says Vice-Principal (Research) Kerry Rowe. “Her success not only highlights her outstanding research capabilities, but also the quality of researchers we have at Queen’s.”

During her Steacie Fellowship, Dr. Johnsrude, Canada Research Chair in Cognitive Neuroscience, will study how knowledge and experience improve speech perception in noisy environments. She and her team use powerful, non-invasive neuroimaging methods to measure changes in activity in different brain regions that occur when people listen to spoken language under different listening conditions.

This work is important both for a basic understanding of the mechanisms underlying speech and language and for tackling the problem of impaired real-world speech comprehension in the coming decades.

“Difficulty understanding a conversational partner in the presence of noise is one of the most common complaints of older people,” says Dr. Johnsrude. “As our entire population ages, we really need to explore this important area more.”

The quality of sensory input deteriorates with age, and the role that knowledge and experience can play in helping someone comprehend spoken language becomes increasingly important.

“Typically when one considers aging, it’s rather gloomy,” continues Dr. Johnsrude. “However, older adults have a lot of knowledge and experience that they can draw on that can help them figure out what someone is saying, and this can compensate to some extent for poorer hearing. We are studying how that works.”

The Fellowship allows Dr. Johnsrude to focus on her team’s research, as it includes a contribution to Queen’s that will lighten her teaching load and administration duties for two years. The Fellowship may also encourage high-quality PhD students and postdoctoral fellows, who want to study cognitive neuroscience, to come to Queen’s.

“The research is a collaborative effort, and that’s what makes this Fellowship so exciting,” says Dr. Johnsrude. “I’m working with a team and I was absolutely delighted when I heard about the Fellowship because it recognizes the importance of this collaborative approach.”

She adds that she is grateful to the many wonderful scientists with whom she has had the privilege to work, and to Queen’s for its support.

Dr. Johnsrude will be officially recognized for her 2009 E.W.R. Steacie Memorial Fellowship at an award ceremony in Ottawa on March 16, 2009.
NSERC is a federal agency whose vision is to help make Canada a country of discoverers and innovators for the benefit of all Canadians. The agency supports some 26,500 university students and postdoctoral fellows in their advanced studies. For more information visit www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca

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