

Woman can't tell one voice from another

Only one she recognises is Sean Connery's

A SUCCESSFUL business-woman who is unable to recognise any voice but Sean Connery's is helping scientists to understand how the brain works.

For as long as she can remember, the 62-year-old woman has struggled to tell different voices apart, even those of close family members.

Unless she can see the face of a speaker, she has no idea who is talking, and as a result avoids using the telephone. The only exception is the gentle Scottish burr of the former James Bond actor.

The woman, identified only as KH, is the first known case in the world of someone being born with 'phonagnosia', or inability to recognise voices. The rare condition has

By **David Derbyshire**

been previously recorded but only in patients who have had a stroke or a head injury.

KH, a management consultant, had no idea what caused her problem until a few years ago when she read an article about face blindness, which means that people cannot recognise faces.

Realising that her condition might be similar, she contacted scientists at University College London.

Over the last few years they have conducted exhaustive tests. They have found that her condition is more than a simple inability to remember voices because she even struggles to tell the difference between two voice recordings played one after the other.

She can distinguish between men's and women's voices, but cannot

recognise her daughter's. In the tests she was unable to identify the voices of Margaret Thatcher, Joanna Lumley, David Beckham, Dawn French, Chris Tarrant or Ann Widdecombe. The only one she recognised was Sean Connery.

Scans revealed no brain damage, but researchers did spot that part of her brain known as the temporal voice area was less active on the right half of her brain.

The finding suggests that the right hemisphere may play a key role in voice recognition.

Professor Pascal Belin, a neuroscientist at Glasgow University and expert on phonagnosia, said: 'Identifying voices is surprisingly important, especially on the telephone.'

'We can usually tell who someone is on the telephone from just a word, even if the line is bad. But people with phonagnosia cannot do this.'

