A Special Tribute to David A. Swinney, Ph.D

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David Swinney made a significant contribution to the field of psycholinguistics. His dissertation research used cross-modal priming to index the activation of word meanings during the comprehension of a spoken sentence. This work laid the foundation for hundreds of subsequent experiments—including my own—exploring ambiguity and structure building in a variety of populations.

Throughout his three decades of active research, one thing that David emphasized is the importance of timing. This was manifest in his use (and advocacy) of time-sensitive measures, and also in the recognition that humans are built to receive auditory input presented at a particular speed: deviate too much from a comfortable speech rate (or lesion a piece of cortex), and the normal, automatic comprehension routines go awry.

That ambiguity and timing would be David's major candidates for scientific exploration came as no surprise when you met the man. David loved to banter, create puns, share jokes, tell stories. I first met David in 1982, while I was working for Edgar Zurif and testing aphasic subjects on a cross-modal priming experiment (using state-of-the-art equipment including a reel-to-reel tape recorder and slide projector). We were friends and collaborators for 24 years, and I would estimate that only a small proportion of our thousands of conversations did not involve a chuckle or outright guffaw. He had a charming way of balancing gravity with levity.

Without David, “doing science” (as he would say) is much less fun than it used to be. And all too often, so is life.

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