

Experts see clear road ahead for speech-activated cars

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AS untrendy as Knight Rider was, at least it could be said that the 1980s television series had a great car.

Kitt, Michael Knight's sleek, black Pontiac Trans Am, could do almost anything - from giving directions to offering the driver fashion advice.

Now, scientists at Edinburgh University are to start work on a project that could see drivers communicate with their cars in the same way as the eighties crimefighter did.

In January, experts at the

university's school of informatics will begin work on a conversational car navigation system that could be on the market in as little as five years.

The three-year project will be led by Oliver Lemon in collaboration with BMW, the car giant, and Bosch, the electronics manufacturer.

The automated system will go further than existing navigation devices as it will be able to respond to questions like "Where am I?" or "How do I get to Edinburgh Castle?" as well as change radio stations or

CDs, operate windows, and tell the driver when fuel is low.

It will operate alongside electronics already installed in some vehicles, such as the satellite navigation system giving onscreen information of location and intended destination.

Mr Lemon said yesterday: "The new system uses reactive planning technology originally developed for robotics. But we have adapted it so the computer programs can respond to human conversation."