

California Computer Care

News,
Views,
Tips and
Cool Techniques
for CCC Members

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We
speak
Geek,
so you
don't
have to.

Speak 'n Spell

It's what everyone considers the holy grail of computing: Speech recognition, the ability to have your computer type what you say as you say it. This *Star Trek* concept promises to free us from the burden of typing.

Speech recognition software has existed for desktop computers for nearly ten years, appearing first on the Macintosh. The problem has been that it just didn't work very well. In fact, it worked so poorly, that the marketplace completely ignored it. Only recently have desktop computers become fast enough for speech recognition to actually become *sort of* usable.

Two premium speech recognition products exist for your Macintosh. One is IBM's *Via Voice Enhanced Edition for Mac*, the other is MacSpeech's *iListen 1.0.1*. I've experimented extensively with both products. Here is what I have found.

Via Voice and *iListen* have many similarities. Both require the use of a microphone headset. Both take about four hours to install, train and set up. Both put up a small floating control window that sits on top of all other windows and frequently needs to be moved out of the way. Both require that you speak punctuation, saying "comma," "period" and so forth. Both are large applications, taking about 250 megabytes of hard disk space. Both require a fast computer (300MHz or faster), 64MB to 96MB of RAM and at least Mac OS 9. And, both are extremely frustrating to use.

Via Voice is limited in that it can only "accurately" dictate into its own special word processing program. While IBM claims that it can also be used with *AppleWorks*, *Microsoft Word* and a few other applications, accuracy is so poor that I found it

unusable. Training was smooth and easy, though boring. Accuracy in *Via Voice's* word processor is about 65%. Accuracy in *AppleWorks* was about 20%. *Via Voice* does allow the correction of mistakes using voice commands, *iListen* does not (this will be added in the 1.1 upgrade), but I found that correcting by voice was so clumsy that it was far more efficient to fix errors using the keyboard (and I am not a touch typist; I rely on hunt and peck for typing). However, if you forgo corrections using *Via Voice's* correction capabilities, *Via Voice* will not be able to learn from its mistakes and improve its accuracy (so IBM claims). *Via Voice Enhanced Edition for Mac* costs \$129.95, USB headset microphone included. An earlier version, *Via Voice Millennium Edition*, \$89.95, is still available, but does not include the ability to work in other applications or provide the limited voice command capabilities of the *Enhanced Edition*.

iListen, on the other hand, is able to work in any application or dialog box; any place where you would type in words or numbers. Accuracy was about the same in all tested applications. Training was not boring as the training module crashed repeatedly requiring a restart each time. Accuracy is similar to *Via Voice*, about 65%. *iListen* also allows more control of your Mac: you can open and save, title, print, do virtually any mouse action by just speaking the correct commands; unfortunately you have to memorized those commands or fill a large portion of your screen with a window showing the commands. *iListen* is also fully *AppleScript* compatible. *iListen 1.0.1* costs \$129.95, microphone not included.

Here are best case examples of *iListen* and *Via Voice* working with the same Thomas Paine

quote (from *The American Crisis, Number 1*, 1776). After training and tuning both applications for best performance, the quote was read six times to each.

First of all the actual quote:

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as freedom should not be highly rated.

Via Voice's best try (errors in red):

These of the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands ready, (...) like hell, is not easily conquered; it we have this consolation with this, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. Well we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dear

to us only that does every thing it's of view. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon it's goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as freedom should not be highly rated.

iListen's best attempt (errors in red):

These are the times that try men's souls. This summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands at now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily Concord; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder to conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we as steam to lightly: It is dear this only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows had a poor proper price upon its goods; and (...) would be strange indeed us of celestial an article as freedom should not be highly rated.

(...) means that a word or words are missing.

Recommendation. The poor performance, difficulty in use and expense of these applications makes it impossible to recommend either to anyone who can use a keyboard, even if poorly. My typing skills are very limited, yet I can

type faster and more accurately than either program.

Both products are supposed to improve in accuracy with use and if so, in a few weeks or months of use, they may be quite valuable. I am going to remove *Via Voice* from my G4, but I will continue to work sporadically with *iListen* and will report on any improvements if they occur.

January Tip—

The new Apple Optical Mouse is a big improvement in many ways over older mice that use rolling balls to keep track of their location. The new mouse isn't susceptible to dirt and lint like its rodentine cousins. However, the Optical Mouse has an Achilles Heel all its own.

The Optical Mouse uses a laser beam to look at the surface upon which it sits. The laser beam tracks the passing of that surface as the mouse moves, but can be confused by fancy mouse pad designs or contrasty grains in wooden table tops. So, if your new Optical Mouse jumps around like a real mouse, give it a nice, plain, no texture, no picture pad to run about on.

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