

Speak 'n Spell II

Back in January 2001, I first looked at the new generation of dictation software.* At that time, the two contenders were IBM's *ViaVoice* and *MacSpeech iListen*. If you take a look at the January 2001 CCC newsletter you will see that neither of these products performed well. As a matter of fact, they were so poor as to be less effective than my usual two finger typing technique. Well, things have changed. *ViaVoice* is no longer owned by IBM and has been relegated to the dustbin of software and *MacSpeech* has created a brand-new product called *Dictate* that really does work.

A little history. Converting spoken words to letters on a computer screen first appeared on our Macs almost 20 years ago. Since then, the technology has been slowly improving, but until recently, it has been pointless for anyone who can type on a keyboard with relative ease. The "holy grail of computing" has been just a dream out of *Star Trek*, until the last few years.

About nine years ago, Dragon software created a new "speech engine" that surpassed all other dictation technologies. Dragon's technology unfortunately, relies upon Intel computer processors to work. But now, Macs are equipped with Intel processors. So, the *MacSpeech* company has been able to license the Dragon speech engine and apply their own command and control technologies to create their new *Dictate* product. In doing so they have brought the first successful speech to text software to our Macs.

Previous dictation software required many hours of boring, frustration-filled training

* CCC News, January 2001:

<http://www.calcompcare.com/news2001.html>

Click on the January link to download.

to be able to work, and even then, it worked poorly. *MacSpeech Dictate* requires only about five minutes of training to be usable. Also, older dictation software could only understand you if you spoke very slowly and very clearly with obvious pauses between words. *Dictate* is smart enough to be able to follow speech that is spoken at a normal, almost conversational, rate. And, while it is possible to speak faster than the words appear on screen, they do catch up to you very quickly. Because of this, I am finding that it is better not to look at the screen while dictating.

Dictate also does a good job with voice commands, like open, close window, print document, etc. This is a function at which *MacSpeech* has excelled for a long time.

So, here is the same test phrase used back in 2001 to test the earlier dictation software. A quote from Thomas Paine writing in the *American Crisis* number one in 1776:

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 everything 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.

As you can see, not one mistake was made by *Dictate* when I read the Thomas Paine quotation. The older dictation software only got about 60% of the quote correct. So even

with text such as this, full of odd punctuation and slightly archaic usage, *Dictate* is able to handle every word, every colon, and every period correctly. Ironically, *Dictate* could not handle speaking the names of punctuation in the previous sentence. But, how often do you actually need to use the names of your punctuation not as punctuation?

Dictate, as does all speech to text software, requires a good microphone and a quiet environment to work well. I recommend a headset microphone even though most Macs have a microphone built right into them. If you are a *Skype* user, your *Skype* headset will work just fine with *Dictate*. If you do not already have a headset, good ones are available at office supply stores, Amazon.com, and computer stores. I can recommend this one:

Plantronics DSP-400 Digitally-Enhanced USB Foldable Stereo Headset

\$48.96 at Amazon.com



The computer requirements for *MacSpeech Dictate* are a bit stiff. You need a Mac with an Intel processor, *Mac OS*

X 10.4.11 or newer, and an internet connection for registration.

MacSpeech Dictate comes in two versions. The basic version is \$199.00. There is also a version and includes a high-quality, wireless microphone for \$349.00. If you have *MacSpeech*'s earlier *iListen* product, there is a discounted crossgrade available for \$79.00.

You can buy *Dictate* from *MacSpeech*:

<http://www.macspeech.com>

or from Amazon.com or your favorite computer store.

I used *Dictate* to write the first draft of this article. It worked extremely well. It also spelled out (pun intended) the many expletives that I muttered when I made a mistake. It even tries to interpret the hems and haws. Fortunately, I edited all of that out!

There is an installation issue. Many early copies of *Dictate* were shipped with flawed disks. This has been corrected.

So, will I continue to use *Dictate*? Maybe. It is fun to play with but it will take some practice to get used to dictating instead of typing and I'm not sure I want to bother. However, if I develop carpal tunnel syndrome or some other disability, *MacSpeech Dictate* will be first on my list of products to use.

April Tip —

Inside almost every computer, there is a small battery. In a Mac this is known as the PRAM battery or the clock battery. As the second name suggests, the function of the battery is to run your Mac's clock (it also preserves your preferences such as printer choice). The battery does its job when your Mac has no other source of power, like during an electrical outage or if your Mac is unplugged.

The PRAM battery will last about 5 years of normal use. However, if you unplug your Mac or turn off your surge protector, you may shorten the life of the battery to a year or less. Replacing the battery will cost about \$35.00, so you may want to leave that surge protector turned on.

Most laptops have dispensed with the PRAM battery. Instead they have a capacitor to serve this function and therefore they are dependent on the main battery to keep going in powerless conditions. So, keep your Macbook or Macbook Pro charged up and ready.

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