

Dictation for the Mac User

A new option could loosen the Windows stranglehold

Desktop dictation has traditionally been PC-based software. Certainly it has seen its greatest success in the Windows world. That's not to say that Mac users lacked options; it's just that their options were limited.

In the 1990s, there was Power Secretary and, ironically, IBM had a Macintosh-compatible version of ViaVoice. But Power Secretary was a discrete speech program and, although a new-and-improved version was announced for 1997, the new release never materialized and Power Secretary became a legacy app. IBM stopped supporting ViaVoice several years ago, but licensed the software to what is now Nuance Communications, which continues to sell the product. For desktop dictation on the Mac, that, as they say, was that.

There were, of course, unusual exceptions. In the late 1990s, a client of mine needed a solution. He was required to use a Mac because of his business environment but really needed to dictate because of his very poor typing skills.

After speech recognition companies Dragon Systems and Kurzweil Applied Intelligence told us it couldn't be done, we set out to find a way to make Windows-based dictation software run on a Mac.

We installed a PC Card in his Mac and used Windows 95 terminal emulation software, among other software. Thousands of dollars and many hours later, it worked. A click of an icon on the Mac launched Windows. Then another click to launch Kurzweil and he was off and dictating. My client had the financial resources to find a solution, but most people either don't have the budget or don't want to expend that much effort tweaking a product for their personal use.

Recently, if someone wanted to dictate on a Mac he had a couple of options: ViaVoice, iListen from MacSpeech, or Dragon NaturallySpeaking from Nuance, with some sort of Windows emulation.

iListen, using the now more than 12-year-old Philips speech engine, was a continuous speech program, but dictation was sluggish and most users were required to invest significant time training the computer. Accordingly, iListen's biggest market was users who were highly motivated, purchasing the software because they needed a tool to replace their hands. It was not an attractive solution for users who wanted dictation for the cool factor.

If a Mac user wanted to take advantage of Dragon NaturallySpeaking's functionality, she would have to use an Intel-based Mac, install Parallels or Boot Camp, and Windows, and

then install Dragon NaturallySpeaking on the Windows side. She would not have access to the Mac side of the computer while dictating. "That's how compelling the [Dragon] engine is, that people would bother doing all that," says Naomi Pearce, a spokesperson for MacSpeech.

Now MacSpeech has harnessed the power of the NaturallySpeaking engine in a new product, MacSpeech Dictate. The product, requiring OS/10 and an Intel processor, offers increased accuracy and decreased training time as compared to iListen.

MacSpeech Dictate allows users to dictate into applications, select text, and navigate by voice, but requires them to

make corrections the old-fashioned way using the mouse or keyboard. A free update incorporating voice correction should be available within weeks. Users should keep in mind that because MacSpeech Dictate is a version 1 product, it is more rudimentary than NaturallySpeaking, which is a version 9 release.

MacSpeech did not release information regarding the current number of iListen users or how many users it anticipates will purchase the first release of Dictate. But the company believes that promoting a real alternative to dictating in Windows is an obvious move because as many as 16 percent of current computer users are on Macs and by 2010 nearly 25 percent of the American population will use assistive technology, including speech recognition.

The industry still does not have a competitive environment regarding research and development of desktop dictation; both products use Nuance's engine. But if Dictate can meet the expectations of the manufacturer and the needs of the public, it will fill a long-existent gap, offering computer users a real choice as to computer platforms. If that happens, it will be interesting to see how many people will switch to (or back to) Macs.

Andrew Taylor, founder of MacSpeech, emphasizes that people who use Macs with Windows emulation and Dragon are doing so because they have to. He believes the running speech natively on a Mac offers a solution that is more productive, more robust, and easier to maintain. Taylor remains committed to moving speech forward on the Mac. As he says, "I don't do Windows." ☒

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