



GeekSpeak

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On the Way to Out-Geeking Yourself

There are a lot of complaints

that speech recognition—the ability to dictate to your computer—is geeky technology, but I think the very opposite is true. How geeky is it to hack on a keyboard to make your computer understand what you are trying to say? Think about it. It makes so much more sense to be able to speak to your computer, dictate text, and navigate through programs. And the only geeky part about it is that we are not used to it and that it works—kind of.

Although I like speech recognition, I am not a “purist.” I use it only when I think I need to speed things up a little, when I have a text that is well suited, or when my fingers just do not work the way I want them to (which, unfortunately, happens more often than I care to admit). But even when I use speech recognition, I do not unplug my keyboard or simply *refuse* to use it. Some things are just more practical to do on the keyboard, and this is particularly true if you need to switch between languages, which, obviously, is quite common for translators. The program I use—Dragon NaturallySpeaking, available at www.nuance.com—supports at least the native language and English in the Dutch, German, Spanish, Italian, French, and Japanese editions; however, unloading one language and reloading the other takes at least a couple of minutes.

So, which texts are well suited—or better, which texts are *not* well suited for speech recognition? The answer to this depends partly on your particular translation subject. For me, speech recognition does not work with text containing a lot of proper names and/or loan words. This does not mean that you cannot teach the program to recognize the proper names and loan words, but it is one of those judgment things. If you want to use speech recognition (or anything else for that

matter) to become more effective, you had better make sure that you truly are increasing productivity. If you have to spend an hour to train the software to recognize a bunch of new terms before translating for an hour and a half on a job that would have otherwise taken you only two hours, that seems like wasted time to me. Plus, while I enjoy translating, I can think of better things to do than training speech recognition software. On the other hand, if I can expect that these proper names and loan words will occur in future projects, I may just as well spend the time to train the software.

My first rule for success when working with speech recognition software will probably have the “purists” shaking their heads in agony. After having used speech recognition for some time, I know some of the weak spots of my speech engine (or my pronunciation). Rather than using the “correct” function again and again, I prefer to type those problem terms even while dictating the rest.

My next rule is to take some time to get used to not “thinking with your fingers.” Instead, try to preformulate longer segments and then speak them coherently for better results.

This goes right along with the next kind of texts that are not well suited for speech recognition—those with a lot of formatting. It is hard to speak formatting commands naturally. Depending on what kind of translation environment tool you are working with and how formatting is handled by the tool, it may be easier to use the keyboard shortcuts for those functions that you are used to. If there is really a LOT of formatting, it may be easier to just type the whole thing.

Now, technically, there is no formatting function or other fancy maneuver that your speech recognition cannot do. That is, if you have the

right version. When it comes to Dragon NaturallySpeaking, the Preferred version comes with all the basic formatting in environments like MS Word or its own editor, DragonPad. When you use a translation environment tool that makes you work in an interface other than Word, you will have a hard time doing everything with voice commands unless you have the Professional edition, in which you can easily write macros with virtually unlimited possibilities. The problem is that while the Preferred version has a relatively modest price tag, the Professional version does not. Once you have the Professional version, you can either stay there and pay premium prices for upgrades because you are interested in the slightly better recognition that typically comes with each new version, or you can go the cheap route, downgrading at some point but then losing all your macros. That is the problem that I am stuck with in Dragon, so I am not running the latest version (9.5 with Vista compatibility).

And while we are talking about Vista, many of you have probably heard that one of the new features of Vista is internal voice recognition. I am sure that many of you have also seen the hilarious video on the official MS demonstration of the new feature gone bad: www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Y_Jp6PxsSQ. Well, I tested it for the first time this week and I was

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The GeekSpeak column has two goals: to inform the community about technological advances and at the same time encourage the use and appreciation of technology among translation professionals. Jost also publishes a free technical newsletter for translators (www.internationalwriters.com/toolkit).