

# Voice technology translates his speech to words

I am not writing this column.

Instead, I am speaking it. I am wearing a headset, much like the earnest-looking young people selling long-distance telephone services in those TV commercials. I am speaking words into a microphone and, almost instantaneously, words are appearing on my computer screen. But the problem is these words are not necessarily the same words that I speak. Despite the claims of the makers of this voice recognition program of 90 percent and better recognition, my initial experiment is more like 50 or 60 percent.



MIKE WENDLAND

The particular system that I am using for this experiment is from IBM and called ViaVoice. I'm using it because it came bundled on my new IBM Aptiva computer, and since it came as part of the package, I might as well give it a try.

How does it work? Not very well. It's taken me the better part of 45 minutes to write just the words you see up to this point. I have to keep going back and manually correcting the words ViaVoice gets wrong.

The on-line help feature that came with the application tells me that it takes some time for the program to recognize my particular speech patterns and for me to get the hang of dictating. Trust me, that is an understatement.

I'm lucky to get even a single sentence out of my mouth and onto the computer screen before

having to go back and correct it.

Here's an example. The actual sentence I spoke that you just read above initially came out as: "I'm not key to get even as swindle out of mammoth and to the computer scream before having to go back and crack it."

I don't know whether I should laugh at how funny ViaVoice translates me, or cry because of how frustrating it is to have to go back and correct the mistakes. I know I am sorely tempted, though, to truly crack this screen.

This is not fun.

ViaVoice says every time I go back and type in the correct word for the bungled word, ViaVoice "learns."

And it does indeed seem to get that word right more often than not afterwards. But it is a slow process.

Frankly, I just don't have the

time to "teach" ViaVoice what I'm saying. Counting the installation process, the set-up and testing and now the dictating of this column, I've been messing with this program for close to two hours now, and my patience is wearing thin. I usually enjoy writing this column. Doing it this way, "talking" my column out, is taking twice the time it should.

This is the second time I've had experience with voice recognition technology. A year or so ago, I tried out Dragon's "Naturally Speaking" system. To "train" that program, I read into my headset microphone a long excerpt from a book for about 30 minutes. That excerpt was in the "Naturally Speaking" application memory and as I followed along the on-screen prompts, it seemed to match up my pronunciation of each word with what its memory

said it should be.

But when all was said and done, when I actually started to use the system, I experienced the same frustrations I'm now encountering with IBM's ViaVoice.

Now, all that said, I suspect that if you are already used to using one of those business voice recorders for secretarial transcription, you may have a much better experience. Both the IBM and Dragon systems are available with optional add-on specialized medical and legal dictionaries, as well as equipment that interfaces with dictation gear and lets you play tape-recordings through your computer for automatic translation.

Also, to be very fair, dictating, rather than typing, is something that takes a lot of getting used to in terms of expressing yourself.

Having to say "comma" or "period" or "question mark" instead of letting your fingers fly to the keyboard just does not come naturally.

In other words, I'm not a very patient person.

So for me, two hours of frustration is enough. I'm unplugging the headset. Someday, I suspect, as voice technology improves and really takes hold, I'm sure I'll be considered a dinosaur as I peek away on a crude keyboard.

But for now, I'm sticking to what works best for me.

Mike Wendland covers technology and the Internet for NBC Television stations coast-to-coast and is heard talking about computers every Saturday and Sunday from 4-6 p.m. on AM1270 WXYZ in Detroit. He can be reached through his Web site at [www.pcmike.com](http://www.pcmike.com)

## Diversity was focus

It sounded like a great idea, but maybe was a little too ambitious, said Mary Drapal, student assistance coordinator at Walled Lake Central High School.

But they did it. The students were taking part in the school Leadership/Communication Camp and chose to hold a cultural festival as their program project.

The 10 students in the group focused on four ethnic groups: Hispanics, Jews, Chaldeans and African-Americans. They presented information about the different cultures, including samples of different foods in four booths in the school gym on Feb. 26. They even had dance demonstrations.

"It was entirely student driven," Drapal said. The students researched the different cultures on the Internet and prepared the program.

"We wanted to make everyone aware of how everyone is different but all similar," said Mary Rabaut, a junior who helped coordinate the program with fellow student

## WALLED LAKE SCHOOLS

Arielle Davis.

"We had a great turnout," she said. About 400 students from the school attended the event.

"It came off better than we could have hoped," Drapal said.

In all, about 60 students divided into 10 groups make up the Leadership/Communication Camp.

"I was really pleased," said Pete Rabaut, a literature teacher. "They had everything from song and dance to food, art and sculpture," Rabaut said.

The students presentation fit in well with the themes of literature that he teaches, Rabaut said. And the students demonstrated the type of leadership the program promotes.

"We're hoping that through leadership we can have a better understanding of each other," Rabaut said.

## MILITARY NEWS

Aaron J. Eckert has joined the Army under the Delayed Entry Program at the Army Recruiting Station, Pontiac.

The program gives young men and women the opportunity to delay entering active duty for up to one year.

The enlistment gives a new soldier the option to learn a new skill, travel and become eligible to receive as much as \$60,000

toward a college education. After completion of basic military training, soldiers receive advanced individual training in their career specialty.

Eckert, a student at North Farmington High School, Farmington Hills, will report to Fort Leonard Wood, Waynesville, Mo., for basic training July 29.

He is the son of Claudia Lee Farmington Hills.

## STATE CAPITOL CAPSULES

### Fight renewed

Rep. Valde Garcia, R-St. Johns, has taken up a battle fought for years by former Sen. David Honigman, R-West Bloomfield — a bill to block cities from imposing residency requirements on firefighters. Garcia's bill also would prevent residency from being a consideration in promotion.

A freshman who succeeded Alan Cropsey in the House, Garcia complained that local regulations are so onerous that "some cities have even taken to spying on their employees. People reported seeing (private) investigators peering through their windows and following them around as they ran family errands."

Detroit and 75 other cities have residency rules. Honigman

argued the rule are obsolete because so many husbands and wives both have jobs but in different municipalities.

Twin bills to allow Michigan to ban the importing of trash if Congress allows it have been introduced into both chambers of the Legislature — by Loren Bennett, R-Canton, in the Senate, and Bruce Patterson, R-Canton, in the House. The bills would apply to Michigan landfills. The problem: Out-of-state waste imports are governed by the federal Interstate Commerce Act, and the U.S. Congress would have to permit state law to supersede federal law.

### Voter file panel

Nine city and county clerks — including Kathryn Dornan of Farmington Hills — have been

named to a special advisory committee on Michigan's "qualified voter file," a statewide electronic voter registration database and elections management system.

"Because the QVF plays such a critical role at the local level," said Secretary of State Candice Miller, "it is essential to make sure it is meeting the needs and expectations of local clerks."

Prior to the QVF, said Miller, 1,700 clerks kept voter registration rolls. The statewide file allowed elimination of 600,000 duplicate or "dendwood" voter registrations — about 1/10th of the total.

### Economy good

The Senate Fiscal Agency had a glowing report on the Michigan economy in February:

Wage and salary employment in December was up 1.6 percent from a year earlier. Gainers were services, construction and retail trade.

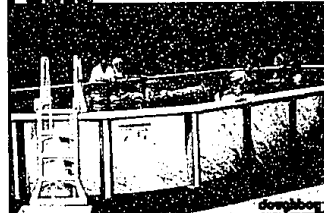
The consumer price index in Detroit rose 0.1 percent in December from October and 2.6 percent from a year earlier. Biggest increases were in education, tobacco and medical care. Declining were housing and transportation.

Unemployment rates ranged from a low of 1.8 percent in the Ann Arbor market to 7.6 percent in the northern counties of Alcona and Iosco. The Detroit metropolitan statistical area reported 2.9 percent. State average was 3.4 percent, down 0.1 percent from a year earlier. The national rate was 4.3 percent in January.

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