

**Dictating Emails and Letters,
Using Voice Recognition Software**
Dragon NaturallySpeaking Software by Nuance

By, Veronica Valero, GGCS Member

Last November, I injured my shoulder while shoveling topsoil into my garden. I could not drive, I could not cook, I could not garden, and worst of all I could not type with two hands. That meant I had to hunt and peck with one hand to write e-mails, type correspondences, create spreadsheets and do a myriad of many other computer tasks, slowly and inefficiently.

Not only did this experience, make me feel old, it also frightened me on many levels: suddenly I felt vulnerable and realized that there was a reason we had two hands. They work together as a pair! Fortunately, after a cortisone shot for my rotator cuff injury, I regained mobility. But, now my shoulder is vulnerable to injury. And, as a Computer Tutor, I do depend on my computer for my livelihood—if I re-injure my shoulder again, it will have negative financial consequences!

Then I thought about my senior clients who had arthritis, Parkinson's disease, back problems, and other mobility and visual issues; suddenly, finding a computer application to help those with disabilities has become paramount.

A few years ago, I heard about Dragon NaturallySpeaking software by Nuance that allows users to send e-mails and create documents by dictating to their computers. The software program also reads back to you, which is of value to the vision impaired. Because of my recent "aging" injury experience, I decided to look into Dragon.

System Requirements

Nuance has five versions of Dragon NaturallySpeaking ranging from the basic for \$99 to legal and medical versions costing over \$1,500. Regardless of version, your operating system should have one of these specs: Windows 2000 with Service Pack 4 or higher, Windows XP Home or Professional with Service Pack 2 or higher, or Windows Vista Home or Professional with Service Pack 1. Your computer also must have a DVD player. Make sure you visit the manufacturer's website (www.nuance.com) to learn of other system requirements before purchasing this software.

Installation of the "Professional" Version

Everything was going well until I had to test the headphones (which come with the program) and dictate in order to train Dragon to my voice. I was stuck on one of its steps, which told me to press a button that I could not see in its window. I restarted the software, read through all the literature, and went to their website, but I found no solution. No phone number was listed on their literature or on the box for support, but I was able to locate it on their website. I spoke to two tech support representatives. It took about 20 minutes to resolve the problem: it was my computer system—the Display DPI setting needed to be adjusted: Right click on the desktop, select *Properties*, click on the *Settings* tab, click on the *Advanced* button, select *General* tab, and under the "DPI setting" dropdown menu select "*Large size (120 DPI)*", press "*Ok*". I was informed this was not a common problem, and a fix was not on their website. Calling was the

right thing to do—but expensive, since they do not have an 800 number, are located in Massachusetts and are open only from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM PST. Once you register the software, you have three months of free technical phone support (not including phone bill) After that, you pay for phone support.

The Fun Begins

Before you can dictate, you must first check the microphone and "Train the User." You also need to "Setup Accuracy Tuning." This involves reading text using the headset microphone that came with the application. The next critical step is going through the tutorial.

You will find the Tutorial in the Help menu. The core topics include: getting started, basic dictation, correction, and applications. What I love about the tutorials are the video demonstrations followed by a "try it" where you actually duplicate what you saw: a very effective training method. Each tutorial also gives additional dictation guidelines. What I don't like about the tutorial, is that it does not have more topics and you have to use the written "Help Topics" found in the Help menu of the software to learn more. There is a PDF User Guide that is on the software DVD. But, the poor retrieval instructions only make it possible for experienced users to possibly locate it. It's easier to go online and download it—if you know how.

Training Dragon: Training the User

Once you have trained Dragon NaturallySpeaking (the Dragon) to recognize your voice patterns and inflections, and once you have been trained on how to use the program, you can open up a word-processing program, like Microsoft Word and start talking. It will type what it hears—and at the beginning, it doesn't hear too well—which often caused me to laugh! For example, when I said, "vulnerable", I did not announce the "l" well enough and it typed, "unfolding Robel." I tried again. It then typed, "the owner of all"! And, when I laughed, it typed, "the the the the"! Then again, when I spoke the word, "aging," it typed "aid gene"! I kept adjusting the mike for better reception. The literature for the software promises 99% accuracy, but I think that's after you've established a "relationship" with the Dragon and it's gotten to learn your speech pattern.

The literature also said that this program can handle accents, and speech impediments. Not sure which one I have, but I am assured that the more I train the Dragon by regularly using the "Accuracy Center" tool and dictating preset stories to the application, it will build its knowledge-base of my annunciation patterns. At one point I was getting very mad at the application and was going to dictate some not-so-nice words, but then I found out that I forgot to plug in the mike headset and the Dragon was picking up my voice from my computer mike about 20" away.

In addition to dictating what you want to type, you need to give commands to the Dragon. For example, to choose words you want to bold, you will need to say, "Select" and then speak the word or phrase you want to bold. Then, you say, "**Bold!**" Then, you need to tell it to go to the end of the line or some other location in the document—which I kept forgetting exactly how to say, and so I often "cheated" by using the mouse to position the insertion point, and then continued dictating. Also, anytime you want to put in a period, comma, quote, question mark, exclamation point, or any other formatting features, you need to give an exact *firm* command. And if you don't do it right, it types out the command!

This is not a plug-and-play software application. It's a language you are going to have to learn. It took about 1 hour to learn the basics after the set up. And, it took extra time in reading the literature to remember and learn more. It can be slow and frustrating. The headset that came with the software also started hurting my temple. I suggest investing in a high-quality headset. I also got a sore throat from talking a lot, and I had to dictate in a quiet room, without my noisy 8-1/2 year old around.

Which Dragon Version for You?

Each of the five versions can do the following: accurate speech recognition, create and edit documents, send e-mail and instant messages, and surf the web—all by voice. All versions also support Microsoft Word, Internet Explorer, AOL, WordPerfect applications. The **Standard** Version costs \$99. The **Preferred** version costs \$199. In addition, Preferred support includes Outlook Express and Excel. It also adds voice shortcuts to perform tasks faster and the ability to dictate into a handheld recorder for later transcription. The **Professional** version costs \$899. It adds Outlook, PowerPoint, Lotus Notes, Mozilla Firefox, Mozilla Thunderbird, InfoPath, and Section 508 certified applications. Professional also adds full network capabilities for multiple users, and combined commands to perform complex tasks. The **Legal** and **Medical** versions start at \$1600 and they add legal and medical vocabularies respectively, in addition to other features. Most versions also come in several languages: Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish. If you want wireless with a Bluetooth headset, or a mobile and digital recorder, there are additional expenses. For Macintosh users check out MacSpeech Dictate for \$199 by MacSpeech, Inc.

If you are considering purchasing any of these applications, I highly recommend visiting Nuance's website (www.nuance.com) to compare the differences.

Making it Better

There is always room for improvements. What Dragon NaturallySpeaking definitely lacks is hardcopy "cheat sheets" of the commands, which Nuance could have included in the box. You need to memorize a lot of commands. And, it's frustrating when you can't remember. I tried to guess many times—but if you say things wrong, you'll be saying a lot of "scratch that" which is the verbal command for "Undo." You can say, "What can I say?" And a window will open up listing some basic commands for that application. But, it didn't always have what I was looking for. Hard copy cheat sheets can reduce the stress level for the new user.

For novice computer users, this will be a hard application to learn if you don't understand computer basics, which is confirmed by some of my novice clients who have purchased the application, but have kept it on their shelves. Nuance would benefit the user by providing more basic instructions for computer novices.

Amazing Software

Nuance's selling point is that you can dictate at 120 words a minute versus the 40 words a minute that most people type. But, thoughts don't always roll out at 120 words a minute. I wrote this review mostly using the Dragon, but I paused a lot while deciding how to compose my sentences. And, I did the editing the old-fashioned way because it was quicker. Nuance markets this application to professionals as a way to work more efficiently. But, this application can help

other users as well: such as those with mobility and cognitive challenges, as well as for those with learning and visual impairment.

Dragon does take time getting used to. Sometimes I got tired of speaking or frustrated when I forgot commands when I tried to edit the text. So I used the mouse and typed. But, for those who many not have this option—Dragon SpeakingNaturally is a gift from heaven, and it is a truly amazing application that I plan to master and share with some of my clients who would benefit from it.

Star Rating: 4 Stars!

Veronica C. Valero is a Golden Gate Computer Society member and started her own computer tutoring business seven years ago in Marin County California. For more info www.ComputerTutorMarin.com or 415-897-2302.