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## Full Story - Voice Recognition Software Consumer Report

**Source:** <http://www.consumersearch.com/www/software/voice-recognition-software/fullstory.html>

**Dated:** October 2005

**NB:** Prices listed are quoted in US Dollars (USD) in this article.

### Review

The best reviews of voice-recognition software compare the two market leaders, ScanSoft Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8 and IBM ViaVoice 10 (now also marketed by ScanSoft). Reviews from Federal Computer Week, PC Magazine and The Boston Globe top our All Reviews chart as the most credible reviews we could find in this category. These publications get picky with each title, testing for accuracy, speed and ease of use. This is no small consideration when it takes up to thirty minutes just to get voice-recognition software up and running -- more if you want to improve accuracy. All three reviews say Dragon NaturallySpeaking easily trumps IBM ViaVoice in both areas.

Most reviews agree that voice-recognition software (VRS) is initially time consuming, but accuracy and ease-of-use have now improved so much that it may finally be worth the investment of time and money. If you have to choose one program, reviews agree ScanSoft's Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8 (\*est. \$90 to \$700 USD, depending on version) is best. It's accurate, intuitive, easy to use and consumes less of your computing resources in comparison to its competitors. According to a review by Cade Metz in PC Magazine, "Speech recognition has never been this good."

The fact that Dragon NaturallySpeaking wins out over IBM's ViaVoice is especially ironic since both products had early development in IBM's Yorktown Heights, NY, research facility. IBM let some employees out of the tent, and they formed Dragon to eventually beat the giant in a quality battle.

Until the introduction of MacSpeech's iListen (\*est. \$85 to \$130 USD, depending on version), IBM ViaVoice for Mac (\*est. \$115 USD) was the only voice-recognition software available to Macintosh users. In the reviews we found, testers prefer iListen to IBM ViaVoice for Mac. Charles W. Moore, contributing editor to Applelinks.com, says that iListen 1.6.8 bests ViaVoice because it's easier to use and install. Moore says iListen is better for entering text in any application -- not just a word processor -- than ViaVoice. In a review for Macworld, Dennis Sellers also likes this feature (called TalkAnywhere), which "lets you dictate anywhere you'd normally type." iListen comes in two versions. The pricier version of iListen 1.6.8 (\*est. \$130 USD) comes with a headset, and the standard iListen 1.6.8 (\*est. \$85 USD) is just the software. The latest version revision works with OS X Panther

### Dragon NaturallySpeaking is easily the best voice-recognition software

Voice recognition software (VRS), also known as speech-recognition, automatic speech recognition, ASR or natural language recognition software, converts your voice to text on a computer. In essence, what this means is that you can create text files without typing. When you speak through a microphone (most voice-recognition software includes this accessory), the software "translates" the sounds into written words.

Many first-generation voice-recognition packages used discrete speech technology, which meant you had to pause between words in order for the computer to understand them. The latest generation uses continuous speech technology, which allows you to speak more naturally. All require an enrollment process, during which you sit at the computer and read sample text out loud to help train the speech-recognition software to understand your voice patterns. While most voice-recognition software users want a large vocabulary in their software package, the larger the vocabulary, the more time-consuming

the training process. That's because many words sound similar, and you need to train the computer to understand how you pronounce them.

Dragon NaturallySpeaking claims a 99% accuracy rate in optimal conditions, though reviews say 95% is probably closer to reality. In a review at PC Magazine, IBM ViaVoice reached only a 70% accuracy rate, and in tests at The Boston Globe, reviewer Naomi Aoki simply didn't get the same comic misinterpretations with NaturallySpeaking as she did with ViaVoice. With Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8, you can use natural language strings (e.g., "print file," "open browser") to edit documents and work around your desktop. Reviews say Dragon integrates easily with leading Windows applications, including Microsoft Word, Outlook Express, Internet Explorer and AOL Instant Messenger.

Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8 is available in five different versions, all of which contain a microphone in addition to the software. The two least expensive versions are suitable for most users. Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8 Standard (\*est. \$90 USD) is designed for personal use, and you can transcribe into browsers, AOL Instant Messenger, Outlook Express, MS Word and WordPerfect word processors. Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8 Preferred (\*est. \$170 USD) adds compatibility with Microsoft Excel, as well as support for digital audio recorders. With a compatible device, you can dictate into a small recorder, and download the transcribed text file into your computer. Very limited macro creation tools are included within Preferred; macros let you create combined functions that can be executed by a single command.

Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8 Professional (\*est. \$700 USD) adds support for MS Outlook, PowerPoint and Lotus Notes. The Professional version also provides complete hands-free use of a PC, including mouse control by voice. Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8 Medical (\*est. \$950 USD) and Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8 Legal (\*est. \$950 USD) are each designed specifically for the medical and legal worlds. They allow professionals to streamline the transcription process, thereby saving time and money. Each comes with expanded vocabularies specific to those professions. The medical version can be used with any of thirteen different specialties.

IBM's ViaVoice 10 offers three different levels of voice-recognition ability. The Standard version (\*est. \$45 USD) provides dictation and basic command and control features, along with simple Internet navigation. The Advanced version (\*est. \$70 USD) provides support for some PDAs, dictation and command and control for many applications, including the Office XP suite. Macro "voice shortcuts" are introduced in the Advanced version along with natural language commands and a voice mouse. The top of the line ViaVoice Professional (\*est. \$160 USD) offers more customized templates and macro "voice shortcuts."

But according to reviews, IBM's ViaVoice lags behind Dragon NaturallySpeaking in overall accuracy and breadth of functions. Interestingly, ScanSoft bought the rights to ViaVoice, so Dragon's parent company now owns the competition. We'll be interested to see if ScanSoft continues to market ViaVoice alongside Dragon NaturallySpeaking. Experts say there's just no doubt that Dragon is the better product, at least for Windows users. Charles W. Moore reports in Applelinks.com that the IBM ViaVoice development team was officially disbanded in April 2003.

If you blanch at paying so much for Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice-recognition software, you should know that if you have Windows Office XP, your computer already has some speech-recognition capacity of its own.

Microsoft is careful when describing its speech recognition function, saying it's most likely to benefit users in China and Japan who need to create documents and e-mails in English, since writing in another alphabet normally involves employing a dizzying array of menus and character lists. For English-speaking users, Microsoft notes, "Most skilled typists will find that dictation for U.S. English is unlikely to be better than typing, and Office XP does not address some of the more advanced requirements of the accessibility community."

While it doesn't sound like Microsoft is lining itself up to compete with NaturallySpeaking or ViaVoice, if you have MS Office XP installed on your computer, you'll get to try some voice recognition for free. Office XP speech recognition works pretty much like other voice-recognition software; you need to put in some training time with a microphone for optimal performance.

For the assisted technology market, a product from Commodo, Inc. shows great promise and provides interesting competition to the current voice-recognition market leaders. QPointer Voice (\*est. \$180 USD) isn't so much a voice-recognition product as it is a voice-operated navigation tool. Even Yizhar Hon,

Director of Sales and Marketing at Commodo admits that Dragon NaturallySpeaking gets much better dictation accuracy. QPointer Voice differs from standard voice-recognition technology because the software itself analyzes what is displayed on the monitor and intuitively identifies those objects. The user can then navigate through the screen by verbally 'pointing' at those words, graphics and controls. QPointer Voice also allows the user to use any combination of the mouse, keyboard and voice controls. This means users can Web surf, click on links with voice commands, and navigate the Internet hands-free -- applications that are not the primary strengths of Dragon NaturallySpeaking or ViaVoice software.

Ultimately, the creators of QPointer hope that their software can be integrated with existing speech-recognition software to create both accurate dictation and hands-free Web surfing. But right now, this product is in its infancy. If you are more interested in hands-free Web navigation and Internet functionality, QPointer is an innovative product. If you are mainly interested in dictating documents to avoid typing, however, Dragon NaturallySpeaking is a better choice.

*(Note from Spectronics at May 2006 - QPointer Voice is no longer available in Australia)*

A rising number of shareware packages are also available on the market, including Voice Studio (\*est. \$30 USD) and Realize Voice Lite 4.0 (\*est. \$50 USD). Both of these are available for download at CNet's Download.com. It remains to be seen whether or not they will offer any significant competition to the mainstream products, and we did not see any reviews of these packages.

### Voice recognition for PDAs and phones

There are a couple of products on the market that work with PDAs and smartphones. Microsoft Voice Command (\*est. \$35 USD) lets owners of PocketPC PDAs and smartphones (running Windows Mobile 2003 and Windows Mobile 2003 Phone Edition) to perform many hands-free functions, such as looking up contacts and calendar information, operating MP3 and media-player functions and voice dialing. While owners say it works well enough, Voice Command can't transcribe much of anything. It can't transcribe e-mail or text messages, for example. Reviews at CNet.com say it does work well for its intended functions, however.

VoiceSignal VoiceMode is included in a handful of Samsung cell phones, including the Samsung P207 (for Cingular). You can't purchase VoiceMode separately, but if you own (or buy) one of these phones, you can use VoiceMode to transcribe text and e-mail messages in addition to hands-free dialing and other voice commands.

Dragon NaturallySpeaking Preferred comes closest to PDA voice-recognition, but you still can't use it to dictate e-mails or text messages. You can use your Tungsten or PocketPC PDA's voice recorder, then later, when you sync with your computer, the voice data will be transcribed. We're still waiting for a voice-recognition product that will let users dictate e-mails or text messages into a PDA or smartphone.

### Important voice-recognition software features

When considering which speech-recognition package is right for you, experts say to take the following into account:

- **Look for a vocabulary of at least 150,000 words, as well as the ability to add at least another 75,000 words of your own.**
- **Make sure the package will work with the software programs you use most frequently (Microsoft Word, Corel, etc.).** For instance, the Standard version of Dragon NaturallySpeaking won't work with Excel; for that you need the Preferred version. Only the \$700 (USD) Professional version works with MS Outlook, PowerPoint and Lotus Notes.
- **It's often easier to use common sense (i.e., "natural language") phrases like "insert here" for editing purposes, rather than more complicated commands.** The phrase "natural" or "free" indicates this feature.
- **Training the software to recognize the way you speak can be tedious.** Look for an easy and quick enrollment (ideally less than 15 minutes) that can be repeated as often as you need to improve accuracy. The more time you spend "teaching" the software, the higher the accuracy rate.

- **Make sure the headset is comfortable and the microphone is in a position that works for you rather than for the software.** Good microphones take into account a normal level of background noise.

## Consensus Report

Our Consensus Report shows how many times products are top-ranked by reviewers included in our All The Reviews Reviewed chart.

# of Picks	Model	Prices from Shopping.com
11	Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8 (Standard, Preferred, Professional, Medical)	est. \$90 to \$950 USD depending on which version
2	MacSpeech iListen	est. \$85 to \$130 USD
1	QPointer Voice*	

*\*(Note from Spectronics at May 2006 - QPointer Voice is no longer available in Australia)*

The numbers in our chart point out the obvious: Dragon, the company that's always held the lead in the consumer end of the industry, is still tops in reviews.

## Manufacturers and Resellers Web sites:

Nuance (Dragon NaturallySpeaking and IBM ViaVoice): <http://www.nuance.com/>

Voice Perfect Systems (Dragon NaturallySpeaking and IBM ViaVoice):  
<http://www.voiceperfect.com.au>

MacSpeech (iListen): <http://macspeech.com/>

Microsoft Voice Command:  
<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsmobile/downloads/voicecommand/default.mspix>

Vista Voice Recognition: <http://blogs.technet.com/chenley/archive/2006/02/21/420136.aspx>  
<http://www.pro-networks.org/forum/viewstory.php?t=75117>  
<http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/sr/Vista-vs-Xp.htm>

## This article was prepared by ConsumerSearch - Who are they?

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