

The Library, Sturgeon's Law, and the Internet

by Frank Dietz © 2001
<http://www1.jump.net/~fdietz>

SOME READERS OF PAST COLUMNS might consider me a bibliophobe, but that is a completely wrong impression. In fact, I am avid consumer of random-access, carbon-based permanent information storage systems, aka *books*. I also visit my neighborhood library frequently. Recently, I noticed that the library parking lot seemed to be getting fuller and fuller. I asked a librarian why this might be the case, and she pointed towards the four Internet terminals set up in a corner of the library. These apparently have developed into a major drawing point for libraries.

Internet terminals aren't the only way libraries are "wired" these days. You can also use your library card as an admission ticket to a world of online information, either on-site or by remote access. The Austin Public Library system, for instance, offers its patrons access to numerous online databases, among them *Academic Search Premier* ("a scholarly collection of peer-reviewed full-text journals covering nearly all academic areas of study"), the *Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, *ERIC*; *Reference USA*, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

While the WWW has made searches for information much easier, the Internet is very much subject to Sturgeon's Law (for those of you who don't know it, go to http://info.astrian.net/jargon/terms/s/Sturgeon_s_Law.html), because large parts of it are quite useless, as anyone can testify who looked through endless lists of hits generated by web searches. Online library resources can be more focused and thus save you valuable time.

So check out the website of your local or university library, or try one of the following resources, some of which are linked to real, others to virtual libraries:

The Internet Public Library
www.ipl.org/
The Virtual Reference Desk
www.virtualref.com/
Refdesk.com
www.refdesk.com/
NYTimes Navigator
www.nytimes.com/library/tech/reference/cynavi.html
Libraryspot.com
www.libraryspot.com/
Argus Clearinghouse
www.clearinghouse.net/
UT Libraries Online
www.lib.utexas.edu/refsites/ ★

More stupid interpreter tricks

by J Henry Phillips
interpreter@BrazilianTranslated.com

DOES DICTATION SOFTWARE EXIST for other languages besides English? The answer is yes, but it is not always produced by the same manufacturer.

In Portuguese, for instance, IBM produces something called Via Voice which actually works. Even though Portuguese is a "phonetic language," the product is not quite as versatile as the English-language version of Dragon NaturallySpeaking Preferred. It is amazingly accurate, however, and often includes grammatically-required accent marks even where they are undetectable from the pronunciation alone.

The box specifications claim that it will work in Microsoft Word, but we have been unable to verify that. In Word Via Voice works poorly if at all. In their own native dictation SpeakPads, however, Standard versions 8 and 9 are able to handle Rich Text Format and Word 6 documents fairly well. By copying text from any Word document and pasting it into the Via Voice dictation pad, it is fairly easy to a complete a translation, check it for accuracy and then delete the English. Fancy formatting can be restored afterward in Microsoft Word. Version 8 seems to work reasonably well at around 400 MHz, and Version 9 works fairly well at twice that proces-

sor speed.

The standard version of the Brazilian-market Via Voice costs about 80 dollars, and a Professional version can be had for about twice that much. Standard versions 8 and 9 will run under Windows 98, and version 9 claims to run under Windows ME. Both have correction features which are for the most part automatic. Neither product will run under Windows NT with service pack 6, but the USB Pro version claims compatibility with Windows 2000. The drawback here is that the Pro version seems to require a USB microphone rather than the ten-dollar headsets which plug into your sound card. It was a huge relief to discover—before filling out Customs forms—that the software is actually produced in the U.S., though I have never seen it for sale here.

Like all other dictation software, you have to read to it so that it can become accustomed to your voice. It does seem to require a little more reading than Dragon, and the more extra reading you do from the texts provided, the better the performance.

The bottom line, of course, is performance. Translator or interpreters able to dictate in clear, native-sounding Portuguese can reasonably expect to double their translation speed in less than a week with reduced fatigue and no loss of quality.

Here again we have an inexpensive product that pays for itself faster than you can say SpeakPad in Portuguese [spay AH key padgie] and yields continuous income dividends in exchange for very little time and effort invested in mastering its peculiarities. ★

Klingon-enabled search engine?

THE GOOGLE SEARCH ENGINE now offers a wider choice of interface languages. At www.google.com/preferences you will find a dropdown list of languages from Afrikaans to Welsh, including such useful items as Hacker, Klingon and Pig Latin. ★