

Software Editorial

The Online Software Magazine

linguatec
language technologies

Breaking the Language Barrier



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I find myself travelling more and more these days and if I journey by public transport I like to take a book to read. However, this is clearly not practical when driving. I have quite a number of books in digital format, many of them from the excellent Gutenberg site. I have often thought that it would be good if I could convert these to audio.

Actually, there are quite a number of the books already in audio format, but many are not. I was keen therefore to try out Linguatec Voice Reader which converts text to audio, among other things. This audio can either be listened to real time or saved to audio format (mp3 and wav formats are supported). So I tried the 'The Outline of Science – A Plain Story Simply Told' by J. Arthur Thomson and tried out the Reader and the Reader Direct. There are only two voices at present – Lara and Julie. Whilst I think the female voice sounds pleasant, I would have liked more narrators, including male ones. Linguatec have done an excellent job of making the reading sound as natural as possible. You can even vary the pitch, speed and volume. Audio is read by a Lara or Julie animation and they really are quite lifelike. A nice touch is that they will either make a phone call or look at their watch if they have to wait too long. If you get too self-conscious, you can always switch them off. You can also use the Reader plug-ins for applications such as Microsoft Word, Outlook, PowerPoint and Adobe Acrobat. The integration is very straightforward. You will be using this program in minutes. Another excellent feature is that audio files can be automatically added to your iTunes library very simply.

So would I recommend this program? The answer is a qualified yes. Linguatec have made great advances in text to speech technology and are light years ahead of the stilted robotic type voices. And yet, while the voice sounds natural, it is clearly not human. It has difficulties pronouncing some well known words such as encyclopaedia, and it still has that slight stilted quality. I also had the feeling that this was still a work in progress. The integration is good but has some strange quirks such as not allowing standard paste functions (you have to use CTRL-INS, and the right mouse button does not do the usual paste function).

If you can live with these minor criticisms though, this inexpensive product is worth trying and offers an excellent way to listen to your favourite publications on the move. It has plenty of potential and I will be watching this product to see where it goes next.

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