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Apple AI tool transcribed the word 'racist' as 'Trump'

2 hours ago

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Technology reporter

Reuters

Apple says it is working to fix its speech-to-text tool after some social media users found that when they spoke the word "racist" into their iPhones it typed it out as "Trump."

The tech giant has suggested the issue with its Dictation service has been caused by a problem it has distinguishing between words with an "r" in them.

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"We are aware of an issue with the speech recognition model that powers Dictation and we are rolling out a fix today," an Apple spokesperson said.

However an expert in speech recognition told the BBC this explanation was "just not plausible."

Peter Bell, professor of speech technology at the University of Edinburgh, said it was more likely that someone had altered the underlying software that the tool used.

Videos shared online show people speaking the word "racist" into the Dictation tool.

Sometimes it is transcribed correctly - but on other occasions it is turned into "Trump", before being quickly restored to the correct word.

The BBC has not been able to replicate the mistake, suggesting Apple's fix is already taking effect.

Prof Bell said Apple's explanation of phonetic overlap did not make sense because the two words were not similar enough to confuse an artificial intelligence (AI) system.

Speech-to-text recognition models are trained by inputting clips of real people speaking alongside an accurate transcript of what they say.

They are also taught to understand words in context - for example, they could distinguish the word "cup" from "cut" if it was within the phrase "a cup of tea".

Prof Bell says the situation with Apple is unlikely to be a genuine mistake with its data because its English language model would be trained on hundreds of thousands of hours of speech, which should give it a high level of accuracy.

For "less well-resourced languages" he said it could be an AI training issue.

But he said in this case: "it probably points to somebody that's got access to the process."

A former Apple employee who worked on its AI assistant Siri told the New York Times: "This smells like a serious prank."
Apple had to row back on another AI-powered feature last month after complaints from the BBC and other news organisations.

It suspended its AI summaries of news headlines after it displayed false notifications on stories - including one where it said tennis player Rafael Nadal had come out as gay.

The company announced yesterday it would be investing $500bn (£395bn) in the US over the next four year, including on a large data centre in Texas to power Apple Intelligence.

The company's chief executive Tim Cook also said it may have to change its policies on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) after President Donald Trump has called for an end to DEI programmes.

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