



# Talking computers

Cliff Joseph explains how to get the best out of Mac OS 8.6's **speech recognition** capabilities.

**B**y now, most of you will have at least read about Apple's recent release of Mac OS 8.6, even if you haven't actually gone ahead and downloaded all 30-odd megabytes worth.

We weren't able to cover this upgrade back in May, following its launch at Apple's annual Developers Conference, and there's not a whole lot of point in rehashing the reviews that you've probably already read on the internet and elsewhere. I'll just say that OS 8.6 is well worth getting, simply because of the improved performance and stability that it provides.

However, there is one aspect of OS 8.6 that seems to have crept by almost unnoticed. Tucked away right at the bottom of Apple's datasheet for OS 8.6 are the words 'speech recognition'.

A few years ago, Apple developed a speech-recognition system that it called PlainTalk. Now, PlainTalk was a bit like the handwriting recognition in the (now-dead)

Newton, in that it promised more than it could actually deliver. Apple

was losing money by the bucketload at the time, so when Steve Jobs took an axe to the company's massive R&D budget, PlainTalk and the Newton were among the first projects to go in the dumper.

Apple did continue to include PlainTalk on the Mac OS CD-ROM, just as a little added extra, but it indicated that it had no plans to develop the technology any further.

But, two years on, PlainTalk seems to be making something of a comeback, although the PlainTalk name has been dropped and the software is now simply referred to as 'English Speech Recognition'. Steve Jobs also went out of his way to invite the president of Dragon Systems — a world leader in speech technologies — to join him on stage at the Developers Conference,

***Don't think you'll be talking to your Mac the way Captain Kirk talks to the Enterprise***

which definitely suggests that he sees a future for speech-recognition on the Mac.

It has to be said that the speech recognition in OS 8.6 is still pretty crude, so don't think that you're instantly going to start talking to your Mac the way Captain Kirk talks to the computer in Star Trek. It's usable, though, and it's free, and it's well worth taking a look at.

First of all, you need to ensure that your Mac's microphone is suitable for speech-recognition work. All Macs include a microphone of one sort or another, but speech recognition requires a highly directional mike, one that can focus on the sound coming out of your mouth while ignoring other sounds coming from nearby. Check the manual

that came with your Mac to see whether or not your mike is suitable, or consult the Speech section of the Help menu on the main

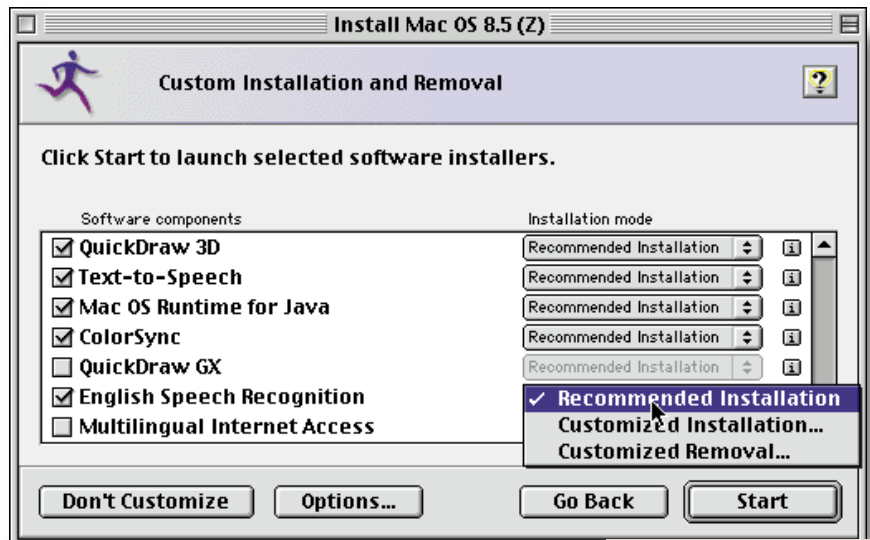
**► FIG 2 TO START SPEAKING TO YOUR MAC, YOU'LL NEED TO TURN ON 'SPEAKABLE ITEMS' IN THE SPEECH CONTROL PANEL**

Mac desktop.

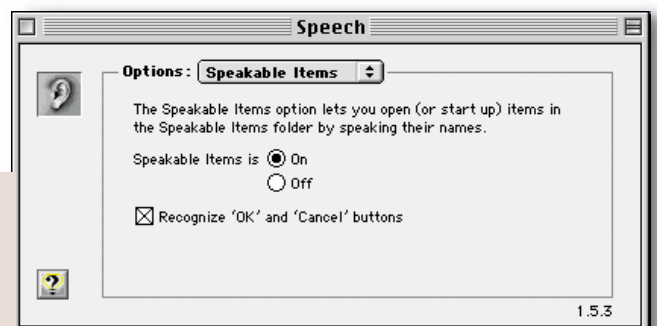
You may find that you have to buy a special PlainTalk microphone, but these only cost about £15 so they're not going to break the bank.

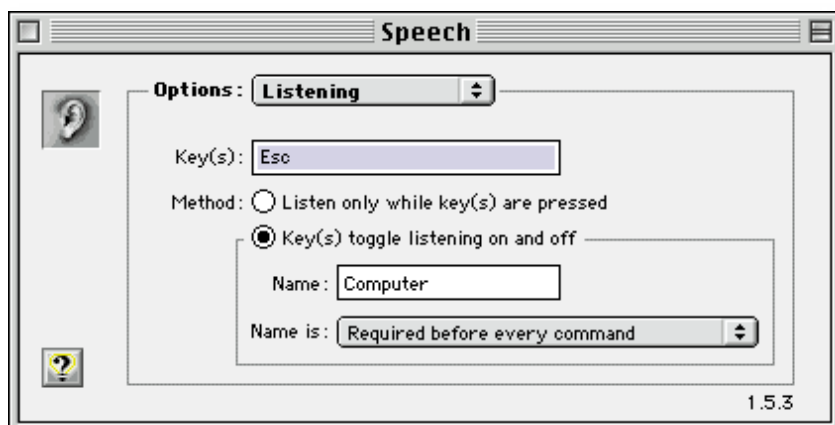
Once you've got your microphone sorted out, you can set up the speech-recognition software very easily. First of all, check to see that it's been properly installed. Go to the Control Panels option in the Apple menu and open the Speech control panel. If nothing happens, you may need to go back to your Mac OS 8.5 CD-ROM and re-select the English Speech Recognition option [Fig 1].

**When the software** is properly installed, you'll be able to open the Speech control panel and turn on the Speakable Items option [Fig 2]. There are a number of additional options available



**▲ FIG 1 THE FIRST THING YOU NEED TO DO IS MAKE SURE SPEECH RECOGNITION IS INSTALLED**





▲ **FIG 3 IS THERE ANYBODY THERE? TURNING ON THE LISTENING OPTION**

one for now is the Listening option [Fig 3]. This allows you to set up a 'listening' word that tells your Mac when to listen out for a speech command. In Fig 3 we've told the Mac to listen out for the word 'computer'. When it hears this word, it knows that the next words will be a command that it must carry out.

When the Speech options have been selected, you will see the Speech Feedback window appear on-screen [Fig 4]. This includes a small window that displays the text of your spoken commands, and an animated head that speaks any responses from the computer itself.

If you see this window on-screen, you know that everything has been set up properly. If not, use the Mac's Help menu to guide you through the set-up process. Thankfully, the Help files are pretty thorough and should give you all the information you need.

#### ➤ **Command performance**

Now we come to the really clever part of Apple's speech system. Look under the Apple menu once more and you'll see a folder called Speakable Items. Any item placed in this folder can be activated simply by speaking its name. So, if you want to set up a speech command to launch an application such as

here, but the most important

Photoshop, you simply create an alias for Photoshop and drop it into the Speakable Items folder. Then, to launch Photoshop, you just say 'Computer, Photoshop'.

Remember, the word 'computer' tells your Mac that the next words it hears will be a command that it has to follow. You can do without that initial 'computer', as there's an option for telling the computer to listen to every word you say. But if you choose this option and then say 'Open the window', the computer won't know whether this is a speech command or simply you telling someone to open a window.

**To make life easier**, Apple has included a whole load of predefined commands that you can use straight away. There are over thirty commands in the Speakable Items folder, including standard commands such as 'Close This Window', 'Empty Trash' and 'Quit This Application'.

There's also a second folder, called More Speakable Items, tucked away in the Apple Extras folder on your hard disk. This folder contains more complex commands, including options for adjusting your monitor display and the volume of your Mac's speaker output.

You're also free to experiment and

add your own commands or edit the predefined commands. I found that the computer reacts best to single-word commands, so I renamed the 'Quit This Application' command to

simply 'Quit'. This shorter command proved much more reliable than the longer version, so use short commands wherever possible.

You can also use the Script Editor that is supplied with the Mac OS to create scripts that perform all sorts of tasks. You can then drop these scripts into the Speakable Items folder and activate them by saying their name. I created a voice command for launching my web browser and connecting to the internet in a matter of seconds.

#### ➤ **I'm sorry, I'll say that again**

The only problem is that the speech recognition is nowhere near 100 percent reliable. As mentioned, single-word commands work best, and I can launch applications such as Word, Photoshop and the Sherlock search engine about 80 percent of the time. Longer commands are much more erratic, though, and some commands just don't seem to like my accent and won't work at all. You may also find that it helps to experiment with the position of the microphone.

The Mac's speech-recognition feature may still be crude and limited, but it's still pretty cool to be able to launch applications just by saying their name. It's dead good for showing off to PC-using friends, too.

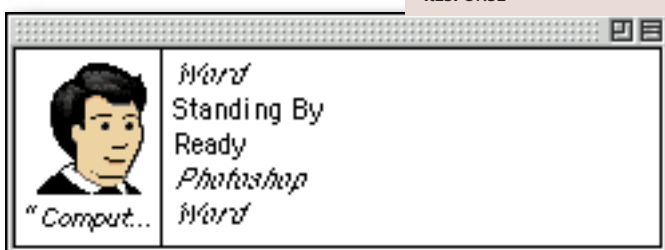
### UPDATE...UPDATE...

**Y**ou can download the OS 8.6 update, along with other recent software releases such as QuickTime 4 and Apple's new OpenGL software for the Mac, from the Apple UK web site at [www.uk.euro.apple.com](http://www.uk.euro.apple.com).

If you don't want to download it, you can order the update on CD for £14. The CD can only be ordered by post (details are on the web site), as you need to send in one of the Proof of Purchase coupons provided with your original OS 8.5 CD.

### PCW CONTACTS

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▼ **FIG 4 THE ANIMATED HEAD IN THE SPEECH FEEDBACK WINDOW SPEAKS THE COMPUTER'S RESPONSE**