
Saved by the dragon

What do you do when you're a working translator unable to use a keyboard?
In Emma Goldsmith's case, you turn to speech recognition software. How well did it work?

When I was a tutor on ITI's Setting Up as a Freelance Translator (SUFT) course, I tried to instil in my students the importance of preparing for the unexpected. Always have a backup plan in place, I advised them – you never know when you might need it. And guess what? My own backup plan was put to the test last March. A fabulous skiing trip ended abruptly with a fall, shooting pains in my left wrist, an X-ray, and a below-elbow plaster cast for the next four weeks.

First, I messaged a client to cancel an urgent project and recommend a colleague to take my place. Then, back at my desk a few days later, it was time to dust off Dragon, a speech recognition program by Nuance. I'd tried Dragon in the past but given up, first because of poor computer specs (Dragon hogs memory) and later because a truculent Trados refused to play.

Dragon V16 currently sells at £680. If I hadn't had a licence already, I would have tried open-source Talon or Windows Speech Recognition (WSR). But the first is for techie people with time on their hands, and the second works only if your operating system runs in its native language without an overriding language pack. Neither of these applied to me.

So I dug up Dragon V15, installed it and then wondered which microphone to use. The choice turned out to be a no-brainer. Putting on my headphones with a single hand defied the laws of nature. Try it yourself – maybe you have the knack – and then keep them on for hours... I found that even my lightweight Sennheiser PC 8 made my ears sore. I soon switched to my FIFINE K670 desktop microphone, which Dragon picked up well with the mic positioned about 12 inches away.

Say what? Getting to grips with Dragon-speak

My first dictation efforts seemed promising: *Testing, testing, are you listening, Dragon, question mark. This looks good, exclamation mark.* But I'm less fluent when translating: I pause for thought, skip back to delete a word, shuffle the order, stet, and sometimes start over. My words don't flow. Dragon stuttered in sympathy, causing

the cursor to jump around randomly in Word, and the undo function to behave unpredictably. (I hear these two issues are largely resolved in Dragon V16.)

Dragon commands integrate well with Word's natural language approach. The trick is to say what you see, from *insert symbol* to *zoom to 120 per cent* or *open footer*. When I got stuck, I learned to ask *What can I say?*, which triggers a pop-up window in any app, showing available commands.

However, despite such a natural, deceptively human approach, nothing could prepare Dragon for a full-on medical translation experience. I started adding rare but frequently used words to Dragon's vocabulary, and teaching it my pronunciation. Dragon

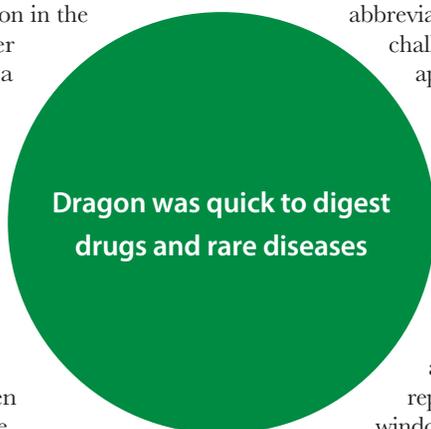
was quick to digest drugs and rare diseases. While common abbreviations could be spelled out (ECG, MRI), more challenging ones required a more imaginative approach. A standard drug reaction report, DSUR, kept being rendered as 'D.S. you are',

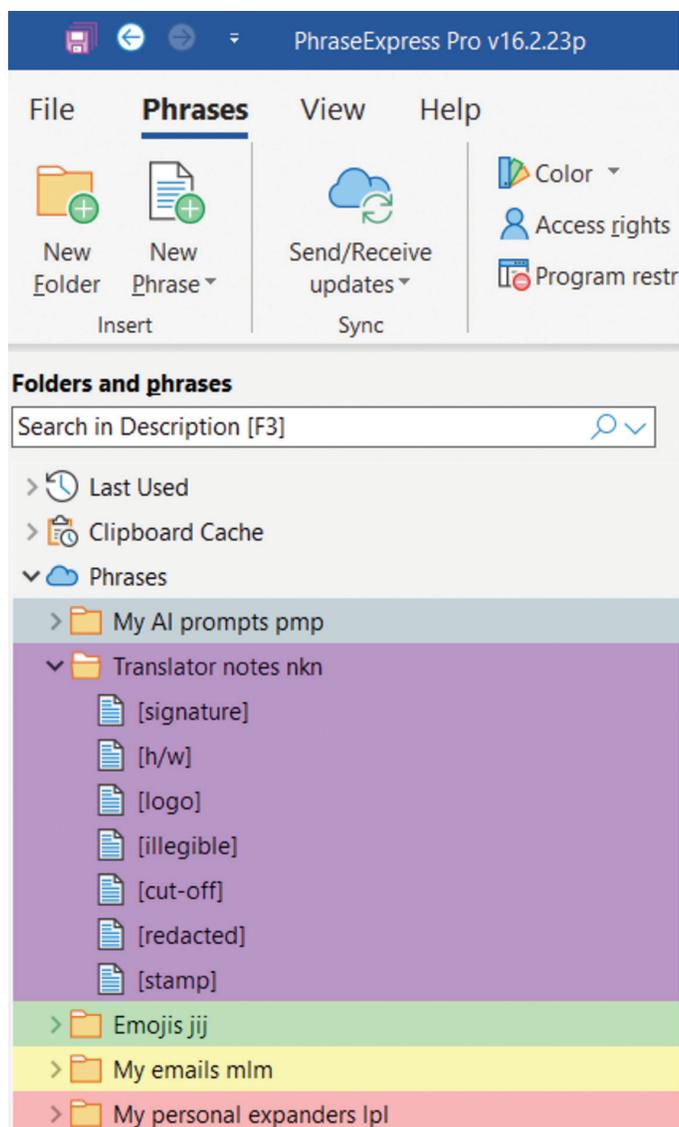
so I trained Dragon that every time I said *dippy sugar* it should write DSUR. (Special thanks to Claire Cox for this ingenious tip.)

Once I felt comfortable dictating in Word, I turned to Trados. I added some customised commands. For example, *Insert term* became Dragon-speak for inserting a term from my termbase, replacing the shortcut Ctrl+shift+L; and *Filter this word* showed certain segments only, replacing Ctrl+shift+F. Dictating in the editor window worked well, but Trados isn't a 'Select-and-Say' app, so to add to Dragon's vocab you have to call up

a special dictation box. Good news for memoQ users: no jumping through hoops for you.

English-speaking family members soon learned that dictation mode in my home office could lead to domestic exchanges being inadvertently reproduced word for word in an email or Trados segment. I quickly mastered the command *Go to sleep* to put Dragon on pause. Eavesdropping on Spanish conversations produced gobbledygook, because Dragon only understands one language at a time. If you buy the program in Nuance's UK online store, you'll receive a monolingual English dragon; if you buy it in another country, you'll receive a bilingual dragon and have to access each language through two separate user profiles. Switching from one to another takes a while, so I found it easier to





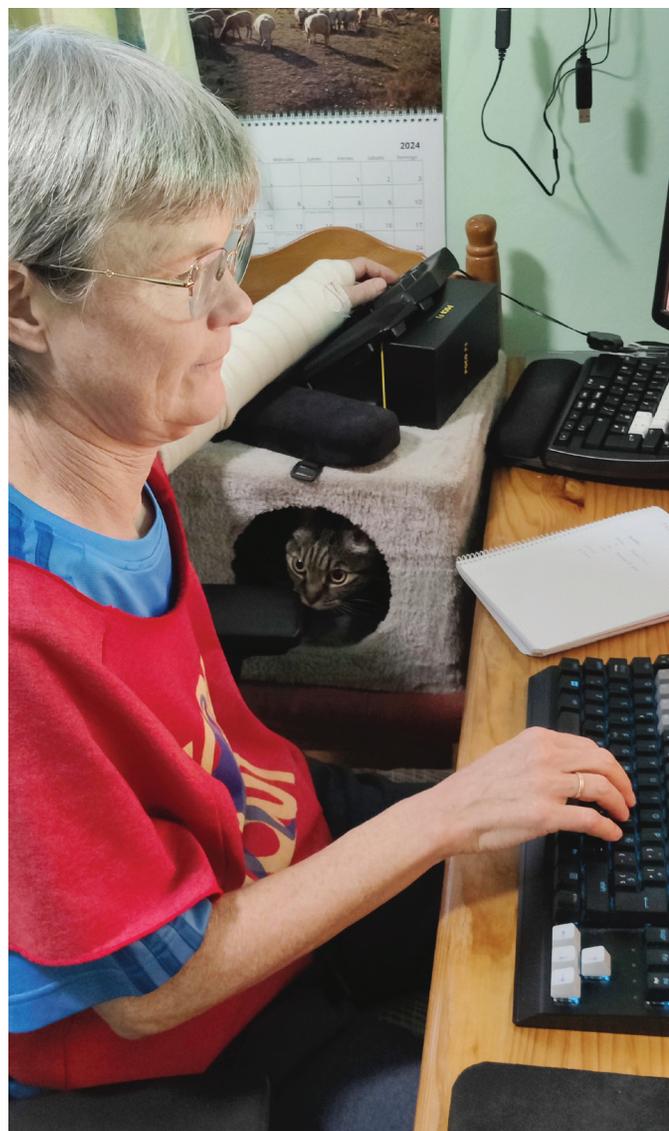
PhraseExpress is a nifty time saver usually, and a life saver now

use the native dictation function in Word or Outlook for my Spanish dictation needs.

Getting Dragon to play with other animals

Mice and dragons get on well, so I could select, click and drag with my good hand while translating aloud. In fact, mouse work felt so familiar and easy compared to my duels with Dragon that I had to be mindful of the risk of contralateral repetitive strain injury. I added a wrist pad to my set-up and alternated between a conventional and an ergonomic mouse. I was lucky that my dominant hand was unaffected by the accident, but I could have switched mouse hands if necessary – I've become an ambidextrous mouse user over the years to avoid right-hand fatigue.

Dragon integrates well with PhraseExpress, an app that stores frequently used word strings, phrases and email templates, and expands them automatically with a hot key or text trigger. To adapt PhraseExpress to Dragon, I grouped my items as pop-up menus to appear when I give the cue. For example, *nkn* calls up a list of notes I often add in square brackets to my translations



Giving it a go with Prototype 1 (cat included in the model)

([illegible], [redacted], [signature], etc) and *mlm* displays my email templates. PhraseExpress is a nifty time saver in normal working mode and a life saver in broken-arm mode. It's more user-friendly than AutoHotkey and more flexible when working with Dragon.

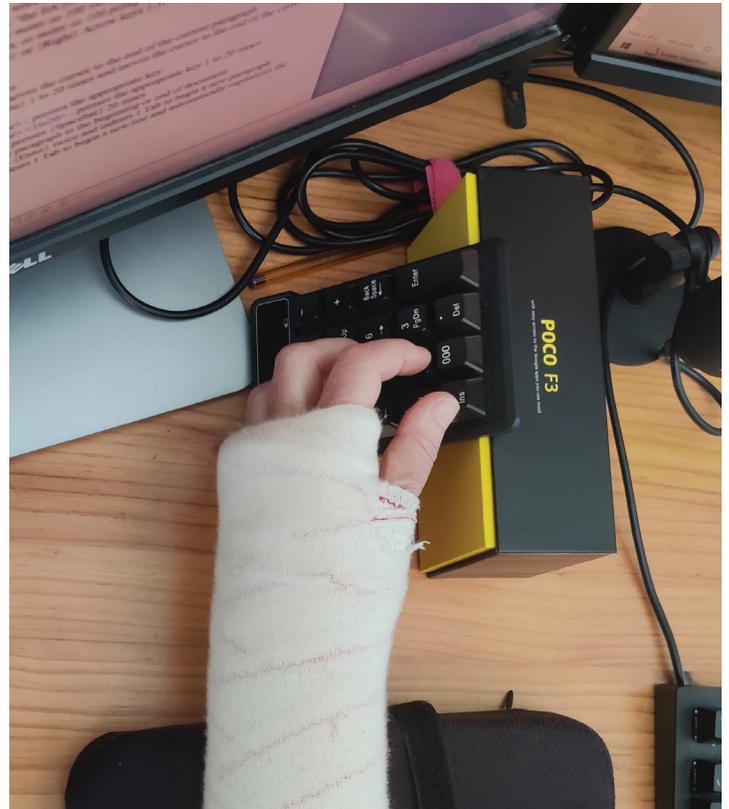
Another app that runs side by side with Dragon is KnowBrainer. This third-party utility adds scores of easy-to-remember commands, which smooths the learning curve. For example, with KnowBrainer you can say *Snip box* to call up Window's snipping tool or *Case toggle* to replace the F3 shortcut in Word or Trados. And if something unexpected happens (a program opens, a print dialogue appears or the cursor jumps elsewhere), just ask *What did I say?* to get your eyes on what Dragon thought it heard. (This phrase is so much easier to remember than Dragon's own command for the same action: *Show recognition history*.)

Experimenting with ergonomics, dragon-style

One week in, I'd got to grips with Dragon. Long hours of talking had led to a sore throat every evening for a few days, but my voice soon adapted. I learned to enunciate every word carefully and



Improvements with Prototype 2 – a lot more comfortable



A short-lived experiment with Prototype 3, which kept falling over

clearly, pausing less mid-sentence. Yet despite my progress, I still missed my keyboard.

I'd also been told to wiggle my fingers in my cast to keep them moving. Typing would be good exercise, I figured, if only the cast allowed me to rotate my wrist and arm to a prone position, level with the keyboard. It was physically impossible. But if my hand couldn't reach the keyboard, how about tilting the keyboard to reach my hand?

Adapting equipment to our needs is the essence of ergonomics. Indeed, Merriam-Webster defines 'ergonomics' as '*an applied science concerned with **designing and arranging things people use** so that the people and things interact most efficiently and safely*'. Accordingly, I rolled up my metaphorical sleeves and got down to work.

Prototype 1 took the shape of a half Matias Ergo Pro keyboard raised to my left and balanced on top of my cat's playbox (cat included). Typing with two keyboards worked well, but my arm soon tired. Prototype 2 saw the same half-keyboard propped up at a 60° angle on my desk, cast resting on a wrist pad and my usual keyboard shifted off-centre. Better, much better. My typing was fairly efficient, albeit slow, and my arm was comfy. Limited finger span still made the stretch to reach 'B' rather awkward – fortunately 'B' is one of the lesser-used letters of our alphabet – and downright impossible for my little finger to reach that elusive left control key.

A short-lived Prototype 3 took the form of an external numeric keypad whose numbers I remapped to mimic a half-keyboard.

Adapting equipment to our needs is the essence of ergonomics

The square layout of the keys made typing challenging. It kept falling over. Back to my second invention.

As the weeks went by, Prototype 2 combined with Dragon gave me sufficient versatility to overcome the frustrations of working with a broken arm.

I even discovered unsuspected benefits, like learning to set up nifty new shortcuts and improving my diction, which came in useful when I presented a webinar for ITI MedNet a few weeks later. (On ergonomics – the irony of it!) But the real silver lining was the satisfaction of finding that my backup plan worked and that, as a freelancer, I didn't have to stop working for four weeks or more.

Make sure you have a backup plan, too. Try Talon or WSR or buy Dragon, get ambidextrous with your mouse, and investigate PhraseExpress. Then cross your fingers and hope you never need to put the plan into practice! 



Emma Goldsmith trained as a nurse in London and later retrained – informally and formally – as a medical translator in Madrid. Her areas of expertise include clinical trial documentation, cardiology, audiology, emergency medicine and nursing. She advocates for health-conscious ergonomics among sedentary language professionals and writes a blog called *Signs & Symptoms of Translation* about Trados, medical translation and computer keyboards. Emma is a Fellow of ITI and currently serves as the chair of MET (Mediterranean Editors and Translators).