Voice recognition the next weapon in the battle of the search engines
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The recent announcement of Microsoft’s plans to acquire Tellme Networks indicates that something is afoot in the market of voice recognition technology. The software giant could pay as much as 800 million dollars for Tellme. This would represent the highest acquisition sum paid by Microsoft since the year 2000. Tellme offers an ample catalogue of voice solutions and is already handling telephone support to North American companies such as FedEx and Merrill Lynch. The company uses robots to interact with clients in order to reduce costs while increasing customer satisfaction.

The market for voice recognition applications continues to grow worldwide. The consulting firm Opus Research reports that in 2006 companies dedicated 1.12 billion dollars to voice technology services, hardware and software. This represents a 35% increase over the 835 million dollars invested in this same area in 2005.

Among the Spanish institutions that have adopted this technology, the National Tax Agency stands out as the most noteworthy example. Its robot allows taxpayers to request draft tax forms, appointments to correct reports or consult the status of tax returns over the phone without requiring the intervention of a physical agent.

Nevertheless, and despite the significant resources dedicated to R & D initiatives in this field, mass use of voice recognition technologies has yet to take hold. On a practical level, many call center clients prefer to speak with human agents in order to avoid repeated “I did not understand you” messages and other errors that less sophisticated robots commit regularly.

In desktop and laptop computer environments, the success index of voice recognition programs is very high once the devices have been “trained” to capture the user’s voice. These PC programs are especially useful in industrial environments where users often have their hands occupied, where repetitive texts must be entered or where disabled people are employed.

However, the vast majority of users continue to prefer the keyboard to enter data into their computers. The new Windows Vista operating system, for example, includes advanced voice recognition software,
but given the scant use of such software, Microsoft barely places any emphasis on this capacity.

Bill Gates and a group of Ford executives explained that Microsoft’s synchronization software, Sync, will allow drivers to operate their car stereos with spoken orders. Advances are also being seen in the field of logistics, and systems that manage product pickup with spoken commands.

Without a doubt, the most intense usage in this market is occurring in the area of mobile phone applications. Microsoft is not alone in this dynamic sector. Yahoo! recently hired two executives from Tellme Networks and 13 engineers from Nuance. Through the use of voice, employees can manage contacts, navigate the Internet and locate services and information. They can also dictate an e-mail address, the “subject” field and the text. This proves especially useful when using devices whose keyboards are small and, thus, not very easy to use.

All in all, the application of these technologies in mobile devices still has a long way to go. A recent Wall Street Journal article on the HP iPAQ 510 mobile phone criticized the device’s less-than-intelligent use of voice recognition. According to the article, the telephone does not allow users to dictate SMS messages, and dictated email messages can only be sent as attached voice files. The article goes on to point out that the device is only compatible with Microsoft Exchange. The article closes by revealing the inconveniences of this type of system. These include the fact that they cannot be used in noisy places, they confuse difficult-to-pronounce names, and on many occasions they require more time to dictate a message than it would normally take to write one.

If this is the case, what justifies the latest investments of Yahoo! and Microsoft in this technology? In reality, what both companies are after now is to position themselves for participation in the next great battle of Internet search engines: spoken searches via mobile phones whose responses are not heard but read. Voice recognition technology is still a future bet, but in the area of Internet searches by mobile phone, this future seems to be just around the corner.