

Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 10

September 2004

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***Review of Superpen: The Ultimate Mobile
Text Scanner (Acton MA: Wizcom
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requirements: Windows 95/NT/98/2000/XP;
CD-ROM drive; 16Mb RAM; 8Mb hard
disk space. £149.***

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The Superpen product combines the functions of Wizcom's various text scanning devices into one unit. It scans text from around 6 point to 24 point for the purposes of producing a computer voiced oration - giving reading assistance (if not aural delight) for persons with learning difficulties; accessing various dictionaries to assist in word definition or translation; and also allowing text to be sent directly or indirectly to office applications. This latter facility is, in theory, the one of great marvel for the modern scholar adept in information technology and looking to take and store notes in ever more efficient ways. So the question is, does it work, and if it does, is it useful for academic study purposes? First, the dictionary function is not of great value. Thirty language dictionaries are available to be installed onto the pen, but can be used only one at a time – it is no 'Babel fish'. Not handy for unanticipated language needs. The definitions, whilst surprisingly lengthy, are tedious to view on what is, perhaps of necessity, a pokey little mono LCD screen. Further languages can be downloaded from the service section of the company website - with even plans for a stab at Latin in the future – or so I have been led to believe. But it is with this prospect that the dictionary function meets the overall problem of the pen as a scanning device. It sometimes makes mistakes and the user needs to know the language being scanned to be able to sort things out. On a good day with a clean text and a steady, well practised hand the thing is an absolute wonder and everyone should have one. In the library

one can zap pages of quotations into the memory of the pen and download them into Word later. Or else sitting at the computer, about to have to type in a big quote from a secondary source, one can just run the Superpen along the lines and see them pop up on the screen at the point of the cursor. But the other side of the coin is the tedious business of scanning and re-scanning a slightly faded text because the Superpen refuses to read the word “carpet” as anything other than FYHHVJ(*U??. All in all I would recommend the Superpen if one is very flush, can’t type, likes gadgets and can think of a definite use for such a device – for example, collecting data for a bibliography or inserting big quotes. Beware however, unless you quickly get into a habit of using it I guarantee that it will end up sitting in a drawer for all time. (Afterword – I find I do use mine quite a lot, more so having got a USB-Serial adapter so that the pen works with my laptop and is a bit quicker at transferring text from page to PC.)