An up-to-date look at free software and its makers

PROJECTS ON THE MOVE

Replace dictionaries and notepads with StarDict, the dictionary application, and RedNotebook, a combined

notepad, diary, and calendar. **BY CARSTEN SCHNOBER**

A trip abroad without a dictionary is almost unthinkable. Web surfers constantly encounter language barriers, and, even if you have a good command of other languages, you are bound to stumble over some expression you don't know. StarDict [1] is a replacement for your huge collection of dictionaries (Figure 1).

One Fell Swoop

StarDict's strongest point is the uncomplicated way in which it integrates dictionaries for just about any need. The innumerable extensions include classic translation dictionaries for many languages, encyclopedias, thesauruses, etymological reference works, and collections of proverbs in different languages. Add to this the Unix man pages installed on your system and the CIA World Factbook [2], and you have a wealth of information for quick reference.

The fuzzy search feature supports the use of wildcards and searches for words with similar spelling. Thus, you can find what you're looking for without knowing the exact spelling. Additionally, an extension draws on WordNet [3] to display terms graphically, relative to terms with similar meanings. The StarDict developers are also working on a Wikipedia plugin. To prevent StarDict from searching every single reference

when you query a word, the dictionary manager lets you specifically disable any references you don't need.

StarDict not only searches local dictionaries, it also actively supports access to most dictionaries directly on the web. For this, you need a free account with the integrated Net-Dict service.

A Babel Fish in Your Ear

If you need a translation aid for full-text translation, rather than just a reference, try out the *Full-Text Translation* section. Automatic translation is a field of research in which the state of the art still can't promise to provide satisfactory results. This explains why the StarDict developers avoided creating their own translation module and instead integrated an interface to the free offerings provided by Google, Yahoo!, Altavista, Systran, and Excite Japan in the GUI. If you try out these services, you will quickly discover that the results are only useful for orientation but do not give you usable translations.

Full-text translation is a good example of a typical problem

that free projects face when they use proprietary offerings. The users regularly change their interfaces and do not support any recognized standards, so full-text translation will typically only work in the very latest version of StarDict. There is no telling whether users will be able to rely on this service in the future.

Direct Help

When you call on StarDict to help you in your daily work, you need not copy every single word from the browser, your word processor, or some other window and paste it into the StarDict GUI. Instead, you can enable the *Scan* function, which waits in the background for you to call on it. If you select a word, StarDict will search the enabled dictionaries and display the results in the active window.

Accessing an external speech synthesizer is a good idea, but the technology's not totally mature. Thanks to plugins for the free Festival [4] and eSpeak [5] projects, you can listen to words and phrases via your computer's speakers. The utility value of this function is limited by the quality of the synthesized output, which is hardly sufficient to give you the correct pronunciation reliably. Al-
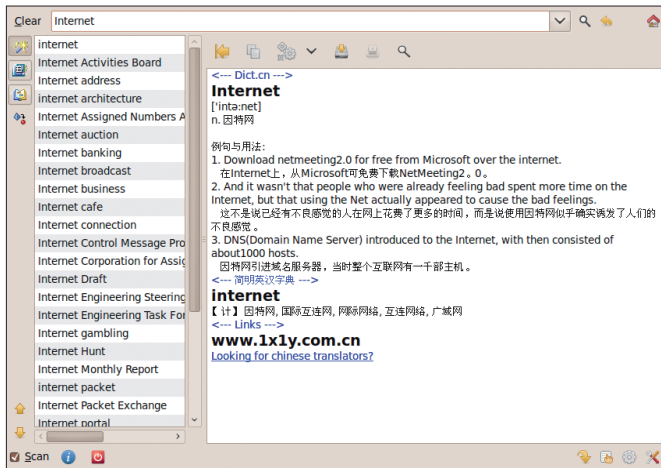
Figure 1: Fast and flexible: StarDict can speak a number of languages. The project website also has links to various free dictionaries.
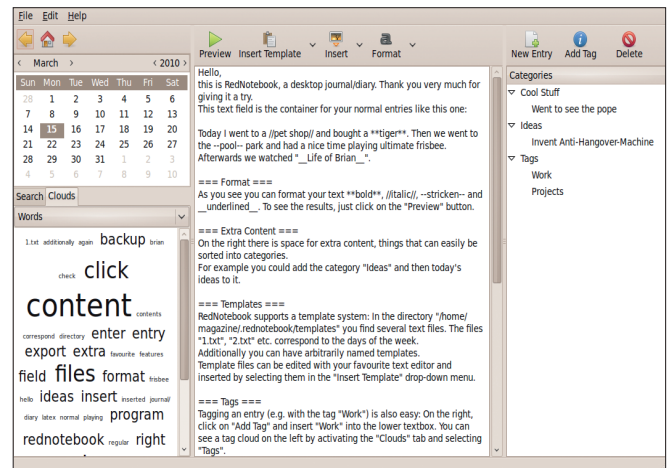

Figure 2: RedNotebook replaces a paper notebook. The tag cloud (bottom left) helps you find entries.

though the Festival technology in particular is state of the art, I wouldn't recommend relying on the program's pronunciation if you are learning a language.

The StarDict team is currently facing staffing problems. Maintainer Lee Ray has dropped out of active development and is asking any programmers interested in the project to contribute. Ray has published a long list of potential improvements on the project homepage. For example, he suggests developing a plugin to help integrate StarDict with chat programs or a conversion tool for various dictionary formats.

Ray is also interested in porting to Mac OS X and PocketPC systems. Thus far, the C++ program supports Windows, Linux, and other flavors of Unix. One potential solution is a Java implementation. If you are interested, you can contact Ray on the StarDict website.

RedNotebook

One thing you always need on a trip abroad, besides a dictionary, is a notepad to write down your appointments, tasks, memories, or just vague ideas and chains of thought. The RedNotebook project [6] removes the need to pack all this ballast in your rucksack – assuming you were planning to take your laptop along anyway (Figure 2). The name for the project comes courtesy of US author Paul Auster, who equipped many of his characters with red notebooks. A compendium of short stories by Auster goes by the same name.

RedNotebook takes a different approach from the memo and to-do list functions that typical organizers offer.

RedNotebook simply lets users make entries without forcing them to organize them in a strict structure. Entries use a wiki-style syntax and can contain images and file or web points as well as text. RedNotebook provides templates for, say, trips and meetings, and you can define your own templates besides using those provided. Tags such as *Work* or *Leisure* help notebook writers categorize their entries. If necessary, you can also add notes in the sidebar and organize them in arbitrary categories that you define yourself.

One reason most other programs rely on strict ordering principles, such as sorting by date or by fixed category headings, is that these principles make it easier to find your entries later. RedNotebook takes a more innovative approach here with the use of tag clouds, popularized by Web 2.0 applications. In this view, the notebook will show you any tags that you have assigned, with the more prominent and frequent terms displaying in larger print.

If you click one of these tags, RedNotebook will retrieve all the matching entries. The program gives you other navigational aids in the calendar and in the form of categories. These provide users with an uncomplicated approach to creating to-do lists or sorting entries by creation date.

Available Where You Are

One big advantage of RedNotebook is its compatibility. The program stores all entries in a text-only format that you can easily edit with another application. Additionally, the application will export

your entries to PDF, LaTeX, or HTML files. Version 0.9, which was recently released, also supports automatic synchronization via SSH, FTP, and WebDAV, so you can access your notebook from various computers. Programmer Jendrik Seipp has even localized the project, making RedNotebook available in 16 different languages.

Although the current state of development leaves some scope for improvement, searching and categorization is not always intuitive, which is attributable to the novel approach taken. For this reason, Seipp is mainly looking for support in the form of ideas, suggestions, and tests.

However, anybody interested in implementing new features and packaging the program for various distributions is very welcome to contribute. Seipp asks business users in particular for donations, which are obviously on a voluntary basis considering the GPL license. ■

INFO

[1] StarDict: *http://stardict.sourceforge.net*

[2] CIA World Factbook: *https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook*

[3] WordNet: *http://wordnet.princeton.edu*

[4] Festival: *http://www.cstr.ed.ac.uk/projects/festival*

[5] eSpeak: *http://espeak.sourceforge.net*

[6] RedNotebook: *http://digitaldump.wordpress.com/projects/rednotebook*