



As we reported last week, the U.S. NHTSA has issued voluntary guidelines for when and how drivers should be allowed to interact with electronic infotainment systems in their cars. The goal is to address distracted driving caused by drivers shifting their attention away from the road and their hands from the wheel in order to fiddle with infotainment controls. But the systems are only growing more polyvalent, and drivers aren't likely to give up any access to functions they want to use. Voice activation is advancing to the point it may provide a solution. The suggestions issued last week focus on infotainment controls that require the motorists' eyes and hands. NHTSA say in 2014 they will issue guidelines on the use of voice technology. Automakers have been working to replace tedious memorised commands with a more conversational approach, as exemplified by the popular "Siri" conversationally-operated assistant on the Apple iPhone, to enable drivers to get access to information and vehicle controls.

Now Ford, General Motors, and others are working to make conversational commands easier and more intuitive. The task is daunting because a smartphone typically has far more computing power than a car's infotainment system. Nuance Communications, the Massachusetts company who developed some of the iPhone's Siri voice technology, are working with Ford and GM to create software that uses natural language for commands.

Siri's voice technology algorithms analyze the speaker's intent; if you ask, "Is it raining in Miami?" the infotainment system offers a weather report.

Two years ago, Ford tried a natural-language approach with its second-generation version of Sync, the technology that enables motorists to use navigation, mobile phone, and entertainment features with verbal commands. It had a vocabulary of 10,000 "aliases"—alternate word choices—that motorists could use for commands.

About 80% of Ford Sync owners use its voice recognition feature, according to Ford. GM will take another step toward natural language this year with the CUE system to be introduced on Cadillac models.