



Tech Talk

Volvo Driverless Cars©

by John McCarthy

Hi and welcome once again to Tech Talk. Today, we're dedicating the programme to the humble automobile, which many of us take very much for granted and use on a daily basis either to commute or do the shopping, drive at week-ends to get out of the city and visit our favourite haunts, or else for longer trips to the seaside or mountains during those privileged holiday moments we spend with our families soaking up the sun on the beach or hurtling down ski slopes.

Enormous progress has been made over the last twenty or thirty years in safety, economy, reliability, comfort and reductions in pollution. This is reflected by the mysterious acronyms that car salesmen use to shift their wares: ABS, EGV, DPF, ESC, TCS, EDF ... the list is endless, but the truth is that cars have never been safer and the reduction in fatalities in traffic accidents over the last few years bears testimony to this.

So what of the future? How could it be possible to make it easier and safer to get around? Well, I'm sure most of you will have heard of the quaintly-named Google car, a new prototype vehicle that's been designed to be fully self-driving with no input whatsoever from a human driver. Rumours also abound of an iCar, Apple reputedly investing billions into a similar project. More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that Swedish car manufacturer Volvo is also getting in on the act, which somehow makes the whole idea more credible; after all, the name Volvo is synonymous with quality, ruggedness, reliability and longevity.

Forget the humdrum of driving ... just do anything you like, without paying any attention whatsoever to the traffic, as the vehicle drives you to your work. Watch movies, send e-mails, converse with your friends on the telephone, snuggle back in the comfy seats and listen to music, or perhaps read the morning press on your iPad.

All very well, I can hear you think, but what would happen in the event of an emergency? After all, if you're lost in a daydream then you couldn't possibly regain control of the car in time to deal with a life-or-death situation. According to the engineers, the car will be able to detect danger and slow down in order to prevent a collision. The vehicle is equipped with multiple radars, cameras facing in every direction, a laser, and ultrasonic sensors, all combining to check and monitor a 360 degree view of the surroundings. The information gleaned is processed by a network of computers.

High-speed GPS, continuously updated, provides real-time changes in traffic conditions. And in an emergency, the car reacts faster than most humans... as you would expect. When autonomous driving can no longer be guaranteed, for either meteorological conditions, technical problems or whatever, the driver is invited to take control; if he doesn't, then the car will automatically stop. The idea is to provide a perfectly safe, crash-free future.

The mass adoption of driverless vehicles won't happen for at least another decade, or even longer. But perhaps one day my grandchildren will laugh at the idea that granddad actually used to drive a car. And this idea, I'm sure Jeremy Clarkson would agree, makes me a little sad.

Join me for some more Tech Talk next week here on EnglishWaves.fr. Until then, bye for now.