

A Problem for Alsatians

For centuries there has been a linguistic as well as a geographical tug-of-war over Alsace and its capital Strasbourg. As James M. Markham puts it, 'Strasbourg has been at the epicenter of French-German vars since Louis XIV annexed Alsace in the 17th century' ('Betwixt and Between', *International Herald Tribune*, 1 Jan 88). 'It is one of the many contradictions of Alsace's bloodstained, topsy-turvy history that the region is losing its German soul as France is trying to forge a strategic alliance with West Germany, including a joint military brigade.'

The Alsatian dialect of German is much the same as that spoken across the Rhine in Baden-Würrtemburg, while Strasbourg, though now so French, 'is a poignant architectural evocation of what cities across Germany might be like if not for Hitler's war'. In 1922, after the French reclaimed the region from Germany, over 90% of the people spoke Alsatian; now, little more than half of the 1.6 million Alsatians say they speak and understand it.

The Nazi reoccupation in 1940 did

enormous linguistic damage when it sought to eradicate all traces of French culture. In 1945, the returning French administrators took their revenge – outlawing Alsatian in the schools, limiting the German press and encouraging the use of the French language. Since that time, Alsatians have been conspicuously slow in accepting the rapprochement between the old enemies, even though Strasbourg vies with Brussels and Luxembourg as a capital for the European Community.

Now that France is officially eager to promote the study of German, Alsace is in an uncertain position, caught midway between Germanic and Romance. As a local editor told Markham, 'We are a little too French for the Germans and a little too German for the French.' The result is irony indeed. Says François-Georges Dreyfus, a political scientist at the University of Strasbourg, 'There aren't ten colonels in the French Army who speak decent German. When they make the Franco-German brigade, the common language of the French and German soldiers will be English.'

Champion of Doublespeak

Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver North is now famous for his pivotal role in a scandal variously named 'the Iran-contra affair', 'Iranscam', 'Iragua', 'Payatollah', 'Iranamuck', and 'Contra-deceptive'. To his battle honours he can now add the uncoveted annual Doublespeak Award of the NCTE (the National Council of Teachers of English), who present it in 'in the hope of embarrassing those who win it into using plain English'. When North gave evidence at the Iran-contra hearings, he talked about such award-winning matters as 'non-log documents' (for shredded papers), 'residuals' (for money left over from covertly selling arms), and 'plausible deniability' (for official lying).

The encyclocard in your pocket

In recent years, the optical storage device called the compact disc, or CD, has revolutionized the recording of music, and has been chosen by Oxford University Press as the medium for their electronic revision of the Oxford English Dictionary. However, even the remarkable CD may soon be upstaged by another optical device – this time, a 'laser card' not much larger than plastic money, developed by the Optical Recording Corporation of Toronto, Canada. As Monty Haas puts it:

'The Hi-Lite Optical Card system puts the data on a card in a series of arc-like tracks down the length of the card by means of a strong laser light beam. Regular audio CDs are rotating discs that spin like a record. Data

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is recorded in spiral tracks or concentric circles, also by a laser light beam. Because the Hi-Lite card is held firmly in the drive, it is designed to withstand greater shock and vibration than a spinning disc. ORC engineers think this will open the market to greater military and industrial uses.

'Information is stored through a pulsar beam. Words, pictures, or sounds are converted to a digital data stream and written – or etched – onto the card in a series of micron-sized pits, or spots. They can then be read back with the use of a less-powerful laser that scans down the data track. The laser light strikes either a pit or an unexposed space and is reflected back through the optical system as either a "1" bit (a pit) or a "0" bit (a space). This binary code is trans-

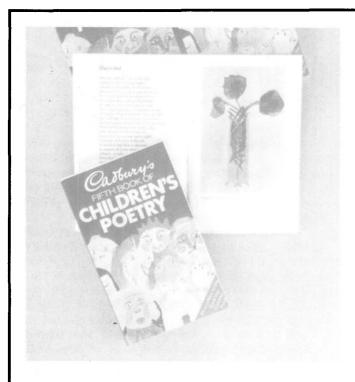
lated and reads out as pictures, music, or text' (Christian Science Monitor, 19–25 Oct 87).

The medical industry could use the card as a personal health record that is regularly updated, including everything from dental x-rays to prescriptions. Clinics could in this way evolve new card-index systems out of their traditional records, as could insurance companies and government bodies holding detailed information about large numbers of people. The brainchild of American inventor James Russell, the laser card has a 200-megabyte storage capacity. That is, one card can hold the whole *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, with all its pictures. Markham's report in the *Monitor* was entitled, 'By 1995, an encyclopedia could fit in your wallet'.



The on-going primacy of the printed word Some prophets of technology have for years been predicting the death of books. With the coming of a paperless society, they insist, the kind of digital achievements described in 'The

encyclocard in your pocket' will reign supreme. Chauvinists of print can, however, take heart. The above array of publishers' stands at the 1987 Frankfurt Book Fair suggests that the traditional printed word is still secure.



Sweet Talk from Cadbury

Cadbury's Fifth Book of Children's Poetry is now available, published by Beaver Books and costing £2.50. Royalties will, as usual, be donated to Save the Children Fund.

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