

# Terminology on Minitel in France

by Andrew Joscelyne

If you are one of France's 2.5 million Minitel owners, since this January you have had on-line access via your telephone to a pool of first generation public access terminology banks. Nothing to send writers and translators rushing to acquire their little beige terminals, mind you, but a step towards wiring tomorrow's society for access to knowledge, as well as being a lesson in the ergonomics of data retrieval.

At present, there are two main services available through the "kiosque" service (entry code 36 15) on the small screen. By tapping out "MITRAD," the access code, you can consult the language service offered by Gachot S.A., the French MT translation agency. It consists of a multilingual translation service based on their in-progress adaptation of the original Systran program for general use, and a three-piece electronic dictionary.

For the writer pursuing that elusive 4-letter *mot juste* there is a version of Harrap's two-way French-English Slang Dictionary; for an unidentifiable clientele there is a curious 16,000 word compilation of French "homonyms" — in fact, an arbitrary list of keywords followed by typical phrasal uses, serving no apparent purpose and, according to Gachot, almost never consulted.

For technical subjects, however, there is the Dictionary of Industries, a 36,000 word listing gathered by Hubert Joly of the International Council for the French Language (CILF) and already available in print version. Only this latter can be said to offer a pukkah terminology bank, being composed of standardized French terms established by either government commissions or the authority of current usage in industrial publications, with access in both English and French. Gachot claim some 60-70 hours of daily usage for these dictionaries, increasing steadily.

ORTHOTEL, billed as a spelling consultation program, is a separate CILF service available on Minitel, offering a dictionary (developed by SDF Plurimédia of Strasbourg) of common words, a bunch of spelling games (staple Minitel fare) and a little-used post-box for criticisms.

It clocks up some 3,000 calls a month, despite the off-putting announcement that you have to fork out for a printed instruction brochure first,

which seems to defeat the videotext ethos.

The dictionary is, in fact, a traditional alphabetic list of head-words followed, rather oddly, by semantic cognates as much as by morphosyntactic variants, and is certainly no substitute for a spell-checker program. The main drawback is that if you enter an erroneous string, the program won't tell you if you have a spelling problem or if the term base has a

counter this with a "neologisms" data bank, to be operational in 1988. And Gachot are negotiating with Harrap to put their specialized print dictionaries on line.

The Audiovisual and Computerized Data Center for Social Communication, Analysis and Diffusion in French (DAICADIF) will be making their term bank Lexicom available on Minitel beginning this July. The service offers

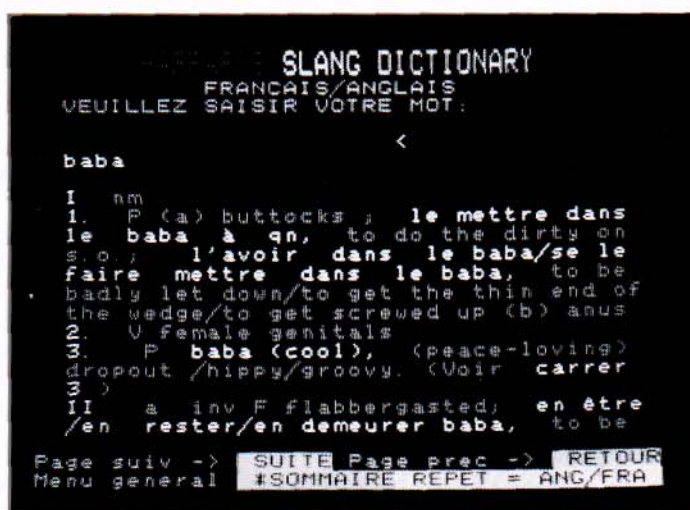
a multi-criterion search for some 2,500 terms in the data-processing, telecommunications and image-synthesis fields, giving both French and English terms, technical field and official status. There will also be 2-way general bilingual English-French indexes and 10 French-English technology glossaries for finding the equivalent once the meaning is known. The final goal is 60,000 terms, 300 added each month, with the index scheduled to double, and include a 2-way listing of official neologisms in French. When operational, this will be the first public access technical glossary for the infotech field in France.

Finally, if you need to know when a certain word was first used in the 18th century or how often it occurred in a 19th century

novel, FRANTEXT, a huge, National Institute of the French Language database, composed of word entries from some 2,300 philosophical and literary texts from the last three centuries, will be on Minitel next year. Moreover, with Minitel available on US and European telephone networks over the next year, the services offered could well serve an international audience of varied language-industrial folk.

Or could they? Certainly at US\$10 an hour, via terminals which in France are either free or extremely cheap depending on the model, these would-be term banks are within the range of any pocket. But, for the professional wordperson who needs speedy access to special lexical data, Minitel is condemned to offer only a second-best service. Search time is mournfully slow simply because the system as a whole was designed as a cheap, general service network. And the switch from PC or word-processor to Minitel working rhythms becomes a source of frustration, which in the end far outweighs any consideration of cost.

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completeness problem — and at a mere 22,000 entries, it certainly has. Ultimately, Orthotel is just another general dictionary.

If current services seem to be mere search and retrieve versions of print ancestors, offering little that is really new, and ill-adapted to professional wordpeople, the future looks a little brighter. For the technical translator needing access to a wide range of current terms, AFNOR, the French standards organization, will be putting their Normaterm database on Minitel in the late autumn. The 40-50,000 word lexicon will offer updated standards in all technical fields from auto engineering to cattle raising, using ISO terms as well as French government terminological decrees as sources.

When Normaterm takes off, it will render the CILF-Gachot industries list redundant, offering the latest term decisions on-line with French and English access straight to the official horse's mouth. Moreover, access time will be quicker and potentially more useful for the translator since the glossaries will be by subject rather than simply by alphabetical mass, as in the current service. CILF are planning to