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Letters

More info on talking machines

Besides relying on NIST to conduct testing and evaluation, DARPA created the Linguistic Data Consortium (LDC) in April 1992 to provide researchers in the United States and abroad with access to speech and natural language data ("Voices in Command," SN: 4/3/93, p.222).

The LDC is a consortium of companies, universities, and government agencies responsible for gathering and distributing the large amounts of machine-readable data needed to train and test speech and natural language systems. Constructing these corpora has always been one of the most costly steps in designing speech and natural language systems; the LDC will thus make it possible for even small universities to participate.

In addition to Air Travel Information System data, the LDC has recently begun distributing several new corpora, including the Switchboard corpus, one of the largest collections of digitized recorded continuous speech, and the

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Cover: City lights let New Yorkers eat, work, and play throughout the night. But in animals at least, nocturnal illumination can increase blood concentrations of estrogen — the leading breast-cancer risk factor known. Because many industrial pollutants also possess estrogenic properties, researchers are investigating the role of environmental factors in breast cancer's climbing incidence. (Photo: Grant Heilman)



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Science Service, which publishes SCIENCE NEWS, is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921. It gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of underrepresented groups. Through its Youth Programs it administers the International Science and Engineering Fair, the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and publishes and distributes the *Directory of Student Science Training Programs for Precollege Students*.

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Penn Treebank corpus, a collection of electronic text that has been labeled with part-of-speech tags and skeletal syntactic bracketing.

Elizabeth Hodas
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Gecko: Neither sucker nor sticker

In a recent article you refer to geckos as having "sticky feet" ("South Pacific invasion of the sexual geckos," SN: 1/16/93, p.38). In a letter response (SN: 4/3/93, p.211), Roy C. Brewer noted that geckos have pads on their toes that "give them a vacuum, but a dry one." I am afraid you are both partially mistaken: Geckos neither stick nor suck. Their ability to adhere to smooth surfaces arises from minute hairs which extend from the fan-like processes on their toe pads. These hairs can hang on to the smallest deformities of a smooth surface, even those in glass. They in essence "stick" but only as Velcro does; they are dry but do not create a

vacuum (as erroneously stated in several dictionaries).

Joseph L. Staton
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California clay at the K-T boundary

The last sentence of the article on the K-T extinction ("Cretaceous die-offs: A tale of two comets?" SN: 4/3/93, p.212) states: "Scientists think such a crash blocked out sunlight and chilled Earth for several years before spawning a global heat wave that lasted perhaps a millennium." For 30 years I have worked with kaolin and other clay deposits in California, always found along the K-T boundary and most completely leached of alkalies. Such a warm period, accompanied by heavy rain and accelerated weathering, could explain these unusual deposits and add another chapter to this amazing tale.

Ron Gibson
Irvine, Calif.

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