

# Careers of Dostert Based on Linguistics

By Bill Brinkley  
Post Reporter

Leon Dostert always has an idea churning around in his head.

His current idea is a system by which he believes he can obliterate illiteracy in five years.

He's also working out a system to teach language sounds by color.

But don't sell Leon Dostert short. People who have done so have lived to sit down to a five-course French banquet in word-eating.

Words—this is Dostert's field. Words in all languages. He's director of Georgetown University's Institute of Language and Linguistics but has done more different jobs than the total of languages he knows.

One was setting up the simultaneous interpretation system at the Nuremberg trials, thereby earning an unintentional accolade from Goering. Hermann complained bitterly that Dostert was shortening his life.

The "Big Job" was establishing simultaneous interpretation at the United Nations, enabling the U. N. to do three hours' work in one. For the chance to try S-I at the U. N. a raging battle was fought, in the course of which another quality of Dostert's was pointed up.

"Colonel," a U. N. delegate said. "I don't believe anything you say but you say it with such conviction I'll vote to give you the money for the experiment."

The "Colonel" is from being Eisenhower's interpreter during the war. As such Dostert sat in on the councils of the mighty.

Leon Dostert is short (5 feet 4 inches), squarely built, with a military air, and a Frenchman by birth. This combination makes people describe him as "Napoleonic" which infuriates him.

A filigree of grey at the temples adorns the black hair, maybe partly from the 12 hours of work he puts in a day.

The presence in the gatherings of the great was a long way from the little village in Lorraine where Leon was born 46 years ago, son of a regular French army man killed early in World War I. His mother died when he was very young.

The Germans got him started in languages. He learned German when the Kaiser's army occupied his town of Longwy. Along came the Yanks and he was learning English, rapidly-budding linguist at 14.

Fittingly, language was the catalyst that got Leon to America. Through learning English he became acquainted with a young



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American officer who invited the young lad to this country.

Arriving in California, Leon learned promptly he had unwittingly acquired a somewhat colorful version of English from the American Army. His friend took him to dinner at the home of friends and Leon was asked:

"How do you like American cooking?"

"It's damn good," affably replied Leon, age 16.

On their way home that night his friend had a few words to say to the boy he had brought to this country.

"Leon," he suggested diplomatically, "it might be a good idea if you listened and learned what words your English has that we don't use."

By 1926 he was at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service—both attending and teaching. He's been at Georgetown since, flying off now and then to take on other jobs, returning covered with glory.

His real monument is the simultaneous interpretation system at the U. N. This is the system by which a speaker is translated as he talks by interpreters sitting in soundproof glass cages. Listeners can plug on earphones and dial in the language they want.

Establishing it was a no-quarter battle, with Dostert arrayed against the old and powerful continuous interpreters.