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An Expensive Grammar Lesson

To one of the disputants in a case making its way through the Canadian telecommunications regulatory system, a single comma could be worth as much as one million dollars.

According to Ian Austen, writing in the October 25, 2006, edition of *The New York Times,* the case revolves around a sentence in a fourteen-page contract between telephone company Bell Aliant and cable television provider Rogers Communications of Toronto. Aliant contends—and Canada's telecommunications regulator agreed—that the second comma in the following sentence allows it to terminate its five-year contract with Rogers before five years have elapsed:

> This agreement shall be effective from the date it is made and shall continue in force for a period of five (5) years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive five (5) year terms, unless and until terminated by one year prior notice in writing by either party.

Because of the second comma, the regulator reasoned, the phrase stipulating a one-year notice prior to termination refers to the initial five-year period of the contract, and thus allows Aliant to get out of the deal early.

Why is so much money riding on this particular comma? The contract governs Rogers's use of telephone poles managed by Aliant on behalf of a local electric utility. The utility is assuming direct control of the poles, and is reportedly planning rate hikes that would cost Rogers an estimated Can$1 million (about US$880,000).

In its appeal, Rogers contends that the French version of the contract—which has equal validity under Canadian law—unambiguously stipulates that the contract cannot be terminated until after five years have passed.

As of mid-November 2006, no decision on Rogers's appeal had been reached.

Molecular Grammar

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) have found that certain antimicrobial peptides are more effective in killing potentially deadly bacteria when the peptides are arranged in sequences that obey rules similar to those of grammar.

According to an article on Physorg.com (***www.physorg.com/news80414158.html***), the MIT researchers have discovered a kind of "molecular grammar" that defines possible sequences of peptides in much the same way that the grammar of a language defines allowable sequences of words:

> As it applies to peptides, the sequence can be thought of as a sentence, while the individual amino acids [the building blocks of peptides] are the words…. In this case, the researchers… used a pattern discovery tool to find about 700 grammatical patterns in the sequences of 526 naturally occurring antimicrobial peptides.

Next, the researchers determined all the possible sequences of amino acids that fit the patterns, discounting sequences that were similar to one another. Testing conducted on forty-two of the remaining "grammatical" peptides revealed that about half were effective at attacking *Bacillus cereus* (which causes food-borne illness) and *Escherichia coli* (better known as E. coli). According to Physorg.com, "That is a much higher success rate than one would expect from testing randomly generated sequences." Other tests revealed that two of the peptides show promise as defenses against anthrax.