

SOME BRETON WORDS IN THE DICTIONARY
OF THE RUSSIAN EMPRESS

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0. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to remind us of an important fact for both the history of comparative studies in Russia and the history of the Breton language and its rehabilitation in the nineteenth-twentieth centuries.

The Breton language was first acknowledged in Russian linguistic research in the eighteenth century, when the Empress Catherine II decided to launch an impressive research project that would lead to the publication of a dictionary of all the languages of the world. As well as other European languages, the dictionary was to contain a section allocated to the native language of Lower Brittany. With this aim in mind, she appointed an editorial team consisting of three scholars. A German, Peter Simon Pallas (1741-1811), was put in charge of the project. He had been the head of the Russian Academy of Sciences between 1768 and 1774, and had participated in several research expeditions to a number of regions of the Empire, including Southern Siberia. Pallas was joined by a Serbian Jankovich de Marievo (1741-1814), who had been summoned to Russia from Vienna in 1773 by Catherine II and appointed as a director of Russian public schools. The third appointee in Pallas's team was another German, Hartmann Ludwig Christian Bakmeister (1736-1806).



The most important part of the dictionary comprised sections dedicated to the languages of the different ethnic groups that inhabited different parts of Russia. The remaining part of the publication dealt with European languages, arranged by linguistic groups. Most of the sections dedicated to the Western European languages, including the Celtic languages, were prepared by Bakmeister.

It is important to note that this edition and the research that made it possible laid the foundations of modern comparative linguistic studies in Russia.

The first edition of the dictionary, *Linguarum Totius Orbis Vocabularia* (hereinafter *LTOV*, in Russian known as *Сравнительные словари всех языков и наречий, собранные десницею Всевысочайшей Особы*) was published in 1787-89. This edition contained 185 entries describing 142 Asian and 51 European languages. The second edition was published in 1790-91, it contained information on 272 languages and dialects, and 273 entries were represented in this edition. The Celtic languages were represented in both editions as following: Celtic (it is not clear to which Celtic language this referred), Breton, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh and Cornish.

1. Breton language in *Linguarum Totius Orbis Vocabularia*

As in the case of many other languages, information about Breton reached the researchers via a number of intermediaries. A list of words was first drawn up in Russian, then it was translated into Latin and thence into French. This list of French words was communicated to the French ambassador, the Count of Segur. On the 15th of July 1785, he sent the list of French words to Baron de Breteuil, who in turn sent it to the Commissary of Brittany, Antoine-François Bertrand de Moleville. De Moleville was not himself a Breton speaker; therefore he had to find someone else to help him fulfil the Russian empress's request. Although it may appear paradoxical that in the eighteenth century, when Breton was spoken by an overwhelming proportion of the population of the western part of the peninsula (Lower Brittany), it was not easy to find someone able to translate a list of French words into Breton. In order to understand this difficulty, one needs to bear in mind that at the time there was no such thing as 'standard' Breton language or 'standard' Breton spelling. The four dialects of Breton (Cornovallais, Trégorois, Leonard, and Vannetais) showed much variation

from each other; moreover, each author employed his own version of spelling. Meanwhile, in order to find the so-called ‘correct’ forms, the translators seem to have used Grégoire de Rostrenen’s *Dictionnaire* (1732). Grégoire de Rostrenen was a Capuchin priest who composed a dictionary and a grammar of the Breton language which favoured the Leon dialect.

In an effort to determine which dialect was the ‘correct’ one, de Molleville sent the list to his subordinates – to Le Goazre in Quimper (where the Cornouaille dialect was spoken) and to Le Bricuir Dumeshir in Lannion (the Trégor dialect). Each translated the words into the Breton spoken in his town.

Thus, the search for a Breton translation of the list of words compiled by the research team appointed by the Russian Empress took no less than four months – from August to October 1785, according to the archive discovered and published in the *Annales de Bretagne* by Roger Gargadenec and Charles Laurent in 1968 (for details, see below).

There is no evidence as to whether Le Goazre and Le Bricuir Dumeshir knew Breton themselves or whether they had to enlist help from Breton speakers. It is however possible that Le Goazre, who lived in Quimper, could at least understand spoken Breton. The apparent difficulty that the French authorities encountered in finding support from the local population may at least in part be explained by a certain distrust of all things French among the Breton-speaking population.

As has already been mentioned, the French commissary in Brittany, De Molleville, did not know Breton; moreover, he did not think much of the language as the following passage from his letter to Le Breteuil demonstrates:

... Cette langue difficile à lire l’est encore plus difficile à prononcer, et qu’il n’y a que l’usage qui puisse familiariser avec les gutturales dont elle est remplie...

... This language is difficult to read and even more difficult to pronounce, and only constant use can enable one to become familiar with the guttural sounds with which it is replete (Letter from De Molleville to Le Breteuil, 14 October 1785).

Finally, the two versions of the Breton section of the dictionary (from Lannion and from Quimper) were delivered to Pallas. The differences between them made it clear to the editors that there was more than one

version of the language spoken in Lower Brittany. One reason why it is difficult to use *LTOV* today as evidence for Celtic studies consists in the way the editors chose to present their findings. All foreign words were transcribed into the Cyrillic alphabet and we can make no conclusion about the spelling of these words at the time. Nevertheless, this document is valuable in providing the first record of the Breton language in Russia and supplying some interesting information about the first stages of the history of comparative linguistics.

2. Importance of the Breton section in *Linguarum Totius Orbis*

Vocabularia

For both historians of Breton and partisans of the revival of the language, the existence of this document and the fact that Breton is mentioned in it is very important. In 1803 the Celtic Academy (*Académie Celtique*) was founded in France; it offered a platform for the study of Celtic languages and culture. At the very first meeting of the Celtic Academy the *LTOV* edited by Pallas was mentioned (as the proceedings of the meeting published in the *Mémoires de l'Académie Celtique* four years later, in 1807, testify). The members of the Academy were interested in the *LTOV* especially because the Breton - like the other Celtic languages - was included in the list of European languages. It was the period of *celtomania* in France, and the Breton language was considered by some enthusiasts to be the oldest and the most venerable of all European languages.

More than a century and a half later the *LTOV* was studied by Roger Gargadennec and Charles Laurent, two Bretons who discovered the correspondence between Le Goazre, le Bricquir Dumeshir, De Molleville, and De Segur (Gargadennec & Laurent 1968). They even attempted to find out who could have informed the Russian Empress of the existence of the Breton language. According to Gargadennec and Laurent, there was a Breton officer, François Guillemont de la Villebiot (or Villebois) born near Guérande, who was an admiral at the time of Peter the Great. His son Alexandre de Villebois was a general by the time of Catherine II and we know that he participated in the palace conspiracies, where he followed Catherine's orders. According to Laurent, Villebois could probably have mentioned the Breton language to the Empress; an hypothesis that seems implausible to me. In fact, the list of languages to be included in *LTOV*

was most certainly made by Pallas and not by the Empress herself. The list of words may have been drawn up by the Empress, but it is difficult to prove or to deny it today.

3. Conclusion

I would like to conclude this paper by addressing the following important question: why is it that knowledge of the existence of the Breton language in eighteenth-century Russia was so important that it deserved to be studied in Brittany in the middle of the twentieth century?

At a time when, on the one hand, the number of the Breton-speaking people in the countryside was decreasing and, on the other, a movement of revival of interest in Breton culture and language was initiated by the younger generations, the rediscovery of the *LTOV* of the eighteenth-century Russian Empress which allocated a special section to the Breton language was seen as another proof of the language's status and worth. If Catherine II thought it a language worth studying, then Bretons themselves should be proud of learning it. One has always to bear in mind that for many of those who used Breton at home with their families, it remained an "unworthy" language. As part of France's project of making Bretons into ordinary French people, for decades Breton children were severely punished for speaking their mother tongue in class. Enthusiasts who struggled for the revival of Breton were searching for arguments to convince their fellow countrymen that the forbidden language of their ancestors was not in fact so "bad" as schoolteachers had led them to believe.

"If even in Russia they study Breton, it must be a good language, it is not useless" - I have often heard Bretons say in 1992 when I became the first Russian student in the Department of Breton and Celtic Studies in Rennes and I went to the countryside with my fellow students. But some would disagree: "You are not the first Russian woman who studied our language, there was once an Empress who did the same two hundred years ago" - that was said partly in jest and partly to express pride in their language.

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SUMMARY

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НЕКОТОРЫЕ БРЕТОНСКИЕ СЛОВА В СЛОВАРЕ РУССКОЙ
ИМПЕРАТРИЦЫ

Данная статья посвящена истории составления словаря «всех языков» (VOCABULARIA LINGUARUM TOTIUS ORBIS), предпринятому по инициативе Екатерины II. В состав словаря вошли известные на тот момент языки народов России и зарубежных стран, и среди них бретонский язык. Руководителем этого проекта стал российский ученый немецкого происхождения Петр Симеон Паллас (1741-1811). Для получения списка бретонских слов были предприняты следующие шаги: русские списки были переведены на латинский язык, потом с латинских списков был выполнен перевод на французский. Французские списки были переданы графу де Сегюр (1753-1830), послу Франции в Санкт-Петербурге, переславшему их Луи-Огюсту Ле Тоннелье, барону де Бретей (1733-1807), который передал списки интенданту провинции Бретань. Тот, в свою очередь, отправил списки двум своим подчиненным: Ле Гоазре в Кемпере (Корнуай) и Ле Брикиру Дюмесиру – в Ланнионе (Трегьер). Мы не располагаем сведениями о том, кто именно оказал помощь Ле Гоазре и Ле Брикиру Дюмесиру, однако в итоге перевод списков на бретонский язык был выполнен и передан по той же цепочке, но в обратном направлении и, наконец, доставлен в Санкт-Петербург. В 1787 и 1789 гг. вышли в свет два тома словаря под латинским названием VOCABULARIA LINGUARUM TOTIUS ORBIS (Словарь языков всего мира) и русским названием «Сравнительные словари всех языков и наречий, собранные десницею всевысочайшей особы».