

ME AND MY DICTIONARY

My *Dictionnaire Royal*

The pleasure of using a historical dictionary

Kim Witthoff

If one day, by a misfortune of fate, my home caught fire and I just had time to rush out of the house bringing only my most valuable and precious belongings, I would be sure to grab my *Dictionnaire Royal*; a French-Danish and Danish-French dictionary in two heavy volumes, edited in 1772-1775 by the Norwegian scholar and translator Hans von Aphelen. The *Dictionnaire Royal* is one of the most treasured works on my bookshelf, a work I use continuously and which I would be really sad to have to do without as a translator.

The books in themselves, as artefacts, are fantastic! In heavy leather binding, with the faded remains of rich gold ornaments on the spine, and signs of two and a half centuries of use from previous owners, a folded corner, a piece of paper left as a page marker, underlined words ... In the text, all French words and expressions are printed in *antiqua* typeface and translations and explanations in Danish are printed in black letters – thus the choice of typefaces reflects the nature of the work's bi-lingual and also bi-cultural content. I can only imagine

what a nightmare preparing the printing plates must have been for the typesetter!

To use my *Dictionnaire Royal* gives a pleasure that no electronic resource, how rich and well documented it may be, can equal. Using a real, printed dictionary adds to the feeling, in the act of translating, of being in real dialogue with a text and another age that an online resource simply can't give.

Getting a glimpse into a different world

Especially in my work with translating 18th century French literature to Danish, I have found great use in a dictionary



Dictionnaire Royal
Photo: Kim Witthoff

from the same period. We do, of course, have fantastic online resources with access to works such as the dictionaries of the *Académie Française* from 1694 and onwards; and we also have the great French–Danish/Danish–French dictionary from the last century, referred to as the *Blinkenberg–Høybye*, considered one of the best dictionaries from French to another language.

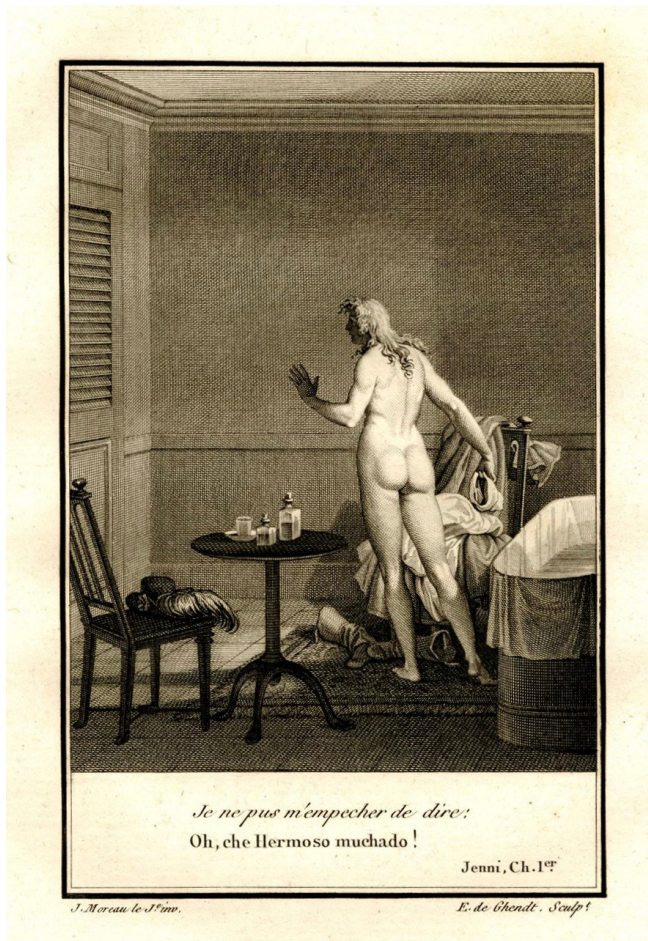
But in attempting to give a contemporary Danish reader a linguistic experience

of what French was like 250 years ago (a task which is in principle impossible, I know, and which implicates many other issues and discussions, but nevertheless...) as well as giving an impression in Danish of how it may sound to the ears of a contemporary French reader, a dictionary edited in the 18th century is not only a very useful but also an amusing tool. It is like peeling off a layer of 250 years of cultural and scientific evolution and getting a glimpse into a different world and a forgotten vocabulary.

Facts or cultural stereotypes in Voltaire

I have recently been working with Voltaire's romances. A fantastic thing with reading Voltaire, and especially his tales, is that you get an insight into 18th century life and thought rare in other writers. The vocabulary is rich and covers a wide range of 18th century life, science and thought. And you meet people in all conditions and social positions: priests, soldiers, countesses, conquistadores, enslaved people, atheists, princesses, philosophers, Jesuits, captured women, etc. During my work with their many exploits and extended *philosophico-theologico-scientifico* discussions, my *Dictionnaire Royal* has given me new cultural and linguistic experiences.

These linguistic experiences not only help the translator not to make mistakes in the target language, but also give, sometimes amusing, diachronic insights into the networks of meaning and their cultural context. You discover that the illness that several of the protagonists are exposed to, *la vérole* ('syphilis'), in 18th century Danish was called 'Franzoser', literally: 'Frenchmen'; and you may wonder if that term,



Nude male figure standing in a room, beside a bath, and looking at the door at left; finished state of illustration to an unidentified edition of Voltaire's *Histoire de Jenni*, ca.1804/1805 Etching and engraving (Source: British Museum / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0))



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Photo: Julie Polar de Greeve

originally imported from Germany, mirrors a fact or if it is the result of a cultural stereotype... A *coquin*, today something close to a ‘rascal’, at the time of Voltaire was translated into Danish as *Kieltring* (‘scoundrel’) and *liderligt Menneske* (‘horny person’).

You also experience the fact that some words in the course of time have changed meaning, sometimes to the complete opposite. The word *énervé*, today meaning ‘to get angry’, in Voltaire’s age meant *svekke*, in Danish, ‘to lose one’s forces’ (derived from the act of cutting the nerves of an animal).

And what do you do with the French word *art* in a Voltairean context? “*Tout est art*”, says the religious character Friend in *Histoire de Jenni* in his attempt to win the atheist youngster over to the Christian faith. But at a time when *art* was not an emanation from the spirit and a creating genius but a set of rules for a trade, i.e. the opposite of nature, you can’t translate the phrase into: “*Alt er kunst*” – “Everything is art.” So what does *Dictionnaire Royal* say? It translates

Art as: “*Maade at gjøre en Ting got og vel efter visse Regler*”, or in English “a way of doing something fine and well according to certain rules.” So, the good Friend refers to the world as intelligent design, created by a god, and not as *kunst*, as a work of art in the modern sense...

This, of course, is nothing new; it is the work of any translator with any given work to plunge into its linguistic universe and transmit that in the target language. But in the digital age we live in where everything we wish to know – and so much more that we didn’t think that we needed to know as well – is available online, it is still possible to find use and pleasure in using a regular, paper, printed dictionary. I would be extremely sad to lose my *Dictionnaire Royal*!