

Collecting to the Core — French Dictionaries

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

The production, maintenance, and perpetuation of great dictionaries constitute a lasting cultural legacy more meaningful than may first be apparent in the modern information environment. This now-generalized linguistic resource, too often undervalued, overlooked, or left undusted on library shelves, has a long and venerable role in the development of the world's great languages and cultures, particularly in France. For the modern reader and researcher, such basic linguistic tools provide a better understanding of meaning, context, and usage when interpreting texts of yesterday and today. This essay examines the evolution of French language dictionaries, many of which are now accessible online.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), begun in 1857 by the **London Philological Society**, contains over 600,000 words and is often recognized as one of the world's most comprehensive and exhaustive single-language dictionaries.¹ That said, the *OED* is neither the oldest nor the lengthiest dictionary in the world. The *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*, or *Dictionary of the Dutch Language*, is one of the world's largest dictionaries, taking over 150 years to develop, edit, and complete.² This exhaustive work now spans 40 printed volumes and contains over 50,000 pages of definitions. The Italian dictionary *Vocabolario della lingua italiana* represents one of the oldest and earliest-produced dictionaries.³ First printed in 1612, the *Vocabolario della lingua italiana* served as the historical model for similar works in French, Spanish, German, and English. This early example, compiled and produced by Florence's historic **Accademia della Crusca**, was dedicated to the further refinement and development of the Italian vernacular. Its success as one of the first single-language dictionaries was soon replicated throughout the Western world as national languages began to challenge Latin as the unrivaled idiom of learning and official communication.

The French medieval antecedents to modern dictionaries, such as thematic glossaries and claves, are often associated with specific works, themes, or domains of knowledge.⁴ These resources, dating from the Middle Ages, led to later bilingual works such as *Le Dic-*

tionnaire françois-latin produced by **Robert Estienne**.⁵ The 1539 publication of **Estienne's** French-Latin dictionary debatably represents the first step toward a single-language dictionary in France. Working with his father **Henri**, the renowned printer and classical scholar, **Robert** was well-placed in the heart of Paris' Latin Quarter to produce such a work, which by its inverse usage laid an important groundwork for future single-language French dictionaries. In later editions of **Estienne's** Latin-French dictionary, *Dictionarium latinogallicum* (1552), increasing emphasis on the French can be detected.⁶ **Jean Nicot**, the famed French diplomat and scholar, who collaborated with **Estienne**, would later produce the *Thresor de la langue françoise tant ancienne que moderne* (1606), the era's closest prototype to future single-language works.⁷

Much like its Italian cousin, **Accademia della Crusca**, the primary raison d'être of the **French Academy** (*l'Académie française*) was from its inception the improved control over language through the production of an official dictionary. The forty-member body, whose members to this day are baptized *les immortels*, still strives to fulfill its earliest edict: "to labor with all the care and diligence possible, to give exact rules to our language, to render it capable of treating the arts and sciences."⁸ As designated by **Cardinal Richelieu** and decreed by **Louis XIII**, the **Academy** was granted official authority over all usages, vocabulary, and grammar of the French language. However, the **Academy** is even today often overruled by the court of popular opinion. For example, an email often remains *un e-mail* (from the lexicon of **Bill Gates**) in flagrant violation of the **Academy's** mandated *courrier électronique*. Continuously updated, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* is overseen by a special commission, *Commission du dictionnaire*, and has been published thirteen times since its earliest incomplete editions began appearing in 1647.

As cultivated and literate segments of French society began debating correct usage of their language, the need for official intervention became clear. A growing obsession with correct usage permeated the highest ranks as even **Jesuit** educational institutions began slowly opening themselves up to the use of French. Wanting to match their language's world standing with France's growing cultural and nationalistic aspirations, the royal court soon demonstrated a clear interest around the production of dictionaries during the seven-

teenth century. The inability of the **French Academy** to readily reproduce the success of Florence's **Accademia** dictionary allowed other authors to insert their own efforts into the breach. The *Dictionnaire françois* by **Richelet** (1680), *Dictionnaire Universel* by **Furetière** (1690) and, following sixty years of delay, the *Dictionary of the French Academy* (1694) represented unparalleled intellectual and political emphasis on control over language.⁹⁻¹¹ Perhaps in error, the **French Academy** had originally laid the monumental task of creating its official dictionary on the shoulders of one man, **Claude Favre de Vaugelas**. Unfortunately, **Vaugelas** died without progressing much past the Cs. By contrast, **Richelet's** timely success was both an embarrassment for the **Academy** and an advance for French lexicography. Even though his dictionary, secretly published in Switzerland, was initially banned in France, the police were powerless to stop its popularity and ubiquitous usage. His early reliance on author citations from existing literature, a strategy inherited from **Jean Chapelain** and the

efforts of others, remains a cultural hallmark of modern French dictionaries. These citations, pulled from the pantheon of French literature, make historic and modern French dictionaries all the more useful for scholars and undergraduate language and literature students. In contrast to the publications of **Richelet** and **Furetière**, the **French Academy** refused use of author citations and was not initially organized in alphabetical order. Rather, an awkward presentation was put forward that listed words derived from alphabetized root words (e.g., emballer: BALLER). Fortunately, the second edition of the dictionary (1718) reflected both the innovations and improvements of a wide range of French and European lexicographers who contributed to the official publication.

Émile Maximilien Paul Littré, the French lexicographer and philosopher, began work on his French dictionary in 1844. Two revolutions and some thirty years later, he was able to complete the *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, or simply the "*Littré*," as it was known.¹² Published by his lifelong friend and **Louis-le-Grand** classmate, **Louis Hachette**, this work would become one of the great models of quality and sophistication in dictionaries of the nineteenth century. **Pierre Athanase Larousse** was the other titan of nineteenth-century dictionary development. **Larousse** published not only his fifteen volume *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, but also many other

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outstanding reference works during the era.¹³ The main difference between the *Littre* and the *Grand Larousse* was that the latter was in reality an encyclopedic coverage. However, within his encyclopedic reference work *Larousse* often inserted his own unobjective frames of reference. For example, his dictionary listed two references for the historical figure of **Napoleon**; one under “B” for **Bonaparte** and another under “N” for **Napoleon I**. According to the article on **Bonaparte**, he died on the eighteenth of Brumaire, the very day which he crowned himself **Napoléon I of France**. The modern descendant of *Larousse*’s original *Grand Dictionnaire*, the *Grand Larousse encyclopédique en dix volumes*, is one of the most consulted French dictionaries in North America.¹⁴ Today *Larousse* publishing is known as a world leader in reference materials, hosting www.larousse.com and offering students easy and fast access to over twenty online dictionaries.

In 1964 **Paul Robert**, working with **Alain Rey**, **Josette Debove**, and a network of lexicographers, produced the *Alphabetical and Analogical Dictionary of the French Language (Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française)*, or what is more commonly known as *Le Robert* or *Grand Robert de la langue française*.¹⁵ This dictionary, much like the *Larousse*, soon became a modern household name in the French-speaking world. *Le Grand Robert* was originally published in six volumes but was soon reissued with a supplement in 1970. In addition to containing all words accepted by the **French Academy**, it included scientific and technical terms, commonly used colloquialisms, and archaic words that appear in classical French literature. Lengthy quotations from contemporary French writers demonstrate historical changes in the use of words and draw on modern-day examples to clarify usage. *Le Grand Robert*, together with the ten-volume *Grand Larousse*, are two of the more widely-held single-language, encyclopedic French dictionaries.

Fortunately for students and researchers, many of these historical and contemporary dictionaries are available online. In addition to improving access through digital facsimiles of historical dictionaries, there are other online tools that further support academic research in these areas. The *Grands corpus des dictionnaires* is a subscription database maintained by **Classiques Garnier Numérique**.¹⁶ This online resource covers the ninth to twentieth centuries and offers over 900,000 historical entries, from **Frédéric Godefroy**’s *Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du 9e au 15e siècle* (1881-1902) to the **French Academy** dictionary and many other works that provide important evidence of the historical development of linguistic tools. In addition to subscription database resources, the **University of Chicago**’s **ARTFL Project** also plays an important role in providing public access to early works such as the *Dictionnaires d’autrefois* as well as **Diderot**’s *Encyclopedie*.¹⁷

Dictionaries offer important starting points to a deeper understanding of French language and culture. They represent monumental efforts to codify and describe usage and context of a language, and their design and diverse structures remain extremely useful in research. **Julie Coleman**, in “Using Dictionaries and Thesauruses as Evidence,” suggests that dictionaries provide today’s linguists with at least five major areas of evidence.¹⁸ She notes that in addition to their more obvious use as references, they also provide linguists with positions and evidence to argue against, as well as assistance researching attitudes toward language, social anxiety, and linguistic changes over time. While many of the historical resources cited here are more appropriate for the advanced undergraduate, graduate student, or researcher, their digital availability and deep scholarly relevance make them suitable for anyone interested in French language, grammar, literature, or historical records. 🍀

consequences that would be imposed on him due to the era’s politics. He was born to a family of farmers in 1955 in the Gaomi area of the

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Editor’s note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

Shandong province — exactly the setting for his generational saga *Red Sorghum*. He was awarded the prize for a writer “who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history, and the contemporary.” A perfect description for both of these novels elegantly translated by **Howard Goldblatt**, a Research Professor of Chinese at the **University of Notre Dame** from 2002-2011. 🍀