

Aurorae Borealis Studia Classica

Vol. XVIII

The aurora borealis as described in early
French dictionaries (1700-1750)

digitized, with an introductory essay
by Muriel Brot and Per Pippin Aspaas

Aurorae Borealis Studia Classica ('Classic Studies of the Northern Lights') is [a series](#) of digitized books, with biographical introductions and summaries of contents, edited by Per Pippin Aspaas and published by [Septentrio Academic Publishing](#), University of Tromsø - The Arctic University of Norway (UiT). The books as such are already in the public domain; all further content is open-access except when stated otherwise.

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The eighteenth volume provides an overview of the Aurore Boréale (northern lights, aurora borealis) as described in monolingual French dictionaries from the first half of the eighteenth century. The very first examples of such dictionaries - published in the 1680s and 1690s - had no coverage of the northern lights. Since 1701, however, the phenomenon was included in the following dictionaries: posthumous versions of Antoine Furetière's Dictionnaire universel edited by Henri Basnage de Beauval (1701) and Jean-Baptiste Brutel de la Rivière (1727); the "Dictionnaire de Trévoux" edited by a group of Jesuits (editions from 1704, 1721, 1732, 1743); and the Dictionnaire de l'Académie française (third edition, 1740). The introductory essay contextualises the introduction of the northern lights as a lexical term and provides English translations of relevant entries in the dictionaries. Digitisations of the original entries are included in facsimile.

This publication is based on a presentation given by Muriel Brot, research fellow at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Unité Mixte de Recherche of the Université Paris-Sorbonne), at an international workshop organised by the Malaurie Institute of Arctic Research Monaco-UVSQ in Versailles, 23 January 2025.

- The editor

Items digitized for this volume:

** Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* edited by Henri Basnage de Beauval's (1701), title page and page with description of the *Aurore*, taken from the [Gallica database](#)

** Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* edited by Jean-Baptiste Brutel de la Rivière (1727), title page and page with description of the *Aurore*, taken from the [Gallica database](#)

** The "Dictionnaire de Trévoux" edited by a group of Jesuits (editions from 1704, 1721, 1732, 1743), title pages and descriptions of the *Aurore*, taken from the [Gallica database](#)

** The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (third edition, 1740), title page and description of the *Aurore Boréale*, taken from the [Gallica database](#)

THE FIRST FRENCH DICTIONARIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF *AURORE BORÉALE* AS A LEXICAL ENTRY

Introductory essay

by Muriel Brot and Per Pippin Aspaas

The first monolingual living-language dictionaries in France were published towards the end of the seventeenth century, between 1680 and 1694. The invention of the monolingual model (French words explained in French) changed the function of the dictionary: it no longer had to provide translations of each word, but define it and explain its meaning. The popularity of the genre reached unprecedented heights in the eighteenth century, when so many dictionaries were published that it became known for its “dictionary craze”.¹ The terms *dictionnaire* and *encyclopédie* were used interchangeably, as in the famous *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Encyclopedia, or Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts) by Diderot and D’Alembert (17 vols, 1751–1765). The present volume of the *Aurorae Borealis Studia Classica* series explores how the concept *Aurore boréale* – the French word for northern lights – was introduced and defined in eighteenth-century works that correspond to the present-day notion of a dictionary, that is a lexical tool that offers succinct explanations of words and concepts in alphabetical order.

The *Dictionnaire françois* by pioneering lexicographer César-Pierre Richelet (1626–1698), a volume of more than a thousand pages published in Geneva in 1680, contains no mention of the aurora borealis. The same applies to the first edition of the *Dictionnaire universel* by Antoine Furetière (1619–1688), which was published posthumously in 1690,² as well as the *Dictionnaire général et curieux* by César de Rochefort (1630–1690), published in 1685. Nor is there any mention of the phenomenon in the first edition of the official dictionary of the

¹ See for example Marie-Leca Tsiomis, *Ecrire l'Encyclopédie. Diderot: de l'usage des dictionnaires à la grammaire philosophique* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999), pp. 13–145; Linn Holmberg, ‘Right and Wrong Ways of Knowing: The Dictionary Craze and Conflicts of Learning in Eighteenth-Century Europe’, *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 20 (2023): 8–33. Fulltext: <https://doi.org/10.7557/4.7203>.

² The first edition of Furetière’s dictionary was accompanied by a preface by another lexicon pioneer, Pierre Bayle (1647–1706). Soon after having prepared Furetière’s work for publication, Bayle embarked upon the writing of his own *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam, 1697 and 1702). Bayle’s dictionary is, however, a lexicon of proper names, not organised according to concepts. It therefore falls outside the scope of this volume of *Aurorae Borealis Studia Classica*.

French Academy of Letters, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise* (Paris, 1694). This silence shows that the northern lights were not yet part of common knowledge at the end of the seventeenth century.

In the second edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise* (Paris, 1718) the aurora borealis is missing as well. The French Academy of letters did, however, devote a lexical entry to the *Aurore boréale* from the third edition (Paris, 1740) onwards. The entry took the form of a single sentence, which was reprinted in unchanged form throughout the rest of the eighteenth century (3rd ed., 1740; identical wording in 4th ed., 1762 and 5th ed., 1798):³

AURORE BORÉALE. This is the word used for a luminous phenomenon that occasionally appears in the northern part of the sky.

The above-mentioned Antoine Furetière was a controversial figure in his time – partly because he operated on his own initiative, in direct competition with the French academy of letters, partly because he was considered a freethinker. In that age of confessional rivalries, long before the adoption of copyright law, it is no surprise that Furetière's work was printed again, in a revised and augmented edition by a Dutch-based Huguenot, Henri Basnage de Beauval (1656–1710). His version of Furetière's *Dictionnaire* comprised three volumes, published in The Hague and Rotterdam in the year 1701 (as well as in 1702 and 1708 reprints). Basnage de Beauval introduces the northern lights by way of a new paragraph added after Furetière's original explanation of *AURORE*, the French word for dawn:

Some have called by the name *Aurore septentrionale* [northern dawn] a glow, or brightness, which sometimes appears during a dark night, and which occupies the entire northern part of the sky. In this way, they have interpreted it to be the *Aurore* [dawn]. Gassendi has described this phenomenon, which he observed with diligence in 1621.

French astronomer Pierre Gassendi (or Petrus Gassendus, 1592–1655), who observed the phenomenon on 12 September 1621 in the Aix-en-Provence region, was one of the first natural philosophers that attempted to explain the northern lights by referring to vapours passing through the sun's rays after sunset or before sunrise. The term *aurore septentrionale* was in fact not used by Gassendi, who in his Latin texts on the phenomenon referred to it as *Aurora Borea*. However, the two adjectives *septentrionalis* / *septentrionale* and *borea(lis)* / *boréale* (in Latin and French respectively) are synonyms.⁴

The third and last version of the dictionary still bearing the name of Furetière came out in The Hague in 1727, edited by another Huguenot, Jean-Baptiste Brutel de la Rivière (1669–1742). The *Dictionnaire universel* had by now grown to four volumes, yet the aurora borealis

³ All translations in this essay are by Muriel Brot and Per Pippin Aspaas.

⁴ See further Per Pippin Aspaas: 'The Auroral Zone versus the Zone of Learning. A Brief History of Early Modern Theories on the Aurora Borealis', in Silje Gaupseth, Marie-Theres Federhofer & P. P. Aspaas (eds.), *Travels in the North. A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Long History of Northern Travel Writing* (Hannover, 2013), pp. 113–135 (on 117–120).

was still described in exactly the same way as in the 1701 edition of Basnage de Beauval, quoted above.⁵

From another camp of Francophone intellectual culture there came a response in the form of a dictionary edited by an anonymous group of Jesuits based in Trévoux, roughly 20 kilometres north of Lyon. This multivolume dictionary, known as the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*,⁶ was issued in altogether six different editions from 1704 to 1771, the last of which actually was printed after the abolition of the Society of Jesus from France (legal measures begun in 1762, completed in all provinces by 1768). From the outset, the editors of the Trévoux dictionary used Furetière's work as a basis. In fact, they allowed themselves to reuse entire lexical entries without crediting the original source. As far as the northern lights are concerned, the phenomenon got its own entry in the dictionary of the Jesuits from the very beginning. Its explanation grew progressively in size, from eight lines in 1704 to 110 lines in the sixth and last 1771 edition.

The very first edition of the so-called *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* plagiarises the Furetière edition of Basnage de Beauval, quoted in translation above. Exactly the same wording is repeated in the second (1721) and third (1732) editions. However, in the fourth edition, published in 1743, the entry is expanded in the following manner:

Some have called by the name *Aurore Septentrionale* [northern dawn], or more commonly *Aurore Boréale*, a glow, or brightness, which sometimes appears during a dark night, and which occupies the entire northern part of the sky. In this way, they have interpreted it to be the *Aurore* [dawn]. Gassendi has described this phenomenon, which he observed with diligence in 1621. They call it *Aurore Boréale* because it generally appears in the North, and because being close to the horizon it resembles the *Aurore* [dawn]. According to the most common opinion, it originates from the zodiacal light, which was discovered in 1683 and described by the late Monsieur de Cassini. This light is the atmosphere that encircles the Sun and which occasionally extends all the way to the earth, where it provides the matter of the *Aurore Boréale*, as it drops upon the atmosphere of the earth. See the treatise that Monsieur de Mairan has made about it.

More than double the original length, this entry introduces two more savants beyond the original reference to Gassendi. Director of the Observatoire de Paris and member of the Académie des Sciences, Jean-Dominique Cassini (or Giovanni Domenico Cassini, 1625–1712), published his treatise on the zodiacal light in the booklet *Découverte de la Lumière Céleste qui paroist dans le Zodiaque* (Paris, 1685). Another member of the Académie des Sciences, Jean-Jacques d'Ortous de Mairan (1678–1771) in his *Traité physique et historique de l'Aurore Boréale* (Paris, 1733) presented an elaborate theory wherein the two phenomena – the zodiacal light and the northern lights – were treated as identical.

⁵ On the various editions of this dictionary, see Ioana Geoffrey Williams & Clarissa Stincone Galleron, 'Announcing the Dictionary: Front Matter in the Three Editions of Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel*', *Euralex* 2020/21, pp. 393–402.

⁶ Its real title was *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin* (Universal French and Latin Dictionary).

The Trévoux editors thus kept track of the developments in French science and updated the entry both regarding lexical shifts (the term *Aurore Boréale* characterised as more common than *Aurore Septentrionale*) and epistemological development (the “atmosphere” of the sun meets that of the earth). The shift from a dictionary (in our sense of the word) towards an encyclopedia or lexicon article had by now begun in earnest.

The entries on the northern lights in the fifth (1752) and sixth (1771) editions of the Trévoux dictionary will be included in a coming volume of the *Aurorae Borealis Studia Classica*, where these substantially expanded entries will be presented alongside corresponding articles in the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné* (1751–1765) of Diderot and D’Alembert as well as the *Dictionnaire d’Yverdon* (1770–1780), edited by Fortunato-Bartolomeo De Felice.

The table below gives an overview of the dictionaries included in the present volume. Hyperlinks lead to the digitisations of the Gallica database of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Short title	Year	Edited by	Volumes, pages ⁷	Relevant entries
Furetière 2nd ed	1701	Basnage du Beauval	III, 3225	AUORE
Trévoux 1st ed	1704	<i>Jesuits</i>	III, 2503	AUORE [identical to the above]
Trévoux 2nd ed	1721	<i>Jesuits</i>	V, 5363	AUORE [identical to the above]
Furetière 3rd ed	1727	de la Rivière	IV, 4225	AUORE [identical to the above]
Trévoux 3rd ed	1732	<i>Jesuits</i>	V, 4717	AUORE [identical to the above]
Académie 3rd ed	1740	<i>Academy of Letters</i>	II, 1846	AUORE BORÉALE
Trévoux 4th ed	1743	<i>Jesuits</i>	VI, 5192	AUORE [expanded]

⁷ Total number of “vues” in the digitised version found in the Gallica database. In some instances, this includes a book’s binding.



A random selection of eighteenth-century books. Library of the *Ancien Hôtel de la Marine* et *Galerie des Affaires étrangères ancien de la marine*, Versailles.

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