

Cryptic avatars: the ornamental illustrations of rare initial letters in French dictionaries

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Figure 1: Claude Augé, *Larousse Classique Illustré* (1928) (copyright Larousse)

Abstract

This paper examines the ornamental illustration of rare initial-letters in some 19th and 20th century French dictionaries and attempts to show how these illustrations offer a few predictable -- and somewhat exotic -- items on the one hand, and on the other reveal a great many diversionary tactics meant to dissimulate the difficulty of illustrating words that start with these letters. These tactics include 1) grouping of rare letters into a single head-piece; 2) graphic stratagems such as drawing "big" or adding irrelevant items; 3) breaching a thematic programme of illustrations for lack of items whose name starts with the necessary letter; 4) stratagems more related to the lexicon itself, such as addition of labels, illustrations based on variant or even fanciful spellings.

Introduction

Some forty French dictionaries published between the 1830s and the 1960s were graced with ornamental head-pieces. The space attributed to such ornamentation was, naturally enough, identical for each section in any given dictionary: in some cases nearly the entire first page of each letter-chapter. Such equal treatment in terms of ornamental image space, not congruent with the extremely unequal lexicographical distribution of words starting with each letter, left the illustrators with a daunting task when it came to illustrating certain letters.

The mainspring behind these ornamental illustrations is the seminal link between the letter and the names of the items presented in the illustration. More precisely, the names of these items, as in an ABC primer, start with the letter of the dictionary letter-chapter. I have coined the term *iconophor* to designate these particular illustrationsⁱ. Where up to sixty iconophors might easily be dreamt up for letters such as C and P, (the "richest" letters in the French alphabet), how would a letter like K or X be illustrated?

I shall focus here on the iconophoric ornamental head-pieces of letters which occur rarely in initial position in French -- K, Q, U, W, X, Y, and Z -- and attempt to show how the task of creating them often appears to have driven the artist to distraction.

Presentation of the corpus

From an overall inventory of the head-piece iconophors in 36 dictionaries, I have extracted data concerning those for K, Q, U, W, X, Y, and Z; data for C and P head-pieces offers a sort of control group.

Statistical observation reveals several characteristics of rare initial-letter iconophors as compared to those of the control group. **First**, their relative preponderance: the 14 occurrences of the first-ranking Y iconophor (*yacht*) constitute 22% of the overall corpus of Y iconophors (whereas the 9 first-ranking C items (*cheval*) constitute only 3% of the overall corpus of C iconophors). The smaller supply of words starting with Y makes those chosen for illustration more predictable. **Second**, the exoticism of many of the terms: "exotic" because the thing the word denotes may be from a foreign country (*yatagan*), or from a historical time that is foreign to the contemporary period (*quadrige*); or an "unusual" word is used to denote a thing that is not in itself particularly unusual (*xylogravure* for wood engraving, *gravure sur bois*). It should be noted, however, that exoticism is also present in the illustrations of the more common initial-letters, though to a lesser degree. **Third**, the particularity of the letter W: though *wagon* and *wapiti* both occur 7 times in the corpus, there are also eight cases in which the W part of the dictionary is given no head-piece at all. Those W iconophors that there are are particularly exotic, since all words that start with W in French are lexical borrowings, mostly from English and German.

Such observations inevitably lead to questions about the creators of the head-pieces, the illustrators. It could be argued that for more common initial-letters, the work of creating the head-piece consisted in little more than a grouping of pre-existing documentary illustrationsⁱⁱ, with the illustrator's input limited to choosing items and positioning them within the overall arrangement. But for the rare initial-letters, the resources may be extremely limited. Claude Augé's 1916 *Petit Larousse Illustré* offers only five documentary illustrations for W, one for X, and four for Y.

Let us momentarily put ourselves at the drawing board of the illustrator asked to create ornamental head-pieces for these rare letters.ⁱⁱⁱ What items immediately come to mind? Judging from the iconophors for the rare initial-letter head-pieces, the illustrators did a certain amount of research. The most frequent X iconophors, for example, are *xyste /xystique*, *xylogravure / xylographie*, *xylophone* and *xéranthème*.^v But then what?

Obvious obviation

In actuality, the illustrators use numerous ruses to get around the difficulties inherent in the illustration of these initial letters.

One of the commoner solutions is the combination of several letters into a single head-piece: J is often combined with K; P may be combined with Q, or U with V; and the WXY combination is frequent. Once the letters are combined, the inadvertant reader might not notice that certain letters are simply left unillustrated.

A second series of stratagems uses graphic means to obviate the difficulty. An elementary ploy, but an effective one, consists in adding illustrations that are not in any way iconophoric, but which occupy the space to be filled, for example with additional décor, not necessary for recognition of the iconophor, but essential for "padding". An excellent example of this is the X head-piece of Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire Universel* (1865-1876).

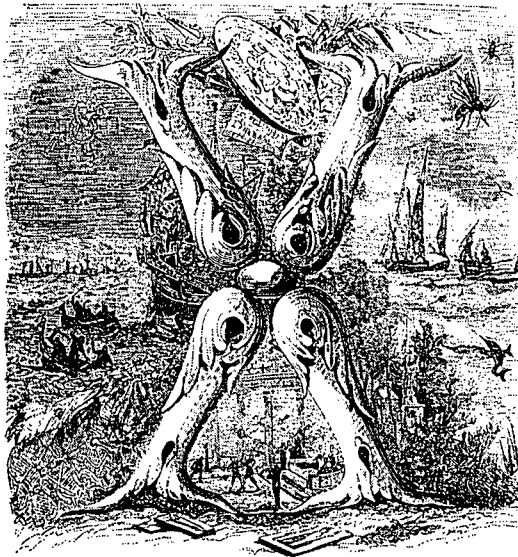


Figure 2: Pierre Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire Universel* (1865-1876)

For those up on their popular mythology, Xerxes is immediately recognizable by the men in boats whipping the sea. However this Xerxes scene occupies almost a quarter of the image-space of the head-piece, and is fleshed out in great detail with the broken bridge of boats in the background, Xerxes himself on board a large vessel, and even the Zoroastrian god Ormuzd portrayed clearly in the sky above the scene.

The trick of drawing "big" is another useful graphic approach. And when the challenge of finding iconophoric illustration seems insurmountable, a fallback solution may be the use of pure ornamentation (arabesques, floral tracery, etc.), with no iconophors at all.

Some of the rare initial-letters lend themselves more specifically to certain graphic wiles. The *zodiaque* may be presented in great detail, with its many signs and symbols: over two-thirds of the Z head-piece in the 1955 *Petit Larousse* is occupied by these, none of which starts with Z. For K, the distraught illustrator may offer *Kirghiz*, *Kalmouck*, *Kabyle*, *Khroumir*, *Kurde*: it is then up to the distraught reader to determine who is who....

A third stratagem involves modification of an explicit or implicit programme. The head-piece theme in Paul Augé's *Nouveau Larousse Universel* (1953) is occupations and professions: J is *jongleurs* (jugglers), but what profession starts with K? In a predicament, the illustrator has presented several people around a table, upon which a *kaleidoscope* is placed. Another way of modifying the programme is by illustrating items not usually illustrated in dictionaries at all. The vast majority of dictionary illustrations, documentary and ornamental, traditionally represent things. And though it cannot be asserted that this is a rule, it is remarkable that one of the few letters which often portrays actions in its head-piece illustration is Q: an alms-giving scene (*quête*) and even the occasional quarrel (*querelle*).

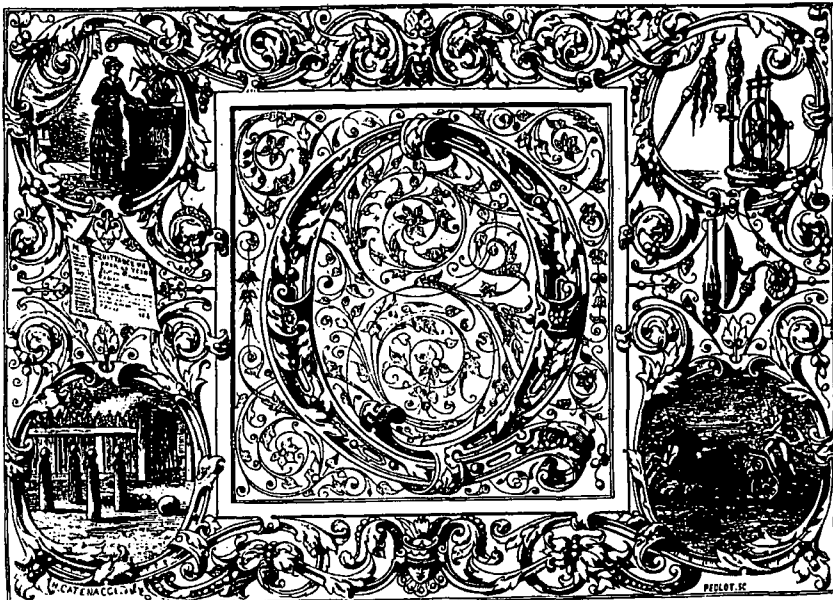


Figure 3: Louis-Nicolas Bescherelle, *Nouveau Dictionnaire National* (1887)

A final series of tricks is more closely connected to the lexicon itself. Head-piece illustrators may use the resource of variant spelling in order to justify certain items: some dictionaries offer cockatoos in both the C and K head-piece (*cacatoès*, *kakatoès*). Napoléon Landais' *Dictionnaire Général et Grammatical* presents a troop of *Uhllans* in the W head-piece; one wonders if Landais did not dream up his own spelling variant *Wlan*, in order to justify the illustration.



Figure 4: Napoléon Landais, *Dictionnaire Général des Dictionnaires* (1834)

The artifice of labelling is not to be scorned: several illustrators resort to this solution, as if aware that certain drawings might not be self-explanatory. In the U head-piece of Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*, in the faintest letters, dissimulated in the hatched foreground of a landscape representing a church seen in the distance in a hilly setting, is printed the word *Upsal*. Who would have recognized it? Numerous other examples exist of labelled items that would not otherwise be recognizable in the head-pieces of rare initial-letters: maps (showing *Uri*, *Unterwalden*, *Uruguay*) jugs (of *kummel*, *usquebach*...) etc..

Conclusion

We have seen that the ornamental illustration of rare initial-letters differs from that of other letters in various ways. Their most frequent iconophors are both predictable and predominant. Study of the head-pieces reveals a series of stratagems used by the illustrators in order to dissimulate the difficulties of the task. The first stratagem, and a common one, is the grouping of rare letters into a single illustrated head-piece (J and K, or W, X, and Y, in particular), in which one letter might not be illustrated at all. A second series of stratagems is solely graphic: for example drawing "big", or adding other items (relevant or irrelevant, figurative or ornamental). A third stratagem reveals the breaking point of an implicit or explicit programme imposed on the illustrations: when an illustration whose name starts with the appropriate letter cannot be found, the programme is breached. A fourth series of stratagems may be more closely connected to the lexicon itself: addition of labels, illustrations based on variant or even fanciful spellings.

In this paper, I too have made use of avoidance tactics: after presenting the illustrations, I have purposefully avoided any remark on the implications of the various points I mention. Given the preliminary nature of this research, and the sad lack of other studies on an artform

that has existed in (albeit few) French dictionaries for over 150 years, I would be most reluctant to make sweeping statements. I believe the ornamental illustrations in French dictionaries, for all letters and not just the rare letters, convey information above and beyond mere denotation. The first stage in gaining access to that information resides in accurate identification of the items illustrated. Further stages would compare the ornamental illustrations of rare and less rare initial-letters, in terms of denotation and connotation. In the meantime, if you were so kind as to name all the iconophors in the X head-piece of Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*, I would be most grateful.

Endnotes

ⁱ Iconophor: an image whose first distinctive feature consists in the letter which begins the name of its referent.

ⁱⁱ There are a few provisos here: though a dictionary may contain ornamental illustrations, it may contain no documentary illustrations whatsoever. And even in those dictionaries with both forms, an item illustrated in a head-piece does not necessarily appear in the documentary illustrations.

ⁱⁱⁱ Given the lack of documentation on the decision-making process behind the ornamental illustrations in dictionaries, this will by necessity involve a certain amount of conjecture.

^{iv} These refer to a form of classical Greek architecture in which sporting activities took place, and to the activities and participants.

^v Immortelle, the flower.

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