
Teaching and learning French in the early eighteenth century: Ivan Shcherbatov's letters to his French teacher

Introduction

Prince Ivan Shcherbatov

The author of the letters that we publish here for the first time is Prince Ivan Andreevich Shcherbatov (1696-1761), the second son of Prince Andrei Dmitrievich Shcherbatov (died 1711), a Russian aristocrat who had been close to Tsar Alexis, the father of Peter I (the Great). Like many Russian noblemen of his time, Ivan Andreevich was sent abroad by Peter (in this instance to Great Britain) to acquire useful skills (in Ivan's case, the art of navigation). It seems clear that he arrived in England in 1716; at any rate it could not have been as late as 1719, as has generally been assumed up until now.¹ Shcherbatov did not obtain permission to enrol in the Royal Navy but devoted himself instead to learning some useful 'sciences' and foreign languages. Judging by his letters, he made it his main aim to learn French and he evidently spent much of his time on this task. He also took an interest in economic matters and in 1720 translated the *Considérations sur le numéraire et le commerce* written by the Scottish economist and adventurer John Law (1671-1729), adding a preface and notes of his own in which he explained English and French weights, measures and values.² In 1721 he returned to Russia, but in 1723 he was sent abroad again, this time to Spain, to assist the Russian consul in Cádiz. Here he wrote, in French, an 'Introduction on commerce in Russia', in which he made use of many western sources.³ In 1726 he was promoted to the post of Minister Plenipotentiary at the Spanish court in Madrid, where he remained until 1731. There followed a brief spell as Ambassador Extraordinary in Constantinople. In 1734 he was appointed President of the Russian College of Justice (Юстиц-коллегия), one of the thirteen central boards set up by Peter with responsibility for various branches of government. In 1739 he succeeded Prince Antiokh Kantemir as Russian Minister Plenipotentiary in London, where he remained, with a short break in 1742-43, until 1746. He was well respected by the British government, especially by Lord Carteret (1690-1763), Secretary of State from 1742-44, and it was hoped by the British side that he would be re-appointed as ambassador to Britain for a third spell after his return to Russia. However, he did not return to England, rising instead, in 1748, to the rank of Senator.⁴

Shcherbatov's letters to his French teacher in London

We have discovered the letters published here in the Manuscript Department of the Russian National Library in St Petersburg. The whole collection of documents to which they belong contains over 120 letters and also a number of translations from French and English documents⁵ that Shcherbatov made while he was in London. Since the collection is classified in the library catalogue as 'anonymous', it has previously been assumed that the author of the letters was unknown. However, the name 'Shcherbatov' appears at the end of some of the letters⁶ and there is also evidence in them that they were written at (or rather very close to) the time when Ivan Shcherbatov was known to be in London.

The quantity of the letters that Shcherbatov wrote in French; the care with which he copied letters and kept his notebook; his teacher's reference in one of the letters in the collection to Shcherbatov's 'great enthusiasm for our language' (« fort[e] ardeur pour nôtre Langue »): all these factors demonstrate not only Shcherbatov's interest in the French language but also his appreciation of the importance of French as the language of a great power and as a new *lingua franca* for people of different national origins in the early eighteenth-century world. Shcherbatov is keen to learn and regrets in one of his letters that he cannot find French company in which to practise the language:

Je suis bien fâché de n'avoir pas trouvé de Compagnie Française pour me recréer un peu. Trouvez bon que je vous supplie de vouloir bien prendre la peine de passer chez moy et de me dire quelque nouvelle Remarque de votre chef sur la langue française. J'ay beau attendre du monde au Chocolat de la meuse avec qui je puisse m'exercer dans votre langue [...] (fols 103 v.- 103)⁷

[I am quite cross not to have found some French company to amuse myself with for a bit. Please think it fit that I beg you to deign to take the trouble to call on me and make some new remark of your own about the French language.⁸ I wait in vain in the Chocolat de la Meuse for people with whom I might be able to practise your language [...]]

His enthusiasm for the French language and his belief that it was important to have a knowledge of it are also borne out by his description of his encounter with a *Monsieur G.*, whose French was poor:

Je passay hier l'après diné à parler françois avec monsieur G.: mais j'eus de la peine de le bien entendre, car la langue française ne luy est pas tout à fait naturelle. Aussitôt qu'il m'eut fait paroître quelque inclination de se remettre à étudier [...] françois je ne manquay pas de vous recommander à luy. Peut être que j'aurai la commodité de luy parler plus amplement de l'utilité de la Langue française [...] (fol. 102)

[I spent yesterday after dinner speaking French to Mr G.: but I had difficulty understanding him well, for French does not come naturally to him. As soon as he showed an inclination to start studying [...] French I did not fail to recommend you to him. Perhaps I shall have a chance to speak to him more fully about the usefulness of the French language [...]]

The letters also offer an insight into the ways in which French was then taught and how Shcherbatov learnt it. Evidently Shcherbatov took private lessons from one of the French émigrés in London, of whom there were many at that time, mainly Huguenots escaping from religious persecution in France after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685. (It is not known exactly who this teacher was but we do have an example of his writing, namely the first letter in the collection, which Shcherbatov diligently copied out and in which the teacher gave his pupil pedagogical advice.) These French émigrés established a number of schools and supplemented their income by giving private lessons. They also published French grammars, some of which became very popular: one of the most widely used throughout the Age of Enlightenment was *The compleat French-master for ladies and gentlemen: being a new method, to learn with ease and delight the French tongue*, first published in 1694, by Abel Boyer, who also compiled a French-English *Royal Dictionary* (1699).⁹

We do not know whether Shcherbatov himself used these books, but we do know much else about the way he learnt French. One of his main methods, for example, was the reading of classical French authors, especially dramatists. This method was recommended to him by his teacher, both because plays provided so many examples of conversational patterns and because reading aloud was a good means of improving pronunciation: 'Make it one of your main concerns to acquire free and easy pronunciation by reading aloud to an attentive teacher who listens carefully. Reading comedies and verse is the most useful thing for this purpose.' (« Qu'un de vos principaux soins soit de vous acquérir une prononciation facile et aisée en lisant tout haut devant un Maître attentif, et qui s'y attend. La lecture des comedies et de vers est celle, qui est la plus utile pour ce dessein » (fol. 113)). Shcherbatov evidently found the method profitable and enjoyable, and sang the praises of Molière (1622-73) to his teacher:

Si vous vous trouvez demain sur le midy chez vous, je me donnerai l'honneur de vous venir rendre mes devoirs et de vous sacrifier une bonne grosse heure à la Lecture de notre Comedie. Après l'avoir finie nous pourrons voir le Bourgeois Gentil-homme de Moliere, si le coeur vous en dit. Je vous suis caution que vous y trouverez vôtre conte [compte], et que vous tomberez d'accord que le ridicule des Personnages y est fort bien touché. Moliere étoit excellent homme à représenter les caracteres, et à divertir les auditeurs. Que je souhaiterois sçavoir par coeur une partie des plus beaux endroits de ses comédies! (fol. 101 v.; the last three words are in another hand)

[If you are at home tomorrow at noon I shall give myself the honour of coming to pay my respects to you and to devote to you a good hour for reading our comedy. After we have finished it we could see Molière's *Bourgeois Gentil-homme*, if you feel like it. I guarantee that you will be satisfied and that you will agree that the ridiculing of the characters is very well handled. Molière was excellent at portraying characters and at amusing audiences. How I should like to know some of the finest parts of his comedies by heart!]

His teacher also recommended that Shcherbatov train himself through translation, not simply by translating at random from English into French but by selecting a passage written

in good French, translating it into English, retranslating it into French and comparing his own effort with the original text.

There is some evidence too that Shcherbatov used the famous *Letters* of Bussy-Rabutin (1618-93), the libertine, memoirist and correspondent of Madame de Sévigné (1626-96), as his teacher also advised him to do: at least, a copy of this book which seems to have belonged to Ivan Shcherbatov was inherited by his son-in-law, Prince Mikhail Shcherbatov, the historian and conservative thinker of the age of Catherine II (the Great).¹⁰ Such epistolary literature was particularly useful for studying the formulae employed in private correspondence. Shcherbatov's letters show not only that he was well aware of the importance of these formulae but also that he assimilated a large number of them, for instance: « J'ay eu l'honneur de recevoir vôtre lettre », « Je suis bien fâché de », « Je prens la liberté de vous prier, de vouloir bien vous donner la peine », « je me sers de cette occasion pour vous asseurer avec combien d'attachement je suis », « Passez moy quelque negligence, je vous en prie, et ayez la bonté de », « je finis par des protestations d'attachement et de respect », « Je vous conjure de croire que j'ay l'honneur d'être veritablement », « Je ne manquerai pas de vous faire savoir », and so forth. Nor is mastery of such phrases a merely linguistic exercise: it also opens up a world of civility and *politesse*, a way of conducting personal and social relationships that is quite new to the noble visitor from Muscovy.

Newspapers in French (and not necessarily French newspapers alone, but also Dutch publications such as *La Gazette de Hollande* (*The Gazette of Holland*)) were another source of material for the study of French vocabulary and structures. 'En cas que La Gazette de Hollande soit arrivée', Shcherbatov writes in one of his letters to his teacher,

je prendrai le plaisir de la lire, et tout ce que j'y trouverai de remarquable je vous le dirai. J'espère que vous voudrez bien raisonner avec moy sur les nouvelles, comme vous êtes accoutumé de le faire avec tout le monde et principalement avec vos écoliers du nombre de quel je suis. (fol. 108)

[In the event that the Dutch Gazette has arrived, I shall take pleasure in reading it and everything that I find noteworthy there I shall tell you about. I hope that you will wish to discuss the news with me, as you are wont to do with everyone, especially with your pupils, among whom I am included.]

In all probability, though, the most important means of learning French at Shcherbatov's disposal was the opportunity simply to correspond with his teacher in French. Shcherbatov composed a great number of letters for this pedagogical purpose. Sometimes the letters describe real events but sometimes Shcherbatov's only aim seems to be to practise his French. All the letters that appear to have been written as a linguistic exercise are marked with an 'A' by Shcherbatov in the archival collection (catalogued as « Recueil de lettres françoises ») that we have used and many of them have been corrected by his teacher.

Language competence and access to a new social world

Shcherbatov's letters to his French teacher in London indicate that he found another means, besides his lessons and his correspondence with his teacher, of improving his knowledge of French. Clearly he also had opportunities to hold conversations in French in public places where French people living in London, and no doubt other French-speaking foreigners as

well, could meet. One possible venue for such social interaction, of course, was the public house: The Horse and Dolphin tavern in St Martin's Street in St Martin's in Fields, which Shcherbatov frequented (and which survived until the late nineteenth century, when it was demolished), was 'next dorr' to his lodgings.¹¹ Another venue, and a venue where more sober conversation could take place, was the coffee-house, an institution that flourished in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England. The first coffee-house in England was probably established in Oxford around 1650 and the first in London in St Michael's Alley, Cornhill in 1652. By the late 1730s there were over 500 coffee-houses in London alone, catering for various clienteles that could be characterised by political persuasion, literary interest, profession or fashion.

Coffee-houses quickly became associated with, and themselves helped to stimulate, the acquisition of knowledge (including the learning of French), many forms of cultural and political activity, and also commercial life (in which Shcherbatov, as we have seen, had an interest). For example, Jonathan's Coffee-House, founded in Exchange Alley around 1680, began to be used at the end of the century to post the prices of stocks and commodities and eventually evolved into the London Stock Exchange. The insurance market Lloyds of London had its origins in the coffee-house opened in the 1680s by Edward Lloyd in Tower Street (soon relocated to Lombard Street), where ship-owners, merchants and sailors gathered and underwriters of marine insurance would meet to conduct their business. The coffee-house may also have encouraged civility, through the adoption of norms of conversational etiquette. Again, it may have had a social levelling function, inasmuch as men (but not usually women, in Britain) of various social origins might mix there.¹²

Shcherbatov himself was well-placed to enjoy English coffee-house culture, as well as the London public house, since the area around Charing Cross in which he was living (and in which the coffee-house that he specifically mentions, the *Chocolat de la Meuse*, was located, he says) was one of its hubs at this period. In fact, judging by Aytoun Ellis's account of the location of coffee-houses catering for a francophone clientele, he could have been no better placed for his particular linguistic purpose:

Although French artists automatically found their way to *Slaughter's*, Frenchmen generally were catered for at the *French Coffee-house* near Charing Cross. Near *Slaughter's*, in St Martin's Lane, was *Giles's Coffee-house*, also much favoured by Frenchmen.¹³

Thus for Shcherbatov, learning French and English went together with his introduction to the new public sphere, whose development is now seen by historians as an important harbinger of the Enlightenment. Acquisition of those foreign languages entailed the adoption of various western habits that are explicitly mentioned in Shcherbatov's letters, such as visiting the theatre, reading newspapers, conversing in coffee-houses, dining with women, frequenting public houses, playing billiards and gambling, none of which had yet been widely adopted in Russia. Of course, these institutions and activities could distract the new-comer to the western city from the mission of which he was conscious when he wrote to his sovereign. Aware of this danger, Shcherbatov is occasionally apologetic in his letters to his French teacher for succumbing to the temptations of the city and for his failure to be ready, after his nocturnal social activities, to resume his studies with him at the appointed hour. And yet, the encounter with British social life must have been overwhelmingly positive and beneficial for such early representatives of a state that had begun to view western

nations in a new way: it introduced Russians to useful knowledge and habits. Shcherbatov was experiencing at first hand not only the civility that finds expression in the phrasing and vocabulary of the foreign languages he was acquiring but also a sociability of an unfamiliar sort. This sociability – which Peter himself was just starting to inculcate in Russia through his ‘assemblies’ (ассамблеи), compulsory social gatherings attended by both men and women at which people would converse, play cards and dance – did not constitute mere entertainment, nor did it necessarily involve the consumption of prodigious quantities of alcohol. On the contrary, it could aid the sober pursuit of serious cultural and commercial aims.

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Along with Antiokh Kantemir, Shcherbatov was one the first Russians to master French and use it in his professional life. The collection of letters from which we have taken the texts published here reveals his appreciation of the importance of French in the early eighteenth-century western world, his desire to learn it, the thought that he gave to the most effective ways of doing so, and the pride that he evidently took in the linguistic achievement to which his letters bear witness. Few Russian diplomats could boast a similarly acceptable knowledge of French in the early eighteenth century, although such knowledge was becoming an indispensable tool for the conduct of diplomatic relations in Europe at that time. No doubt Shcherbatov’s command of French (and of English and, subsequently, of Spanish too), together with the manners, civility and knowledge of western life that he acquired during his stay in London in his early twenties, helped to earn him the respect of the foreigners with whom he dealt and therefore advanced his diplomatic career.

Shcherbatov’s correspondence with his teacher is of interest, to be sure, as material for the study of the life of an early Russian diplomat and a member of a Russian noble family that achieved distinction in the eighteenth century, but it is of broader interest too. These letters also offer us a glimpse of Russians’ first contact with the vibrant early-modern western civilisation of the Age of Reason, to which French and other foreign languages could give them access. Through them we see the exposure of the young Russian nobleman to an array of institutions, habits, manners, concepts and attitudes with which his compatriots had previously been largely unfamiliar.

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¹ The documents we are examining in this essay are held in the Manuscript Department of the Russian National Library (RNB) in St Petersburg. They are in the Hermitage Collection, French manuscripts (Эрмитажное собрание, французские рукописи), 105. Regarding the date of Shcherbatov’s arrival in England, the title of the notebook containing the letters (« Recueil de pièces curieuses fait depuis le 26 Octobre 1717 ») suggests that he was already in London in 1717. There are in any case numerous references in the letters themselves to contemporary events that are known to have taken place in 1717. There is mention, for example, of the visit by Peter the Great to Maastricht, which took place at the end of July, during Peter’s foreign travels in that year (fol. 107). Again, Shcherbatov notes that ‘The Tsar of Great Russia plans to leave Holland on 15 August to arrive back in St Petersburg as soon as he can’ (« Le Czar de la Grande Russie a fait dessein de partir de Hollande le 15. Août pour se rendre aussitôt qu’il se pourra à Pétersbourg »; fol. 103 v.)

And again, the battle Shcherbatov mentions at which Prince Eugene of Savoy (1663-1736) defeated the Turks during the Austro-Turkish War of 1716-18 ('a grand piece of news' (« une grande nouvelle »), he says) took place at Belgrade in mid-August 1717 (fol. 102 v.; see also Letter 26 in the texts published here, fols 101 v.-101 in the RNB collection). Moreover, Shcherbatov displays a good knowledge of French in the letters we are examining and seems to know London quite well, which may indicate that he had already been in England for some time, and studying French there, when he wrote them.

² Law's work was first published in English, under the title *Money and Trade considered; with a Proposal for supplying the Nation with Money*, in 1705. The title of Shcherbatov's Russian translation is *Деньги и купечество, рассуждено с предложениями к присовокуплению в народе денег чрез г-на Ивана Ляуса, ныне управителя королевского банка в Париже*.

³ « Introduction sur le commerce en Russie ». See the biographical note on Ivan Shcherbatov on the website <http://www.rusdiplomats.narod.ru/index.html> (accessed on 01.03.2013) and also S. M. Troitskii, « "Система" Джона Ло и ее русские последователи » [John Law's "system" and its Russian followers', in *Франко-русские экономические связи [Franco-Russian Economic Relations]* (Moscow and Paris: 'Nauka', 1970). There is an electronic version of this article at http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/Dokumenty/France/XVIII/1720-1740/Sist_John_Law/pred.htm (accessed on 01.03.2013). Shcherbatov's writings about banks, banknotes and commercial companies had some influence on Russian economic thought in his time: see *История экономических учений [The History of Economic Ideas]*, ed. V. Avtonomov, O. Ananich, N. Makasheva (Moscow: Infra-M, 2001), chapter 20.

⁴ There is information on Shcherbatov's diplomatic career at <http://www.rusdiplomats.narod.ru/ambassadors/xerbatov-ia.html> (accessed on 01.03.2013), on which we have drawn here.

⁵ Russian National Library (RNB), Manuscript Department, Эрмитажное собрание, французские рукописи, 105, fols 33 ff.

⁶ See for example letter 103, *ibid.*, fol. 69 v.

⁷ The numbering of the folios of the letters we cite here requires explanation. The collection of documents is numbered in its entirety, with both sides of the paper used. However, the letters in French begin at the end of the collection, so that material on the reverse side of each letter precedes the material on the face of the folio. Thus folio 103 verso precedes folio 103 recto.

⁸ The content of Shcherbatov's letter should not be read too literally. He is merely practising phrases and forms of civility that he thinks may in future prove linguistically and socially useful.

⁹ See Jean A. Caravolas, *Histoire de la didactique des langues au siècle des Lumières. Précis et anthologie thématique [A History of Language Didactics in the Age of Enlightenment: A Summary and Thematic Anthology]* (Montreal and Tübingen: Presses de l'université de Montréal, Günter Narr Verlag, 2000), pp. 20-21; S. Lachenicht, « Учителя-гугеноты на Британских островах (XVI-XVIII вв.) » [Huguenot teachers in The British Isles from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries'], in A. Tchoudinov, V. Rjéoutski, *Франкоязычные гувернеры в Европе, 17-19 вв. [Francophone Tutors in Europe from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries]*, *Французский ежегодник [French Yearbook]*, 2011 (Moscow: Institut vseobshchei istorii RAN), pp. 7-15.

¹⁰ *Les Lettres de messire Roger de Rabutin, comte de Bussy, Lieutenant General des Armées du Roi, et Mestre de Camp General de la Cavalerie Française et Etrangere*, Nouvelle édition avec les Reponses, vol. III (Paris: chez Florentin et Pierre De l'aulne, 1698). This book is held in The Russian National Library, where it has the classmark 6.58.11.10. We are grateful to Vladimir Somov and Sergey Koroliov for drawing our attention to the fact that Mikhail Shcherbatov owned this book. See S. V. Koroliov, « Книги из собрания рода Щербатовых в Российской национальной библиотеке » [Books from the Shcherbatovs' library in the Russian National Library], in *Книга: исследования и материалы [The Book: Scholarship and Documents]* (St Petersburg, 1995), pp. 224-27.

¹¹ The Horse and Dolphin was replaced by The Macclesfield Arms, but the yard of The Horse and Dolphin remains. The 'dolphin' in this instance refers to the bollard to which owners visiting a tavern would attach their horses: see

<http://www.gyford.com/archive/2009/04/28/www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Cabana/9424/page16.html>

¹² On English coffee-houses and their culture see, e.g., the following: Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee-Houses* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956); B. Lillywhite, *London Coffee Houses: A Reference Book of Coffee Houses of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1963); Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004); and Brian William Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). See also Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 11 ff.

¹³ Ellis, *The Penny Universities*, p. 154.