THE LATVIAN-GERMAN DICTIONARY
OF LIBORIUS DEPKIN

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Liborius Depkin (1652–1708) studied theology in Rostock and Leipzig before becoming rector of the Riga Domschule in 1680, combining this office with parish duties in Limbaži (Lemsal) and later in Riga. He is the author of a Latvian-German dictionary (Depkin, s.d.), a very small part of which (just 16 pp.) was published in 1704 as Vortrab Zu einem längst=gewünschten Lettischen Wörter=Buche, and republished in 1954 by Haralds Biezaiz. His name is not a household word, and there is no article devoted to him in the standard encyclopaedias, although Latviešu literatūras darbinieki (Lld 1965) accords him 20 lines and Zemzare (1961) devotes 10 pages to his dictionary.

The manuscript is held in Riga, by Latvijas Akadēmiskā Bibliotēka, under the numbers L. dr. b. (=Latviešu draugu biedrība) 5332 and 5333. The first of these consists of 1991 pages of basic text, along with 53 pages of Errata and 74 pages of Nachricht, and is sub-divided into 3 parts, Part 1 being A-J (570 pp.), Part 2 being K-R plus the letter T (863 pp.), and Part 3 being the letter S plus U-Z along with the Errata and Nachricht (718 pp.). The letter S has thus been moved from its expected place at the end of Part 2 to non-alphabetic placement at the beginning of Part 3. The second number contains 5 Appendices, totalling 997 pp., along with 592 (double-sided) pages devoted to a listing of German words occurring in the work. The provision of this register of German words has led to the claim (Lld 1965, 78 and Zemzare 1961, 108) that Depkin was also contemplating a German-Latvian dictionary.

The whole thus amounts to over 3700 pages of closely written text in a smaller than average hand: certainly the largest Latvian dictionary manuscript before the 20th century. The pages themselves are long and narrow, approximately 27 cms x 9.5 cms, leading to occasional problems of legibility at the margins, as the
author has often tried to squeeze into the line more text than can conveniently be accommodated.

The work is highly eclectic, drawing on a range of sources. There is frequent reliance upon Mancelius, particularly his two-volume dictionary Lettus (usually referred to as 'Mane. Voc.') and Phraseologia Lettica (often referred to simply as 'Mane.'). Adolphi's grammar of 1685 (widely held to be substantially the work of Christopher Fürecker) is regularly cited, although more for its lexical content than for grammatical matters. Fürecker's dictionary is another frequently invoked source, as too are other religious writings of the time, such as hymnals and prayer-books. The greatest single source, however, is the Latvian translation of the Bible (1685-1689+): it is a rare entry that is without a reference to the Latvian Bible, and many entries are followed by longish lists of such references. The word $chodeen 'today' CLD 559) has over 200 chanter and verse references to the Latvian Bible.

This heavy reliance on the Bible translation is reflected in the grammatical and lexical content of Depkin's dictionary, since he usually took examples as he found them, refraining from editorial corrections. The dictionary thus contains the usual oddities of 17th- and 18th-century Baltic German clerical usage – Zemzare (1961, 106) draws attention to the use of *tas* as a definite article, the prepositions *iekš* and *apakš*, as well as unspecified instances of incorrect word order. Mention might also be made, in morphology for example, of the occurrence, in place of the indeclinable possessive *juhšu*, of the declinable masculine singular *juhšs*, with feminine singular *juhša* (LD 522). Such declined forms are unlikely to be a reflection of authentic contemporary Latvian usage, and Endzelins' comments (1951, 521) must be seen as particularly sceptical.

Another dubious usage is that of the postposed genitive, which is not infrequent in the dictionary. Thus, even in the Vortrab, where Depkin obviously had the opportunity to make editorial changes, we read (Depkin, 1704, 14):

"Preekšch=Ahdu to Kohku ap=graisiht... Der Bäume Vorhaut beschneiden. id est. Die Früchte von denen ersten dreyen Jahren eines jungen Baumes wegwerffen, vor unrein
achten.... Preekșch=Ahda [sic!] to Sirșchu apgraisiht. Die Vorhaut des Herzens beschneiden.... Preekșch=Ahda tahs Meeșas. die Vorhaut des fleisches.”
['the fore-skin of trees, of hearts' – both instances highly metaphorical – and 'the fleshly fore-skin']
where no significant change has been made to the original (see LD 7).
Elsewhere in the manuscript we have, for example:
“Pameschana to Grehko” (LD 448 ‘the forgiveness of sins’)
“Tahs juhgs mannu Grehko” (LD 513 ‘the burden of my sins’)
“Tahs juhgs mannu Grehko” (LD 540 ‘the burden of my sins’).
Some 80 years later, Stender (1783, 171) accepts this construction under certain conditions and even gives a rule for its use:
“...die Letten gemeiniglich den Genitivum vor dem andern Substantive vor, und nicht nachsetzen.... Nur mit einem Articulo, kann der Genit. auch hinterher stehen. Als: Deews irr tas Radditajs tahs debbes un tahs semmes Gott ist der Schöpfer des Himmels und der Erden.”
['Latvians usually place a genitive before, not after its associated noun.... Only when an article is present can the genitive also stand after the associated noun. Cf. 'God is the creator of the Heaven(s) and the Earth'.]
As far as the lexicon is concerned, the Bible provides a number of Hebrew words which were perforce taken over in the various translations (English, German, etc.) that appeared from the end of the Middle Ages, and which appear in the 17th-century Latvian Bible as well. These are faithfully listed by Depkin among his Latvian head-words. In addition to numerous proper names (people and places) a number of ancient measures can be found. Thus, beeka ‘a half-shekel’ (LD 497):
“weenu Beeku preeksch ikweenu galwu, so manches Haupt, so manch halber Sekel” ['A bekah for every man, that is, half a shekel’ - Exodus 38:26]
Units of capacity are more frequent and more complicated. Thus ins (LD 501: = 6 quarts – Webster):
“Ins. ein Hin. weens Ins.... ein Maaß.” Ein Hin Öls zu einem Epha
['an bin of oil to an ephah’ – Ezechiel 46:5]
Eepa (Luth. Epha, Eng. epha(h)) thus needs to be determined. According to Depkin (LD 165),

"Eepa ist ein Scheffel 1/10. vom Gomer oder Malter." ['An epha(h) is a bushel' (i.e., 8 gallons (dry measure) – 1/10. of a gomer or of c. 150 litres.]

But we still need to know what a Gomer(s) is. Webster gives 'eleven and two-thirds bushels', one tenth of which is slightly over a bushel, and Depkin's statement remains plausible.

We learn elsewhere (LD 438), however, that

"Wens Gomers ir ta dešmita Tēsa no weena Eepa... eeksch ka tik dauks Sačet Zeek eeksch 43. Pautu Tsaumalahm telp." ['A gomer is the tenth part of an epha(h), as much as will fit into 43 egg-shells.]

Obviously, if an epha(h) is one-tenth of a gomer, then a gomer cannot simultaneously be one-tenth of an epha(h), and we must therefore assume that Depkin has here got things back to front. He also holds that gomers is an incorrect form, which should be replaced by homers.

LD 203, citing Isaiah 5:10, introduces us to the bats (Luth. Eimer; Eng. bath – Webster: 37 quarts). He does not cite the verse, but Luther’s version reads:

"Denn zehn Acker Weinberges sollen nur einen Eimer geben, und ein Malter Samens sohl nur einen Scheffel geben" ['Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath and the seed of an homer shall yield an epha(h).']

It may be safely assumed that in instances such as these Depkin’s enrichment of the Latvian lexicon was merely temporary.

Since Depkin does not seem to impose any editorial standardisation on the material gathered from far and wide, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether certain recurring oddities in the text reflect tendencies of his own or peculiarities of his sources.

Thus, from time to time we find -a rather than -u as a first person singular ending for verbs: cf. es bija bijis ('I had been', LD274), es warreja tapt isglahhts ('I could have been saved', LD 420), Grahmatu... dabbuja es ('I received the book', LD 441), gribbeja to Lahtzi noschaut, ne warreja peeguht ('I wanted to shoot the bear, but I couldn’t get close', LD 471), es winnu
guhstija (‘I pursued him’, LD 475), es to darrija (‘I did it’, LD 508).


Nonetheless, there are occasional instances where Depkin does indeed appear to state an opinion of his own. Thus he seeks to differ from Adolphi in the matter of the usefulness of the words jā and nē, as opposed to the repetition of an affirmative or negative verb (Adolphi, 1685, 230-231; LD 477). Depkin argues that jā is in fact necessary in certain (religious) affirmations, because of the confusion potentially arising from the conjunction of affirmative and negative questions: ‘wiltu mit ihr in liebe leben... [und] dich nicht scheiden lassen’ [‘wilt thou live with her in love... [and] not cause any putting asunder’] but he appears to undercut his argument by suggesting that jā ‘yes’ and ja ‘if’ could be easily confused.

Another striking instance of the intrusion of a personal opinion arises from the alleged use of either un or in in the meaning ‘and’. Endzelins (1951, 700) clearly accepts the existence of in, as already cited by Mancelius (1638, Lettus, 195) for the region of Schrunden (= Skrunda), and as used almost universally by Langius (1685, 41a, 56a, 99, etc.). Depkin (LD 501) mentions in with Mancelius’ reference to Schrunden, but adds, against the prevailing citations of the period and the view of subsequent commentators, the categorical and somewhat surprising view that “kein Unentscher sagt in, sondern un.” [‘No Latvian says in, but on the contrary, un.’]

Whether such comments are accurate or not, they are a great deal more explicit than Depkin’s usual response to forms which
are seemingly less than acceptable to him. Thus "Alluns cur non Alune" ['why not Alune' ('alum'), LD 32], "Apkkkle. ('collar, shirt-front') ein halb=Hembd. cur non m" ['why not masculine', LD 56], "deews apskaistahs... ('God became angry') cur non apskaitahs?" ', ['why not apskaitahs?', LD 66], "no Assins-Sehrgas širgt... ('to be suffering from bloody flux') cur non ar Assins=Sehrgas širgt?" ['why not 'to be suffering with bloody flux', LD 89], "Aumeisters. ('overseer?') Hofmeister.... cur non Waldnecks" ['why not overlord', LD 127], "Kad gaišma mitehs. ('when it began to get light') cur non mettahs." ['why not mettahs', LD 134], "Kad deena ause. ('when day broke') cur non auša." ['why not auša', LD 134]; and many similar, somewhat reserved comments.

We may add to the difficulties already cited the fact that the manuscript is in no way ready for publication. Material on any given word has not been brought together, but remains scattered throughout the pages of the basic manuscript and the Appendices. Thus the entries are only partially ordered, and the plethora of references has not been reduced to manageable proportions. Such comments as we have been able to locate are thus not to be taken as Depkin's final word on any given question, but rather as a series of notes which he wrote for himself, to be evaluated in a subsequent editorial phase, which as far as is known was never undertaken. The Vortrab indicates, for example, that the number of references would have been drastically reduced, and that at least some of the manuscript material would have been discarded. It may well be that morphological and syntactic editing would have removed the contradictions and uncertainties which abound in the "notes" of the manuscript, but at three centuries' remove from the original compilation it is a task which can no longer be legitimately undertaken, and the material must now stand as we find it.

As we approach the tercentenary of the 1704 Vortrab and indeed of Depkin's death in 1708, it is high time that his material be published, in order to make it accessible to a wider scholarly public and thus initiate debate on such controversial points as it may throw up. Some of these have been mentioned above, and numerous other issues will no doubt arise as our investigation
continues. The first volume (570 pp.) of the material is nearing readiness for publication, and the remainder should follow over a four- to five-year period.

Given the unordered nature of the material, it is clear that the mere publication of the manuscript as it stands, even with notes and commentary, will not suffice to convert Depkin into a reader-friendly lexicographer. A second phase, itself occupying some five years, in which the material is re-ordered into concordance format, is a sine qua non if we are to produce an effective research tool. In announcing here the beginning of the Flinders University Depkin project, and giving an outline of its ultimate scope, it is hoped that further impetus can be given to the increasing interest being shown in the early grammars and dictionaries of Latvian, and that others will come forward with their own projects to shed further light on what remains an ill-explored corner of Latvia’s linguistic history.

References


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