The Bourgeois Collection

Who was Henri Bourgeois? This was the question posed by Frans Plank,[[1]](#footnote-1) a German professor of linguistics in a paper presented in 1993 to the Belgische Kring voor Linguïstiek/Cercle belge de Linguistique, Bruxelles/Brussel. But despite extensive investigation, he concluded that almost nothing could be said with any certainty about this elusive figure other than that he lived in Belgium (probably Brussels) from 1909 until ca 1922. In sharp contrast to this paucity of information about the man, he discovered that Bourgeois was a prolific writer of scholarly articles, published, before and after the First World War, in many journals, such asthe *Revue de Linguistique et de Philologie comparée*, *Bulletin de la Société Royale Belge de Géographie*, and the *Atti della R. Accademia delle Scienze di Torino.*

While working on a study of a linguistic phenomenon prevalent in Caucasian and Transcaucasian languages, amongst others,[[2]](#footnote-2) Professor Plank encountered an early article by Bourgeois on Georgian,[[3]](#footnote-3) which resulted in his quest for more information about its author. However, it was only in 2015 that the Library’s Bourgeois Collection came to the attention of Professor Plank and his Antwerp collaborator, Professor Johan van der Auwera, and they made contact.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Bourgeois arrived in Britain as one of the large number of Belgians fleeing the invasion of their country by Germany in August 1914.[[5]](#footnote-5) It seems he resided in Glasgow during the years 1915-18, and was accorded Special Reader status by the University Library in October 1916.[[6]](#footnote-6) When the war ended, he returned to Belgium, taking up residence in Arlon, a town in south-east Wallonia. In 1927 he wrote, offering his philological collection to the University Library as gesture of gratitude for the Library’s kindness during the war years.[[7]](#footnote-7) This was readily accepted and the collection was accessioned in 1928.

Comprising some 2,000 volumes, mostly items published in the latter half of the 19th century and the first three decades of the 20th, the collection deals with a wide range of languages and literature. Not long after its reception, an article was published dealing with a section of the collection.[[8]](#footnote-8)

However, it remains largely uncatalogued: an initial, and very superficial survey gives the following approximate data on a selection of the more unusual languages represented:

Armenian: 90 items (mostly publications of the Mekhitarist religious order at San Lazzaro in Venice).

Albanian : 30

Basque: 21

Concani (Marathi): 40

Georgian: 16

Indo-Iranian: 30

Rhaeto-Romantsch: 33

Sami/Lapp: 16

Semitic languages (including Maltese, 13): 242

Turkic languages (including Karamanli, 6): 60

Yiddish: 71.

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1. <https://ling.sprachwiss.uni-konstanz.de/pages/home/plank/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. F. Plank (ed.) *Double case: agreement by Suffixaufnahme*, Oxford, 1995 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Henri Bourgeois, ‘Notes sur la déclinaison en vieux-Géorgien’ *Revue de Linguistique et de Philologie comparée*, 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/lingty-2017-1001/html?lang=en> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is estimated that around 250,000 Belgian refugees came to Britain. Denise Winterman, ‘World War One: How 250,000 Belgian refugees didn't leave a trace’ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28857769> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Library Committee Minutes, 20th October, 1916. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Library Committee Minutes, 4th March , 1927. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David Atlas, ‘Hebrew and Yiddish books of the Bourgeois Collection in Glasgow University Library’, Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society, vol. 7 (1934-1935), pp 24-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)