

ABO, TAKAJI, BYRON W. BENDER, ALFRED CAPELLE & TONY DEBRUM. 2009. *Marshallese-English Online Dictionary*. <http://www.trussel2.com/mod/>.

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The *Marshallese-English Online Dictionary* (“MOD”) is a revised edition of the *Marshallese-English Dictionary* (“MED”; Abo et al. 1976), originally published as part of the University of Hawai‘i’s *PALI Language Texts: Micronesia* series. The new online version¹ has been updated with substantial revisions, expansions and new arrangements of material. Almost 5000 more example sentences have been added, many of them from a novella in Marshallese that is included on the same site, or from Bender’s (1969) *Spoken Marshallese*. Grammatical information has been made easier to understand. As a bonus, essentially the entire text of the original MED (with minor corrections) is also included alongside the revised MOD. There is also a Windows Unicode keyboard for typing the Marshallese writing system, which uses several diacritics.

The coverage is extensive: almost 8800 entries. One of its special strengths is the inclusion of names of plants and animals of the Marshall islands, of stars and constellations used for navigation, and place names. The content of these entries was verified by consulting experts in each area.

The new version takes advantage of several opportunities available in an online format. It presents material using multiple alternate arrangements of the same information, something that would be an expensive luxury in print publication. For example, each Marshallese entry is presented twice, in separate sections that use two different alphabetization schemes. One, the “Divided alpha” section,² uses the same rules as the original MED, which treats every combination of a letter with a diacritic as a separate item in alphabetic sequence (thus, for example, words beginning with “A” and “Ā” are in separate sections). The other, the “Unified alpha” section,³ uses a simplified system that ignores diacritics, except when two words are otherwise identical. The latter system is one that, in my experience, is considerably easier for people to use, particularly if they are primarily familiar with alphabetization in languages like English that normally do not use diacritics. And, as mentioned before, the original MED entries are also included.

There is a concordance of the example sentences, presented not just once, but twice: once in normal alphabetical order according to the first letters in a word, and once in ‘reverse’ order according to the last letters, as well as a concordance of words in the English translations. Similarly, the collection of place names is presented twice, once alphabetically⁴ (using unified alphabetization), and once hierarchically by location, with nearby places grouped together⁵ (and also with an interactive map with links to the entries⁶).

¹<http://www.trussel2.com/mod/index.htm>.

²<http://www.trussel2.com/mod/MEDA.htm>.

³<http://www.trussel2.com/mod/MEDA2A.htm>.

⁴<http://www.trussel2.com/mod/PNA.htm>.

⁵<http://www.trussel2.com/mod/LocA.htm>.

⁶<http://www.trussel2.com/mod/locator.htm>.

On a subtler level, the new version abandons an abbreviatory convention used in the MED to handle variation between the two main dialects, e.g., Ratak *memed* and Rālik *emmed* were both listed in MED under the abstract form *mmed* (which, I would guess, was confusing to people from both dialects). Now, such words are listed under the Ratak form, but there are also minor (cross-reference) entries under the Rālik form that link back to the main entry under the Ratak spelling, which gives both forms, including in the example sentences.

All of these features, if used in a printed book, would increase its size and cost. Faced with this problem, some books compromise by providing indices with alternate ways to access information, but these are more cumbersome to use, since they require flipping to some other place to find the desired information. With MOD's approach, all the relevant information is immediately available. The reader definitely gains by having the same information available in several places.

This philosophy of providing features that are too expensive for print books extends to layout, typography, use of color, and decoration. There are attractive background images, and decorative illustrations of what appear to be Marshallese postage stamps at the top of each page. Color is used effectively in the text itself to distinguish different types of information within each entry: Marshallese words and sentences are consistently blue, while English glosses are black, etc. This makes it easier to parse the entries while reading. Layout is also generous, with much more white space than in a typical printed dictionary, again increasing readability. Overall, the layout is clean and pleasant. To underline the fact that all these features are very inexpensive in an online edition, the MOD is presented to the public free of charge, even though MED is still for sale.

The MOD is intended to be a living dictionary, again exploiting the online format. It solicits suggestions and comments at the bottom of every page with email links. A more elaborate system would provide a link with each entry, which would probably encourage more comments and more specific ones. Further, being electronic, it is easier to put out a new edition with new entries, definitions, etc., than it would be to print a new book—and a new electronic edition, when released, is immediately available to all users without them having to do anything special (like ordering a book). Whether the authors and publisher will actually be able to follow through on new editions is another question. As of October 2014, five years after first release, they do not seem to have done so—nor do I fault them for this, knowing from personal experience how long it takes to put out a revised dictionary, even one in electronic format.

There are also important features that would be simply impossible in a printed book. Electronic format provides linking and other navigational aids, which in MOD are extensive. At the top of each page are links to the major sections of the site (Home, Unified alpha, Divided alpha, etc.). Within the Unified alpha section, there are links to each alphabetic section, as might be expected, but with an extra bonus: a bar graph and counts showing the relative size of each section. Then, since some sections are quite large (1514 entries under “K”, for example), they are subdivided according to the first two letters of the word (KE, KI, KO, etc.), then subdivided further by the first three letters (KAA, KAB, KAD, etc.), with links that allow a reader to quickly move to the entry desired, as shown in Figure 1. The navigational aids in the divided alpha and original MED sections are somewhat simpler, but still adequate.

Some readers may complain about the absence of a Search box, common in online dictionaries, where they could type the word in question and go immediately to the desired entry. Although such a feature would have been nice to include, the approach employed in



FIGURE 1. Unified alpha, KA

MOD is also valuable. If a person doesn't know exactly how a word is spelled, they are more likely to be able to find it by browsing through entries than by repeatedly guessing at the spelling in a search box, never able to be sure if the word is missing or just spelled different from what they expect. If the only access to entries is through a search box, it may provide more of a hindrance than a help. And, if users *do* know how to spell a word correctly, they can still use MOD's system: once they get to the correct page (one click), they can always use their browser's Find capability (a built-in local 'search' box) to quickly locate the word on the page.

Further, in a dictionary of a lesser-studied language, in which one does not simply want to present information about the language but also to encourage people to use and learn it, presenting many entries together on one page in a traditional alphabetical arrangement allows for discovery, learning, and portrayal of the richness of the language that won't happen in online dictionaries displaying only one word at a time.

Navigation is also facilitated by cross-reference links between entries and other specific portions of pages, such as from the English finder list directly to the Marshallese entries, from example sentences to the concordance and source texts, and from the alphabetical place name list to the list organized by location and to regular entries of the words that form the names. The linking system has a sophistication that is not immediately apparent. For example, if someone is viewing a section of the Unified alpha listing, and clicks on the link for the Divided alpha, it takes them to the corresponding section, e.g., from one K section directly to the other one. Or, if a person clicks on a link in the English finder list, it takes them to an entry in either the Unified or Divided alpha, depending on which of those two sections they last visited.

All this carefully developed navigational structure has an Achilles heel, though. Many of the pages are very long—some of them with several hundred entries. This is cumbersome in an online format, requiring a lot of scrolling (which is only partially made up for by the rich navigational system). Worse still, the pages load slowly, even on a fast connection. When a link is targeted at some specific part of the page after the beginning, it can take over ten seconds before the whole page loads and scrolls to the proper target. Such delays can confuse users, and diminish the usefulness of links that target specific entries. I don't know what internet connectivity is like in the Marshall Islands, but I suspect it may be considerably slower than in my Arizona home. If so, that diminishes further the usefulness of this dictionary for one of its primary audiences. Practical factors like this need to be taken into account in the design of an online dictionary. In this case, I would recommend breaking up most of the pages into several smaller ones, with only a few dozen entries maximum on each one.

There is one rather odd aspect to the navigation. In the introductory sections that are reprinted from the MED, the navigation bars at the top and bottom of the page have different labels for the same topic. So, for example, “Entry” at the top of the page and “Intro 2” at the bottom link to the same page, the one describing the structure of an entry. To avoid reader confusion, the labels in the two navigation bars should be the same.

The structure of each entry has the standard elements one expects to find: entry word, a pronunciation key, dialect information, grammatical information (word class, subclass, derived forms), multiple glosses that distinguish senses, and example sentences. This work definitely deserves the name ‘dictionary’ (unlike many other online so-called dictionaries I’ve seen), both in the number of entries and the amount of detail in each one. Although I point out below some aspects of the structure of entries that I think could be improved, this should not be taken as criticism of the overall product, which is impressive in the amount of information it includes about the Marshallese lexicon.

The rather technical grammatical information about word classes, subclasses, and derived forms is given first in the entry, before the glosses. Most readers are going to be more interested in the meaning of the word, so the glosses should come first, leaving the more technical information for later in the entry, where a reader can easily skip it.

The various derivationally related forms are given without glosses. This is problematic, as it forces readers to predict the meaning of a form from technical linguistic metalanguage that they may not understand. For example, under the noun *baak* ‘ship, barque, frigate’, one of the forms given is “v. distrib *bōbaakak*”, with no indication as to what the derived verb means, other than that it is distributive. One can guess (‘to have many ships scattered across a stretch of water’?), but meanings that result from derivational morphology are often not fully predictable and sometimes quite surprising due to semantic shifts over time. The introduction to MED⁷ acknowledges this problem, and refers the reader to example sentences which “often” illustrate the meaning. Still, it would be better to provide an explicit gloss for each form, and not leave it to the reader to puzzle it out. This part of the entry in MOD is, however, significantly improved over the original MED in one important way: it uses text labels for the different forms, rather than MED’s numeric codes.

I suspect some readers would have trouble finding many derived words, as they are listed only under the entries for their roots. Since some of these words are derived using prefixes, this requires the reader to know enough about the grammar to be able to strip off the prefix and identify the root. I would suggest that in any future editions, all derived forms, at least

⁷<http://www.trussel2.com/mod/medintro3.htm>

those with prefixes, be included as minor entries in their normal alphabetical position, with a cross-reference link to the main entry for the root. It should be straightforward to generate these entries programmatically, and they would, I expect, make it easier for readers to find information about derivationally complex words.

Sometimes, the glosses given include an explanatory comment. For example, the glosses for *memed* include “very ripe, overripe, of breadfruit only.” The final phrase is not a translation equivalent, but rather an indication of a selectional restriction. This would be more clearly presented as “very ripe, overripe (*of breadfruit only*)” or even “very ripe, overripe (*breadfruit*).”

Although the number of example sentences is impressive, I am mildly dissatisfied with two aspects of them. One is again related to organization; all example sentences are placed at the end of the entry, after the derived forms and glosses. Although this makes sense in terms of layout, it forces the reader to figure out which example sentence illustrates which derived form or sense. It would have been better to interleave them: first a sense with its glosses, then one or two sentences that illustrate that sense, then the second sense and its illustrative sentences, and likewise for the different grammatical forms. Not only would this be clearer to the reader, it would make it obvious to the compilers when a sense or derived form did not have a corresponding example sentence. As it is, there are gaps in many entries, even in entries with 6–10 examples. I realize, of course, not everything needs an example sentence, but I am left with the feeling that some things that could benefit from examples don’t have them.

Two, some of the example sentences are not as helpful as they could be. Ideally, an example sentence should provide enough context that if the entry word is omitted, it is possible (for a speaker of the language) to guess what word should fill the blank. For example, under the entry *abwin bōk* ‘reject,’ there is an example sentence that is translated, “He refused to take his food.” The sentence would still make sense if one replaced “refused” with “hesitated,” “was happy,” or even the antonym “agreed”. In other words, the sentence doesn’t provide enough context to clarify the meaning or use of the word that it is supposedly illustrating. In this case, a second clause would help: “He refused to take his food because he wanted to die.” I must say, though, that the example sentences are certainly natural and provide many insights into Marshallese culture. The links to the concordance and to the source texts make them more useful than they would be otherwise, as these features provide more information than can be condensed into a single dictionary entry.

To conclude, although I have pointed out several ways that the entries themselves could be improved (one can probably find comparable things to complain about in most dictionaries), I fully recognize that this would be a massive undertaking, so I offer my observations more for those who might be contemplating starting to build a dictionary. Whether any of these ideas can be incorporated in future editions of the MOD is less important. As it stands, it is already an admirable production, with extensive coverage not often achieved in minority-language dictionaries and a carefully designed and useful online implementation.

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