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# Moth's Danish Dictionary

## Publishing a Dictionary with a 300-year Delay

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### Abstract

The first comprehensive Danish dictionary was compiled by the high official Matthias Moth (1649-1719). To get material for the dictionary he organized a collection of words from all over the Danish King's realm, asking especially for the daily language of ordinary people, including dialect material. This was quite unusual for his time – and for a long period after. The collection was finished shortly after 1700, and Moth immediately started editing the dictionary. He compiled several editions and changed the overall layout before starting the final edition that comprises more than 20 volumes in folio, all written by Moth himself. This huge work was never printed, but for 200 years the manuscripts were used as an important source for comprehensive Danish dictionaries because of the valuable collection of words and sayings. In 2013-2015 an online edition was published, and to demonstrate the working out of this edition an account is given of Moth's dictionary through three centuries focusing on the digitization of the handwritten material. Finally the online edition is now presented.

**Keywords:** historical dictionary; daily language; Elder Danish; digitization; mark-up; online edition

### 1 Matthias Moth

Matthias Moth (1649-1719) was a high official in the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway during the early years of absolutism under King Christian V.<sup>1</sup> In his youth he studied medicine both in Copenhagen and abroad, but in 1675 he was appointed to a post in the central administration of Denmark-Norway. Being skilled and efficient he soon rose in the ranks. In 1679 he was ennobled. In the course of the following years he received important honours and posts, and in 1690 he was appointed to the highest civil post in Denmark-Norway. His power and influence was enormous, but it all ended with the death of Christian V in 1699. Shortly after the accession to the throne of the new king, he was dismissed from most of his posts.

Even during his most busy years he devoted his time to learned pursuits. Thus he was the first ever to translate Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from Latin into Danish in full (Hjorth 1997). His most important achievement, though, was to compile the first comprehensive dictionary of Danish ever. He started the work c. 1686 and continued almost until his death. After his dismissal the dictionary was his main occupation.

<sup>1</sup> The hitherto most circumstantial account in English of Moth and his dictionary is (Considine 2010).

## 2 The 17th Century Cultivation of the Danish Language

Moth's dictionary is one result of the early modern efforts to cultivate the Germanic vernaculars (Bjerring-Hansen 2015). In the middle of the 17th century a whole network of scholars and poets strived to raise the Danish language to an international standard. The inspiration was German, namely the language academies, among which *Die Fruchtbriugende Gesellschaft* 'The Fruitful Society' (1617–1680) was the most important and influential also in Denmark.

The first task undertaken by the Danish language reformers was to create a new poetry with a refined imagery and a metrical system flush with classical norms. Several treatises on prosody were written from c. 1650, and shortly after the earliest descriptions of the Danish language were compiled. In 1663 the learned vicar Peder Syv published his "Considerations of the Cimbrian [i.e. Germanic] Language" (Syv 1663), dealing with a wide range of topics and enumerating things still to be done. Among these tasks is the compilation of a Danish dictionary (Syv 1663: 73-95). In 1692 he himself published a sample volume of a Danish-Latin and Latin-Danish dictionary (Syv 1692), mostly a simple glossary. The book was dedicated to Moth, who supported Syv, and in the dedication Syv asks Moth for money to finish the dictionary. No more volumes were actually published, however, and no doubt the reason was that Moth had quite a different idea of how to produce a suitable dictionary (Bjerrum 1958).

## 3 The Basis of Moth's Dictionary

The earliest dated document related to Moth's dictionary is a rough draft of a letter to the bishops in Denmark from December 1697 (Moth 1697b) instructing them to arrange a collection of popular words and sayings. Shortly afterwards identical letters were sent to the bishops in Norway (Moth 1698a), and a few scholars received similar instructions (1698b). These letters are the best source of information about Moth's thoughts and plans, and some central passages are cited here from the letter to the Danish bishops (1697b). Moth describes his aim as "a Danish dictionary as complete as it could be made" ("et Dansk *Lexicon*, saa fuldkommet som det hafves kunde") for "the reputation of the fatherland" ("fædernelandets *reputation*"). To fulfil this task the bishops are asked – and that really means commanded – to organize a collection of words. They are to select skilled and especially interested vicars, teachers and scholars in their diocese and instruct them to take down "all the names that seamen, artisans, peasants etc. use for their tools as well as names of birds, fish, plants etc." ("alle de nafne, som skibsfolk, handverksfolk, bønder *etc.* bruge til deres reedskab, saa vel som *nomina avium, piscium herbarum etc.*"). Especially dialectal words used only in specific regions are to be collected carefully, even though they are "peasants' words unfit for use" ("ubrugelige bønderord"). The collectors are to take down not only the words but also their meanings, besides expressions and phrases. The collected words are to be arranged alphabetically, and this goes even for derivatives and compounds – they are not to be treated under their etymon. As a model Moth sends a specimen sheet with 22 entries (Moth 1697a).

This collection method was well-tried in Denmark-Norway. In 1622 the authorities instructed the bishops to make the incumbents register and describe the ancient monuments in their parish, and similar requests were issued later in the century. However, the idea that the daily language of ordinary people was to be treated in a national dictionary was quite unique. Moth was well informed about both older and contemporary lexicography, and Svend Eegholm-Pedersen has demonstrated that he was influenced specifically by two of the most important contemporary dictionaries, *Teutscher Sprachschatz* from 1691 by Caspar Stieler and the dictionary of The French Academy, *Le Dictionnaire de l'Academie Françoise* from 1694 (Eegholm-Pedersen 1997). These influential dictionaries followed the so-called academy principle, namely that a dictionary should comprise only words, forms, meanings and phrases that are acceptable to the literary cultivated native speakers (cf. Considine 2014). The normative language that was the scope of these dictionaries was of course primarily found in literary works, often dating from earlier periods. According to this historical approach the overall composition was etymological, derivatives and compounds being treated as sub-entries under their (supposed) etymon.

Obviously Moth's plan differs substantially from the mainstream of his days. His express desire to collect the "peasants' words unfit for use" is directly contrary to the academy principle, and the old words and the refined literature cherished by the normative dictionaries are not mentioned at all in his instructions. The fact that he prefers the alphabetical order can be interpreted as a lack of learned linguistic subtlety.

In the years 1698-1701 a series of word collections were sent to Moth from all over Denmark-Norway (Bloch 1698; Bork 1698; Grüner-Nielsen 1939; Grüner-Nielsen 1941; Grønvik 1998; Harboe 1698; Ramus 1698; Rasch 1698; Seip 1923; Vikør 2000). Some of this material is still extant, and Moth's notes in the manuscripts show that he has studied the collection, carefully preparing the lists for the editing of the dictionary. So, when he was dismissed from his official posts in 1699, everything was ready for the editing of the great work. The first to examine Moth's editing through almost 20 years is Svend Eegholm-Pedersen, and every work on the subject ever since is in debt for his groundbreaking account from 1997.

## 4 The Editing

The specimen sheet (Moth 1697a) gives an idea of Moth's intentions before he had received the word collections and it reflects the instructions in the letters. Already in 1698 the first proper trial edition utilizing the collected material was probably initiated. Of this edition the letter A is still extant, and we do not know whether the edition ever comprised more than that.

In the period c. 1700-1708 Moth made a rough draft of the whole alphabet that he called the second edition. The title page (Moth 1708) says: "Rough draft of a DANISH DICTIONARY in Danish and Latin and Latin and Danish" ("Udkast til en DANSK GLOSEBOG på Dansk og Latin og Latin og Dansk"). The plan apparently was a

bilingual dictionary in two parts, one with Danish entries and the other with Latin ones, but for the following many years he actually only worked on the Danish-Latin part.

The rough draft was revised several times, especially the first letters of the alphabet. In 1712 he set out to make a new version of the whole of the Danish-Latin dictionary. At this late phase he rather surprisingly altered the overall layout. He placed compounds and derivatives as sub-entries under their etymons, and he divided the work into two parts, with the first and the largest one dealing with the ordinary vocabulary and the second part with place-names, foreign words, and technical words about medicine, anatomy, biology, and shipping. In both ways he was probably influenced by the dictionary of the French Academy (Eegholm-Pedersen 1997), but he retained the popular and dialect words and phrases. The number of entries had increased considerably, and most of the entries had become more extensive. In chapter 6 below the principles of the two main phases of his editing is demonstrated. This final edition of the Danish-Latin dictionary was completed in 1715, and by that time Moth was already working on the Latin-Danish part that is merely a glossary. Probably he continued working on this part until 1718, always adding and correcting the manuscript. As far we know he did not try to publish the work, probably for two reasons: The manuscript was so comprehensive that it would cost a fortune to have it printed, and he never considered the work to be complete – perfectionist as he was.

## 5 The Impact of Moth's Dictionary

After Moth's death in 1719 his manuscripts passed down to the family who sold them to the king of Denmark-Norway in 1752. They soon ended up in the Royal Library in Copenhagen, where they are still preserved. Today the material consists of 62 manuscripts in folio, under the shelf marks *Gammel kongelig Samling 769,2°-777,2°* (Nielsen 2015a). The manuscripts are of various kinds: letters, word collections sent to Moth, excerpts, the trial edition, the rough draft, the revisions of the draft, and the final edition.

What has interested posterity most is the final edition of the Danish-Latin dictionary. In Moth's autograph version it comprises 8,689 folio pages, containing c. 105,000 entries. Some entries are merely headwords serving to demonstrate the rich vocabulary of Danish, but most have at the least a Latin equivalent. The total number of these full articles is c. 79,500. Many headwords consist of verb + particle, and this makes it difficult to compare the number of entries with other dictionaries, but there is no doubt that it is a great and comprehensive work.

The king's acquisition of Moth's manuscripts marks a new era in Danish lexicography. All important national dictionaries for the following 200 years utilized Moth's work. Notably this goes for the dictionary of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters (*Dansk Ordbog udgiven under Videnskabernes Selskabs Bestyrelse*, I-VIII (1793-1905)), Chr. Molbech's Danish Dictionary (*Dansk Ordbog* (1833)), Otto Kalkar's dictionary of Elder Danish (*Ordbog til det ældre danske sprog*, I-V (1881-1918)) and

Dictionary of the Danish Language (*Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, I-XXVIII (1918-56)) (Nielsen 2015a). Only the Danish material in the Danish-Latin dictionary is utilized by these later works, but then massively. Thus Moth is the main source for the dictionary of the Royal Danish Academy, especially for the first volumes, and Dictionary of the Danish Language contains c. 38,000 references to Moth, averaging one per column.

A serious loss of manuscripts was caused by the English bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807. The editors of the dictionary of the Academy kept the relevant volumes of Moth's manuscript in their home. Thus the scholar working on *P* kept the volumes of *P-R* in the first part and *O-R* in the second. These manuscripts were destroyed as was the home of the inconsolable editor (Nielsen 2012).

What makes Moth's manuscripts so valuable to Danish lexicography is first and foremost the rich and varied vocabulary that is treated in a surprisingly modern way. Especially the large selection of expressions and phrases from daily life in Danish c. 1700 is a marvellous source for the period's language, ways of life, views, opinions and beliefs. To give an impression of the treasures some of the collocations with the verb *run* (*Løbe*) are cited here. With =MD it is marked when the expression exists in Modern Danish.

- (1) Hand løb, som der var îld i rumpen på ham =MD ("he ran as if his backside were on fire")
- (2) klokken løber for fast ("the clock is fast")
- (3) [løbe] af landet for geld ("run away from the country because of debt")
- (4) sølvet er løben an =MD ("the silver has tarnished")
- (5) Hun har lenge nok løben efter den karl =MD ("she has run after that guy long enough")
- (6) løbe frem og tilbage =MD ("run to and fro")
- (7) [løbe] i en andens kârde ("run into somebody's sword")
- (8) Hanß tender løber i vand =MD ("his mouth watered")
- (9) Jeg skal snart løbe det igennem =MD ("I shall quickly skim through it")
- (10) Hand løber om, som et galt kompaß ("he runs about like a wrong compass")

Many entries are interesting in a broader cultural and historical context. In some entries Moth deals with popular superstitions:

- (11) **Våd-mund** /den/ kalder bønderne lûks Evangelier, efftersom de trôer, at de søndage, som de Evangelier falder ind på, fører rein med sig. ("**Wet-mouth** /the/ is the peasants' name for the gospel of Luke because they believe that it rains on Sundays when Luke is read from").

As in this case he often stamps ideas as superstitious, and thus he is in accordance with modern times. Of course many of his notions seem peculiar today, and especially that sort of entry is of great historical interest. His description of Montmartre in Paris gives a rather old-fashioned picture of the city:

(12) **Monmarter** inc[olis] Monmartre. Er en bakke, uden for Pariß by, Hvôr der er et Abbedi. (“**Monmartre**, for the inhabitants Monmartre, is a hill outside Paris where an abbey is situated”).

Many exotic animals he apparently knows only from books or pictures:

(13) **Tiger** /en/ Er et firfødded dÿr, større end en mynde, og iblant så stôr, som en mâdelig hest; har glinsende øien, en stakked hals, krøgede og hvasse kløer, spidse tender, mange tæer. (“**Tiger** /a/ is an animal with four feet, bigger than a greyhound and sometimes as big as a mediocre horse; has shining eyes, a short neck, crooked and sharp claws, pointed teeth, many toes”).

His background in medicine shows clearly in the numerous entries on anatomy, botany, pharmacy and diseases. The entry on rheumatism begins

(14) **Gigt** /en/ Er en smerte omkring leddene, som forårsages af en skarp vedske, som bider på senerne, og gør hævelse, hidsighed og pine i det samme led [...] det beste råd for denne syge er at holde en gôd diêt, og holde lemmen varm, som det onde er i. Vare sig for hidsig spise, drik og lægedom: bruge lægedomme, som er lit varvende, bêskagtige, og lit snerpende. (“**Rheumatism** /a/ is a pain around the joints that is caused by a sharp fluid that bites the tendons and makes swelling, heat, and pain in this joint [...] The best advice against this disease is to follow a good diet and keep warm the joint where the illness is. Beware of hot food, drink and medicine. Use medicine that is slightly warming, bitter and a bit astringent”).

Even these few examples should make it clear that Moth's dictionary is a window into the world of a cultivated man on the threshold of the Enlightenment. This is the main reason why both scholars and the general public have shown great interest in the work.

## 6 Moth's Dictionary through Three Centuries

In the following, we shall demonstrate how the manuscript travelled through the centuries on its way to publication in the years 2013-2015. For a more detailed account of Moth's successive editions we refer to Eegholm-Pedersen 1997.

### 6.1 The Rough Draft

In his manuscripts Moth usually dated the beginning and the completion of each letter of the alphabet. Thus we know that entries beginning with *B* were edited in the period from May till November 1702 in a rough draft. One of the entries, the verb *balbere* (“to shave”) is shown in figure 1 below. The text reads: “**Balbere** /at/ p. ieg vi balberer. i. ieg vi balberede. par balberedt. pas. balberes, balberedes, er balberedt. Er af tydsk, bemerker at rage skeg af. Tondere Cic.” (“[Headword and inflectional forms] Is from German, means to shave off the beard. Tondere Cic.”).



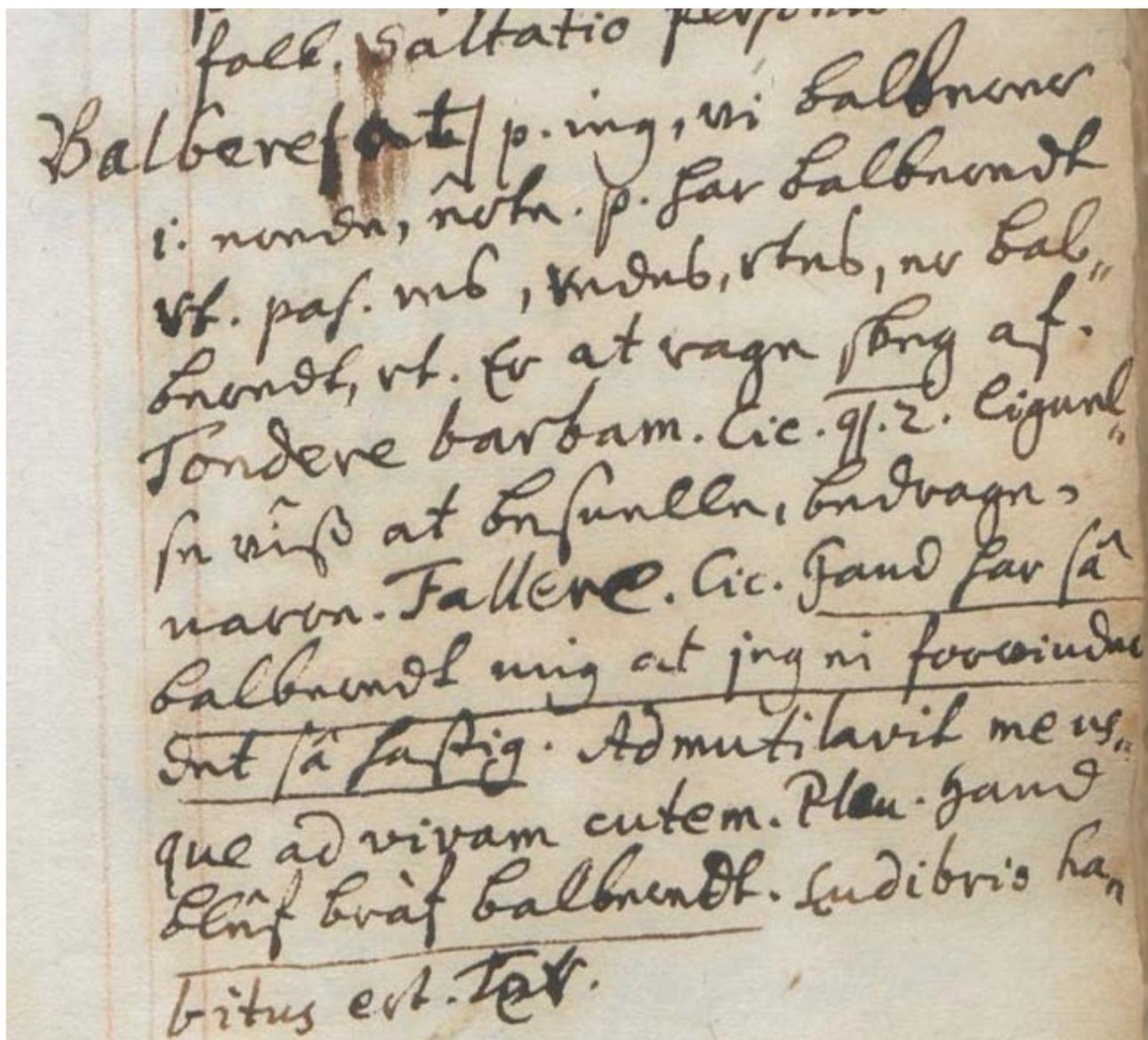


Figure 2: From the final draft of Moth's Dictionary. Photo by the Royal Library, Copenhagen.

A collation of the sample entry in the 1715-edition with the rough draft shows that a series of changes have been made:

- Some inflectional forms have been added: *balbêrte*, *balbêrt*, and *balbêrtes*.
- The etymological remark has been deleted.
- The definition has been shortened from “bemerker at rage skeg af” (“means to shave off the beard”) to “er at rage skeg af” (“is to shave off the beard”).
- The direct object *barbam* has been added to the Latin equivalent.
- A figurative meaning, ‘to cheat’, has been added, with usage examples and Latin translations.

### 6.3 The Written Copy from 1944-1951

During World War 2 the cultural heritage of Denmark was protected against damage by military operations in different ways. In connection with Moth's dictionary the destruction caused by the English bombardment in 1807 was a serious reminder. In

addition many newly graduated candidates were unemployed, and these two circumstances made it possible to raise the funds for copying the final edition of Moth's manuscript, supplemented by the rough draft of the lost volumes (Nielsen 2012). The Society for Danish Language and Literature (DSL) organized the work which started in January 1944 and continued till 1951. The aim was a printed edition, and the instructions to the transcribers were defined by this aim. Thus, the copy includes information about page numbers and page turns in the original manuscript, and corrections from Moth's hand are added in the margin, cf. figure 3 below; but it was impossible to fund the printing, and the copy was known only to a very few scholars.

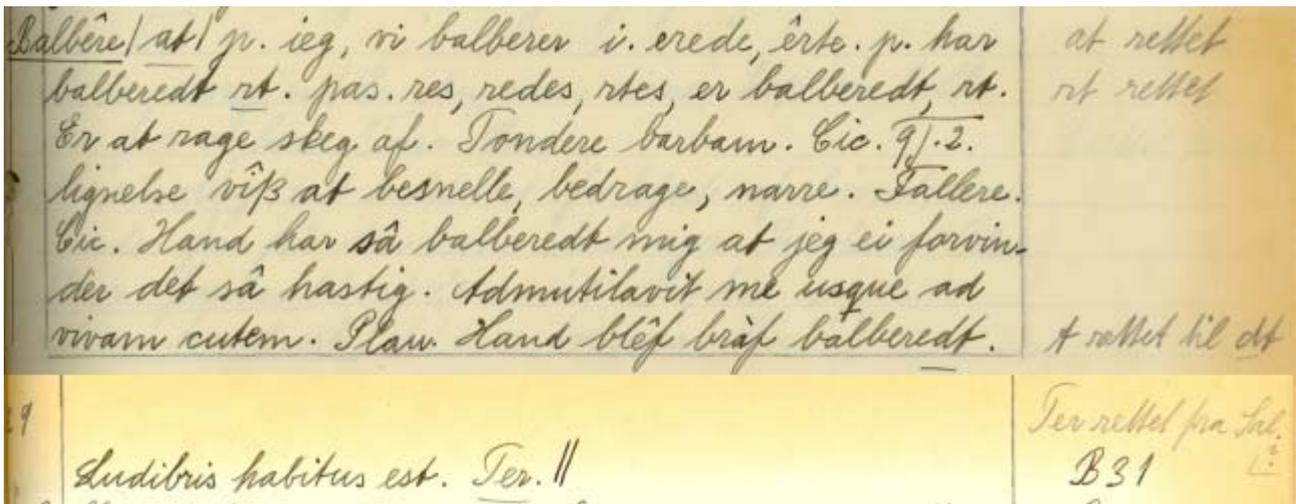


Figure 3: From the 1940's handwritten copy of Moth's Dictionary. Photo by DSL.

Although the copy is handwritten, it provides much easier access to the text compared to the original manuscript – the writing is clear and uniform, and all corrections and additions are put in the right place, a job that is not always easy, particularly in the parts copied from the rough draft.

#### 6.4 The Digitization in 2012

On the occasion of DSL's 100 years' jubilee in 2011 the prospects for a publication of Moth's dictionary finally became brighter. The Carlsberg Foundation supported a digitization of the work embedded in a research project that investigated Moth's work in the contemporary context. In the years 2012-2015 an interdisciplinary group compiled an online edition of the dictionary and published several research articles.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The staff comprised Jens Bjerring-Hansen (Postdoc), Jeppe Berndsen (student assistant), Michael Greve (IT), Marita Akhøj Nielsen (leading editor), Anders Bruun Olsen (IT), Nicolai Hartvig Sørensen (computational linguist), and Thomas Troelsgård (lexicographer). Dorthe Duncker, Svend Eegholm-Pedersen, Ebba Hjorth and Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen were the academic supervisors of the project. The typing was done by AP Data and the design by Nikolaj Thomassen.

First of all the text had to be digitized. A scanning with OCR was out of the question, so using a custom-designed interface the text was typed into a database in a rough structure, singling out headword, Latin equivalents, and Danish text. To facilitate the work the 20th-century copy and not the 18th-century original was chosen as source, relying on the palaeographic interpretations of the experts of the previous century. The input structure – once again using *balbêre* as an example – is shown in figure 4 below.

<i>Headword:</i>	<b>Balbère</b>	
<i>Danish:</i>	/at/ p. ieg, vi balberer i. erede, êrte. p. har balberedt rt. pas. res, redes, rtes, er balberedt, rt. Er at rage skeep af.	[POS and inflectional forms] Is to shave off the beard.
<i>Latin:</i>	<b>Tondere barbam. Cic.</b>	
<i>Danish:</i>	¶. 2. lignelse vîß at besnelle, bedrage, narre.	2. figuratively to deceive, cheat, dupe.
<i>Latin:</i>	<b>Fallere. Cic.</b>	
<i>Danish:</i>	Hand har så balberedt mig at jeg ei forvinder det så hastig.	He has so deceived me that I shall not recover in a short time.
<i>Latin:</i>	<b>Adutilavit me usque ad vivam cutem. Plau.</b>	
<i>Danish:</i>	Hand blêf brâf balberedt.	He was thoroughly cheated.
<i>Latin:</i>	<b>Ludibris habitus est. Ter. //</b>	

Figure 4: Data from an entry in Moth's Dictionary, shown in the data entry structure used in 2012.

One of the drawbacks of copying is that a copy of the original is obviously the risk of typos. Errors have been made both in the first and the second copy, and we continuously correct the errors as they are discovered. Thanks to the scanned facsimiles, which were made as a part of the project (see below), the original is just a click away, and error-checking is now crowdsourced by means of a device on the homepage to report problems.

## 6.5 The Online Edition from 2013 and 2014

The digitization made it possible finally to publish Moth's dictionary – 300 years after its completion. In the current online edition the different information types that were singled out during the digitization are rendered differently: Headwords in red, Latin in italics, and the Danish text in regular. The online edition also provides pop-up explanations of current abbreviations, e.g. of author names and grammatical categories. Hence, a mouse-over pop-up text explains whether e.g. *p.* should read *present*, *perfect* or *passive*. Figure 5 below shows the sample entry as it appears in the Internet dictionary.

**Balbêre** /at/ p. ieg, vi balberer i. erede, êrte. p. har balberedt  
 rt. pas. res, redes, rtes, er balberedt, rt. Er at rage skeg af.  
*Tondere barbam. Cic.*

¶. 2. lignelse við at besnelle, bedrages, narre.  
*Fallere. Cic.*

Hand har sâ balberedt mig at jeg ei forvinder det sâ hastig.  
*Adutilavit me usque ad vivam cutem. Plau.*

Hand blêf brâf balberedt.  
*Ludibris habitus est. Ter. //*

*Rapportér et problem* fra Moths Ordbog. *Verbalordbogen, se håndskrift*

Figure 5: From the Internet dictionary, mothsordbog.dk

The search facility of the Internet dictionary includes free text search, as well as some “spelling help”, insofar as automatically normalised forms of the lemmas are included in the search facility. At the foot of the entry you find three features: a link to open an e-mail reporting problems to the staff where the actual entry is noted, information about which part of the work the entry belongs to, and a link to open a facsimile of the relevant page(s) in Moth's original.

## 6.6 mothsordbog.dk – a Comprehensive Online Archive

On the Internet the dictionary forms part of a comprehensive archive on Matthias Moth and his works. Here you find all the printed papers on the subject that we have obtained permission to publish. Moreover, a series of new investigations utilizing the digitized version is published.

## 7 Concluding Remarks

Moth's dictionary is an outstanding lexicographic work that offers a unique insight not only into language usage but also into the mind-set and everyday life in Denmark c. 1700. The recent online edition has facilitated the accessibility, and the publication of the site received much publicity in the Danish media focusing largely on the expressions from the everyday language of the common people. The site is still much used by the general public, sometimes for purposes of which the editors never dreamed – like word feuds to find the dirtiest insults to women. Students and scholars in history, literature, and ethnography use Moth's work as a tool to understand older texts, whereas linguists and philologists focus on the linguistic material. Even investigations of Moth's mind-set as a representative of the early Enlightenment have been undertaken.

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