

# Byron

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Byron's main linguistic interest has always been Micronesian linguistics, most particularly in the Marshallese language and the comparative linguistics of Micronesian as a group. However, more recently a second, quite separate, research interest has emerged. A decade or so ago he found himself assigned to teach the Department's course on morphology—a course that he has since taught many times. The task of preparing the course gradually led him to give serious thought to unresolved questions in the field of morphology. He reviewed what he considered the main ones in a guest lecture in a linguistics class in 1994, and has published the background paper for this lecture on his website (Bender 1994). Anyway, his involvement in these problems has developed to such an extent that, of late, morphology has become a major area of publication for him.

But this is starting the story at the end. The beginning was on August 14, 1929, when Byron Wilbur Bender was born at Roaring Spring, Pennsylvania. His family were Mennonites who operated a dairy farm. His first schooling was in a little two-room school where he could hear the classes of the older children. The small size of the school permitted the teaching to be somewhat individualised, and Byron completed the first three grades in two years. Both of his parents had an interest in education. His mother had been a teacher, and his father had once planned on a career in teaching. Although things hadn't worked out in such a way as to permit him to enter that profession, he was somewhat able to satisfy this interest by teaching Sunday School and engaging in other similar church-related activities.

When Byron was about 10 years of age, the family moved to Elkhart, Indiana, where his father was employed as treasurer of the Mennonite Board of Mission Charities. They lived in, and his mother served as hostess in, a guest house for visiting members of the same organisation.

Byron spent his last two years of high school in a boarding school, Hesston Academy, in Kansas. His parents hoped this would provide a better environment than the local high school during the unsettled times—this was at the height of World War II.

In the summer following his graduation from high school, he had one of the more memorable adventures of his life. He was employed with some 30 other boys to accompany several hundred horses (a considerable number of which died en route) that were being transported to Poland aboard a World War II Liberty Ship. He particularly enjoyed this exposure to the high seas, and toyed with the idea of joining the merchant marine. However, his father persuaded him to give college a try first.

Thus he entered Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana, a Mennonite-affiliated institution. That was in the fall of 1946. He graduated with an English major three years later, in 1949.

After finishing college he went on to graduate studies at Indiana University. It was at Indiana that he first discovered linguistics. He received his MA (in linguistics) in 1950. He had met his future wife, Lois Marie Graber, while at Goshen, and they were married on August 25, 1950.

Byron went to the Marshall Islands in the summer of 1953. It was then part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior. He was originally hired under an ambitious plan to prepare dictionaries and grammars of all languages in the Trust Territory. The headquarters and staging area were at Fort Ruger in Honolulu, where Lois obtained a secretarial job. She remained in Honolulu when Byron went on to Majuro in the Marshall Islands, since no housing was yet available in the Marshalls. Shortly after he arrived there, many jobs—including his—were cancelled in a sweeping economy move. However, he'd decided he wanted to remain, and an opportunity presented itself when one of the school teachers who had been hired for the coming term refused to come because of the lack of housing. Byron signed on for that job and Lois soon joined him in Majuro.

His first students were of high school age, although the level of studies was somewhat lower than that of high schools in the United States. Teaching in the Marshalls in this period called for a jack-of-all trades. Byron was involved in a wide variety of activities—teaching, training teachers and running a print shop. He even taught a course in celestial navigation, learning (from a book) as he went.

His first two-year contract was followed by two others. During these terms he took on wider responsibilities in the Trust Territory educational program, finally serving from February to May 1959 as Acting Director of Education for the Trust Territory as a whole.

The first three Bender children (Susan, now married and a practicing attorney in Honolulu; Sarah, who is teaching at the university of Iowa and now has two children; and Cathy, a physician in Kailua) were born during their stay in Micronesia. During this period (1953–59) Byron also was able to collect data for his dissertation.

In 1960–62 he served as Assistant Professor of linguistics and anthropology at Goshen College. There he prepared his dissertation, 'A linguistic analysis of the place-names of the Marshall Islands'. His PhD (with a minor in anthropology) was awarded by Indiana University in 1963.

It was also during the period at Goshen that the remaining two Bender children were born (Judy, now a biochemist at Johns Hopkins; and John, now married, with two children, and employed by the *Honolulu Advertiser*).

The Benders returned to the Trust Territory in 1962—this time to Saipan, where Byron served until 1964 as the English Program Supervisor for the Territory and traveled widely throughout the Trust Territory.

In 1964 they came to Honolulu, where Byron was Associate Professor in the English Language Institute at the University of Hawai'i for one year, before moving in 1965 to the Linguistics Department where he has been ever since.

I have one recollection about our experience in hiring Byron that very neatly foreshadows the role he's played since. Unfortunately, that recollection seems to be false. However, it's too apt for me simply to discard it.

What I remember is that when we were in the process of hiring Byron into the Linguistics Department, we received a letter of recommendation from Fred Householder in which Fred said that he would recommend Byron for any department role **including chairman**. I

remember especially that we (Howard McKaughan and I in particular) found this surprising in view of his limited experience as a university faculty member and the fact that there had been no mention of anything like the department chairmanship for him at that time.

Unfortunately, I seem to be remembering something wrong since searches of the University's files have failed to turn up any such letter, and Howard doesn't remember it. I say 'unfortunately' because whatever it was that I'm remembering (something Fred said orally?) was a foreshadowing of much of Byron's later career, as he did in fact become department chairman in 1969 and served nine successive terms before he finally decided to give up the post in 1995. His fairness and his administrative abilities were such that we faculty members found it easiest just to get on with our work and let Byron handle things.

The University evaluates its faculty members in terms of three kinds of activities: teaching, research and service. Although Byron certainly never neglected his teaching or research, what strikes one as particularly exceptional is the extent of his activities that fit best under the 'service' rubric.

His position as department chair led him to assume wider responsibilities in a number of directions. One was the Linguistic Society of America (LSA). The LSA's 1977 Summer Linguistic Institute was hosted by the University of Hawai'i and the East-West Center. Byron played the leading role in the planning and served as Director of the Institute. During this time he served on the LSA Committee on Institutes and Fellowships. Some years later he served as member, and eventually chair, of the LSA Program Committee (and ex officio member of the Executive Committee). Again, in 1995–97, he served the LSA as Parliamentarian.

Byron has also played a central role in leadership of the faculty union of the University—the University of Hawai'i Professional Assembly (UHPA)—throughout most of its history. UHPA was formed in 1974 as a joint affiliate of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the National Education Association (NEA). Byron joined its Board of Directors in 1978, and played a major role in revising its constitution to bring about a harmonious union of these two rather different constituent organisations.

He served four three-year terms on the Board of Directors in two sequences of two (two consecutive terms being all that the Constitution permits). He also was President for six one-year terms—again all that the Constitution permits. (He was the first member to be awarded the title 'President Emeritus'.) He has also served UHPA as Vice-President, Secretary, Chair of the Finance Committee, and as a member of the Executive Committee, the Collective Bargaining Committee, the Negotiating Team, the Nominations and Elections Committee, the Legislative Committee and the Personnel Committee—most for several terms.

Byron has also played a role in both of the national organisations with which UHPA was affiliated. During his service with UHPA, he was elected a member of the AAUP Council and was a delegate to their annual meetings. He has also been on the Standing Committee on Higher Education of the NEA and has contributed to the NEA journal, *Thought and action*.

As president of UHPA from 1983 to 1988, he had a weekly ninety-second spot in a series on KHVH radio called 'Viewpoint'. In this, he gave his thoughtful views on a wide variety of matters related to the University and its place in the community. A number (103, to be exact) of these were published by UHPA in 1985 as a booklet entitled 'University Views'.

J.N. Musto, Executive Director of UHPA, recommended to the Governor of the state, John Waihee, that Byron be appointed as a trustee of the Hawai'i Public Employees Health Fund. He served successive four-year terms, and held both the position of Vice-Chair of the Trustees and that of Chair of the Benefits Committee. In addition to all of the preceding

responsibilities, he also served for fifteen years on the University of Hawai'i Faculty Senate, to which he was first elected in 1980. During nine of these years, furthermore, he was a member of the Senate Executive Committee.

When I set out to prepare this piece, I was very conscious of the fact that there were whole domains of Byron's professional service of which I had no firsthand knowledge, and so I tried to find and elicit information from people who had worked with him in various organisations. Of the three national organisations—AAUP, NEA and LSA—I was successful only with the LSA, but I was able to contact a number of people who had worked with him in the Faculty Senate and UHPA. All of those that I talked with were eager to express their appreciation for his work and for him as a person. Their comments clearly evoked the same person whom we in linguistics had become so familiar with, but they did provide some details of his other activities that we didn't have. A number of these comments deserve quoting here.

Many of us were aware that Byron had played a very significant role in the early stages of the development of UHPA, but knew very little more. Some of the comments make it clear that the union was seriously divided between two camps, and that Byron deserves the principal credit for bringing them together into an effective unit; for example:

Byron was the first leader of UHPA to truly unify the Board members from UHM and the CCs. When I started on the Board, the 'AAUP types' sat on one side of the room and the teachers and education community, which resulted from CUPA, sat on the other side. Byron led the changes in our Constitution that created an independent organization called UHPA out of bifurcated organization defined by the merger of 2 national affiliates. It was through Byron that UHPA became an all encompassing union of UH faculty members. (J. N. Musto)

Our AAUP Chapter was active in the Collective Bargaining contest, initially leading on Manoa and later collaborating with others in forming UHPA. I think that it is a significant testimony to Byron's character and leadership that once he was elected president of UHPA, the rivalries between different groups faded away. (Vincent Peterson)

The same ability to calm troubled waters is reported from other contexts; for example, from the Faculty Senate:

I came to admire his moderate approach, concern for fair play, and refined sense of humor which eased tensions when discussions became a bit heated. (Vincent Peterson)

The impression on seeing him in the SEC, or in the Senate, was of an almost extraordinarily quiet man, thinking but perhaps of things other than the topic under discussion. But that was only until he began to speak, when with words so well chosen and thoughtful he brought closure to even the most vociferous of arguments. He had seen both sides of the problem, and he offered a solution, a question, another direction. (Alison Kay)

And from the Linguistic Society of America:

Byron has played many roles in the life of the Linguistic Society—Director of one of the largest and most successful Linguistic Institutes in 1977 (over 800 participants), member of the Society's Program Committee and most recently, the first officially appointed Parliamentarian (1995–1997).

His talents as an able administrator and thoughtful facilitator were a great asset on the Program Committee and in managing the complexities of the Institute. But it was in his role as Parliamentarian that these gifts took on a more public face and his serenity and personal kindness shone. During the 1997 Annual Meeting in Chicago, the national debate on ebonics brought enormous press interest in the LSA Business Meeting where a

resolution on ebonics was presented for the members' endorsement. While television crews jockeyed to capture the essence of a lively, scholarly debate about the resolution, Byron maintained order amid a flood of motions and substitute wordings, bringing unanimity on the statement AND adjourning the session on time. (Maggie Reynolds)

And finally, comments on Byron as a person:

Dr. Bender is a wonderful human being. He is patient and kind, has a sense of humor, is a connoisseur of good food and wine, enjoys fine music, is a good listener ... he is humble and humane. I have never seen him undermine anyone to make them feel inferior. He treats people with dignity and has never expressed any arrogance. (Pamela Tsuru)

(I'll also include here the following unsolicited comment from my wife:)

A thing I notice about Byron—always—is his chuckle—his deep laugh that goes knees to eyes: his wit and warmth are always on his face. (Liz Foster)

All of these comments ring true to those of us who've known him in other contexts.

It's true that he's soft-spoken, but he is capable of making himself heard when he's ready to speak. Certainly, he doesn't at all fit the stereotype of the glib, fast-talking academic. He could be described as a man of few words—one who thinks before he speaks.

In fact, this thinking before speaking is one trait that many of us have found disconcerting. For instance, one would ask him a question, and he'd sit and stare into space for long enough that one would feel increasingly uncomfortable, feeling the need for something to be said, and finally—unable to hold out any longer—repeat or reword the question. Then, almost simultaneously, he'd give his answer—which he'd been thinking out all along.

Not only is he a connoisseur of good food and wine, but he's also an excellent cook. My personal experience of his cooking comes particularly from a period of several years when he and Lois were part of a 'Great Life Dinners' group, the other members of which were Gordon and Anna Fairbanks, Leatrice Mirikitani and me. We met periodically to enjoy one of the dinners from a cookbook entitled, as I recall, *Great Life Dinners*. Each of the dinners consisted of several dishes which, of course, were prepared by the members of the group (with Gordon and me as notable exceptions—our justification was that we 'took care of the drinks'). But it always seemed to me that Byron took responsibility for the most challenging of the dishes, and he always met that responsibility with noteworthy success (and, I thought, considerable enjoyment).

Another interest of Byron's that needs to be mentioned is computers. From the time that personal computers began to assume a significant role in the academic world, Byron effectively took the lead in bringing the department members into the world of the PC and word processing. And ever since he's remained impressively well-informed—more so than almost any of us—on ongoing developments in personal computers and, more recently, the Internet.

Byron has been involved in educational activities throughout his professional life. In addition to his own teaching and his administrative responsibilities for instructional programs at the University of Hawai'i, he has a continuing interest in the people of the Pacific islands and their languages. This interest is represented, for example, by his report on *Linguistic factors in Maori education* (1971) prepared for the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. However, the Marshall Islands and the Marshallese language have always been most central. Although in 1969 he published a book of Marshallese lessons designed for Peace Corps volunteers, the goal of his main efforts has been (to borrow the words of Capelle

and Bender 1996:37), “to make the Marshallese language a viable written medium for use in all tasks of daily living, including its use in the islands’ schools”.

This continuing effort is marked by a number of publications and other activities; see, for example, the correspondence with Alfred Capelle in Capelle and Bender (1996).

But so far I’ve said nothing about what has been most central in his professional life—increasing our knowledge about the languages of the Pacific. He has contributed to this knowledge in a variety of ways in addition to his own research. For one thing he has been editor-in-chief of the journal *Oceanic Linguistics* since 1991 (he had previously served as Managing Editor from 1965, and has been one of the coeditors of the *Oceanic Linguistics Special Publications* since 1965). Under his editorship the journal has blossomed into the kind of vehicle it was intended to be. It has settled into a regular schedule of publication and its contents have more than doubled in size.

I can still quite clearly remember the experience that first made me fully appreciate the quality of Byron’s own linguistic research. It was reading a paper on Marshallese phonology that he had submitted to *Oceanic Linguistics* (where it was published in volume 7, 1968).

The analysis presented in that paper (one which is now quite generally accepted) contained some remarkable conclusions. First of all, he concluded that Marshallese had only a single series—high to low—of vowels. The front–back and rounded–unrounded distinctions that had been reported in earlier studies were reinterpreted as phonologically conditioned variation. But that wasn’t all. The analysis also posited three semiconsonants, *w*, *y*, and *h*, which often were perceptible (at least to English-trained ears) only through their conditioning effects on neighbouring vowels.

Small wonder that when he submitted the paper to *Oceanic Linguistics*, my first reaction (as editor of the journal at that time) was to think that it looked like an exemplary instance of the kind of analysis for which Byron’s mentor, Fred Householder, had coined the name “hocus-pocus linguistics”. Yet, from what I knew of Byron, it was hard to imagine him resorting to hocus-pocus analyses no matter how elegant the results might appear. Now, having known him much longer, I find it even harder to imagine such a thing. Is there **anyone** from whom hocus-pocus would be more out of character?

However, as I read the paper more carefully, I found myself more and more impressed. I was impressed, for one thing, by how clearly Byron wrote. This is something I’ve noted many times since—even in his memos as department chairman. (As chairman he was often frustrated when he sent a draft of some report required by some higher administrative level to the faculty for suggestions and didn’t receive any. I can tell him now that part of the problem was that he expressed things so thoughtfully and clearly that it was hard to think of any improvements to suggest.)

If I found his presentation lucid, I also found it very compelling. It led the reader through the evolution of his analysis, laying out for each successive modification the newly recognised evidence that had determined it. It was not so much an argument for a particular analysis as an explanation of his reasoning, and I could find no basis for questioning any of it.

Byron has numerous other publications on Marshallese. His dissertation was a meticulous and thorough study of place names (the principal results of which were published in Bender 1970). Although this may appear an unusual topic for a dissertation, it’s probably a very good one for involving the investigator at once in many aspects of the language and laying a foundation for further research in a variety of directions. In any event, he has published (sometimes with collaborators) the textbook for an intensive course in the language, a dictionary of “almost 12,000 entries” and several papers on matters of



morphology/morphosyntax. There are also a number of papers that include other Micronesian languages, from survey treatments of Micronesia as a whole to discussions of features shared by Marshallese with one or more others.

And now there is this additional, and quite separate, area of research in which Byron has become increasingly involved. As was mentioned earlier, his having wound up teaching the department's course on morphology led him to give serious thought to unresolved questions in that field.

Of course he had had to deal with problems of morphological analysis in Marshallese from as early as his dissertation, and morphological questions had figured in several of his Marshallese papers, but some of his recent publications have had a significantly different focus. They are concerned with the part played by morphology in human language—with what its bounds are and how it works. The first paper that called this new departure to my attention was Bender 1988 in which he discussed the reduction in the number of conjugations between Latin and Spanish and what kind of analysis might have been able to predict this levelling. Since then, there have been several others—some with no Austronesian content at all. Although there is no question of Byron's having abandoned Marshallese, with the additional time he has gained since leaving his administrative responsibilities he seems to be growing a second parallel career.

## NOTE

I knew when I undertook to write this piece that I'd have to draw heavily on the knowledge of a number of other people, but I was confident that I'd have no difficulty in getting their assistance. That confidence was completely justified. All of the people whom I approached who had known Byron in one or another capacity proved to be eager to cooperate—to take advantage of this opportunity to express their appreciation for him.

I owe particular thanks to Byron's wife, Lois, who supplied many details of his early life and made a number of helpful suggestions.

In addition, J. N. Musto, Pamela Tsuru and Vincent Peterson all contributed to my understanding of the role Byron played in the history of UHPA—both in the formation and subsequent functioning of the Union itself and in services to the wider community that arose from his UHPA role.

Alison Kay and Vincent Peterson contributed their recollections of his role in the Faculty Senate and in its Executive Committee.

Maggie Reynolds was the only source I was able to find on his activities in national organisations, but she was a good one.

Finally, I should mention that I've also benefited from discussions with Don Topping, Ken Rehg and Alfred Capelle, and that I've received help in identifying and contacting my sources from a number of people who will remain nameless mainly because I didn't think to note down their names.

My sincere appreciation to all of the above, as well as to any others whose contributions I may have overlooked.

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