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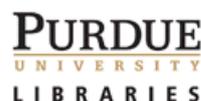
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Sounding sacred: The adoption of biblical archaisms in the Book of Mormon and other 19th century texts

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Abstract

The Book of Mormon is a text published in 1830 and considered a sacred work of scripture by adherents of the Latter-day Saint movement. Although written 200 years later, it exhibits many linguistic features of the King James translation of the Bible. Such stylistic imitation has been little studied, though a notable exception is Sigelman & Jacoby (1996).

Three hypotheses are considered: that this is a feature of 19th century religious texts, and the Book of Mormon adopts the style of its genre as a religious text; that this is a feature of translations of ancient texts, and the Book of Mormon adopts the style of its genre as a purported translation of ancient records; that Joseph Smith, who produced the Book of Mormon, absorbed the idiom of the King James Bible and used it in his writings generally.

A selection of 19th century religious and translated texts are evaluated, along with personal letters of Joseph Smith, with consideration given to a wide range of archaic features, including lexemes, morpho-syntactic features, and idiomatic expressions. The rates are compared to those in the King James Bible and to the Corpus of Historical American English, which serves as a control for 19th century usage.

Archaic features are indeed used extensively in a number of the investigated texts, at rates far in excess of contemporary usage. The most widely used features are address pronouns starting with T, such as thou, the verbal -th inflection, as in saith, the archaic preterite form spake, the preposition unto, and the expression "to come to pass." Writers who used archaic features used a suite of such elements rather than one or two. 19th century use also indicated discomfort in the use of some such features, either mixing them with modern alternatives (hath alongside has) or extending them to unexpected contexts (hypercorrections such as -th with plural subjects or ye in object positions).

Archaic features are characteristic of the translated texts, which make the most consistent and standard use of archaisms. They are not characteristic of 19th century religious texts generally, but are common to two texts, both of which claim to be new revelations of scripture: The Book of Mormon and the Holy Roll. These lack the

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consistency of the translations, and have more mixing and hypercorrection.

In Joseph Smith's letters, archaic features are concentrated in portions where he is relaying revelations, in contrast to other tasks, such as managing church business. Smith and the other prophetic writer lacked credentials as religious clergy, and lacked the education in historic English of the translators. Their use of archaisms shows the most reliance on the King James Bible in particular. This inexpert use by writers with a need to establish a sense of spiritual authority indicates that biblical imitation was an active choice used to project an identity as a prophet.

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