Abstract: In recent years the Book of Mormon has been compared to pseudo-biblical texts like Gilbert J. Hunt’s The Late War (1816). Some have found strong linguistic correspondence and declared that there is an authorial relationship. However, comparative linguistic studies performed to date have focused on data with low probative value vis-à-vis the question of authorship. What has been lacking is non-trivial descriptive linguistic analysis that focuses on less contextual and more complex types of data, such as syntax and morphosyntax (grammatical features such as verb agreement and inflection), as well as data less obviously biblical and/or less susceptible to conscious manipulation. Those are the kinds of linguistic studies that have greater probative value in relation to authorship, and that can determine whether Joseph Smith might have been able to produce Book of Mormon grammar. In order to determine whether it is a good match with the form and structure of pseudo-biblical writings, I investigate nearly 10 kinds of syntax and morphosyntax that occur in the Book of Mormon and the King James Bible, comparing their usage with each other and with that of four pseudo-biblical texts. Findings are summarized toward the end of the article, along with some observations on biblical hypercorrection and alternative LDS views on Book of Mormon language.

This study addresses the degree to which Book of Mormon language differs from that of pseudo-biblical writings of the late 1700s and early 1800s, investigating whether there are small or large differences in form and structure. Pseudo-biblical writings can be considered a control group in relation to the linguistic form and structure that Joseph Smith might have produced had he been attempting to mimic biblical style in 1829. He was repeatedly exposed to King James idiom growing up. Thus, either adherence [Page 178] to biblical language or deviations from biblical language that are close to pseudo-biblical patterns could support the position that Joseph was the author or English-language translator of the Book of Mormon text. On the other hand, there is nothing to indicate that Joseph was well versed in many Early Modern English texts when he dictated the Book of Mormon. Hence, large deviations from both biblical and pseudo biblical patterns that approach attested archaic usage could support the position that Joseph was not its author or English-language translator.

By means of deeper linguistic analysis we can discover whether the influence of pseudo-biblical style on the earliest text of the Book of Mormon is noticeable, or (as another possibility) whether there is substantial correspondence in style between pseudo-biblical texts and the Book of Mormon. Are there fundamental, structural similarities in syntax and morphosyntax? Alternatively, do low-level differences rule out classifying the Book of Mormon as just another pseudo-biblical literary production? Does the earliest text match Early Modern English usage sufficiently so that it should not be regarded as a pseudo-archaic text?

There is of course a very large amount of syntactic data to consider, and much of the syntax would have been produced subconsciously, based as it is on implicit knowledge. Consequently, systematic analysis is possible and meaningful. Careful, thorough investigation of Book of Mormon grammar can therefore go a long way toward telling us whether Joseph could have been the author or English-language translator.

Specifically, this study focuses on those grammatical features whose usage patterns are either less noticeable (to non-linguists) or not as easily imitated. This is a crucial point. Linguistic items that are readily noticed and easily imitated are, at least as far as authorship determination is concerned, trivial and uninteresting. Such items have made up the bulk of the linguistic comparisons that the Book of Mormon has been subjected to up to this point. In contrast, some of the features analyzed [Page 179] for this study are reliably characterized only after rather detailed linguistic analysis.

The Pseudo-Biblical Texts Examined

The four pseudo-biblical texts examined for this study have been chosen based on frequent comparison to the Book of Mormon and/or being prominent, worthy specimens of the genus. The four texts include John Leacock’s The First Book of the American Chronicles of the Times (1774–1775), Richard Snowden’s The American Revolution...
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(1793), Michael Linning’s *The First Book of Napoleon* (1809), and Gilbert Hunt’s *The Late War* (1816). These four pseudo-biblical texts are freely available in the WordCruncher library.\(^4\)

The background of these authors is as follows: John Leacock (1729–?1802) was a goldsmith and silversmith from Philadelphia, Richard Snowden (1753–?1825) was a Quaker from southwest New Jersey, Michael Linning (1774–1838) was a Scottish solicitor originally from Lanarkshire near Glasgow, and Gilbert J. Hunt was a manufacturer from New York City.\(^5\)

According to Eran Shalev, Leacock’s work was “the most popular writing in biblical style of the Revolutionary era;” Snowden’s two-volume effort was “the first full-blown, thorough, earnest, and mature attempt to biblicize the United States and its historical record;” and Hunt’s history of the War of 1812 was “the most impressive text among the numerous published during the opening decades of the nineteenth century.”\(^6\) A contemporary review of Linning’s pseudo-biblical effort found that

the book gives, in language with which they [the Bible-reading public] are best acquainted, a just view of the principle which led to the French revolution, to the elevation of Buonaparte to the throne of the Bourbons, and to all the miseries under which the continent of Europe has so long groaned; contrasting those miseries with the happiness which Britons, here denominated Albions, enjoy under the mild government of our excellent and amiable sovereign.\(^7\)

Other Primary Sources


The principal English textual source used in this study was the Early English Books Online database (http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home). The publicly searchable portion of EEBO (Phase 1 texts) is currently found at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup. I have mainly derived Early Modern English examples from a precisely searchable 700-million-word WordCruncher corpus I made from approximately 25,000 EEBO Phase 1 texts. Other important textual sources include Eighteenth Century Collections Online (https://www.gale.com/primary-sources/eighteenth-century-collections-online and https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco), Literature Online (https://literature.proquest.com), and Google Books (https://books.google.com).

Observations on Pseudo-Biblical Influence

Both LDS and non-LDS perspectives on Book of Mormon language have tended toward the pseudo-archaic or pseudo-biblical. Two commonly held beliefs are the following: (1) archaic Book of Mormon usage is not systematically different from King James language; (2) the earliest text is often defective in its implementation of archaic vocabulary and grammar. Many scholars believe Book of Mormon grammar is a flawed imitation of biblical usage. That conclusion, however, has been founded on insufficient grammatical and lexical study.

A number of LDS scholars believe that because Joseph Smith’s mind was saturated with biblical language, he could have produced the text of the Book of Mormon from a mixture of biblical language and his own dialect.\(^8\) Other commentators, whose affiliation is not always known, [Page 182]have drawn similar conclusions. Here is one observation made in 2013 by a blogger — who goes by the initials RT — on the influence that one pseudo-biblical writing might have had on the formulation of the Book of Mormon text:
In sum, linguistic and narrative elements of the [Book of Mormon] are probably descended, at least in part, from Gilbert Hunt’s pseudo-biblical account of the War of 1812. The relationship between these two literary works is relatively strong, suggesting that the book had quite a memorable impact on Joseph Smith. But Smith did not borrow directly from [The Late War] (at least for the majority of the narrative content) during the process of composing the [Book of Mormon].

For purposes of determining possible influence on authorship, RT has focused on linguistic and narrative evidence. However, the linguistic evidence he has considered is not syntactic in character, and there is no discussion of possibly obsolete lexis. Instead, this commentator has concentrated on archaic phrasal and lexical evidence that is rather obviously biblical or that is contextual to a larger degree than syntactic structures are, which can be employed in a wide array of diverse contexts. Phrases and lexical items routinely identifiable as biblical are of course more susceptible to imitation. Moreover, they are also less likely to have been produced subconsciously than syntax, so they are of secondary importance in determining authorship influence, compared to more complex linguistic studies. Also, the narrative evidence RT has considered is, by its nature, weaker than substantive linguistic evidence from the domains of semantics, morphology, and syntax.

Here is another summarizing comment about the Book of Mormon which one can currently find online: “Joseph most likely grew up reading a school book called The Late War by Gilbert J. Hunt and it heavily influenced his writing of The Book of Mormon.” Again, a comparison of phrases and lexical usage shared between the Book of Mormon and The Late War led to this comment. Specifically, the two researchers responsible for this comment carried out n-gram comparisons between the Book of Mormon and more than 100,000 pre-1830 texts. A significant flaw in the comparisons they made was failing to incorporate many Early Modern English texts — regularized for spelling and morphology — in their large corpus. Nor is it clear that they used the critical text, the text closest to Joseph Smith’s 1829 dictation. In addition, as Benjamin McGuire pointed out in 2013 (using different language), n-gram analyses provide only a brute-force approach to the question of authorship, since they ignore constituent structure.

To these points I would add that issues of lemmatization have been ignored as well. Lemmatization involves regularizing words with inflectional differences as equivalent variants of the same lexeme. And even many lemmatization efforts cannot remedy the inherent deficiencies of most n-gram analyses. For example, Nicholas Lesse’s translation language “do not cause hym, that he shuld performe . . .” (1550, EEBO A22686) is a syntactic match with “causing them that they should . . .” (3 Nephi 2:3). These are both ditransitive causative constructions with repeated pronominals. But such a correspondence isn’t caught by standard n-gram comparisons, nor by narrowly drawn lemmatized comparisons, so that competent linguistic analysis is ultimately needed to determine relevant syntactic matching.

The website that contains the above comment comparing The Late War to the Book of Mormon has a large quantity of material to digest, and the linguistic analysis is confined to phrasal and lexical elements, which have their interest but are contextual in many cases. If there were no syntax, morphosyntax, or obsolete lexis to study, then we would have to content ourselves with studying mostly contextual linguistic evidence, such as we find on this website. But there are other things that can be studied that are either more complex and less contextual or can be studied in a way that brings out relevant complexity. Hence, the choice of data and methodologies are quite important.

As McGuire mentions in his 2013 article, quoting Harold Love, the explosion of available textual data has made “intelligent selectivity” extremely important. Syntactic studies rank very high in terms of intelligent selectivity. (To this may be added studies of potentially obsolete lexis not undertaken here but soon to be available in Royal Skousen, The Nature of the Original Language. A substantially different version of this paper will be available in that two-part book as section 12.) Syntactic studies constitute a richer source of linguistic information and a more reliable data set on which to base conclusions about Book of Mormon authorship. One specific example is the study of relative-pronoun selection after human antecedents in earlier English, addressed below.

The aforementioned website liberally employs the ellipsis symbol (…), at times in lengthy or discontinuous
passages. The way this symbol is used goes against customary practice in quite a few cases and can mislead the unaware. The casual reader is led to believe there is much more compact correspondence between the Book of Mormon and The Late War (and other texts) than there actually is. This analysis has been referred to by the CES letter, whose latest iteration links to the site rather than incorporating it in the body of the letter. 15 A recent imitation of the CES letter provides the reader with a reprint of some of the color-coded comparisons that are heavy in ellipsis. 16

Another short blog entry to consider is one titled “American Pseudobibles (and the Book of Mormon).” The author, John Turner, quotes Eran Shalev as suggesting that “the unique combination of the biblical form and style that the Book of Mormon shares with the pseudobiblical texts, as well as their distinctly American content, provide a case for seeing Smith’s book as meaningfully affiliated to that American mode of writing.” 17 This view of things — that pseudo-biblical style and Book of Mormon style are not substantively distinguishable — is only based on superficial linguistic considerations. We must dig deeper before we can be confident that such a view is accurate.

Eran Shalev wrote the following at the end of his article on pseudo-biblicism: 18

The tradition of writing in biblical style paved the way for the Book of Mormon by conditioning Americans to reading American texts, and texts about America, in biblical language. Yet the Book of Mormon, an American narrative told in the English of the King James Bible, has thrived long after Americans abandoned the practice of recounting their affairs in biblical language. It has thus been able to survive and flourish for almost two centuries, not because, but in spite of the literary ecology of the mid-nineteenth century and after. The Book of Mormon became a testament to a widespread cultural practice of writing in biblical English that could not accommodate to the monumental transformations America endured in the first half of nineteenth century.?[emphasis added]

The character of the Book of Mormon’s English is a matter that demands special study, not unstudied assumptions. Before Skousen, no one had acknowledged and accepted this reality.

Just before final submission of this piece, I was alerted to a recent Purdue University dissertation by Gregory A. Bowen. 19 Bowen’s thesis examines usage in 10 texts and two small corpora, with the focus on the King James Bible and the Book of Mormon. Because the net is cast wide and touches on several linguistic areas, this study is a preliminary one in relation to the Book of Mormon. Hunt’s The Late War is one of the 19th-century texts examined.

[Page 186]Bowen either begins with or comes to an expected academic conclusion. 20 He doesn’t explore the possibility that a significant amount of Book of Mormon usage could be genuinely archaic, despite the existence of extra-biblical archaic markers occurring throughout the text. Although he mentions a few, he never pursues lines of inquiry that might have revealed true archaisms. In short, there is good material in this thesis, but it doesn’t approach lexical and grammatical issues that might be dispositive of the authorship question.

Bowen concludes that some heavy usage of archaisms found in the Book of Mormon were biblical hypercorrections by Joseph Smith. In the case at hand, a hypercorrection is a presumed overuse by Joseph of a prestigious biblical form. 21 The issue of biblical hypercorrection will be addressed at various points in this study.

One item of archaic vocabulary that Bowen tracked was the adjective wroth. This word is a strong marker of archaisms because the EEBO database clearly shows that usage rates dropped off significantly during the first half of the early modern era. He classifies the Book of Mormon’s high-frequency wroth usage as a biblical hypercorrection, since its textual rate exceeds that of the King James Bible: 90 words per million (wpm) versus 64 wpm. 22 In this case, however, the close synonym angry could have been considered as well.

If we include angry in calculations and determine a relative rate of archaism, we find that the King James Bible is
53 percent wroth (49 of 93) and that the Book of Mormon is only 26 percent wroth (24 of 93). As a result, even though the absolute rate of wroth in the Book of Mormon is greater than it is in the King James Bible, the Book of Mormon’s archaic wroth–angry rate is half that of the King James Bible. This extra bit of analysis — which recognizes the importance of also considering the close synonym angry — reveals that the Book of Mormon’s high rate of wroth is partly due to archaisms and partly due to a higher textual frequency of the notion ‘angry.’

In summary, after duly considering a variety of evidence, a number of critics and researchers have concluded that the Book of Mormon isn’t [Page 187]genuinely archaic, and that its language is close to that of Gilbert J. Hunt’s The Late War and similarly styled texts. Some see direct influence from The Late War, others see indirect influence. Yet no one has drilled down to the foundational elements of style beyond shared lexical and phrasal usage in context and simple morphological studies; all have ignored independent archaic semantic usage, syntactic structure, and in-depth morphosyntactic research. Those are the things that can tell us most reliably and convincingly whether the Book of Mormon is similar to pseudo-biblical texts in terms of style and archaism. My primary concern in this study is with syntactic structure and morphosyntax. To my knowledge, a substantive syntactic comparison of the Book of Mormon with pseudo-biblical writings has never been performed. There is much to compare; I only touch on a few things here.

Summary of Analyses

Topics covered include agentive of and by, lest syntax, relative-pronoun usage with personal antecedents, periphrastic did, more–part usage, had (been) spake, the [-th] plural, and verbal complementation after five common verbs as well as the adjective desirous.

Agentive of and by

In most syntactic domains, Book of Mormon archaism turns out to be different from that of the King James Bible, while exceeding that of the four pseudo-biblical writings. The following is one example. Agentive of is biblical syntax, but it is the kind that was apparently more difficult for pseudo-biblical authors to imitate. Its use is less obvious than that of lexical items like thou, saith, unto, or past-tense spake (to this we may also add the prominent lexical phrase it came to pass).

In late Middle English, just before the early modern period, the chief preposition used in passive constructions to indicate the agent was of, later giving way to by.23 (Late Middle English ended around the time William Caxton began to print books in English in the final quarter of the 15th century, and Early Modern English continued to the end of the 17th century.) An example is the following sentence from a book found in the EEBO database: “God requireth the law to be kepte of all men” (1528, EEBO A14136). By the late modern period this expression would have [Page 188]almost always been worded “God requires the law to be kept by all men.” A Book of Mormon example is “Moses was commanded of the Lord” (1 Nephi 17:26), equivalent to “Moses was commanded by the Lord.”

Royal Skousen has carried out systematic but incomplete sampling of past participles followed by either agentive of or by in the two scriptural texts (mostly from an inspection of the syntax of regular verbs ending in {-ed} that are immediately followed by of or by and an animate agent). I have done the same for the four pseudo-biblical writings. This research has yielded the following estimates:

Estimated agentive of rates

- King James Bible 72%
- Book of Mormon 46%
- Scottish pseudo-biblical text < 20%
- American pseudo-biblical texts < 10%

In this domain we find that the King James Bible has the greatest archaism, followed by the Book of Mormon, and
followed more distantly by the four pseudo-biblical writings. The one by the Scottish author Matthew Linning comes closest to the scriptural texts in its level of archaism at less than 20 percent agentive of. The Book of Mormon exhibits considerable biblical influence, while the pseudo-biblical texts exhibit slight biblical influence.

The King James Bible favors the use of agentive of (estimated at 72 percent), but there are still significant levels of use of agentive by. The Book of Mormon slightly favors the use of agentive by (estimated at 54 percent), but there is almost as much agentive of usage. In contrast, the four pseudo-biblical writings do not use much agentive of, strongly preferring the modern alternative.

The kind of verb and agent involved in the syntax influence the selection of the agentive preposition (of or by?), complicating matters. Yet the large differences in agentive of rates permit one to reliably observe that while the Book of Mormon is quite archaic in agentive of usage, pseudo-biblical writings are not — especially the American ones.

Agentive of is used with a wide variety of verbs in the scriptural texts, and the usage in many cases is not overlapping. In other words, the King James Bible employs agentive of with some verbs quite frequently whereas the Book of Mormon does not; the Book of Mormon also employs agentive of with some verbs quite frequently while the King James Bible does not. An example of this is the passive construction “commanded of/by.” The King James Bible has four examples of “commanded by” but no [Page 189] examples of “commanded of”; the Book of Mormon has nine examples of “commanded of” and three examples of “commanded by.” This means it is not inaccurate to state that the Book of Mormon’s agentive of usage approaches but is independent of biblical usage. This is statistically verifiable.24

Pseudo-biblical texts are not that archaic in this regard, especially the three American ones. Of the four pseudo-biblical writings considered in this study, the Scottish one contains the highest rate of agentive of usage — estimated to be 15 percent. This is about one-third the rate found in the Book of Mormon. The three American pseudo-biblical writings have been estimated to be below 10 percent in their agentive of usage. Some details follow:

- Leacock’s text (1774–1775) has no examples of agentive of out of about 10 possibilities. The agentive of rate in this text is 0%.
- Snowden’s text (1793) has three instances of “beloved of the people” (5:14, 19:13, 26:2). The estimated agentive of rate in this text is 7% (3 of 43 regular verbs). (There are also three instances of “beloved by,” with various noun phrases [3:13, 45:7, 52:3].)
- Linning’s text (1809) has four instances of agentive of: “despised of men” (twice: 12:7; 14:2), “favoured of Heaven” (14:5) and “approved of men” (21:19). The estimated agentive of rate in this text is 15% (4 of 27 regular verbs).
- Hunt’s text (1816) has only one example of agentive of: “the king was possessed of an evil spirit” (1:14). The estimated agentive of rate in this text is 2.5% (1 of 40 regular verbs).

Lest syntax

Next, we consider the syntax of sentences that occur after the conjunction lest. The 1611 King James Bible consistently employs the subjunctive mood in sentences following this conjunction. About 80 percent of the time no modal auxiliary verb is used. This of course means that about 20 percent of the time a modal auxiliary verb is used with an infinitive after lest, most frequently should.

A fairly comprehensive search of the 1611 King James Bible (including the Apocrypha) yielded 63 lest–should constructions. This tally is probably close to the actual figure and is equivalent to a textual rate of 68 wpm. But because lest–should usage continued into the late modern period robustly (after the year 1700), use of lest–should syntax in pseudo-biblical texts isn’t actually a good candidate for possible biblical hypercorrection. Some of it could represent late modern usage.
A few details of *lest* constructions in the other texts are the following:

- The Book of Mormon employs a modal auxiliary verb in sentences after *lest* about 80 percent of the time, usually *should*. It has much higher levels of modal auxiliary usage after *lest* than the biblical text does. Its 44 *lest–should* constructions translate to a rate of 175 wpm — 2.6 times the biblical rate.
- Leacock’s *American Chronicles* (1774–1775) and Linning’s *Book of Napoleon* (1809) have six and five instances of *lest*, respectively, without any following modal auxiliary usage. These pseudo-biblical texts are more closely aligned with biblical patterns than the other two pseudo-biblical texts.
- Richard Snowden’s *The American Revolution* (1793) has 14 *lest–should* constructions, a rate of 284 wpm. Snowden’s *lest–should* rate is more than four times that of the King James Bible, and higher than the Book of Mormon’s.
- Gilbert J. Hunt’s *The Late War* (1816) has six instances of *lest*, and five times the sentences that follow employ a modal auxiliary: three with *should* and two with *might*. Its *lest–should* rate of 70 wpm is very close to the biblical rate.

Continuing our investigation, we find that there is only one short passage in the entire King James Bible (including the Apocrypha) where the modal auxiliary verb *shall* occurs in sentences following *lest*:

> For I fear *lest* when I come, I *shall* not find you such as I would, and that I *shall* be found unto you such as ye would not, …

> And *lest* when I come again, my God *will* humble me among you, and that I *shall* bewail many which have sinned already,

> The phrase *when I come* may have triggered the *shall* usage. This passage also has a simple case of *lest there be* (not shown), as well as one instance of the auxiliary verb *will* (“my God will humble me”).

Yet the four pseudo-biblical writings do not have any examples of *lest–shall* syntax. As noted, Snowden’s *The American Revolution* and Hunt’s *The Late War* do have *lest–should* constructions — 14 and 3 instances, respectively — but the other two pseudo-biblical texts do not. So, *lest–should* syntax, which is both biblical and persistent usage, is fairly well represented in the pseudo-biblical set, while the *lest–shall* usage of 2 Corinthians 12:20–21 is not represented at all.

Specifically, Snowden’s text had five contexts in which he might have employed *lest–shall* syntax and Hunt’s text had one; all 11 of Leacock’s and Linning’s *lest* sentences could have employed *shall*. Because *lest–shall* syntax is missing in 17 possible cases, it is possible that the pseudo-biblical authors were unaware of the rare biblical usage (only three times after 240 instances of *lest*), and this was also possible for Joseph Smith.

Nonetheless, the Book of Mormon has 14 cases of the conjunction *lest* followed immediately by sentences with the modal auxiliary verb *shall*, as in the following example:

> But O my people, beware *lest* there *shall* arise contentions among you, and ye list to obey the evil spirit which was spoken of by my father Mosiah.
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Stanford Carmack

Present-tense ye list, conjoined to there shall arise, suggests the shall may primarily be a subjunctive mood marker. The Book of Mormon variation — “lest there shall arise . . . and ye [ø] list” — has been found in the textual record after lest and should.

These 14 cases represent an extraordinary amount of lest–shall usage. It is equivalent to a rate of approximately 55 wpm, which is slightly more than 17 times the rate of the King James Bible. An analyst such as Bowen would call this outsized use of lest–shall in the Book of Mormon a biblical hypercorrection. As noted, however, there is no supporting pseudo-biblical usage; in this domain Joseph Smith rather obviously exceeded the four pseudo-biblical texts in reproducing hardly noticeable, archaic biblical syntax. This same set of circumstances is encountered in the Book of Mormon in many different linguistic domains and raises the possibility that Book of Mormon authorship might have involved Early Modern English competence (implicit knowledge).

The argument for the Book of Mormon’s lest–shall usage not being a biblical hypercorrection, but rather representing Early Modern English competence, gains a measure of support from a passage in the olive tree allegory, which displays triple variation in auxiliary selection after lest:

Jacob 5:65

[A]nd ye shall not clear away the bad thereof all at once,

lest the roots thereof should be too strong for the graft,

and the graft thereof shall perish,

and I?[ø]?lose the trees of my vineyard.

Here we read three clauses after the conjunction lest: the first one has the auxiliary should, the second one shall, and the third one has no auxiliary (shown by [ø]). Initially, without any knowledge of past grammatical possibilities, we might assign the auxiliary mixture in Jacob 5:65 to Joseph making a mistake. Yet there are rare textual precedents found in the early modern period to consider, as in this example:

[Page 193]1662, Abraham Wright, A Practical Commentary on the Pentateuch [EEBO A67153]

Lest either Abraham should not do that for which he came, or shall want means of speedy thanksgiving for so gracious a disappointment;

Here and below the spelling of EEBO examples has been regularized. In this case, only a hyphen has been deleted from thanks-giving.

The auxiliary variation of this 1662 example and Jacob 5:65 provide us with a clear syntactic match. Neither the King James Bible nor pseudo-biblical texts contain this variation. It slightly strengthens the position against biblical hypercorrection and for Early Modern English competence. Without further support, however, this should be regarded as a coincidence. As it turns out, however, there are dozens of coincidences in the earliest text — of one kind or another — some of them edited out. These things taken together materially strengthen the position against biblical hypercorrection in this specific case and for the entire Book of Mormon text.

Personal that, which, and who(m)

The cataloguing of relative-pronoun usage after human antecedents in the Book of Mormon has much to tell us about the issue of authorship. That is because the majority of such usage is generated subconsciously. This contrasts with the mostly conscious use of content-rich phrases and words, some of which are obviously biblical.

Just as speakers and writers today rarely pay attention to whether they use that or who(m) to refer back to human antecedents (in phrases like “those who were there” or “the people that heard those things”), 400 years ago speakers and writers would have paid little attention to whether they employed that, which, or who(m) — the three options available in the early modern period — to refer back to human antecedents. They would have followed personal and dialectal preferences, almost always subconsciously.
Personal *that* was the most common option coming out of late Middle English and throughout most of the 1500s and 1600s, and it has persisted to this day, at close to a 10 percent usage rate. Over time, personal *which* (e.g. “Our Father *which* art in heaven”) became less and less common and personal *who* took over from personal *that* as the dominant form. Personal *which* is the option that has become very rare except in narrowly confined contexts.

Syntax and the antecedent affect relative pronoun selection. Also, the antecedent cannot always be determined. Yet enough clear data exists to lead to the conclusion that the Book of Mormon usage is different from modern *who–that* usage and from the usage patterns of the four pseudo biblical writings considered in this study. Book of Mormon usage is also significantly different from the dominant form of Early Modern English represented in the King James Bible. Book of Mormon usage is not derivable from any of these sources, but it is similar to less common Early Modern English usage.

Details for the Book of Mormon and the King James Bible are as follows:

- The Book of Mormon’s personal *which* usage rate probably exceeds 50%; one sampling involving four different types of high-frequency antecedents — *those/they/them, he/him, man/men, and people* — shows an interesting diversity in usage patterns and an overall personal *which* usage rate of 52%; personal *that* (30.5%) and *who(m) (17.5%)*, taken together, are used slightly less than half the time after these antecedents in the earliest text.
- The King James Bible employs personal *which* only 12.5% of the time after these same antecedents; personal *that* is dominant (83.5%), with *who(m) occurring only 4% of the time; only when the relative pronoun’s antecedent is *he/him* are these two scriptural texts correlated; otherwise their usage is uncorrelated or negatively correlated.

Personal *which* was extensively but incompletely edited out of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith for the 1837 second edition. It is more likely this was a case of Joseph’s attempting to grammatically change and partially modernize the text rather than attempting to achieve original authorship aims.

On the topic of personal *which*, Bowen recently wrote the following in his dissertation: “Smith modernized this feature aggressively in the 2nd edition and only a few instances of the older form remain.” However, in the process of performing thorough text-critical work, Skousen has noted that 952 of 1,032 instances were changed in 1837 and only several more later. Consequently, calling the remaining instances of personal *which* “a few” gives the wrong picture; there aren’t fewer than 10 remaining (the typical upper-bound meaning of “a few”) but actually almost 80. If we take “a few” to mean less than 10 percent, then it works. As we might expect, in changing so many instances of *which* to *who*, Joseph occasionally over-edited *which* to *who*, making mistakes.

Three of the pseudo-biblical writings have examples of personal *which* but are dominant in *who or that*: Leacock’s text (six instances of personal *which*), Linning’s text (two instances: “multitudes/captives which”), and Hunt’s text (one instance: “false prophets which come”). No examples of personal *which* in Snowden’s text were found in a recent search. All pseudo-biblical writings but the earliest one, Leacock’s, are strictly modern in their profile. Thus, three pseudo-biblical authors didn’t break from the preferences they learned as native speakers and writers of late modern English.

Recent counts yielded the following details (here I exclude prepositional contexts):

- Leacock’s text has 45 instances of personal *that* (58%), 6 instances of personal *which* (8%), and 26 instances of *who(m) (34%)*. The relative order of use of these relative pronouns (in descending frequency) — *that, who(m), which* — makes this text a biblical–modern hybrid.
- Snowden’s text has about 20 instances of personal *that* (10%), no instances of personal *which* (0%), and about 180 instances of *who(m) (90%)*; this text exhibits a strong preference for *who(m) over that*.
- Linning’s text has 8 instances of personal *that* (20%), 2 instances of personal *which* (5%), and 31 instances of *who(m) (75%)*; this text exhibits a strong preference for *who(m) over that*.
- Hunt’s text has 44 instances of personal *that* (47%), 1 instance of personal *which* (1%), and 49
instances of *who(m)* (52%); this text exhibits a slight preference for *who(m)* over *that*.

As a side note, Joseph Smith’s 1832 History is strictly modern in its profile since it contains 10 instances of the relative pronoun *who(m)*, two instances of personal *that*, but none of personal *which*. This agrees generally with the contemporary textual record and independent linguistic research. Moreover, Bowen’s 2016 dissertation provides supporting evidence from Joseph Smith’s letters (see pages 167 and 171). This means, of course, that Book of Mormon usage is different from Joseph’s own linguistic preferences.

It is relevant and important to note that the short 1832 History has quite a few archaizing, biblical features in it. Thus, if a desire for archaism on the part of Joseph Smith had been the driver of the heavy usage of personal *which* in the earliest text of the Book of Mormon, we would expect some personal *which* to have been employed in the History. The lack of it there weakens the position that heavy doses of personal *which* in the Book of Mormon emanated from Joseph’s attempts to be archaic and biblical.

To recap, here is the breakdown of usage in the texts considered in this study:

Table 1. Percentage usage of relative pronouns with personal referents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th><em>that</em></th>
<th><em>which</em></th>
<th><em>who(m)</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King James Bible (est.)</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Mormon (est.)</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Page 197]American Chronicles</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American Revolution (est.)</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Napoleon</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>75.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Late War</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>