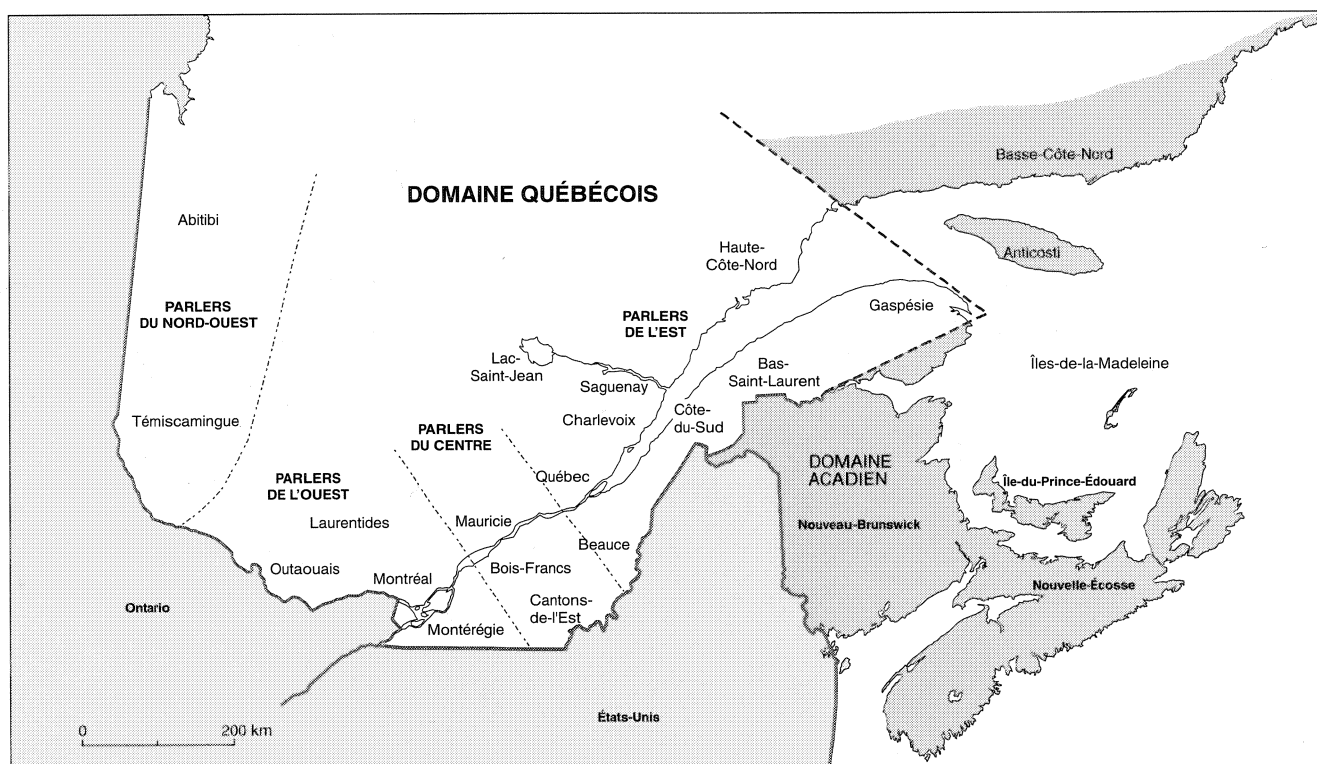


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## ÉTUDES DE GÉOLINGUISTIQUE QUÉBÉCOISE



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- MÉMOIRES ET TRAVAUX DE PREMIER ET DEUXIÈME CYCLES

# GOD'S ENGLISH

## A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF *THE BOOK OF MORMON*

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Robert DOLE  
Université du Québec à Chicoutimi

*The Book of Mormon* is the only text in the English language that claims to have been written or translated by God or by divine inspiration. Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, affirms that it was “translated into modern speech by the gift and power of God as attested by Divine affirmation”. The purpose of the present article is not to question the divine origin of the English version of *The Book of Mormon*, but rather to make a serious linguistic analysis of the form of English in which it is written. In order to forego any theological controversy, it will be granted that Joseph Smith was correct in saying that the translation was indeed an act of God. We shall therefore agree to identify the real translator as being God.

It might be wise first to recall to the reader how *The Book of Mormon* was bestowed on humanity. On September 21, 1823, the Angel Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith in the village of Manchester, Ontario County, New York, and told him of the whereabouts of golden tablets containing the history of the original inhabitants of the Americas, who were the lost tribes of Israel. The angel also gave Smith a breastplate with the Urim and Thummim, which is mentioned in the Old Testament. Smith used the Urim and Thummim as a translation machine. He placed it on the gold tablets and it rendered an English translation of the original texts, which Smith copied down and published as *The Book of Mormon*.

It is our desire to analyze the English language as it emerged from the Urim and Thummim. To our knowledge, this is the first time that such an attempt has been made. The most striking feature of this language is that it is obviously modeled on the English idiom of the King James Version of the Bible, hereafter referred to as the KJV. Why God should choose to write a text in the language of seventeenth century England while at work in nineteenth century America can only remain a divine mystery. The result of this choice, however, is certainly the perfect example of an idiolect.

Certain passages of *The Book of Mormon* seem to have been copied whole from the KJV. In 2Nephi 12:4, we find these words, which are exactly those of Isaiah 2:4: “And he shall judge

among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more". In Moroni 7:45, we discover words that echo Paul's speech on charity in 1 Corinthians 13: "And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things".

There are several extremely archaic and rare expressions in *The Book of Mormon* that come directly from the KJV. The expression "warred a good warfare" (Alma 1:1) occurs only once in the KJV, in 1 Timothy 1:18. Likewise, the extraordinary locution "the author and finisher of their faith" in Moroni 6:4 is a direct borrowing from Hebrews 12:2. It also occurs only once in the Bible.

If the author or translator of *The Book of Mormon* were anyone other than God, he would be accused of plagiarism. In Mormon theology, however, the duplication of speeches from the Old and New Testaments can serve only to prove the divine inspiration of *The Book of Mormon*. What God inspired Isaiah and Paul to say, He can also inspire his Mormon prophets to say.

The morphology and syntax of *The Book of Mormon* are quite obviously based on those of the KJV. The second person pronouns are *thou* and *thee* for the singular and *ye* and *you* for the plural. *Thou* and *ye* are used for the nominative, and *thee* and *you* are used for the accusative. The second person present indicative verb ending is *-est*, and the third person is *-eth*. Archaic verb forms like *durst* and *spake* are consistently used, as are the archaic *mine* and *thine* possessive pronouns before nouns beginning with a vowel.

What is absolutely fascinating in this idiolect, however, is when God forgets His seventeenth century British English and inadvertently slips into nineteenth century American English. He says in Helaman 5:6: "And this I have done that when *you* remember your names ye may remember them". He obviously meant to say *ye*. This error occurs a number of times. God sometimes forgets that the speaker is speaking to only one person and inadvertently uses the plural pronoun *ye/you* when the singular pronoun *thou/thee* is required. An example is Moroni 9:1: "My beloved son, I write unto you that ye may know that I am yet alive". In this same chapter, God forgets to say *hath* and puts in the modern American *has* (Moroni 9:16): "And that part of the provisions which... the army of Zeneph has carried away". God makes a similar error when he says *confesses* for *confesseth* in Moroni 7:44: "If a man be meek and lowly in heart, and confesses by the power of the Holy Ghost".

God makes a number of other errors that can confound or amuse the linguist. The verb *utter* is used as an intransitive verb in 1 Nephi 2:14: "They durst not utter against him"; and *bring* is used intransitively in Alma 55:8: "We have taken of their wine and brought with us" In normal English, these verbs are only used transitively. They are examples of hapax legomena. The word *much* is used before a plural noun, as in 1 Nephi 18:17: "They did breathe out much threatenings". The singular verb ending *-eth* is used for a plural subject in Moroni 7:12: "All things which are good cometh of God". Double negatives occur often, as in Mosiah 19:29: "The Lamanites did not

molest them nor seek to destroy them”. The word *whomsoever* is used in Alma 46:35 when standard English grammar requires the word *whosoever*: “And it came to pass that whomsoever of the Amalickiahites that would not enter into a covenant”. The needless repetition of *that* in the sentence is a peculiarity that occurs often in *The Book of Mormon*.

*The Book of Mormon* contains numerous examples of exalted gibberish. These are sentences whose grammar is so convoluted that there can be no apparent meaning. Here are some examples: “Yea, even to their women, and all those of their children, as many as were able to use a weapon of war, when Moroni had armed all those prisoners” (Alma 55:17); “Therefore they did speak unto the great astonishment of the Lamanites, to the convincing them” (Helaman 5:19); “Behold, baptism is unto repentance to the fulfilling the commandments unto the remission of sins” (Moroni 8:11).

*The Book of Mormon* has a style that becomes heavier as God attempts to create a language more sanctimonious and archaic than even that of the KJV. There are countless repetitions of “And it came to pass”, “yea”, “unto”, “did” plus infinitive for the past tense (*cf.* “and they did fellowship” in Helaman 6:3, in which the noun *fellowship* is used erroneously as a verb). The goal of sounding arcane at all costs can result in idiosyncratic word order, as in “It did harm them not” (Helaman 6:44) instead of the normal “It did not harm them”.

Although the syntax seems British, the spelling is American: *honor*, not *honour*. The one exception is the British spelling *defence* instead of the normal American *defense*. No reason is given for this peculiarity. God has invented the orthography *wo* for the word that most mortals spell *woe*.

*The Book of Mormon* is a linguistic gem that demonstrates how profoundly the King James Version of the Bible has inspired the American folk imagination. Its numerous grammatical errors and stylistic idiosyncrasies make one wish that Jonathan Swift had succeeded in creating an academy for the English language, which would have been horrified by God’s, or Joseph Smith’s, or the Urim and Thummim’s massacre of the superbly beautiful language of the King James Version. Perhaps Joan of Arc was telling the truth when she said that God speaks only French.