Candidate Number: 1081263

A13355S1 The History of the English Language to c.1800

Section A

5. The unity and identity of a language is closely bound up in the concept of nationhood and political boundaries, but neither language nor boundaries are fixed stable entities' (LINDA PILLIÈRE and ÖZLEM BERK ALBACHTEN) – *Discuss ANY ONE OR MORE of the language issues raised by this statement.*

2440 Words

Section B

12.'The simple division of genres into oral and literate potentially oversimplifies register differences' (TERTTU NEVALAINEN). – *Examine the relevance of genre to the language of ANY TWO passages of your choice. Your answer need not be limited to differences of register.*

2489 Words

Section A

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> "Savages [...] value themſelves upon their nearer Approach to Brutality ; pretending, that it is the Vices only of Mankind that put them upon Labour and Invention, and that they may live very happily with a very ſmall Share of either"[1] – Robert Dodsley, *The Preceptor* (1748)

Any substantial research into 18th century texts will eventually throw up a text as dull, inaccurate and bigoted as Dodsley's *Preceptor*. The above sentiment is nothing unique from the self-aggrandising *encyclopediae* of countless other Grub Street hacks; Dodsley's would be similarly uninteresting, if not for his better-known clientele. In 1746, Samuel Johnson entered Dodsley's bookshop and left with a commission for a complete English Dictionary[2]. Two years later, Johnson's preface to *The Preceptor* was published, affirming the need for "one nation" to "preſerve superiority over another"[3]. The suspicion that the two men shared a defensive nationalistic attitude which generated appetite for the dictionary is confirmed in Johnson's preface to his first edition:

> "Commerce [...] as it depraves the manners, corrupts the language; they that have frequent intercourse with strangers, [...] learn a mingled dialect, like the jargon which serves the traffickers on the Mediterranean and Indian coasts. This will [...] be at last incorporated with the current speech."[4]

Johnson later defines "jargon" as "unintelligible talk"[5], but the linguae francae* referenced in the preface exist only to be understood; the underlying opposition is in fact a moral one. Johnson equates the breakdown of "language" to the breakdown of "manners", and lawless trade languages to the lawless trade states which used them. When Johnson concedes that English must, in fact, change, he does so in opposition to the simplified, static "barbarity" of "Mahometan" languages (Johnson, 1755†). The contradictory laments for progress and stasis are unified by two common enemies: simplicity, and barbarity. Looking back to Johnson's contribution

* Henceforth "LF". The "Mediterranean" LF is likely Sabir, but "Indian" may refer to any of several English, Portuguese and Dutch pidgins in the East and West Indies, and/or to Sabir again.

†Quotations from the preface are cited in-text without page numbers, since they are unhelpfully missing from the first edition of Johnson's dictionary. Luckily, however, the preface is short, and the quotations should be easily retrievable since most are taken from a single paragraph in the final quarter.

to The Preceptor, it is safe to assume that the latter remains a byword for racist and xenophobic prejudice; my intention in this essay is to argue that the same is true of *simplicity*, and that the rapid codification of *complexities* in Standard English during the eighteenth century was partially a defensive response to interaction with non-European substrata* (primarily via the trans-atlantic slave trade and the EIC†). The first section of the essay will address how and why superstrata can become standardised in response to creolisation, even when it occurs outside of their vernacular *sprachräume*, and the second will address developments in Standard English which may have been catalysed by creole-formation, in reference to superstrate, substrate, and universalist hypotheses.

Johnson's example is an appropriate one for the description of *defensive codification* more generally. The general public desire described in Johnson's dictionary to "fix [our] language" and "secure it against corruption and decay" (Johnson, 1755) survives into modern authorities on standardisation almost entirely unchanged; Einar Haugen's widely used model of *Language Planning*, for instance, is prefaced by W.D.Witney's description of a language being "fixed" against the "danger [...] of its undergoing corruption"[8]. Johnson's concern is ostensibly that such corruptions outside of the *sprachraum* will eventually make their way into "current"– presumably vernacular – "speech" (Johnson, 1755), but the preface seems concerned with corruption even when it *isn't* widely propagated. It is difficult to explain Johnson's model of creolisation – "lucrative" temptation, which "depraves" and "corrupts", and which overcomes "resistance", becoming "mingled" and "incorporated" through "intercourse" as "forcible" as "intumescence of the tide" (Johnson, 1755) – without reading an underlying fear of sexual violence‡. In Johnson's eyes, the virginal language is compromised by the single depraved act of pidgin speech, and codification is the duty of the virtuous (White British English men) to restore integrity to their deflowered mother tongue. The fact that Johnson essentially abandons this preservative/restorative duty in no way negates its initial significance; his acquiescence to change comes only as a retrospective confession of inadequacy: "with [the intention to fix English] I will confess that I flattered myself for a while." (Johnson, 1755) – It is plausible that without a duty to defend English against foreign perversion, Johnson would never have set pen to paper. The preface is so useful as an example because it illustrates how creolisation can appear to threaten superstrata before it encroaches on their *sprachräume*: national languages are projections of the body politic, and any corruption of English is an attack on the English populace.

* For the avoidance of confusion, "-stratum/-strata" is used for noun forms, and "-strate" for adjective forms

†The proportion of the House of Commons with measurable interest in these two enterprises rose by over 600% in the 18th century (7 members elected in the 1715 General Election[6], 53 elected 1790[7]).

‡Though the sexual definitions of "intumescence" and "intercourse" are unattested before the 19th century [9,10,] sexual uses of "mingled" and "incorporated" are both attested before 1700 [11, 12]

This equivalence was an Enlightenment commonplace; Thomas Sprat's adage – "the purity of Speech, and greatness of Empire have in all Countries, still met together"[13] – was already accepted wisdom by the mid-18th century. Popular philosophies of language, such as Rousseau's "Essay on the Origin of Languages"[14], were less concerned with investigating the link between language and national character than investigating how many xenophobic stereotypes the link could confirm*. Creolisation, against this philosophical background, is injurious to the English *character*, and corruption of language analogous to corruption of race†. There is analogy, then, between simplified English and Defoe's image of the primitivised Englishman: "naked", "discoloured" and "wretched"[18] after extended time in the colonies. Just as racialist "academics" fabricated clear divisions between racial "species"[19], to defend themselves from identity with and inclination towards primitivism‡, lexicographers drew strict divisions between "true" forms and dark "spots of barbarity" (Johnson, 1755). There is nothing imaginative about this analogy either: it is only out of the racial category of "creole" that the linguistic term emerged[20]. It is these racialist anxieties over miscegenation – thinly-veiled behind the "purity" discourse of Johnson or Dodsley – which constitute the "danger" (Witney, 1879) necessary for standardisation. This explains the huge prevalence of racial difference between creole superstrata and substrata: creoles are formed when racialist anxieties suppress the integration of non-European substrata, instead reinforcing a standard superstrate form and maintaining a separate creole basilect — this is the mechanism of *defensive codification*.

Having established the causal link between creolisation and codification, it becomes possible to evaluate the three primary hypotheses of creole-formation (substrate, superstrate and universalist) not by their consistency with creole features, but by their consistency with features codified in the superstrate. Beginning with the superstrate hypothesis – which Mufwene's extensive work on creole-formation brands the least "fundamental"[21]– *defensive codification* becomes simply one step removed from *acrolect prescription*. If creoles owe their distinctive features to vernacular basilects, the labels of *barbarity* and *corruption* are simply expanded to include basilect speakers of the superstrate. This is entirely believable, since analogy between non-european *natives* and lower-prestige English speakers allows for a circular justification of racist and classist subjugation:

*Though published posthumously in 1781, the essay presents a methodology common even before its composition in 1754.
† Race, only in the general sense of a people. The application of modern ethnographic categories to historic issues of race is an issue too complex to be sufficiently addressed here.
‡ It is counter-intuitive to consider primitivism a common inclination, but not unreasonable. Dryden's sympathies are more with the "noble savage" than the "base" European "law"15, while pope writes of the "poor Indian" imagining a "safer world" and "happier island" where "no fiends torment" 16 him. Even Rousseau himself imagines "l'homme civilisé" denuded of weapons and overcome by "l'homme sauvage"17; the edenic life of the non-european native is essentially an appealing one.

non-europeans use basilectal English, and are therefore of a lower class; working-class English is learned by non-Europeans, and must therefore be inferior*. Under the superstrate hypothesis, all the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century codifications of RP phonology in opposition to basilectal varieties would have been fortified in response to creolisation. In fact, one of the first texts to codify a "received pronunciation"[22] does so out of an anxiety that "defects" in phonology "reduce[s English] to a level with the equivocal gibberiſh of gypſies"† (Walker, p.1). The comparison of aberrant vernacular English to (presumably) Para-Romani mixed languages confirms an anxiety surrounding interracial creolisation that underlies the codification of English phonology in the 18th century.

Deferring again to Mufwene's authority, it seems unnecessary (or even impossible) to separate discussion of substrate and universalist hypotheses (Mufwene, 129). Any discussions of particular substrate influence depend on a generous estimation of colonisers' ability to distinguish linguistic features of (say,) Akan, or Hindustani, and to reject them independently. Outside of obvious rejections of substrate lexis – the maintenance of English "eat" over Senegambian-derived creole equivalent "nyam"[23], or the rejection of Igbo-derived dual pronoun "unu" despite the absence of an English alternative (Avram, p.37) – few forms of *defensive codification* can be explained without some level of universalisation. The reason for this is transparent: features of non-European substrata could only have been encountered and understood by English-speaking colonisers when they had formed a grammatically intelligible creole, and a creole could not have been intelligible to English speakers unless it featured either English morphosyntactical structures, or Universal ones.‡ Since (with the aforementioned exception of vernacular basilects), English speakers were unlikely to oppose English structures, *defensive codification* of grammar is generally an opposition to these *universals* of substrata and creoles.

Bickford's influential description of creole *universals* makes extensive reference to the improvised pidgin of young children[24]; if we accept Bickford's theory of linguistic bio-programming, it follows that the *defensive codification* of English against these *universals* would reinforce whichever aspects of English were most difficult for children to learn. This would in turn explain the eagerness of the Grammar Schools in the 18th century to

*This standard structure for what might be called *intersectional bigotry* has since changed very little.
† It is unlikely that the exonym "gypſ[y]" was applied with much ethnological discretion – but whatever their real heritage, "gypſies" were considered non-white diasporai, and their creoles a similarly racialised threat.
‡It could be argued that English lexemes arranged without recognisable morphosyntax could be intelligible through pragmatic context, but restructurings such as "Black mat the the sat on cat" for "the black cats sat on the mat" are not recorded in any English creole.

introduce English grammar to their curricula[25] – many of the censures found in Ash's 1783 textbook[26] (bemoaning phonemic orthography, preposition stranding, double comparatives and uninflected plurals) have survived into the present-day classroom purely because their instructions oppose, or exceed, bio-programmed "faculties" (Bickerton, p.39). It is these anti-universal features of morphosyntax, rather than influences of particular substrata on English lexis and phonology, which define *defensive codification* in the eighteenth century*.

The final unifying factor between the various forms of *defensive codification* in eighteenth-century English is, unsurprisingly, Classical Latin. Few histories of English avoid some claim that codification of *correct* language was highly influenced by a reverence for Latin as a kind of flawless *hyperstratum*.† An ironic example of this reverence is John Ash's "lessons" (Ash, p.152) which quotes Locke's tirade against the prevalence of Latin in English schools[28], immediately beside Robert Lowth's defence of his thoroughly Latinate *Introduction to English Grammar*[29] – Locke's hope of liberating English scholarship from Latin had clearly failed to liberate grammarians such as Ash from the need for a high-prestige ideal on which to model the *defensive codification* of English. The neo-classical ideal of Greco-roman society as a model for a *civilised* and *civilising* Britain is aptly summarised in Dodsley's *Preceptor*:

> "Things were preciſely in this Situation‡ when the Romans invaded Britain; [...]With Learning and Politenefs the Romans introduced foreign Commerce, [...] When the Romans unwillingly left Britain, and the Britons as unwillingly made way for the Saxons, a new Deluge of Barbarity overflowed this Iſland; almoſt all the Improvements of our civilized Conquerors were defaced" (Dodsley, pp.411-412)

Dodsley's vignette shows a reverence for Latin even in opposition to English (or rather *Anglish*.) The analogy of "civilized" Romans with British Colonisers, and Britons and Saxons with the "barbarity" of colonised natives explains the preservation of a prestige divide between Romance and Germanic etymologies long after the decline of Norman French as a prestige language.

*One possible exception is Johnson's choice to record syllabic stresses in his dictionary despite giving no other phonological indications, which may be a particular opposition to the stress-accent inconsistency of English pidgins and trade languages, which was primarily influenced by tonal Atlantic-Congo and Sino-tibetan substrata, but possibly also by the syllable-timed systems of French, Persian and Hindustani. Though historical accenting in the latter two languages is ambiguous, both lack the qualitative stress-accent of Johnson's Modern English.

† See John Huise's *Suruey* (1624) for early evidence[27] – in modern histories, the overwhelming consensus is that 17th and 18th century grammarians schooled in Latin had no choice but to model (and format) English grammars after Latin ones.

‡That of the British Empire in the Indies

It is not only the publication of *Grammars* in the latin model and the proliferation of neo-classical *inkhorn terms*, but also the codification of derivational orthography which can therefore be understood in racialised terms. Johnson's argument that "true Orthography" depends on "derivation" (Johnson, 1755), has so far been considered a convincing and complete explanation, but it must have been strengthened by, if not motivated by a distaste for phonemic orthography. Morphophonemic (derivational) orthography is no more "true" than absolute phonemic orthography, it is simply less *universal*, and thus a better representation of British ascendancy over native human "barbarity". Johnson's Roman orthography, like Dodsley's Roman London, represents the "venerable [...] Antiquity" (Dodsley, p.412) – the more ancient and unintuitive a spelling, the better it serves as a shiboleth to distinguish the developed British character from primitive human intuition. Given that the most significant features codified by Johnson and his contemporaries are similarly opposed to *universals* of creole and early language formation, all of these features must represent some level of *defensive codification*. It follows, then, that English could not have taken on its present-day form, without the racialised fear of creolisation by a "barbaric", non-European other.

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Section B

12. 'The simple division of genres into oral and literate potentially oversimplifies register differences' (TERTTU NEVALAINEN). – *Examine the relevance of genre to the language of ANY TWO passages of your choice. Your answer need not be limited to differences of register.*

> I don't think– like– literate– like different– like there's umm– problems with— makin distinctions between whatever different— things–

The above introduction would be, for a critical commentary of any standard, entirely inappropriate. Em- and en-dashes transcribing hesitations, the formulaic filler "umm", and the transcription of *g-dropping**, alongside persistent anacolutha and disfluencies of expression are clear markers of transcribed ordinary speech. But the insufficiency of the above introduction is not simply the insufficiency of an "oral" text for a "literate" context. If the essay had instead begun:

> "Earlier this year, as we commemorated the 80th Anniversary of D-Day, The Queen and I had the enormous privilege of meeting, once again, the remarkable veterans of that very special generation who gave of themselves so courageously, on behalf of us all."[1]

No such issues of *appropriateness* would have arisen. This well-meaning introduction is quoted from The King's Christmas Speech, and despite being a blatantly "oral" text, it contains fully standard spelling and fluent expression of a complex[+] sentence. When examining differences between "oral" and "literate" texts, it is important to account for the breadth of idiolect, sociolect and register which might complicate the distinction. The pragmatic difference between the above introductions seems obvious, but distinctions of register become more complicated as we attempt to draw them between older, more isolated texts. As, moving from Modern English texts to the limited corpus of Early Middle and Old English, textual and contextual evidence becomes more scarce, critics begin to preference diachronic distinctions in register over formal and generic ones. Cartlidge's edition of *The Owl and The Nightingale*[(b)], for instance, overruled previous critical "consensus"[2] on the poem's date of composition by exploiting this tendency to resolve "precocious" (Cartlidge, p.XV) texts into

* A misleading standard term for dialectal alveolarisation of /ŋ/ to /n/

\+ Complex in the syntactical sense, ie. containing multiple subordinate clauses

a linear history. The idea that a tract of so-called Middle English* might have been written within a half-century of, for instance, *The Grave*[(a)] (untitled in MS.Bodl.343), is hugely problematic within the *One English Poetry*[†] model of literary history, when no allowance is made for intraperiodic differences in register. It is therefore vitally important to compare texts such as these, and to exhaust possible differences of form, genre, function and style, before citing discrepancies as evidence of linguistic development. Although the original text of both (a) and (b) has been dated to the turn of the thirteenth century. [3,4], there are several caveats to treating the two as contemporaries. Firstly, the poem in MS jest29t is almost certainly copied, and likely not first-hand (Stanley, p.xix), while *The Grave* is ostensibly closer to an *original*, excluding the appended lines 14-15 ("For sone"... "Stracien"), which are of more obscure provenance (Dudley, p.440). Nonetheless, the general linguistic consistency between the editions of the Owl and the Nightingale in MS jes29t and MS Cotton Caligula A IX, suggest that the text of (b) is generally faithful to its origins c.1210, and therefore that there is insufficient historical distance between the forms of language in (a) and (b) for one form to be considered a linear descendant of the other. It seems most productive, then, to treat the texts as contemporary, and thereby consider the full scope of potential differences in form, genre and register.

A helpful fact when historically reframing these texts is that differing registers can differ in their fidelity to vernacular speech. Just as <makin> and <making> signify different registers in Modern English by varying their fidelity to phonological shifts, "i seonne" (a.13) and "isene" (b.34) need not represent a phonetic difference between the poets' ordinary speech. While the smoothing of <ea> and <eo> diphthongs[‡] is often treated as a phonological shift distinguishing MidE from WS, there exist in many cases monophthongal forms contemporary with, or predating the diphthongal forms. For instance, WS {earm} is cognate with Old Saxon {arm} and Old Norse {armr}, while some formations from {seon} (the uninflected infinitive form of "i seonne" in (a)), use the grapheme <e> in place of <eo>. The standard spellings of <bisene>, blind, and <gesene>, evident, throughout WS texts suggest that at least certain conjugations of <seon> were pronounced with a medial monophthong before AD 1000. More broadly, if orthographic differences between (a) and (b) need not represent phonological shifts, they may instead be interpreted as differences in register. In this case, the comic,

* Henceforth "MidE" This essay uses "ModE" for Modern English and "WS" for West Saxon, referring to the literary language of Wessex during and after Alfred's reign. Discussed rather than "OE" since there is patchier reconstructive evidence for non-WS dialects.
[†]For "One China", read: "One China that matters"; any attempts at a unification of poetry are predictably more interested in subduing outliers than incorporating them.
[‡]No phonetic notation here since pronunciation of OE vowels is a critical issue more often addressed than substantiated. Pyles and Algeo propose [æːə] and [ɛːə] for OE <ea> and <eo> respectively[5], but no evidence or reference is provided (as is standard for the volume).

spoken debate in (b) might favour spellings more faithful to vernacular phonology than the identityless gnomic-elegaic voice of (a)*. We can similarly understand “healice” (a.4) and “iliche”(b.28) as contemporary forms without negating traditional chronology: use of the digraph <ch> to replace <c> in {-ic} and {-ice} endings *is* motivated by disambiguation of Old English /tʃ/ from Norse /k/ and french /s/, but this does not justify the assumption that any text using the <ic> or <ice> spellings is simply removed from Norse and French influence.

In fact, (a) shows many features of Norse and French-influenced English. While (a) uses the inflected article “þa” for feminine nouns “molde” (a.4), “cæȝe” (a.9), and “dure” (a.13), it also uses the uninflected late form “þe”/ “ðe” for both singular and plural masculine nouns: “rof” (a.6) and “helepaȝes” (a.5), clearly showing some of the inflectional simplification influenced by mutual stem intelligibility with Norse. “Þe” is also inflected in the genitive/posessive: “Þin” (a.4, a.14), and the dative: “Þire” (a.6), but neither of these cases is strong evidence that (a) is any closer to the strict inflectional system of WS than (b), which uses “þe” throughout (b.2, b.3, b.12, b.18). The genitive “Þin” is preserved into Early Modern English while the dative “Þire” is an unrecognised, likely erroneous form of {þe}; neither is evidence that WS inflections were ordinarily used and understood during the twelfth century. The use of “Þire” is likely influenced by false analogy to {heo}, which is inflected to {hire} in the dative. This confusion is possible since the standard dative form, {þe}, used correctly in (a.1), is identical to the accusative {þe}, adopted after the older accusative {þec} fell out of use in WS.

A simplified {-es} plural form is also used throughout (a) – likely influenced by schwah-reduction within unstressed {-as} endings in WS *a-stem* noun plurals, and by Norman French plural {-es }). The plural forms in (a) are much more like those in (b) than traditional WS plurals: <paȝes> is used in place of WS <paȝas>[†] (a.6), <purmes> over <pyrmas> (a.10), <faxes> over genitive <feaxa>[‡] (a.14), and <fingres> over dative <fingrum> (a.15). Text (b) similarly uses the {-es} plural for dative “nyhtes” (b.1) and accusative “wyhtes” (b.8). Surprisingly, the only example of a non-{-es} plural is from text (b), which uses “muse” (b.1, b.20) in place of the

*(b)’s orthography does also seem inconsistent in (b.3-4), rhyming “netle” with “seotle”(b.3-4), but this may still be faithful to phonology, if <o> functions diacritically, distinguishing between rhymable but distinct monophthongs, likely /ɛ/ and /e/.

[†]This is the standard plural of WS {paȝ}, meaning wall. The best known translation of the poem Wadsworth-Longfellow’s translation, interprets both cases of {paȝ} as a variant of {peȝ}5, presumably influenced by the popularity of {-peȝas} within WS kennings, but the grave is more likely enclosed by walls than ways. Nonetheless, both plurals are traditionally formed with {-as}

[‡]Both instances in (a.14) are likely genitive, firstly in the construction meaning bereft of hair, then in the construction meaning the fairness of the hair.

standard ablaut form <mys>. However, this may simply be a variant spelling of the singular form – "mus" is used somewhat interchangeably in (b.17) – as a confused default response to the rare plural form. Generally, the inflections in the two texts point to a similar level of grammatical simplification, suggesting that there is no huge disparity of sociolinguistic *period* between the two texts.

The question remains then, as to why critics have placed these texts within different periods. Both texts contain thoroughly Germanic lexes, which appear so different only because (b) is far more readable to a modern English speaker. This is partially a result of orthographic changes – the obsolescence of the scribal abbreviation <□> (a.8-12), the carolingian <g> (b.3-33) in place of the insular <ȝ> (a.1-11)‡, and the blackletter <w> (b.1-34) in place of the runic <p> (a.1-12) – but more significantly of structural changes. Although <b> may seem simply more recognisable in terms of lexis, this explanation doesn't entirely hold up to quantitative analysis. Take, for example, first ten distinct concrete nouns in (a):

> "Bold" (a.1), "molde" (a.1), "moder$_2$", (a.2), "hus"$_2$ (a.4), "helepaȝes" (a.5), "paȝes" (a.6), "rof$_1$" (a.6), "broste$_3$"(a.6), "den$_0$" (a.7), "honde$_2$" (a.8)

And in (b):

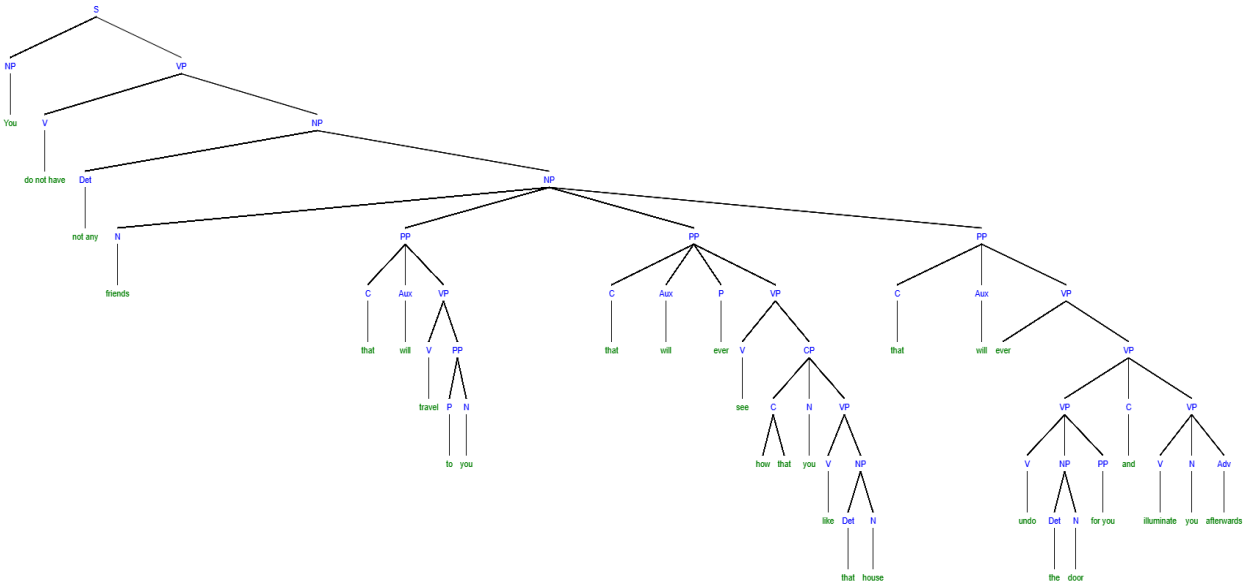
> "Nyhtes$_3$" (b.1), "muse$_2$" (b.1), "ruhuse" (b.2), "wede$_2$" (b.3), "netle$_1$" (b.3), seotle (b.4), "byhinde$_2$" (b.6), "mete$_2$" (b.7), "wyhtes" (b.8), " attercoppe" (b.10)

In both cases, six nouns have recognisable modern equivalents, and although the verbs are slightly more readable in (b) – eight of the first ten have modern equivalents compared to only six in (a) – the difference is still minor. It is not even the case that the nouns in (a) are considerably further in orthography from their modern equivalents than those in b; the mean Levenshtein distance (subscripted) of the above nouns from their modern equivalents is 1.67 in (a) and 2 in (b). The readability of (b) is in fact mostly stylistic and structural. Although equally recognisable, the ten nouns in (a) are spread over 100 words, compared to only 57 words in (b). The

‡ The additional hand from (a.14-15) uses <g>

*The poem in MS. Jes29 is written in Gothic blackletter, not carolingian miniscule; the term carolingian is used here to refer generally to the continental, as opposed to insular, <g> grapheme.

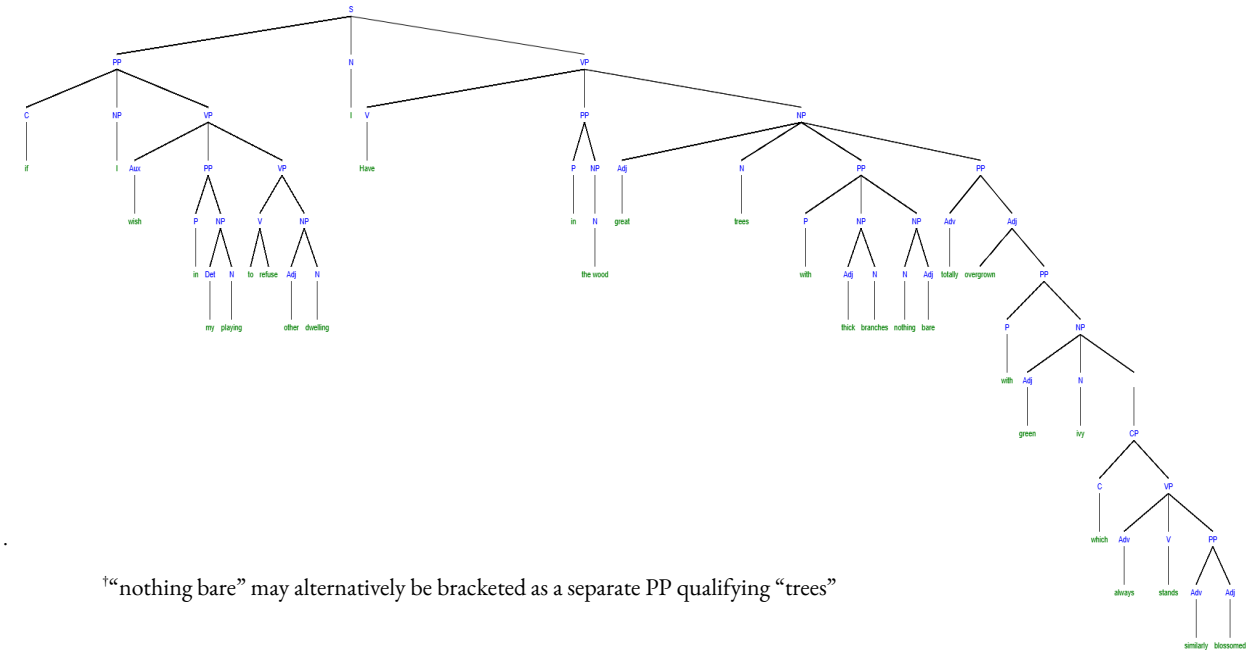
concrete-dense, co-ordinating structure of (b) is immediately accessible when parsing, while the semantically indirect text of (a) relies on endophora, deixis and subordination. Illustrated below is a parse tree for (a.11-13), “Nefst [...] lihten”:



This nested subordination is further complicated by variable word order. Below is the quotation, with each word numbered in standard ModE SVO order.

Nefst ðu nenne freond, þe þe pylle faren to. Ðæt efre pule lokien. hu þe □ hus þe likie. Ðæt æfre un don ðe pule ða dure. 7 þe æfter lihten.
2 1 3 4 5 9 6 7 8 10 12 11 13 14 17 18 15 16 19 21 22 25 20 23 24 26 28 29 27

For comparison, here are the similar figures for the longest subordinating phrase in text (b), (b.23-28)[†]:



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[†]“nothing bare” may alternatively be bracketed as a separate PP qualifying “trees”

if me lust on my skenting to wernen oþe wunying. Ich habbe at wode treon. Grete. mid þikke bowe. noþing blete. Mid ivi grene al

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 16 15 17 18 19 20 21 24 26 25 22

bigrowe. Þat eu stont iliche iblowe.

23 27 28 29 30 31

Evidently the word order in (b) is far closer to Modern English standard, departing only in the case of two adjective-noun inversions ("ivi grene", and the end-rhyme-motivated "treon grete"). The SVO inversion "if me lust" is unproblematic, since "lust" is impersonal, and the accusative "me" essentially functions as a subject. In the example from (a), however, every verb phrase contains either subject-verb inversion: "Nefst ðu", or verb-object inversion: "þe pylle faren to", "□ hus þe likie", "un don ðe pule ða dure"*, "þe æfter lihten", with the single exception of the phrase: "pule lokien". This apparent archaism or difficulty in (a), however, is not so much distant from ModE as from *casual* ModE. The sentence from (b) contains only four verbs†, one of which ("lust") is auxiliary to another ("to wernen"), whereas the shorter sentence from (a) contains nine, only three of which are auxiliaries.

Compound sentences with multiple verb phrases *are* a historic feature of WS, but they can equally be a feature of register – for a modern example, UNSC resolution 2781 contains over a hundred verbs in a single sentence[6], while many chat-messages contain none. Since the texts can be considered neither historically nor regionally distinct‡, there is little reason to consider their syntactical differences anything other than a difference in style and register. Given that (b) displays progressive spellings ("moder", a.2, "rof", a.6, "purmes", a.7, "likie", a.12 etc.) and simplified inflections, it is possible that its conservative features of syntax and structure are conscious stylistic choices, aligned with the comfortably WS remainder of MS. Bodl.343. But these archaic features in *The Grave* do not preclude the possibility that its author spoke a language similar to that of *The Owl and The Nightingale*. In fact, it is impossible for the contrived and complex syntax of (a) to represent a form of language ordinarily spoken in any period – it is necessarily an artefact of literary style. The informal vernacular English in (b) is so readable in comparison that critics have been compelled to place the texts within different periods of English, but this is entirely unhelpful. If (b) is distinguished from (a) by fidelity to oral transcription, forcing (a)

* The main verb here follows SVO order, "freond" … "un don" … "ða dure", but the order of the auxiliary and main verb is inverted: "un don ðe pule".

† Linguistically conservative texts are often dismissed as Northern, but both (a) and (b) are likely Wessex texts. Given that (a) was first recorded at Winchester, and (b) conspicuously mentions Nicholas of Guildford, a case could be made for placing the texts less than fifty miles apart.

into the “oral tradition of Old English”*, is just as inaccurate as forcing (b) out of it. Even when evidence is limited, it is essential that the need for understandable chronology does not collapse the breadth of genre, style and register which can exist within a single period.

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* an absurd oversimplification, but a prevalent one

Appendix

Text (a), transcribed from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 343, fol.130r

ðe pes bold ȝebyld, er þu iboren pere. ðe pes molde imynt, er ðu
of moder come. ac hit nes no idiht, ne þeo deopnes imeten· nes ȝyt
iloced, hu long hit þe pere. Nu me þe bringæð, þer ðu beon scealt.
Nu me sceæl þe meten. ⁊ þa molde seoðða. ne bið no þin hus healice
itinbred: hit bið unheh and lah, þonne þu list þer inne. ðe helepaȝes
beoð laȝe, sid paȝes un heȝe; þe rof bið ibyld þire broste ful neh.
Spa ðu scealt on molde. punien ful calde. Dimme ⁊ deorcæ: þet den
fulæt on honde. Dureleas is □ hus. ⁊ dearc hit is pið innen. Ðær þu bist
feste bidytt. ⁊ dæð hefð þa cæȝe. ladlic is þet eorð hus.
⁊ grim inne to punien. Ðer þu scealt punien and purmes þe todeleð. Ðus ðu
bist ileȝd. ⁊ ladæst þine fronden. Nefst ðu nenne freond, þe þe pylle
faren to. Ðæt efre pule lokien. hu þe □ hus þe likie. Ðæt æfre un don
ðe pule ða dure. ⁊ þe æfter lihten. for sone þu bist ladlic. ⁊ lad to i seonne.
For sone bið þin hæfet. faxes bireued. al bið ðes faxes feirnes forsceden· Næle hit nan
mit fingres feire stracien·

Text (b), transcribed from Oxford, Jesus College, MS. Jes29t, fol.160r-160v, l.591-624

H wanne ich fleo nyhtes aft muse.
I ch may þe vinde at þe ruhuse
A mog þe wede. amog þe netle.
Þ u syttest ⁊ singst bihinde seotle.
Þ ar me þe may ilomest fynde.
Þ ar men worpeþ heore byhinde.
Y et þu atwitest me myne mete.
⁊ seyst þat ich fule wyhtes ete.
A c hwat etestu. þat þu ne lye.
B ute attercoppe ⁊ fule vlye.
⁊ wurmes if þu myht fynde.
A mog þe volde of harde rynde.

Y et ich can do wel gode wike.
F or ich can loki monne wike.
ꝛ mine wike beoþ wel gode.
F or ich helpe to monne vode.
I ch can nyme mus at berne.
ꝛ ek at churche in þe derne.
F or me is leof to cristes huse.
T o clansi hit wiþ fule Muse.
N e schal þar neu cume to.
F ul wiht if ich hit may ivo.
ꝛ if me lust on my skenting.
T o wernen oþe wunying.
I ch habbe at wod^{e} treon. grete.
M id þikke bowe. noþing blete.
M id ivi gr^{e}ne al bigrowe.
Þ at eu stont iliche iblowe.
ꝛ his heou neu ne uorleost.
H wanne hit snywe. ne frost.
Þ ar inne ic habbe god ihold.
A winte warm a sume cold.
Þ ane myn hus stot briht ꝛ gr^{e}ne.
O f þine nys nowiht isene.