



Something wicked this way comes! Applying linguistic structures within Ricoeur's interpretation theory

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Keywords:

Propositions
Punctuation
Linguistics
Speech acts
Hermeneutics
Religious texts

ABSTRACT

Punctuation may seem to be minor, but even 'minor' editing influences the interpretation of a text. This paper draws in several novel connections in language and communication in order to look at how the punctuation of the exclamation mark, and the editors that select it, create a symbol that suggests to the reader how to appropriate the text. Using Ricoeur's interpretation theory as the foundation, this study applies linguistic structures of propositions, syntax, speech act functions, and genre to microscopically analyze the use of punctuation and how it functions to guide the reader's interpretation of a text. In the case of a religious text, the exclamation point is used to alert the reader to understand his own state of wickedness.

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When Ricoeur first delivered his lectures on interpretation theory in 1976, he changed how hermeneutics interpreted texts.¹ Where the German hermeneutics favored a focus on understanding and the art of interpretation out of rhetorical principles (Arthos, 2019), Ricoeur combined "a hybrid of structuralism and hermeneutics" (Fauvergue, 2021, p. 450) to a more rigorous hermeneutics. His work "reached a transdisciplinary level through a close dialogue with semiotics, structuralism," and others (Fauvergue, 2021, p. 450), constituting a revival of a critical orientation which "attempted...to give some methodological purchase back to hermeneutics" (Arthos, 2019) As a "universal science of interpretation" (Grondin, 1994, p. 48), his work is used in literature analysis and communication studies; and regularly applied to the study of religious texts. Following this tradition, this article examines the fourth most influential American literary work (Burr, 2016) and influential cultural artifact (Nibley, 1988; Givens, 2001), the text of the Book of Mormon. Looking specifically at the exclamation mark, this article microscopically analyzes the use of punctuation and how it functions to guide the reader's interpretation of a text by asking from a hermeneutic perspective, How does an editor's punctuation mediate the interpretation of a text?

A secondary but perhaps more important question is raised by the methods Ricoeur proposed in his 1976 lectures espousing interpretation theory. With his philosophical audience, the linguistic methodological underpinnings he directly addressed went largely ignored in the application and use of methods applying his theory. As a result, his adherents tend toward more 'phenomenological than methodological' approaches to interpretation (Grondin, 2016; Pellauer, 2012). Ricoeur's writings at times seem to encourage departure from methodology in his obscure endpoints of the dialogue of explanation and understanding. Yet the entire foundation he lays for textual interpretation, metaphor, and symbols is rooted in his fellow

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¹ For a recent thorough overview of Ricoeur's impact on hermeneutics, see John Arthos' *Hermeneutics After Ricoeur*.

Frenchman, Saussure's, structural linguistics—it is a foundation dependent on propositions, speech act theory, syntax, and the way in which written text can be 'recovered' by the reader as a living text. Linguistic structures which have since gone on to be firmly established methodologically in the subfields of the science of language. This raises, for the authors, the secondary question of this article, Can rooting a Ricoeurian analysis of written texts in the linguistic structures he identified re-establish some of the objective methodology Ricoeur was seeking? And if so, to what extent can Ricoeur's interpretation theory be claimed and used in linguistics? While the latter question requires more discussion than the scope of this article, to the former question we argue the linguistic methods of identifying propositions, syntactic structures, and speech acts provide a robust methodology for objectifying the textual interpretation of an artifact as it relates to the interpretative effect of punctuation on a text, suggesting that linguistic methods provide a general basis for Ricoeurian analysis.

1. Punctuation

To answer the first question, how an editor's punctuation affects the interpretation of the text, we must understand the origin of punctuation. The term *punctuation* comes from the word *punctilious*, meaning attentive to formality or etiquette, elucidating the primary role of punctuation as "a courtesy designed to help readers to understand a story without stumbling" (Truss, 2004, p. 7). Before the start of the sixteenth century punctuation was essentially non-existent. Even in the origins of printing, the only punctuation initially used was the colon and the period. Both indicated pauses, with the period indicating a greater pause. Later the comma was added to clarify syntax and to aid readers in micropauses. Only after these were well-established did writers eventually add the exclamation and question mark.

1.1. Function

When punctuation is introduced by the author of a text, it becomes part of the speech event and, as Ricoeur (1976) alluded, functions similarly to spoken paralinguistic cues that help us interpret the utterer's meaning of the text. In his words, "Writing not only preserves these linguistic marks of oral speech, it also adds supplementary distinctive signs such as quotation marks, exclamation marks, and question marks to indicate the physiognomic and gestural expressions, which disappear when the speaker becomes a writer. In many ways therefore illocutionary acts can be communicated to the extent that their 'grammar' provides the event with a public structure." (p. 18). For example, consider the following sentence: *How great is our Lord*. Since many exclamatory sentences follow the same structure as an interrogative, this sentence can be read as either a question or an exclamatory statement (i.e., *How great is our Lord!* Or *How great is our Lord?* Collins, 1938). The exclamation mark is critical to understanding the structure of this sentence, where *how* can be either an intensifier or an interrogative. As shown in this example, punctuation serves two purposes, one being to indicate pauses and the other to clarify the construction of a sentence" (Crutchley, 1968).

1.2. Purposes

Over the years, scholars have identified three main purposes for punctuation (Krahn, 2014), and for the exclamation mark in particular: to indicate pauses, to clarify sentence construction, and to serve a rhetorical function. The rhetorical function of the exclamation mark is expansive and dynamic (Webster, 1828). Contemporary dictionaries and usage guides list various rhetorical functions of the exclamation mark: to express admiration (Truss, 2004), to express astonishment (MacKellar, 1885), to express wonder (Collins, 1938), and to express surprise (MacKellar, 1885; Collins, 1938; Fowler, 2015). The use of the exclamation mark to express warmth or sincerity, especially in emails and social media, is a relatively new development. Likewise, though it has long been used to express approval, the use of it to express effusive thanks is also relatively new.

Over time, changes occurred in the formatting of the exclamation mark as well. "While the first users of the exclamation mark would perhaps have gawked at constructions such as *I'm so excited to see you tomorrow!!!!* where it would seem one exclamation mark is not enough, we might likewise find the following construction a little odd: *I'm so excited! to see you tomorrow*; however, this kind of sentence-medial punctuation was common until about the 1980s when this usage was dropped in favor of sentence-final" (Anderson et al., 2022).

Grammatically, punctuation can resolve ambiguity (Min, 1996; Mrochen, 2009), result in different senses of the text (Emerson, 1926) and be used to delineate temporality, address someone, create an intimate atmosphere or call somebody's attention, signal discursal relations, and reinforce the thematical approach of a text (Gomez-Jimenez, 2011). Many modern punctuation studies observe the rhetorical effect it has on the tone of electronic messages in emails, texts, and tweets. One recent study determined that the inclusion of a period after a positive one-word response led readers to perceive the response as less sincere, while periods after one-word negative or neutral responses were seen as more negative, therefore serving a rhetorical, rather than grammatical, purpose (Houghton et al., 2018).

1.3. Punctuation in the bible

There have been a small number of articles addressing punctuation in the Bible, across its various editions. While Hornsby (1973) studies biblical punctuation from a historical perspective as a clue to the use of punctuation within the

Renaissance period, the majority of biblical punctuation studies aim to resolve ambiguity or other disputes regarding the meaning of the text by tracing back to and consulting the original texts. Much of the disputes over punctuation arise from its Greek origins. In its early history, the New Testament text appeared only in *scriptio continua*, so that punctuating the text was a matter of interpreting the meaning of an unbroken stream of Greek letters. In “Day and Night and the Punctuation of John 9”, Poirier (1996, p. 290) changes the placement of a period in John 9:3–4 that results in a changed interpretation and a resolution to what some have seen as a “bizarre theodicy.” Turner (1922) similarly offers a new punctuation to a New Testament passage. He refers to the original Greek of St. John 7:37–38 to determine out of whose belly shall flow “the living water” and proposes an appropriate punctuation. Thorsteinsson (2002) also refers to the original Greek to suggest a new punctuation of Romans 1:13–15 to solve the issue of what seem to be contradictory statements in 1.15 and 1.20 regarding Paul’s missionary objective. The point of a codified religious canon is to preserve some text-based knowledge content for the sake of orthodoxy, but the fact that each reading-event effectuates a new understanding may complicate this. On the other hand, the constant production of new understandings is what makes a religious text a relevant part of the reader’s life. This dialectic, working in tension, makes it especially fruitful for a Ricoeurian analysis.

2. Textual considerations of the Book of Mormon

While editing studies on the bible remain fruitful, we chose the Book of Mormon for a few reasons: its editing history up to the first publication, its eight major editorial editions since its first publication (Anderson et al., 2022), and its relative dearth of editorial analysis to date.

2.1. Translation of the text

The Book of Mormon is, in addition to the Holy Bible, an authoritative book of scripture for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is held to be a record of the rise and fall of an ancient Jewish nation in North America, discovered on gold plates in New York in the 19th century by Joseph Smith. The original record is stated in the text (Mormon 9:32; 1 Nephi 1:2) to be in a lost language known as “reformed Egyptian”. A major difference between the textual analysis performed on the Book of Mormon and the analyses of other scriptures is that the translation process of the Book of Mormon from the now-absent ancient record lies beyond the realm of linguistic analysis. This contrasts sharply with the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek of the Bible, and with the Classical Arabic of the Qur’an. Biblical translation and Qur’anic *tafsir* (or exegesis), is an entire field that has no equivalent for the Book of Mormon. Biblical studies have access to earlier Greek or Latin translations, yet Book of Mormon scholars cannot cross-compare editions with its source language. This inherently limits syntactic studies to diachronistic Book of Mormon English syntax studies (Jessee, 1970), cross-linguistic examinations, or Book of Mormon-Bible structural comparisons (Frederick, 2018).

Joseph began the English translation in 1827 but the work was put on hiatus for a time, and the translation that comprises the current text occurred in the spring of 1829 over approximately 60 working days. While exact details of the translation process are not available, it is generally accepted that Joseph Smith used clear stones to aid his translation process, and would peer through the stones and dictate the manuscript to scribes,² chiefly Oliver Cowdery. While critics see the deviant translation process as evidence the work is fiction (see Larsen et al., 1980), it should be noted that Joseph had minimal formal education and that even his later personal writings were full of substantial syntactic incongruities and other grammatical errors, suggesting he is not the author of the text. The dictated manuscript that the scribes wrote down as Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon is known as the *original manuscript*, of which about 28% still survives.²

2.2. Editing history prior to translation

One of the highly distinguishing features of this text is that it was primarily compiled and substantially edited by one of its last authors, Mormon (hence the book’s name), making it rare among historical religious texts. Most religious texts are compilations from passed down copies of a first recording. During copying, the bible shows evidence of editing in verbal markers, such as repeated lines and repetitive resumption (Bokovoy, 2007). The Book of Mormon, however, was the life work of Mormon, who collected and summarized a library of records kept by his people over approximately 1000 years. In attempting to write a summary of the text for a survey of religions publication, Reiss (2016) noted the difficulty of such a project, stating,

“the Book of Mormon had already been edited, quite rigorously it would seem. In several places we learn that the original records from which the Book of Mormon was compiled were vast, as many as a hundred times more expansive than the small fraction that were passed down. The Book of Mormon as edited had already been winnowed considerably, the final product as truncated as its original editors had dared to make it” (p. 77).

² For the Church’s discussion (with sources) on the translation process, see their full article at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>.

2.3. Punctuation at the first printing

After translation, a copy of the original manuscript was produced, known as the *printer's manuscript*. It is this copy that was primarily used by Grandin's print shop in Palmyra, New York, where the first edition of the Book of Mormon was typeset and published.³ During printing, Wilson (2004) indicates that "the type and spacers had to be typeset thirty-seven different times" (The printing commences section, para. 2). This manuscript was then punctuated by the shop's typesetter, John Gilbert.^{4,5} In a letter 63 years later, Gilbert recalled that his employer asked for him to assist in printing and binding 5000 copies of the Book of Mormon (Skousen, 2012). Gilbert closely recalls the size of the page (roughly 1000 ems), font (small pica), paper size (foolscap paper) (Skousen, 2012), but there are few details provided about John Gilbert's specific typesetting process. However, he does elucidate his editorial process. John Gilbert was told not to correct grammatical errors; "The Old Testament is ungrammatical, set it as it is written" (Gilbert, 1892, p. 3). Although Gilbert sometimes accidentally made corrections and removed redundancies, he was mostly faithful to the script, and left ungrammatical expressions unchanged.

Punctuation in the printer's manuscript was sparing. In Gilbert's (1982) words, "Every Chapter, if I remember correctly, was one solid paragraph, without a punctuation mark, from beginning to end" (p. 5). To punctuate the Book of Mormon, John Gilbert eventually began taking it home in order to work through the manuscript faster. Gilbert primarily wrote punctuation on the typeset text, only writing in light pencil in a short portion of the printer's manuscript. Skousen, a prominent Book of Mormon researcher, states that "When Gilbert refers to reading down half a page of manuscript to determine the punctuation, he was apparently trying to determine the reading of the text and then adding the punctuation to the typeset text only, not on the manuscript itself" (Skousen, p. 67). Although not noted in his statement, Gilbert was also responsible for the paragraph spacing present in the 1830 edition Book of Mormon.

2.4. Punctuation in subsequent editions

Since its initial publication in 1830, there have been over twenty editions of the text. Eight of these are considered major editions highlighted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Anderson et al., 2022; fn. 1). The first re-editing of the text in 1837 included almost 1000 changes made by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to "correct mistakes... which stemmed from inexperience of the transcribers, the intricate typesetting methods of the 19th century and the rapidity of the translation."⁷ Almost 4000 word corrections have been made to the Book of Mormon since the first publication,⁶ and 100,000 punctuation changes. FAIR, a Mormon apologetics group, writes of these, "Most changes are insignificant modifications to spelling, grammar, and punctuation, and are mainly due to the human failings of editors and publishers Some of these typographical errors *do* affect the meaning of a passage or present a new understanding of it, but not in a way that presents a challenge to the divinity of the Book of Mormon."⁷

When changes are suggested, the Church's Scripture Committee researches the suggestion and recommends any edits to the president and governing body of the Church. The Council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles approves any changes. The goal of any edits is to "eliminate the human errors", and "improve readability while leaving the doctrine unaltered."⁶ The current (2013) edition contains the disclaimer: "Some minor errors in the text have been perpetuated in past editions of the Book of Mormon. This edition contains corrections that seem appropriate to bring the material into conformity with prepublication manuscripts and early editions edited by the Prophet Joseph Smith."

2.5. Prior editorial studies

While the 2013 Book of Mormon contains many updated modern rhetorical and grammatical exclamation mark functions, there are still obsolete grammatical usages consistent with a translated text (Welch, 1969), or preserved from the 1830 edition (Carmack, 2014). As an example of the distinctive language, 'that' is the fourth most common word in the Book of Mormon (Carmack, 2022). The largest and most extensive study on the text is the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, whose purpose is to "establish and display the history of the wording of the text, including both accidental errors and editorial changes that the document has undergone as it has been transmitted down through time in its many editions" (Skousen, 1997, p. 30). Most of this analysis has focused on word changes. Verbal punctuation in the text was recently examined by Gee (2022), who noted

³ By 1829, new printing technologies had revolutionized the printing process. Facilitating the printing process, paper mills in America were now producing cheap paper in abundant supply because of mechanical paper machines. Additionally, iron handpresses made the printing process more efficient than wooden presses, creating a proliferation of smaller print shops. E. B. Grandin purchased the Smith press model, making possible the great feat of quickly printing 5000 copies of the 592-page Book of Mormon (Wilson, 2004). Using these innovations, small print shops had greater control of the publishing process, from printing to book binding.

⁴ After this, the individual sheets were then dried, folded and cut apart, and the 592 pages were bound into individual books. Overall, the process of typesetting and publishing took seven months, beginning in August 1829 and finishing in March 1830.

⁵ It is unknown whether a particular editorial style guide was used. However, by this period, several English grammar books were popular and widely disseminated such as Lowth's 1762 *A short introduction to English grammar*, Webster's 1785 *A grammatical institute of the English language*, and Houston's 1817 *Essence of English grammar*.

⁶ <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/understanding-the-process-of-publishing-the-book-of-mormon>

⁷ https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Book_of_Mormon/Textual_changes/Why_were_these_changes_made

parallels with many ancient languages. No studies have been done on typographic punctuation marks in the Book of Mormon as we do here. This study meets gaps by addressing how interpretation theory can be applied to punctuation, punctuation symbolism, ideographic functions of the exclamation mark, and in religious analysis by expanding linguistic studies on the Book of Mormon and the effect of editors on creating interpretation of the text.

3. Interpretation theory

Where German hermeneutics asks the question ‘What happens when we come to an understanding?’, Ricoeur’s 1976 interpretation theory is more axiomatic in asking ‘How do we interpret?’ (Arthos, 2019). With a focus on textual interpretation, he fundamentally addresses the relationship between interpretation and the interpreter. Ricoeur separates discourse into two constructs—event and meaning—which work together as dialectic opposites (p. 71). He defines *event* as the moment the message is instantiated or expressed. In this way, the time bound actuality of discourse is accounted for. The text *meaning* is encoded in the proposition of the utterance. Discourse, consequently, occurs when propositions are expressed through the event of an utterance. This accounts for writing as an inscription of the event of discourse, containing propositional content, reference, and semantic sense.

When the utterance is written and the reader is, therefore, removed from the event of the utterance, interpretation factors from the event itself are no longer available to aid the intended meaning. Ricoeur calls this removal from the initial event *distanciation*. We can attempt to reclaim the initial event by extrapolating on what the author intended, but for Ricoeur this is a useless exercise; we cannot go back to the initial event and ask the author what they intended. Instead, Ricoeur proposes that we *appropriate* the event to the reader. The reader interprets as an *event*. This appropriation of the event to the reader becomes an act of iconicity as the reader, through the act of interpretation, recreates the text. The reader approaches the text without preconceived notions and allows the text to speak to them. The interpretation of the reader can then be further understood as a guess and explanation, often called a *naïve reading*. These guesses, though subjective, are not wild, but rather based on a shared communication system that takes words at their face value, and is substantiated by an explanation of why the particular interpretation in question is the most likely interpretation. Shared sense of the words, illocutionary force of speech acts, and propositional content can be interpreted through accompanying syntax and grammar of the evented written text, allowing for different understandings and layered meanings than perhaps what the author intended.

As one interprets text after the discursive event of recording, they move from a process of reductive explanation of the overall text, to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the parts and the whole, through both a *structural analysis* and/or a *deep understanding*, leading to an appropriation of the text. This process together forms what Ricoeur associates with the “hermeneutical arc” (1981, p. 161). Ultimately, to have interpreted a text, a reader must create a new event, so that the text is now “one’s own” (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 94) and illuminates a new perspective (Arthos, 2019). In this way, Ricoeur captures the connection between text and experience. The text can reflect one’s own experience, and the text can profoundly influence one’s experience—the text itself has acted upon the reader to open a new world perspective in some way.

Such an approach freezes the text as its own linguistic actor, independent of the author. It effectively denies that the author’s intent is relevant to the reader’s meaning because the text’s propositions and the event of reading and interpreting take on an illocutionary force all their own. This force alone is relevant to the reader’s experience and understanding, not the author’s. Accordingly, this theory accounts for the fact that an author may not have effectively encoded their intentions anyway; it is impossible to read the author’s mind and so the author’s state of mind is irrelevant.

4. Methodological analysis

Interpretational theory is confined to analysis of the effects of textual content on reader interpretation. This means that actual reader interpretation from surveys is unnecessary—the interpretation is a reasoned and supported understanding from the text, any appropriation must be done by individual readers themselves. Instead, a naïve reading is done on the text first. The naïve reading is done by simply creating a general impression of the text based on a few reads and is provided typically as a short summary or exemplar table. The structural analysis is where the rigor of linguistic methods can then be applied to support interpretations of the text (Lindelof et al., 2010). Linguistic syntactic and semantic analysis are used here to give methodological purchase to Ricoeur’s interpretation theory. Based on his explicit incorporation of propositions, illocutionary acts, and references to punctuation and syntax, we utilized those in our foundational inquiry into how these methods interact with and support interpretation of the text’s meaning. We specifically look at how the editor’s choice of exclamation mark on its immediate surrounding linguistic content influences the Book of Mormon’s textual interpretation.

4.1. Data collection

Placement of exclamation marks in the current edition (2013) were identified using *WordCruncher* (1991–2022), a textual analysis software developed by Monte Shelley and Jesse Vincent at Brigham Young University’s Digital Humanities Office. When a single verse had more than one exclamation mark, it was treated as a new instantiation. This resulted in 113 instances of the exclamation mark in the 2013 edition.

Table 1
Sample data.

Cite	Text
1 Nephi 11:30	And it came to pass that the angel spake unto me again, saying: Look! And I looked, and I beheld the heavens open again, and I saw angels descending upon the children of men; and they did minister unto them.
2 Nephi 13:11	Wo unto the wicked, for they shall perish; for the reward of their hands shall be upon them!
Jacob 6:3	And how blessed are they who have labored diligently in his vineyard; and how cursed are they who shall be cast out into their own place! And the world shall be burned with fire.
Mosiah 8:20	O how marvelous are the works of the Lord, and how long doth he suffer with his people; yea, and how blind and impenetrable are the understandings of the children of men; for they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them!
Mosiah 15:16	And again, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those that are still publishing peace!
Alma 19:29	And it came to pass that she went and took the queen by the hand, that perhaps she might raise her from the ground; and as soon as she touched her hand she arose and stood upon her feet, and cried with a loud voice, saying: O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell! O blessed God, have mercy on this people!
Alma 29:1	O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!
Mormon 6:17	O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you!
Moroni 9:18	O the depravity of my people! They are without order and without mercy. Behold, I am but a man, and I have but the strength of a man, and I cannot any longer enforce my commands.

4.2. Naïve reading

The text chronicles a thousand-year period starting with a Jewish family's migration to the Americas around 600 B.C. The population growth, division, and wars of this family are documented within the context of their religious tenets. The central event in the Book of Mormon is the appearance of Jesus Christ shortly after his crucifixion in Jerusalem. Around 400 A.D. the civilizations created by these people are made extinct through war. Of the many events chronicled in the thousand-year span of the text, only 113 sentences are exclaimed. The majority cluster around a few prophets: Nephi and his brother Jacob, Alma, and Mormon. Typically, these exclaimed utterances document or address great wickedness among ancient American peoples. Various prophets implore others to forsake sinful behavior and repent so that they can be saved through Christ from eternal damnation. Mormon, the main compiler and redactor of the records now comprising the Book of Mormon, provides exclaimed commentary on past events. Many exclamation marks accompany his asides to current readers and writings about his current time period [Table 1](#) shows sample exclaimed verses.

4.3. Structural methods

Text meaning was operationalized through *propositional* notation, and coding *syntactic* descriptions of the affected sentences. Event meaning was operationalized through coding the speech act's illocutionary force of the exclamation mark as it related to the appended proposition (*function*), and the specific *genre* within the Book of Mormon in which the exclaimed mark was located. Both closed and open coding strategies were used, and intercoder reliability was established.

4.4. Coding propositions

A reader's extraction of meaning from a text can be split into two different categories: the objective *proposition*, which remain the same across all readers and each reading-event; and the subjective *event*, which is produced in the reader's mind in real-time with each reading. Propositional meaning is derived purely from the senses that link things in the text to other referents in the text and resistant to personal interpretation. Semantically, propositions are asserted in certain syntactic constructions and merely underlie the other constructions in the deep structure of the sentence. For this paper, propositions were extracted from the statements that were annotated with an exclamation mark in order to produce the falsifiable assertion (i.e., bearing a truth value) that lay behind each expression. Propositions can be written using semantic notation. This both creates a higher level of visibility for the predicate of each individual proposition and facilitates the comparison of different propositions. To maximize readability at all levels, we encoded each proposition in sentence format as well as in semantic notation, for more critical interpretation of text meaning.

4.5. Coding syntax

Whereas propositional coding was open-ended, we chose to code the sentence structure of each exclaimed phrase with closed coding based on linguistically-accepted categories. First, we coded (Structure 1) based on four types of sentence order: *declarative*, *interrogatory*, *expletive*, and *modal*. To distinguish between sentences inquiring information and those containing *Wh-* intensifiers, the first were coded as *interrogatories* and the second as *declarative*. Lastly, while many sentences contain modals, this category was deemed necessary to determine potential correlation with *function* encoding since many verses contained strong modals when attempting to elicit a desired action. These categories are inherently prone to some overlap. However, each coder selected the category that they determined to be the primary feature of the utterance. ([Table 2](#))

Table 2
Syntax closed codes, structure 1.

Code	Explanation
Structure 1	the organization of the sentence structure
<i>declarative</i> (<i>& declarative(how)</i>)	the sentence had a default word order structure (in English this is SVO, e.g. <i>He is home</i> , or <i>How strong he is</i>)
<i>Interrogatory</i>	the sentence was structured as a question (the inflection was fronted, e.g. <i>Is he home</i> , or <i>How strong is he</i>)
<i>Expletive</i>	the sentence was, foremost, emphatic, often including an interjection such as 'wo' or 'behold' followed by a declarative or imperative phrase (e.g. <i>Behold, he is home</i> , or <i>Look, how he is home</i>)
<i>Modal</i>	the sentence included a modal such as 'would' or 'mightest' (e.g. <i>He mightest come home</i>)

The second closed coding for syntax was punctuation position of the exclamation mark (structure 2), and had two coding options, whether the exclamation mark was: *sentence-medial*, or *sentence-final*. In cases where the single word was exclaimed but the word was an imperative and, therefore, propositionally capable of a truth value such as 'Look!', this was coded as *final* rather than *medial*. An example of medial punctuation is in Mosiah 27:37; "And how blessed are they! For they did publish peace; they did publish good tidings of good; and they did declare unto the people that the Lord reigneth.". Sentence-medial punctuation is one extant feature of archaic language preserved in the Book of Mormon. (see Table 3)

Table 3
Syntax closed codes, structure 2.

Code	Explanation
Structure 2	where the exclamation mark occurs in the sentence
<i>sentence-medial</i>	the exclamation mark occurred after the exclaimed word rather than the exclaimed proposition (e.g. <i>He is very! strong</i>)
<i>sentence-final</i>	the exclamation mark occurred after the exclaimed proposition (e.g. <i>Look!</i> , or <i>He is very strong!</i>)

Finally, a third structure assessing the syntactic complexity of the affected sentence was coded. This category had four coding options: *simple*, *compound*, *complex*, and *compound-complex* (Table 4).

Table 4
Syntax closed codes, structure 3.

Code	Explanation
Structure 3	the syntactic complexity of the sentence which editors marked
<i>simple</i>	the sentence had a main subject, verb, (object) (e.g. <i>He is home</i> .)
<i>Compound</i>	the sentence had two <i>simple</i> underlying sentences, aided by a conjunction (e.g. <i>He is home but resting</i> .)
<i>Complex</i>	the sentence had an additional dependent or relative clause (e.g. <i>He is home where the birds sing</i> .)
<i>Compound-complex</i>	the sentence had both compound and complex features (e.g. <i>He is home where the birds sing but he is resting</i> .)

4.6. Coding illocutionary speech acts

When Austin first conceived of speech act theory in 1962, he divided the speech act into an utterance (the locutionary act), the force intended by the utterance (the illocutionary force), and the effect of the utterance (the perlocutionary act). The illocutionary force became the heart of speech act theories, looking at functions like warning, telling, asking, and wishing. Prior studies attempting to link speech act theory with the exclamation mark have resulted in a wide variety of illocutionary forces, although it should be noted that almost all these forces are derived from the linguistic content itself rather than truly a force of the exclamation mark (e.g., MacKellar, 1885; Collins, 1938; Truss, 2004; Fowler, 2015). Relying on these findings, our assessment resulted in fifteen codes: Expressive speech acts (*absurdity, lamentation, awe, effusive thanks, contempt, intensifier, enthusiasm, approval/praise, sudden joy, regret*), Declarative speech acts (*invocation/request, irony, call of alarm*⁸), and Directive speech acts (*inspiring action, command/proclaim* (including call for attention)). These fifteen functions were coded exclusively across all the verses, with the most salient function of the mark coded (Table 5). As a result, *intensifier* was only used when it was the highest function operating in the exclamation mark, even though by definition the exclamation mark is arguably always considered an intensifier.

⁸ While *call of alarm* is a type of warning that can function as a directive to change, it does so indirectly with the exclamation mark; the *inspiring action* is a direct directive speech act and so *call of alarm* was categorized as a declarative speech act as its direct function.

Table 5
Speech Act illocutionary-based exclamation mark functions.

Code	Explanation
<i>Call of alarm</i>	warning or other concern over the future state of another
<i>Command or proclamation</i>	directive to another by order or announcement
<i>Approval/Praise</i>	acclamation of another's character or action
<i>Intensifier</i>	rhetorical device used to accent the sentence, usually in the case of repetition
<i>Lamenting</i>	exclamation of sorrow over an action or event
<i>Inspiring action</i>	motivational statement
<i>Invocation/Request</i>	an exclaimed interrogatory
<i>Absurdity</i>	a statement the speaker finds incongruity with, based on rhetorical argument in the genre
<i>Awe</i>	being impressed with another's character or skill
<i>Contempt</i>	derisive attitude toward another
<i>Enthusiasm</i>	excitement for an activity
<i>Irony</i>	situational irony
<i>effusive thanks</i>	exclaimed thanking
<i>regret</i>	sorrow over an action or event accompanied by an expressed desire or wish to change it
<i>sudden joy</i>	surprise or exclaimed statement of joy in dialogue

4.7. Coding genre

Genre is more often considered a literary category than a linguistic one, but one Ricoeur (1976) said influenced the textual interpretation. The entire text of the Book of Mormon fits into a religious genre of scripture. However, within the book, there are several conversations and speeches recorded. We called these text-acts. A *text-act* was defined as a block of consecutive verses regardless of chapter in which an *event* originally occurred. Whereas Arthos (2019) argues that Ricoeur conflates different text types when considering interpretation, a problem lacking differentiation between the written text which is merely a record of an event, and written text which is intended as dialogue (part of the original event), these *text-acts* provided the discourse context of the mark. To distinguish these types as they occur in the anthology that is the Book of Mormon, we chose codes based on the naïve reading: *record*, *letter*, *prayer*, *speech*, *conversation*, and *aside* (Table 6). Genres were assigned by the most 'outer' genre, such that a prayer recorded in a record entry would be marked as a record entry. Codes were defined by their immediacy with the event (*speech*, *conversation*, *letter/epistle*, and *prayer*) verses their distancing with the event (*journal/record*, *aside*). These codes were also distinguished by the dialogic role of the participants. In conversation and letters, there is an active intended dialogue, distinguished only by whether it was spoken or written. In speech and prayer, there is a presumed monologic speech activity, distinguished by whether the audience was immediately present. In record and aside, the difference was whether the author making the comment was the original author, or a subsequent editor. Since Mormon edited previous records to compile the Book of Mormon, his notes are further distanced than records of history by the original authors. We were curious how these different genres influenced the placement of the exclamation mark.

Table 6
Genre coding.

Code	Explanation
Genre	category of text-act
<i>journal/record</i>	report of general events, or feelings of the author
<i>Speech</i>	monologic talk given by a character in the present tense
<i>Aside</i>	editorial verse of a subsequent author while summarizing a record; where the event topic was offset by an extended entry of the editor
<i>Conversation</i>	a dialogue between characters written in the present tense
<i>letter/epistle</i>	an originally-written document from one character to another and intended as a dialogue
<i>Prayer</i>	a prima facie supplication to the divine

4.8. Raters

Three independent student raters majoring in linguistics were trained for these closed codes of syntactic structure, genre, and function. The coders independently coded the closed codes as well as notated the propositions and their referents. Cohen kappa results for intercoder reliability were established between each set of coders, as seen in Table 7, with only one result pair below established standard in Structure 1 (0.80 or higher is considered 'very good' reliability), and total agreement in another result pair in Structure 2.

Table 7
Kappa results.

Coders	Genre	function	Structure 1	Structure 2	Structure 3
R/L	0.960	0.830	0.804	1.00	0.937
X/L	0.923	0.862	0.679	0.843	0.925
R/X	0.910	0.810	0.936	0.948	0.950

To resolve any differences in closed codes, the majority coding between the coders for the verse was used. In the rare cases that there was not a majority, the coders discussed the utterance in question until a consensus could be reached. Additionally, the final function was chosen based on the majority's agreement. When all three coders disagreed, as occurred in Alma 36:2 with sentence clause composition (Structure 3), these specific instances were discussed and reconciled. The propositions used for the master sheet were a similar resolution of the propositions of the three encoders where commonalities amongst the three were most often preserved. Once the master sheet had been created, all exclamatory utterances were separated according to their genre and text-act and a summary of that text-act was provided.

5. Structural analysis

Coding results for propositions, syntax, the exclamation mark's function illocutionarily, and genre are presented in the following tables, followed by discussion of thematic findings.

Table 8

Sample proposition table.

Cite	Text	Exclaimed Proposition(s)	Notation
1 Nephi 11:30	And it came to pass that the angel spake unto me again, saying: Look! And I looked, ...	Nephi looks at something.	n LOOK-AT s
2 Nephi 13:11	Wo unto the wicked, for they shall perish; for the reward of their hands shall be upon them!	If one is wicked, then they will perish.	$((\exists x)(x \text{ WICKED}) \rightarrow (x \text{ PERISH}))$
Jacob 6:3	And how blessed are they who have labored diligently in his vineyard; and how cursed are they who shall be cast out into their own place! And the world shall be burned with fire.	If you work in the vineyard, you are blessed. If you are kicked out, you are cursed.	$((x \text{ WORK-IN } v) \rightarrow (x \text{ BLESSED})) \& (\sim(x \text{ WORK-IN } v) \rightarrow (x \text{ CURSED}))$
Mosiah 8:20	O how marvelous are the works of the Lord, and how long doth he suffer with his people; yea, and how blind and impenetrable are the understandings of the children of men; for they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them!	People don't seek counsel from God.	$\sim (x \text{ SEEK } g)$
Mosiah 15:16	And again, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those that are still publishing peace!	The feet of those who publish peace are beautiful upon the mountains.	f BEAUTIFUL-UPON m
Alma 19:29	And it came to pass that she went and took the queen by the hand, that perhaps she might raise her from the ground; and as soon as she touched her hand she arose and stood upon her feet, and cried with a loud voice, saying: O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell! O blessed God, have mercy on this people!	Jesus saved me from hell. God have mercy on this people.	j SAVED i h $(\exists x)(g \text{ HAVE-MERCY-ON } x)$
Alma 29:1	O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!	I wish I was an angel. I wish I could go speak with a powerful voice. I wish I could cry repentance unto everyone.	$((x=(i = a)) \& i \text{ WISH } x) \& ((y = v \text{ POWERFUL}) \& i \text{ WISH } y) \& ((\exists p)(z = i \text{ CRY-REPENTANCE } p) \& i \text{ WISH } z))$
Mormon 6:17	O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you!	The people depart the ways of the Lord.	p DEPART g
Moroni 9:18	O the depravity of my people! They are without order and without mercy. Behold, I am but a man, and I have but the strength of a man, and I cannot any longer enforce my commands.	The people are very depraved.	p DEPRAVED

Table 9
Frequency of syntax structures.

Frequencies of Structure 1		
Levels	Counts	% of Total
Expletive	72	63.7%
Declarative	22	19.5%
Modal	12	10.6%
Question	7	6.2%
Frequencies of Structure 1		
Levels	Counts	% of Total
Expletive	72	63.7%
Declarative	22	19.5%
Modal	12	10.6%
Question	7	6.2%
Frequencies of structure 3		
Levels	Counts	% of total
Compound	16	14.2%
Compound-complex	40	35.4%
Simple	42	37.2%
Complex	15	13.3%

Table 10
Frequencies of exclamation mark function of illocution.

Levels	Counts	% of Total
Call of alarm	35	31.0%
Command or proclamation	20	17.7%
Approval/Praise	14	12.4%
Intensifier	10	8.8%
Lamenting	10	8.8%
Inspiring action	6	5.3%
Invocation/Request	6	5.3%
Absurdity	5	4.4%
Awe	2	1.8%
Contempt	2	1.8%
Enthusiasm	2	1.8%
Irony	1	0.9%

Table 11
Frequency of Genre.

Levels	Counts	% of Total
Journal/record	60	53.6%
Speech	31	27.7%
Aside	10	8.9%
Conversation	5	4.5%
Letter/epistle	4	3.6%
Prayer	2	1.8%

5.1. Syntactic extremes

The most common sentence compositions were *simple* and *compound-complex*. This creates an interesting juxtaposition: sentences notated with exclamation marks typically either contain three or more clauses, or merely contain one. For example, while some exclaimed sentences only contain an imperative, others may be comprised of winding complementizer clauses or subordinate clauses. For example, Alma 29:1, in [Table 8](#), can be seen having extensively complex propositional content. The presence of exclamations in complex sentences may serve to highlight the reasoning aspect of the proposition (see [Table 9](#)).

5.2. Maintaining the Reader's attention

Statements such as 'Look!' and 'Awake!' used imperative syntactic structure to create the illocution of directives. In the predominate case of 'Look!', sometimes it was to call attention to a definite visual scene, such as the birth of Christ, and other times it was to maintain attention to an abstract continuation of a speech or conversational interaction. Using the exclamation mark to inspiring action was frequently characterized by future modals (e.g., would, could, might) and were often observed with the overall structure "O that (x) would (y)!". Whereas the call of alarm often contrasted characteristics or groups of people, the exclaimed inspiring action was one of comparison; exemplified in Lehi's optative wish that his son Lemuel be firm like the valley they were settled in (1 Nephi 2:10). ([Tables 10 and 11](#))

5.3. Syntactic relationship with illocutionary function of the exclamation mark

The most common functions of exclamation marks in the Book of Mormon came from each speech act category of exclamation marks: Declarative, Directive, and Expressive. The expressive functions of effusive thanks, regret, and sudden joy were absent in the mark's use in the text even though the 2013 edition could have been updated to include these more recent functions of the mark. Two syntactic structures aligned with specific illocutionary functions of the mark: Modal structures were only found in the following illocutionary types: *approval/praise*, *call of alarm*, *inspiring action*, and *invocation/request*. Interrogatory structures corresponded with *lamenting*, *awe*, or *absurdity*.

5.4. Exclamation mark as rhetorical repetition

The exclamation mark was used in one verse as an intensifier through repetition. In 2 Nephi 4:33 there are three simple sentences, each with an exclamation mark after it. Each of these three sentences has the same syntactic structure, starting with "Wilt thou". This repetition is poetically used to intensify a thought in Isaiah as well as other places in the Book of Mormon (Parry, 2007, p. 69). By using the mark with each of these sentences, the exclamation functioned to intensify not only the proposition immediately connected to it, but also to intensify the previous sentence uses in the poetic set. It also intensified the desire surrounding the original invocation/request. This instance is most aligned with the current exclamation repetitions (i.e., "!!!") we see used in social settings today.

5.5. Interplay of genre and illocution

The most common genre was the record/journal. Along with speeches, record/journal made up the bulk of the instances for *inspiring action* and *approval/praise*, although they were far outweighed by the preponderance of exclaimed utterances were *call of alarm* and *command/proclamation*. Asides were dominated by *lamenting* and *call of alarm*. The idea of preaching and missionary work is also a prevalent one among asides. Hence, there is also a notable cluster of exclamation marks with the functions of *awe*, *inspiring action*, and *approval/praise*.

The few exclamation marks that were to be found in letters and the single exclaimed conversation are widely distributed across different functions. The genres in which these exclamation marks occurred probably did not have much bearing on their function. Interestingly with the prayer genre, only one of the many prayers in the text had exclamations, a prayer of the Lamanite queen. Once she was raised from the ground, she cries in a speech of *gratitude* to the people, "O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell!" followed by a prayer *invoking* God for mercy, "O blessed God, have mercy on this people!" (Alma 19:29). This single prayer is closely aligned with speeches, since it is *apostrophic* (directed at others) rather than a true invocation (toward God) (FitzGerald, 2012). None of the text's other prayers expressing *lamentations* or *gratitude* were marked with exclamations by the editor. Given that the main rhetorical function of prayer is to invoke relief from the divine (FitzGerald, 2012), the editor's choice of only marking the unexceptional nature of *invocations/requests* in only a single prayer suggests the propositional content was more influential in their choice than the genre.

5.6. Doctrinal preservation

Analysis of the propositional content served, in part, to check the claim that edits did not alter the doctrine of the text. While Book of Mormon authors repeatedly cited passages from the Old Testament, there was found to be high variation in presence of an exclamation mark varies across multiple verses quoting the same passage. For example, Mosiah 15:14-15 and 3 Nephi 2:4 are virtually identical to the KJV renderings of the associated Bible verses, down to the presence of exclamation marks. The same biblical phrases appear in 1 Nephi 13:37, Mosiah 12:21, and Mosiah 18:30. In the 1830 edition they all included exclamations. In the 2013 edition, none of these second set of verses contain exclamation marks. This, at minimum, represents an editorial shift from reliance on the bible to a claim of independent ownership of the text's content.

Across genres, there were no identifiable trends—the propositional content revealed an array of thematic content, not concentrated in one particular genre. Similarly, we compared exclaimed and unexclaimed propositions within a single genre and across all genres. This analytic method found no correlation. For example, while some warnings against particular sins are exclaimed, others are not. Though some iniquities are specifically exclaimed, like taking away justice from the poor (2 Nephi 20:2), there are also cautions against general wickedness that are exclaimed (Helaman 7:27). Similarly, on a positive note, the glorified attributes of Christ—such as his mercy and wisdom—can be found in both exclaimed and unexclaimed utterances. This suggests the choice of exclamation was not intentionally based on consistently emphasizing a certain doctrine.

6. Discussion of the Editor's influence

Punctuation may seem minor and uninteresting compared to bigger textual issues, but like small talk (Atkinson and Heritage, 1999), the study of punctuation deserves analysis because it always affects interpretation of the text. Even when analysis is not necessary to resolve a visible ambiguity, Ricoeur (1976) notes that grammar and syntax allow us to interpret the context of the illocutionary force of the speech-acts in an event.

When Mormon did the main editing work of the text initially, he re-interpreted the prior records into a new event. Hardy notes “the regular interplay between embedded documents and narrative paraphrase makes the Book of Mormon more than just a compilation of primary sources; it shows Mormon as a thoughtful, engaged editor who is consciously responding to and adapting the material at hand” (pp. 147–48; quoted in Reiss, 2016, p. 80). In the exclaimed asides (in 2 Nephi, Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and 3 Nephi), propositional content emphasize the sins committed by mankind that create distance from God, and the holy desire to encourage others’ repentance. Indeed, it is stated twice that those who engage in this missionary work will receive a holy reward. While sin causes suffering to the sinner and others, missionary work brings blessings to the missionary and the repentant alike. Thus, the exclaimed asides offer a microcosm of the exclaimed themes in the Book of Mormon as edited by Mormon. As Reiss (2016) elaborates, “How he incorporated primary sources—and how he structured his own narrative—reveal much about Mormon’s anxieties and hopes” (p. 80).

And yet Mormon did not add the punctuation, later English editors in the 19th century did, and those in the 2013 edition made changes to punctuation placement. When punctuation is added after the initial writing, and by someone other than the writer (as in the case with editors), it materially changes the meaning by creating a new utterer for whose meaning we interpret—that of the editor. “An editor’s role is powerful but largely unseen”, Reiss (2016) writes, and “it is part of an editor’s job to stand in as an advocate for the reader... an editor must remain vigilant about building gradually upon the knowledge the reader already has, challenging some assumptions while reinforcing others” (p.80–81). There were many instances of propositional content that were similar or the same to the exclaimed utterances that were not exclaimed. Thus, even the exceptional function uses present in the text are informative to understanding the symbolic function of the mark in this text. Why these marks, these places?

7. Discussion of the exclamation mark in the Book of Mormon

Viewing the text, as Ricoeur’s distanciation demands, from the reader’s interpretation rather than the editor’s intent, we find the exclamation marks emphasize certain doctrinal themes of the state of the wicked, the state of the righteous, and the juxtaposition between the two.

7.1. *What is the state of the wicked?*

Lauchman (2010) defined punctuation as “A bunch of impossible-to-figure-out marks, invented by the devil to give writers a foretaste of hell, taught in a hundred confusing and contradictory ways” (p.17). The reader is certainly given a ‘foretaste of hell’ in this text—the exclamation mark shows us the state of wicked souls. Exclaimed utterances called to the alarming state of others’ wickedness or ‘works of darkness’. Letters and speeches with exclamation marks focus on sin, specifically directives to remember past sins, recognize current sins, and to avoid future sin, lest one get punished for it. ‘Wo’ was pronounced upon the people for a variety of sins (2 Nephi 11–24; 27:1–30:18; 3 Nephi 9:2). Here the exclaimed propositions identify the state of wickedness as the “foolishness of man”, ‘wise in their own sight’ (2 Nephi 15:21), ‘trusting man’ (2 Nephi 28:6), not counseling with God (2 Nephi 27:27), and the “cunning plan of the devil” (2 Nephi 9:28). While these are general descriptions, the exclamation highlights one specific behavior that is relevant to modern-day members of the Church: being a drunkard. Hence, the exclamation mark highlights the metonymic use in the text of foolish workers of iniquity being drunks.

Often these uses were preceded by declarative expressions over the people’s state of wickedness and functioned merely to exclaim the state of the people. For example, Mormon (6) mourns that his people have rejected Jesus, as does Ether when he sees the destruction of his people, who rejected God (Ether 13–15). When the wicked state of the people distanced them from God through ‘rebellion’ and ‘pride’, the lamentations of the prophets are exclaimed. When the wicked state of the people was the result of foolish thinking, absurdity was exclaimed. When they chose to stay in the wicked state, third person contempt was exclaimed.

7.2. *The righteous!*

The use of the exclamation mark as an *expressive* speech-act unsurprisingly remained the widest use of the mark. The largest function here was that of *approval* of the righteous people and praise for the attributes of God, and mainly appear in Jacob’s speech to his people early in the Book of Mormon. This speech, in which the vast majority of the text’s positive exclamations are present, can be considered a well-organized argument for Christ (2 Nephi 9:8). Here, Jacob’s speech about the goodness of God is the only place where the exclamation mark is used consistently to rhetorically mark each of his main points of his speech. This draws the reader attention to his points about God’s character and adds to the organizational effectiveness of his speech as being more in line with today’s public speaking patterns. Had the exclamations been replaced by question marks, the rhetorical effect would have invited the reader to think about the answer that Jacob then provides.

We also see exclaimed the joy and fruits of repentance and the final mercies of the Lord (Alma 26:36). Ammon glories in the conversion of the Lamanites who were brought to behold the light of God. Alma likewise experiences this conversion and the light of God and exclaims the joy that filled his soul because of his repentance. Awe was exclaimed on the eventual downfall of Evil. The final exclamations in the Book of Mormon are in the Lord’s speech to the multitude at Bountiful. He speaks extensively on the gathering of the covenant people. The exclaimed utterances in this speech are that God will reign in Zion and comfort his people. Taken together, the positive exclamations have one simple message: *God reigns*.

7.3. The juxtaposition of wicked and righteous states

While the text holistically functions to encourage repentance (Reynolds, 2020), “repent!” is only found once propositionally as exclaimed in the text (Helaman 7:17). In Helaman 7 the people are told to repent after a condemnation of their wickedness and in Helaman 13, Samuel the prophet delivers a lengthy speech in which the only exclamation is to hear his words. This parallels the command to hearken to the Lord as Samuel’s words are to remember the Lord, to repent, and be saved. More often, the use of the exclamation mark strategically emphasizes this interpretation indirectly, through contrast. For example, in the conversation that the prophet Abinadi has with the priests of Noah before he is killed, Abinadi begins his conversation by pointing out the priests’ wicked behavior for their false teachings. This is contrasted with his focus praising the power of God and explaining how one can live a righteous life by testifying of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, the notated proposition *It is bad to pervert the ways of the Lord* is juxtaposed sharply against the proposition *The feet of those who publish peace is beautiful upon the mountains*. This shows the great importance of missionary work and spreading the news of Christ’s righteous rule over humankind. Because God is all-powerful and brings only goodness, those who spread this news are righteous individuals, worthy of commendation. The contrast between the pain of sin is overcome by the joy of turning to a righteous state (Alma 36:2; 4 Nephi 1:18) and this contrast is intensified by the exclamation mark.

Further, the exclamation mark’s emphasis on the contrast creates a reference to a specific universe of discourse. The propositions that are exclaimed necessitate references to a world in which God exists and the righteous are missionaries of his gospel, a state of wickedness exists, and they are spatially separated with God’s righteous state above the state of wickedness. These are expressed metaphorically through words such as “fallen,” “evil,” “cut down,” “weaken,” and “departed” (e.g., 3 Nephi 9:2, Mormon 6:17) in the text. This is seen in lamentations from the prophets which lead to a call of alarm about the consequences of evil as a reward (e.g., to be placed alone in the midst of the earth (2 Nephi 15:8).

Placed in the context of Church, exclaiming propositions which build a world of contrast follows protestant invocations of joining Christianity to avoid hell and punishment. But the exclamation mark around only select doctrinal points takes it further to the need to join this branch of Christianity. The exclamation mark draws attention to the reasoning processes the reader undertakes, and how to judge one’s own reasoning as foolish or wise. The exclamation function of *absurdity* highlights viewpoints that obviously should (or should not) make sense (Mosiah 8:20, 2 Nephi 29:3), including infant baptism (Moroni 8:12). Church doctrines of baptism (of age) and receiving the Holy Ghost, current revelation and miracles, praise for missionary work, and avoiding alcohol are typical of how the Church distinguishes itself from other branches of Christianity. Thus, the reader is encouraged by use of the exclamation mark to choose a righteous path, focused on Christ, and be baptized in this Church. It is little wonder then that the Book of Mormon is hailed by Church leaders as an effective missionary tool.

8. Conclusions on Ricoeur

German philosophical hermeneutics is rooted in the rhetorical interpretation of the law and scripture (Gadamer, 2001), as a result of increased print and literacy. While Ricoeur attempted methodological differences to the field, his work still is applied to religious texts quite productively. That the exclamation highlights the wicked state of the people falls squarely in line with Ricoeur’s hermeneutics in that it “attends so centrally to the human capacity for evil” (Arthos, 2019). Using Ricoeur to show the how punctuation mediates the interpretation of a text, we showed the current editors of the Book of Mormon use the exclamation mark to direct the reader’s attention away from the narrative.

Like a newborn taking its first breath of air with lungs already polluted by its mother’s air, the reader’s interpretation of a new text is already polluted by the editor’s punctuated interpretation of that same text. Thus, extending Ricoeur’s theory, the reader must interpret based on an already filtered interpretation provided in the punctuation of the editor. The reader is directed, through the exclamation mark, towards doctrinal references of God and Christ, the state of the wicked, and to the contrast between the two.

Ricoeur (1981) explains that “the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself” (p. 182). Arthos (2019) calls this the “focus on the capability of the person arising from linguisticity.” The editor’s choices guide this appropriation as they advocate for “the reader’s enjoyment, edification, or even transformation” (Reiss, 2016, p.81). The primary question of this article was how editor punctuation mediated the interpretation of the text. In the case of exclamation marks in the Book of Mormon, the editors invited readers to interpret their state in relation to God and ‘understand themselves’ in relation to a world of fallen wicked and elevated righteous. Future research into punctuation might look at how other punctuation functions symbolically in a text, in edited punctuation in diachronic editions of texts, the modernization of older texts, and the role of punctuation in translated works.

Finally, our analysis was underscored by the question of methodology. Echoing Grondin and Pellauer, Arthos (2019) writes that “Ricoeur’s own mode of argumentation [is] less methodological than he himself would admit”. This article showed how microanalysis of several linguistic structures can serve to support and strengthen methodology for the distanced interpretation of the text independent of the writer/editor’s intent. Far from definitively answering the question, this article both raises the question and offers how that approach might look. Further investigation of the role of Ricoeur in linguistics and linguistic methodologies should explore both written and spoken events for speech-acts and pragmatics constructions of context.

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