

Two Possible Readings
of *The Gettysburg Address*
 — The “DASH” and “SHALL” Readings —

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1. Background

1.1 *The Gettysburg Address*

Lincoln's address give at the dedication of the cemetery at the site of the Civil War battle at Gettysburg has been analyzed by our group at three meetings of the Linguistic Society of Western Japan: In 1999 at Kyushu Sangyo University by Shuichi Ozono; in 2000 at Hiroshima Municipal University by Vernon Sullivan, Yuji Tomihara, Shuichi Ozono, and Baku Honda; and in 2001 at Osaka Gakuin University by Yuji Tomihara, Vernon Sullivan, Shuichi Ozono, and Baku Honda. Our analysis has focused on the concluding sentence (Table 1).

Table 1. The concluding sentence of the “Bliss” copy of *The Gettysburg Address*

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — ^[1]that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — ^[2]that we here highly resolve ^[3]that these dead shall not have died in vain — ^[4]that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and ^[5]that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

1.2 The “DASH” and “SHALL” Constructions

We previously proposed two possible interpretations of the above sentence. The first interpretation we will call the “DASH” reading. In the copies of the address in which dashes are predominantly used, the structure can be cast as follows:

- [1] that
- [2] that resolve [3] that
- [4] that
- and [5] that

The second interpretation of the sentence, the “SHALL” reading, relies on the use of the word “*shall*” to indicate three imperative outcomes, and the sentence can be recast as:

- [1] that
- [2] that resolve
- [3] that**shall**
- [4] that**shall**
- and [5] that**shall**

The forms of the subjects and verbs in clauses 3, 4, and 5 are clearly different from those of clauses 1 and 2, which suggest that they are dependant on “resolve” (Table 2).

Table 2. The forms of the subjects and verbs

	Subject	Verb
“That” clause #1	we	take
“That” clause #2	we	resolve
“That” clause #3	these dead	shall not have died
“That” clause #4	this nation	shall have
“That” clause #5	government (of the people, by the people, for the people)	shall not perish

1.3 Analysis of Translations

Our analysis of 11 Japanese translations of *The Gettysburg Address* and one into Basic English by C.K. Ogden (1968, pp. 371-372) (Gordon W. T., 1994, pp. 223-224) clearly showed that the vast majority of the translators preferred a “DASH” reading (Table 3).

Table 3. Translations of *The Gettysburg Address*

	Ogden: Basic English	Japanese Translations	TOTAL
“DASH” reading	1	9	10
“SHALL” reading	0	1	1
Not Clear	0	1	1
Total	1	11	12

1.4 Research Question

During the question and answer section following our Hiroshima presentation, the first author was asked which interpretation he supported. His answer was “Sometimes A, sometimes B, and sometimes both”. Although the answer may have seemed evasive, it was heartfelt. The grammatical structure seems to support the “SHALL” reading, but the “DASH” reading has been favored in the translator’s interpretation. What was Lincoln’s intent? In this paper we will attempt to answer this question.

2. Discussion

2.1 Drafts of *The Gettysburg Address*

For this analysis it is important to note that Lincoln produced five handwritten drafts of *The Gettysburg Address*. The first known manuscript, the “Nicolay” copy, was given by Lincoln to his private secretary John Nicolay in November of 1863 and is now held by the Library of Congress. The “Hay” copy, which is also in the Library of Congress, was given to Lincoln’s other secretary, John Hay, also sometime in November. The third copy, the “Everett” copy, was sent to Edward Everett, the featured speaker at Gettysburg, for inclusion in a book of the speeches presented at the dedication of Gettysburg. The book was to be sold at auction, with the proceeds going to charity. This copy was written in late 1863 or early 1864 and is currently held by the Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield. The fourth copy, the “Bancroft” copy, now at the Cornell University Library in Ithaca, New York, was given to historian George Bancroft to produce lithographs to be sold for charitable purposes at the Baltimore Sanitary Fair that was held in February 1864. Because it was written on paper that was not suitable for the printing process being used, Mr. Alexander Bliss, Bancroft’s stepson, sent the proper type of paper, on which Mr. Lincoln wrote the last of his drafts. This copy is on display in the Lincoln Room at the White House in Washington D.C. and is known as the “Bliss” copy. (Wills, 1992) (“Library of Congress Home Page”, 2006)

2.2 Lincoln’s Punctuation

The variations of the punctuation of the five versions of the address are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Variations of the punctuation

Draft	[Clause 1]	[Clause 2]	[Clause 3]	[Clause 4]	[Clause 5]
1. Nicolay	— that	— that	resolve ...	; that	, and that
2. Hay	— that	— that	resolve that	; that	; and that
3. Everett	— that	— that	resolve that	— that	— and that
4. Bancroft	— that	— that	resolve that	— that	— and that
5. Bliss	— that	— that	resolve that	— that	— and that

2.3 Semi-colons and syntax

The punctuation of the two copies written nearest the time the address was given consists of a comma and semi-colons in clauses 4 and 5, punctuation that clearly indicates a “SHALL” reading, even though it does not follow the generally accepted rules of grammar in which a semi-colon should be used to separate independent clauses (Hodges & Whitten, 1967, p. 134). The three versions written later have become ambiguous because the use of dashes, in place of the comma and semi-colons, makes two interpretations possible. This would seem to contradict the usual editorial process in which mistakes are corrected and ambiguity is clarified in each successive draft, with the last draft having the most clarity and being generally accepted as representing the intention of the author. Therefore, because the “Bliss” copy was the last written by Lincoln, we use it to reflect his intention as to how the document should be read.

2.4 Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address

Approximately one year after writing *The Gettysburg Address*, Lincoln, on March 4, 1865, wrote the following as the final sentence of his second inaugural address:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work

we are in; **to** bind up the nation's wounds; **to** care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan — **to** do all which may achieve and cherish, a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations. (Library of Congress Home Page)

The parallels between the closing sentences of *The Gettysburg Address* and the second inaugural address can be clearly seen. Lincoln lists a series of goals that he feels are imperative and that he hopes will make a lasting imprint on the consciousness of the American people. Except for a single dash, Lincoln chose to highlight these pressing matters by separating them with semi-colons.

2.5 Dash and Semi-colon: Definitions and Usage

A dash can be used “to mark the separation of included units when the units are positioned medially or finally” (1985, 1629). The modern definition of semi-colon as found in *The American Heritage Dictionary* (p. 1640) is “A mark of punctuation used to connect independent clauses ... ” Booth (1998, p. 44) describes the final three “that” clauses as “dependent on resolve”, which would make semi-colons inappropriate according to the above definition.. Would Lincoln have made a fundamental mistake in punctuation by using semi-colons between dependent clauses? Why would Lincoln use semi-colons in the early versions of *The Gettysburg Address*, change to dashes in the final version, then return to the use of semi-colons a year later in his second inaugural address?

2.6 Elocution vs. Punctuation Rules

Stephen Booth (1998, p.52) comments that *The Gettysburg Address* makes perfect sense and is generally unquestioned, but that in-depth analysis of the syntax shows it to be nonsense; what he calls “precious Nonsense”. In his words “The last sentence can be demonstrated to be syntactically incomprehensible”.

Why did Lincoln edit from clarity to ambiguity in *The Gettysburg Address*, but not do the same in his second inaugural address? The key to answering this question may lie in the following definitions. A dash can be used “at any point in a grammatical structure when you feel a pause would be appropriate” (*The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing*). “It (a semi-colon) is a stronger mark than the comma, signifying a greater break or longer pause between sentence elements. But it is weaker than the period and other terminal marks....” (Shaw, 1963, p. 125). Notice that both definitions focus on the function of the dash or semi-colon as a marker of where to pause, not as an indicator of the relationship between the elements of the sentence. An important function of the written word is to accurately record what a person has said and how they said it -- their elocution. The “Bliss” copy of the address was not made simply to record the words spoken by Lincoln: It was to be sold as a representation of this important speech. Not only what was said, but how it was said would be of great importance.

A “SHALL” reading divides the end of the speech into two main parts; the second of which is further divided into three subordinate parts. Indeed, it makes a great difference whether we read the end of the speech by the “SHALL” reading or by the “DASH” reading. The “SHALL” reading has two long pauses and two short breaks. Visually, this might look as follows:

██████████ — — —

A “DASH” reading divides the concluding section of the address into four, more symmetrical parts, which places more equal emphasis on each of Lincoln’s four imperatives, the elocution of which would consist of four long pauses.

██████████ ██████████ ██████████ ██████████

The difference is striking. The former represents one major point of climax followed by three less impressive points, which results in an anticlimax, rather than a more impressive sustained climax. The latter far better represents how Lincoln probably delivered the speech, with four major pauses that build the concluding section

to an extended, emotional climax that ends in the memorable clause “government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish”.

3. Conclusion

Determining a person’s intentions is an impossible task, especially so when almost 150 years has passed. However, our analysis may shed some light on why Lincoln changed to a more abstract version in his final draft of *The Gettysburg Address*. In all likelihood, the answer is quite simple. Rather than producing a grammatically correct document, he wished to document to as closely as possible the elocution with which he presented the address on the solemn occasion of the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg.

By changing to dashes in the “Bliss” copy, Lincoln emphasized the symmetry of the climax of the spoken address. In doing so he created a work that has withstood the test of time and remains one of the United State’s most precious documents. Its popularity rests both in its simplicity and in its complex poetic beauty. Each dash is like a lightning bolt, illuminating its subsequent phrase and building the address to its most memorable climax. Lincoln, in a stroke of artistic genius, created a minimalist, abstract piece of literature that has inspired readers from a wide range of cultures over many generations.

In answer to the question of which is the correct way of reading the address, the “dash” or the “shall” reading, it seems that there is no either/or answer. We are still not quite certain what Lincoln intended, but feel we are getting closer. Lincoln, with great artistry probably used the dashes to emphasize the elements of his spectacular climax that highlighted his four imperatives, three of which require much resolve, and all of which are as relevant to contemporary society as they were in 1863.

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