

Activity 19.5 - Dr Samuel Johnson - *The Rambler* No 38, 1750

The following analysis of the first two paragraphs of Johnson's text is taken from Dennis Freeborn's *Style - Text Analysis & Linguistic Criticism* (Macmillan 1996), and the vocabulary list from the accompanying *Commentary & Data Book*.

The advantages of mediocrity

... Health and vigour, and a happy constitution of the corporeal frame, are of absolute necessity to the enjoyment of the comforts, and to the performance of the duties of life, and requisite in yet a greater measure to the accomplishment of any thing illustrious or distinguished; yet even these, if we can judge by their apparent consequences, are sometimes not very beneficial to those on whom they are most liberally bestowed. They that frequent the chambers of the sick, will generally find the sharpest pains, and most stubborn maladies among them whom confidence of the force of nature formerly betrayed to negligence and irregularity; and that superfluity of strength, which was at once their boast and their snare, has often, in the latter part of life, no other effect than that it continues them long in impotence and anguish.

These gifts of nature are, however, always blessings in themselves, and to be acknowledged with gratitude to him that gives them; since they are, in their regular and legitimate effects, productive of happiness, and prove pernicious only by voluntary corruption, or idle negligence. And as there is little danger of pursuing them with too much ardour or anxiety, because no skill or diligence can hope to procure them, the uncertainty of their influence upon our lives is mentioned, not to depreciate their real value, but to repress the discontent and envy to which the want of them often gives occasion in those who do not enough suspect their own frailty, nor consider how much less is the calamity of not possessing great powers, than of not using them aright...

Vocabulary

The style of a text is partly dependent upon whether the words are familiar and informal, or not, and how the derivation of the vocabulary provides a guide to this. The *Rambler* text contains 100 lexical words, 23% of which derive from French or Latin from the 15th to the 17th centuries.

(lexical words)

Old English	32	32%	
Old French	43	43%	
Middle English from Latin	2	2%	ie 77% are older, probably core words.
French 15 th -17 th centuries	13	13%	
Latin 15 th -17 th centuries	10	10%	ie 23% are later, perhaps non-core words.

14th C & before 77%*OE*

acknowledged lives
 always long
 aright often
 bestowed sharpest
 blessings sick
 boast snare
 enough sometimes
 find strength
 frame stubborn
 gifts thing
 gives *ON*
 great(er) skill
 happiness want (n)
 happy
 health
 hope
 idle *ME fr Latin*
 latter absolute
 life repress
 little

OF

accomplishment liberally
 anguish maladies
 apparent measure
 ardour mentioned
 betrayed nature
 chambers necessity
 comforts negligence
 consequences occasion
 consider pains
 continues part
 corruption persuing
 danger powers
 duties procure
 effect(s) prove
 envy (n) regular
 force superfluity
 frailty uncertainty
 generally using
 impotence value
 influence vigour
 irregularity voluntary
 judge (vb)

15th C & after 23%*French*

15th C
 beneficial
 calamity
 performance
 possessing
 real
16th C
 constitution
 diligence
 distinguished
 enjoyment
 former(ly)
 gratitude
 pernicious
17th C
 productive

Latin

15th C
 confidence
 discontent
 legitimate
 requisite
 suspect (vb)
16th C
 anxiety
 frequent
 illustrious
17th C
 corporeal
 depreciate

Rhetoric and patterning

The rhetorical features of a text can often be made visually clearer by setting it out in a diagrammatic form, boxing the words, phrases or clauses in parallel or in a balanced pair:

[Health
and vigour
and a happy constitution of the corporeal frame]

ARE

of absolute necessity to the enjoyment of the comforts *and* to the performance of the duties of life

and requisite in yet a greater measure to the accomplishment of any thing illustrious *or* distinguished)

yet even these, [*if* we can judge by their apparent consequences],

ARE

sometimes not very beneficial to those [on whom they are most liberally bestowed].