

history of early-modern and modern English

key dates in the standardization of modern English:

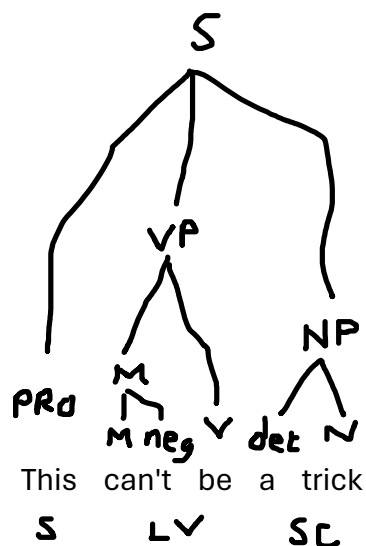
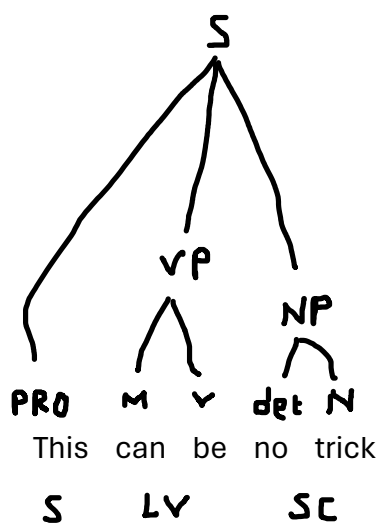
1476: William Caxton establishes the first printing press in England (London)
1586: William Bullokar's *Brief Grammar for English* published (London)
1755: Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* published (London)
1800-1850: rotary printing press & wood-pulp paper; proliferation of periodicals
1820-1850: origins of U.S. public-school system (Massachusetts)
1870-1920: establishment of state-funded education in England
c1920: initial radio broadcasts in Britain and the U.S.
1930s/40s: BBC and American TV networks begin broadcasts
1995-2000: World Wide Web and home computing
2007-08: iPhone and Android smartphones

The passage below is early modern English, from William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* (c1598); Act 2, Scene 3. The speaker, Benedick, gives a *soliloquy* - he is the only person on stage as he speaks. Benedick has always had a low opinion of falling in love, and a low opinion of a woman named Beatrice. But now he has overheard some people saying that Beatrice might be in love with him. (Which she will be; but she has always expressed a low opinion of falling in love, and an especially low opinion of Benedick.)

This can be no trick: the conference was sadly borne.
 They have the truth of this from Hero. They seem to pity the lady:
 it seems her affections have their full bent. Love me!
 why, it must be requited. I hear how I am censured:
 they say I will bear myself proudly,
 if I perceive the love come from her;
 they say too that she will rather die than give any sign of affection.
 I did never think to marry: I must not seem proud:
 happy are they that hear their detractions and can put them to mending.
 They say the lady is fair;
 'tis a truth, I can bear them witness; and virtuous; 'tis so, I cannot reprove it;
 and wise, but for loving me;
 by my troth, it is no addition to her wit,
 nor no great argument of her folly, for I will be horribly in love with her.
 I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me,
 because I have railed so long against marriage:
 but doth not the appetite alter?
 a man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age.
 Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of
 the brain awe a man from the career of his humour?
 No, the world must be peopled.
 When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.
 Here comes Beatrice. By this day!
 she's a fair lady: I do spy some marks of love in her.

One way to get a sense of Shakespeare's English - and to develop facility in reading and studying it - is to slow down drastically and check each construction against the corresponding construction in 21st-century English. This is a painstaking but rewarding process that we can try even on a relatively straightforward passage like Benedick's soliloquy.

Let's try this with the very first independent clause in the speech: "This can be no trick." In 21st-century English, we would say instead (among other options) "This can't be a trick," using the NICE rule of modal plus negative that we have previously studied. But instead of inserting the negative marker into the verb phrase, Shakespeare keeps the verb phrase affirmative and uses a negative determiner in the subject-complement noun phrase.



In a sense, we might say that Shakespeare's sentence is "non-standard," though of course it was standard enough in London in 1598. It is no longer standard in the 21st century, but the meaning is still clear. Just as one might code-switch between contemporary standard and non-standard dialects, reading early modern English is a matter of switching into a (slightly) different code; studying that English is a matter of being able to explain what has changed in rules and idioms over 425 years.