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Jehovah's Witnesses, endangered languages, and the globalized textual community



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This article explores Jehovah's Witnesses' use of Oaxaca Chontal, an endangered language spoken in Mexico. The Witness religion is highly centralized and standardized: Witnesses obeyed instructions to use Chontal because these instructions bore the authority of the Watch Tower Society institution. This article proposes the concept of the globalizing textual community, which synthesizes understandings of community from throughout social science literature, in order to explain how religious identity can supersede national, ethnic, and linguistic identities. A central mechanism of this community is the discourse of the "pure language," which renders language choice irrelevant even as it provides a warrant for extensive translation.

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On the morning of the second day of the 2010 Chontal-language District Assembly of Jehovah's Witnesses in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, México,¹ the dog dragged my freshly washed dress off the line and into the mud. I swore at him under my breath, and a member of the family I was staying with heard me. Some hours later, I was strolling next to the patriarch of this family, Jacinto, a congregational elder in his 70s.

"In paradise," he said, as if merely making conversation, "we will have a pure language that contains no curses, words that offend or hurt people, or even words about hurting people, because we will have no need for them." He did not mention my transgression directly (cf. [Basso, 1990\[1984\]](#)).

I wondered at the time how to understand this notion of purity, but I would connect it only later to an even more important word: "we."

Individuals often speak of the collective body of Witnesses in just this inclusive fashion. When I left Santa María Zapotitlán at the end of my fieldwork, almost everyone encouraged me to associate myself with a Witness congregation. "Jehovah's Witnesses, we're good people," they would say, or, "we live well."² I had also been told that individuals who had migrated within Mexico or even to the US had typically found their jobs through Witnesses with roots in these locations. The encouragement to find a congregation was heartfelt advice, rooted in direct experience. Indeed, individual Witnesses speak of

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¹ A District Assembly is an annual event in which a large number of Jehovah's Witness congregations come together for three days of religious activity. This event, held in Salina Cruz, brought together all of the eight Chontal-language congregations in Oaxaca State.

² The Spanish construction uses first person plural agreement on the verb and an overt noun phrase subject, and can be rendered into English in several ways. What I wish to emphasize is the simultaneous (third-person) characterization of the group and (first-person) identification with it.

Witnesses worldwide as a single congregation, as a community, one in which they feel membership and about which they feel entitled to generalize.

Yet there are 7,538,994 Jehovah's Witnesses, and they live in 239 different countries and speak 595 different languages.³ How can such a community function? More specifically, how is diversity controlled and managed so that insiders become aware only of the uniformity of this community? What role do particular languages play?

1. Jehovah's Witnesses and congregational orientation to the institution

Jehovah's Witnesses are an evangelical⁴ Christian sect⁵ whose practices are heavily standardized and centralized. All meetings center on the performance of various written texts, which afford just this standardization (Barchas-Lichtenstein, 2013). Importantly, Witnesses' required religious reading includes not only the Bible but also publications produced at regular intervals by their institutional arm, the Watch Tower Society, and available in multiple languages.

This article is based on nine months of fieldwork in Santa María Zapotitlán, Oaxaca, México, a community of approximately 1100 people, roughly half of whom are affiliated with Jehovah's Witnesses between three congregations. Zapotitlán residents consider themselves ethnically Chontal, yet few people of child-bearing age and younger speak the Highland Chontal language fluently. According to the 2010 census (INEGI, 2010), 62.7% of the population (over the age of five) are Spanish-speaking monolinguals, and there is only one Chontal-speaking monolingual. In spite of the large number of Spanish monolinguals, the population of Zapotitlán considers Chontal the defining language of this community, and all members imagined to speak Chontal.⁶ Furthermore, the Watch Tower Society has recognized all three Jehovah's Witnesses congregations as Chontal language congregations since 2005.

Watch Tower Society ideology makes overt claims that Witnesses form a global community; due in part to these claims, the study of any particular congregation must be situated within the organizational whole. I begin with a brief explanation of the textual and religious practices that unite Witnesses around the world.

The massive number of textual materials that Witnesses use is exemplified by the portfolios – black leather briefcases or purses – that make them identifiable on sight. They carry these portfolios to meetings, as well door-to-door; even children who are barely learning to read may carry one around. A portfolio will contain, at minimum, a song book, a New World Translation of the Bible, a Bible study book, and current editions of two newsletters used in meetings. Many people also carry around assorted pamphlets and magazines for door-to-door preaching, a smaller Bible study book, a daily Bible guide, and other texts that are frequently used in meetings. A Jehovah's Witness, in short, will not attend a meeting or go door-to-door without hundreds and maybe thousands of pages of written literature (cf. Cahn, 2003: 156; Penton, 1997: 231; Reed, 1986: 121).

Congregations meet several times weekly, and these meetings consist of three main types of activities. In one activity, two men, often elders, lead the congregation in studying *The Watchtower* magazine or another Witness Bible textbook. One man reads a paragraph aloud, and the other reads the study question provided and mediates responses from the congregation. These responses typically consist of rereading the relevant sentences from the text. A second type of activity is the *public talk*, in which a senior man gives a 30-min sermon based on an outline received from the Watch Tower Society. The third activity is known as the *Theocratic Ministry School*, in which congregation members are assigned to present skits and short talks that demonstrate particular challenges encountered in door-to-door ministry. The topics of skits for any given week are determined by a newsletter that is centrally distributed; sometimes this newsletter include concerns that are simply not relevant to a given congregation.⁷ Witnesses also attend Assemblies several times yearly: these are multi-day events where multiple congregations come together to participate in similar activities.

These activities share an intense centralization and standardization. All of the publications around which these activities are built are approved by the Governing Body (see Franz, 1983), a small panel of senior men based at Watch Tower Society Headquarters in Brooklyn. Publication, translation, and distribution are carried out by Branch Offices in a number of countries, and these are all under Brooklyn's authority. No Witness, even a congregation elder, ever gives a talk unless he is asked to do so by the Watch Tower Society, and no Witness ever gives a talk on a topic of his own choosing. The outlines on which talks are based provide appropriate Bible verses and suggested references from the canon of Witness literature, including old *Watchtower* issues, pamphlets, and books. Should the speaker choose to do additional research, he has Witness-published

³ <http://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/> accessed July 25, 2013.

⁴ I use this term with a lower-case e in Cahn's (2003) inclusive sense to refer to all Christian sects that share a belief in the importance of conversion, Biblical inerrancy, and the urgency of active door-to-door evangelism. In Mexico, all non-Catholic Christians are typically considered *evangélicos* (evangelicals), a broad catch-all category. As Cahn (2003: ix n1) observes: "Following the terms that believers themselves use, I will refer to all those non-Catholic Christian churches that engage in proselytizing activity as evangelical." However, Witnesses are not denominationally Evangelical; indeed, they are usually characterized as para-Protestants due in large part to their non-trinitarian beliefs. (See also Balmer's (2006: xii–xvi) thoughtful discussion of the terms *evangelical* and *fundamentalist*; he, too, uses *evangelical* as an umbrella term.)

⁵ I use this term in the sociological sense to refer to a religious movement that is more centralized, cohesive, and committed than a *denomination*, and which lacks a trained professional ministry (Wilson, 1959: 4–5).

⁶ See Avineri's (2014) notion of *metalinguistic community*, which emphasizes connection to a language rather than competence in it.

⁷ For example, Witnesses are often required to present about preaching to Jews, regardless of the religious makeup of their region. In fact, one high-ranking Witness even commented on the impracticality of this topic at an Assembly, yet he did not have the authority to change it (Barchas-Lichtenstein, 2013: 196n294).

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