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**Author**

Barchas-Lichtenstein, Jena

**Publication Date**

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

"When the dead are resurrected, how are we going to speak to them?":

Jehovah's Witnesses and the Use of Indigenous Languages

in the Globalizing Textual Community

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Anthropology

by

Jena Barchas-Lichtenstein

2013

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2013

## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

"When the dead are resurrected, how are we going to speak to them?":

Jehovah's Witnesses and the Use of Indigenous Languages  
in the Globalizing Textual Community

by

Jena Barchas-Lichtenstein

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Paul V. Kroskrity, Chair

In the face of global language contraction, unlikely allies are emerging to support language maintenance and revitalization. This dissertation demonstrates that the interest of many speakers in revitalizing the indigenous Mexican language Highland Oaxaca Chontal is connected to their faith as Jehovah's Witnesses, a new religious movement rooted in the global North. At the time of research, Witness religious meetings were the only high-status context – and the only public context – in which Chontal was consistently used. Moreover, new indexical connections between language and religion position knowledge of the language as a moral imperative rather than a matter of individual choice. That is, local Jehovah's Witnesses have begun using more Chontal as speaking this language has come to index devoutness.

This 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 dissertation 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. In particular, I consider how members define their language practices as shared across externally imposed boundaries between language varieties. I build on Anderson's (1983) fundamental insight about the affordances of written texts to consider how translations are framed as commensurate or even identical, using community members' own logic as a guide.

A *textual regime* of shared reading and shared literacy practices unites this community. If written texts afford standardization not only of content but also of literacy and mediational practices, translation represents the potential to challenge it. One chief mechanism for minimizing these challenges is the *transidiomatic authoritative discourse* of the "pure language." Other mechanisms include a variety of mediational performances (Bauman 2004) of written texts, institutional regulations and consequences, and textual ideologies.

This dissertation explores both the particular ethnographic case and the institution behind many of this community's language ideologies and religious practices. I demonstrate that the enactment of Witness religious texts and the moral weight this enactment carries are, ultimately, inseparable from the language in which it is carried out.

The dissertation of Jena Barchas-Lichtenstein is approved.

Marjorie Harness Goodwin

Pamela Munro

Elinor Ochs

Aaron Huey Sonnenschein

Paul V. Kroskrity, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hundreds, if not thousands of people, made this project possible. While only one person is ever named as the author of a dissertation, dozens of other voices appear in the pages, and many more contributed in less definable ways, through academic and personal support.

In Santa María Zapotitlán, I am grateful to every single individual who appears in this document in any way, whether as a recurrent character or merely in the margins, unnamed but no less important for that. I do not name anyone here in the interest of protecting their privacy, but I am particularly grateful to my extended Chontal families, not only those whose house I lived in but also those who invited me for regular meals and companionship, and the various sons, daughters, and grandchildren, both in Zapotitlán and elsewhere. Their warmth was invaluable, and I wish I could express my gratitude for their patience with me and my insistence on breaking certain rules of conduct on a daily basis. I passed many pleasant hours chitchatting in dozens of houses, sometimes as a result of simply stopping to say hello. *Shnats'ekolwa* and *gracias*.

The members of the language rescue committee were also integral to this research project, as were regular attendees who were not formal members. I wouldn't have been able to do anything without dozens of Chontal teachers, either, among them nearly all of the older people of the community. *Shnats'ekolwa*. I apologize for mangling your beloved language time and again, and for ultimately failing to learn it beyond the level of small talk.

I also want to acknowledge every member of Congregación Sur for their acceptance of me and my project, however they understood it. Among them I count many friends, who made my stay in Zapotitlán more pleasant than it otherwise would have been. Various Jehovah's Witness pioneers were also both supportive of my research and kind to me, as were elders and ministerial servants of all three congregations, and various levels of overseers in Mexico.

All of the Zapotitlán authorities from the years 2009-2011 made this project possible with their support. I am particularly indebted to the computing committee.

In Oaxaca City, this gratitude extends to the members of the Atzompa Chontal congregation, especially for their patience with my irregular attendance and their willingness to help me in spite of it. In Brooklyn, I thank James Pellechia for taking me in, showing me around, introducing me to a number of people involved in the writing and editing process, and allowing me to see how the Bethel family works. I especially appreciate the sense of humor that took us to the gymnasium to look inside the windows of my father's apartment, and his generosity in reading and commenting on entire chapters of my dissertation. Ethnography is a dialogue, and I am grateful for James's thoughtful participation in it. In Texcoco, Jorge Daesslé and Isabel Arévalo were happy to show me around as well. I also thank every single person who took the time to talk to me, eat with me, and answer my endless questions in both locations.

I cannot possibly overstate my gratitude to my committee. My chair Paul Kroskrity has been endlessly positive and available during my time at UCLA. Without his help I would never have made it this far, and his extensive comments on multiple drafts of every chapter have helped make this dissertation the best work it could possibly be. Pam Munro has been incredibly supportive of my work in both linguistics and anthropology and willing to lend her careful eye to multiple drafts, Candy Goodwin took a great deal of time to help me analyze several of my recordings, and Elinor Ochs pointed me to theory that has changed the way I think about large sections of this dissertation. They are all fantastic mentors and scholars and I am lucky to count on their support.

I also want to thank Suzanne Wertheim for endless encouragement, support, and "real talk" about the dissertation writing process. John A. Lucy remains my first mentor, a devoted

academic cheerleader, and a true friend. Jennifer Jackson shared her office with me when I had nowhere to write, which was the greatest possible gift. Shirley Brice Heath has been nothing but supportive, particularly in helping me reach out to SIL-International for comparative information and in providing extensive comments on several chapters. Aaron Huey Sonnenschein read and commented on a great deal of my work, and has believed steadfastly in the Chontal language documentation project for years. George Chryssides was gracious enough to provide me with several articles that I was unable to locate, as well as a thought-provoking correspondence and comments on Chapter Eight.

I am grateful to each and every colleague and friend at UCLA, especially Alethea Martí and Jennifer Guzmán, who were always willing to comment on the details of translation or transcription; and Rachel Flamenbaum, Lisa Newon, and Hadi Deeb, who helped me handle various tedious administrative tasks from afar. Every member of the UCLA Discourse Lab has contributed to my understanding of theory. CedarBough Saeji read more versions of my dissertation than anyone and discussed it with me at great length, and my writing group (various permutations of Xochitl Flores-Marcial, Lela Gibson, Daniella Perry, Marissa Petrou, and Daphne Rozenblatt) has also been tremendously supportive. Far from UCLA, Magnus Pharao Hansen, Ian Kalman, and Adam Shapiro have been terrifically generous colleagues and good friends to boot, and Talitha Phillips has answered many questions about Bible chronology.

My Oaxacan academic community has also been a wonderful source of support: Anjali Browning, Pame Castillo, Paja Faudree, Uliana Guerra, Nick Johnson, Quetzalcoatl Orozco, Kim Potowski, Bruno Renero-Hannan, Dan Suslak, Michael Swanton, Amy Trubek, Holly Worthen, and Lianne Visser. I thank Hub Oaxaca and the entire team for a space and another supportive community, and Antonio Bolaños for faithful transcription. I'm also grateful to many good

friends and neighbors in Oaxaca, including (but of course not limited to): Susan Bean Aycock, Scott Marc Becker, Alyssa Biebel, Lindsey Bryan, Rodrigo Carús, John Fox, Reid Gilbert, Kim Groves, Catherine Hemenway, Tony Macias, Andrea Meza, Bev and Jean Mitchell, Dave Oswald Mitchell, Phillip Smith, Roberto Tijerina, and so many more. You all made my time living in Oaxaca even richer and more rewarding than I could have hoped for.

A million administrators kept me from accidentally forgetting some seemingly-minor details and kept me on track in ways small and large. Foremost is Ann Walters, who must hold the world record for appearances in dissertation acknowledgments due to the sheer volume of anthropologists whose sanity she has preserved. I also thank Tracy Humbert, Tyler Lawrence, and Kate Royce in UCLA Anthropology; Melanie Levin in UCLA Linguistics; and dozens of people in various Graduate Division offices who have helped me negotiate their procedures, and Philip Perrin, Jack Busbee and the entire staff of the National Academy of Education. Tracey Horst at NYU Anthropology got me library access for a few weeks, which was a tremendous help. (I must also thank my father for letting me take advantage of his NYU library borrowing privileges. Whoever is trying to figure out why a dental school field instructor borrowed a few dozen books on Jehovah's Witnesses and fundamentalists has their work cut out for them.)

This work could never have been completed without generous funding from the UCLA Department of Anthropology, the UCLA Graduate Division, the UCLA Latin American Institute, the Pauley and Faucett families, and the National Academy of Education/Spencer Dissertation Fellowship. The National Academy of Education has also provided a wealth of resources for professional development and mentorship that have been vital to my academic success, and I am grateful to everyone who has been part of it, especially Emily Bruce.



The map that appears as Figure 3.2 on page 92, from Paul Turner's *The Highland Chontal*, © 1972 Wadsworth, a part of Cengage Learning, Inc., is reproduced by permission: [www.cengage.com/permissions](http://www.cengage.com/permissions)

Too many friends to count have supported me in ways large and small throughout this process. Many of them made me smile with their frequent email correspondence, especially (but not exclusively) Rich Allen, Hadi Deeb, Rachel Flamenbaum, Ron Gurantz, Katie Hale, Larry Kao, Ben Leach, Harold Liss, Jen Myers, Lisa Newon, Daniella Perry, Marissa Petrou, Gilda Rodríguez, Tanya Romaniuk, Stephanie Salwen, Blythe Sheldon, Ilana Schachter, Dan Stein, Jen Straus, Spider Vetter, and Daniela Wellisz. Ellen Sharp and Anna Corwin provided much-needed encouragement from their respective field sites at crucial times. (My father's family also rallied around me and kept me in the loop – Carol Bretstein is a particularly fabulous correspondent, but Susan Horn, Jo Ann Lewis, Vivian Lewis, and Sandy Withers are tied for second place.)

Danny Zborover and Veronica Pacheco provided a home-away-from-home in Xalapa, Veracruz, and kept me very, very, very honest in my portrayal of everything about Zapotitlán. Danny's years of experience there opened many doors for me, both literal and figurative.

Andrea Barchas, Phyllis Barchas, Dr. Bernard S. Lichtenstein, and Freddie Lichtenstein are the best family one could ask for and I couldn't have done it without you. Nathan Z. Dershowitz read the very first full draft and contributed immense organizational help, above and beyond the call of family duty. Alex Fern has not only kept me sane but provided enormous doses of faith in my ability and celebrated every incremental victory along the way.

Finally, I want to apologize to anyone who I have left out. The omission does not mean that I am any less grateful, only forgetful. And while many, many people have contributed to my completion of this dissertation, any shortcomings or errors found within are exclusively mine.

## VITA

- 2005 B.A. with Honors, Anthropology and Linguistics  
University of Chicago
- 2007 William O. Bright Award  
Department of Anthropology  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2007-2011 Pauley Fellowship  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2008-2009 Teaching Assistant  
Department of Anthropology  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2008-2009 Chancellor's Prize  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2009 M.A., Anthropology  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2009-2010 Graduate Research Mentorship  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2010 Graduate Summer Research Mentorship  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2011 Faucett Grant  
Latin American Institute  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2012-2013 Dissertation Year Fellowship  
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2012-2013 Dissertation Fellow  
National Academy of Education / Spencer Foundation

# One Arriving

## 1.1 Arriving in Zapotitlán: The Projects We Choose and the Projects that Choose Us

All graduate students hold close to our hearts Burns's famous observation that "the best-laid schemes of mice and men / go often awry": we almost never write the dissertation we had proposed a scant two or three years earlier. This is most true for those of us who work with human beings: it's highly unlikely that the subjects of our research do what we think – or hope – they will. When we propose our dissertations, our attention is on the projects we choose; when we write them, we orient to the projects that have chosen us.

I visited Santa María Zapotitlán, Oaxaca, Mexico for the first time in November 2009 with two colleagues: archaeologist Danny Zborover, who had been conducting ethnohistorical and archaeological research in the region for 10 years, and linguist Aaron Huey Sonnenschein, who had worked in other regions of Oaxaca but was also new to Zapotitlán. The three of us were proposing an interdisciplinary language documentation project: in addition to Spanish, 345 people out of a total population of 1,104 (INEGI 2010) in Zapotitlán speak Highland Oaxaca Chontal (ISO 639-3 code: chd). Highland Oaxaca Chontal and its sister language, Lowland Oaxaca Chontal (ISO 639-3 code: clo) are spoken by a total of approximately 4,400 individuals (INEGI 2010), and together form a language isolate.<sup>1</sup> I use the term "Chontal" to refer to Oaxaca Chontal, and specifically Highland Oaxaca Chontal, rather than to Tabasco Chontal, an unrelated

---

<sup>1</sup> Beginning with Alfred Kroeber (1915) and Edward Sapir (1920), scholars have suggested links to Hokan, but this hypothesis is problematic as a whole (Langdon 1974). I summarize issues in the classification of Oaxaca Chontal in section 3.1.7.2 of this dissertation.

Mayan language spoken elsewhere in Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

We had made this visit in part because Danny encouraged us to attend the inauguration of the community museum he helped found. During this first trip, I had seen a lot of enthusiasm for the language. A few men poured over monolingual Spanish dictionaries to understand the essence of the word *museum*. Armed with this knowledge they felt confident to translate it appropriately; the final sign proudly proclaimed "Museo Comunitario Educativo Centro de Investigación Chontal Santa María Zapotitlán / Ewespika Fojlia Jlumshajma Kijlijma Lajlpijlya Juala Witu." The Spanish content reads "Santa María Zapotitlán Educational Community Museum and Center for Chontal Research"; the Chontal content requires further explanation and will be addressed later in this dissertation.

The second time I arrived in Zapotitlán, ready to begin nearly a year of fieldwork in October 2010, I was eager to examine and compare several very different sites<sup>3</sup> of language maintenance and revitalization. These sites were: (1) a committee of the local government, working out of the town museum, that was charged with "rescuing" the Chontal language; (2) the Jehovah's Witnesses and their increasing use of Chontal in services; and (3) the eventual interdisciplinary language documentation project that Aaron, Danny, and I were planning.<sup>4</sup> When I arrived for this more extended period of fieldwork, I found that the current government was very interested in promoting the language, making a point of encouraging its use in public meetings.

---

<sup>2</sup> Where these distinctions become relevant I refer to "Oaxaca Chontal" and "Tabasco Chontal," or to "Highland Chontal" and "Lowland Chontal."

<sup>3</sup> I use the term "sites" here in the sense of Silverstein (1998b) and Philips (2000).

<sup>4</sup> I recorded a number of language learning and elicitation sessions that we had hoped would form a first step in this project, and had planned to review recordings made as part of this project. Unfortunately, we were unable to receive funding for this project and had to cancel planned field seasons in both summer 2011 and summer 2012; we are currently planning a 2013 field season.

In spite of this general atmosphere of enthusiasm, the language committee was far from self-sustaining in practice. It had been founded as part of a larger regional initiative, but its members had largely lost interest in attending the regional meetings, both because they were inconveniently far away and because they felt that the people in charge unfairly favored their own town over the rest of the region in distributing financial resources. Mountainous topography and circuitous roads mean that communities that look nearby on a map may actually be quite distant, which complicated these arrangements. While the Zapotitlán committee met on a fairly regular basis at my behest, it floundered. Committee members found it hard to conceive of a long-term project that would be both useful and interesting, and often chose to sit around brainstorming lists of words on some semantic theme, like animals or plants. I enjoyed the atmosphere of these gatherings, but was apprehensive about considering them a 'native' institutional site of language maintenance, since very little happened without my initiative and input. At one point the committee allegedly met twice a week, but it was rare for more than two of the four appointed members to attend. I also received word in my first two months of fieldwork that the language documentation team was rejected by every single grant we'd applied for. In short, two of the three sites of my comparative project were simply not viable.

Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other hand, were actively using the language in new contexts, translating ready-made texts and genres that had previously been available only in Spanish. While language revitalization has been studied extensively, the focal sites are more typically schools or collectives of local intellectuals (for example, see papers in Kroskrity and Field 2009). Non-indigenous religion has largely been overlooked as a site for this type of maintenance project,<sup>5</sup> but in some cases it is not only *a* site of language work but *the* focal site,

---

<sup>5</sup> But see Faudree 2006, Phrao Hansen 2010, and the array of studies on the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), including Hartch 2006 and Hvalkof et al. 1981. However, some studies suggest that the SIL is not a site of language

and as such needs to be explored in more depth. Furthermore, religious institutions may well have a unique power to position knowledge of the language as a moral imperative and not simply a matter of individual choice.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses are growing rapidly worldwide, particularly in developing countries (Cragun and Lawson 2010; Lawson and Cragun 2012; Stark and Iannaccone 1997), they have been the focus of surprisingly little academic research. Most of the historical and descriptive work that has been published is quite dated,<sup>6</sup> and only a very small – but growing – number of works have examined the practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses outside a White, English-speaking context.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, almost none of these works has taken the language of the Witnesses as central (Elliott 1993). Although Jehovah's Witnesses have been publishing tracts and magazines in multiple languages for some time, the extension to indigenous languages without a long tradition of literacy is a recent initiative and thus has not yet been widely studied (Mubimba 1987; Pharao Hansen 2010).

I began, then, with a seemingly simple question: what implications does Jehovah's Witnesses' use of a contracting language – that is, a language that is being used in fewer domains than previously, or one whose speakers are aging – have for the continued maintenance of that language? To carry out their religious mission worldwide, the Witnesses translate their materials

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maintenance but rather thinly veiled ethnocide (Smith 1981; Stoll 1982). Studies of religious Jews (e.g. Fader 2007) have also touched on the question of religion and language maintenance.

<sup>6</sup> Beckford 1975; 1978; Eddy 1958; Penton 1997; Rogerson 1969; Stroup 1945; Whalen 1962; White 1967; Zygmunt 1968. See also Elliott (1993: n7) and Holden (2002: 2) for summaries of the available works. Penton (1997: 399-405) notes the strengths and weaknesses of the major works available at the time of his writing. Some of the earlier works, for example, are more dismissive than scientific in tone.

<sup>7</sup> Cahn 2003; Fortuny Loret de Mola 1995; 1996; 2001; Garma Navarro 1994; Gross 2001; 2003; Hernández Castillo 1994; 2001; Montes García 1999; Pharao Hansen 2010. I list here only works examining Jehovah's Witnesses in Latin America and Mexico in particular; this bibliography is not intended to be exhaustive.

into 595 languages,<sup>8</sup> although not all publications are available in all languages. Furthermore, this number may not include languages that are used in services but have no written publications. The Witnesses constantly add new languages to their repertoire as they see new opportunities for proselytizing, yet many of these languages have few, if any, monolingual speakers. Why, then, do they make the effort to introduce new languages that are otherwise contracting (cf. Pharaoh Hansen 2010: 130), particularly in communities where the Witnesses have long been active in the dominant language (here Spanish)? Scholars have seen the Witnesses' encouragement as unambiguously positive in terms of language maintenance (Mubimba 1987; Pharaoh Hansen 2010). However, I would suggest that the Watch Tower Society,<sup>9</sup> the institutional arm of Jehovah's Witnesses, is not primarily concerned with the fate of the languages it uses to spread its message; its orientation to these languages is chiefly instrumental.

As I started to explore these questions, I came to understand that Witness ideologies and processes of translation could not be understood without understanding the much larger linguistic and textual landscape (see Chapters Six and Seven) of which they are a part. After all, the Witnesses are perhaps best known for an orientation to the written word. Anyone who has ever received a visit from door-to-door proselytizers, or been approached by Jehovah's Witnesses in a public park or train station – and I suspect this includes nearly all readers – has been offered an

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/> as of 3/5/2013.

<sup>9</sup> The Witnesses hold several corporations, including the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York. The New York corporation is primarily a holdings company, while the Pennsylvania corporation is the "international legal agency used ... for the worldwide Kingdom work" (Michael S., p.c., 12/3/2011). I use the term "Watch Tower Society" rather than "Watchtower Society" for the "global institutional arm of [Jehovah's Witnesses]" (Michael S., p.c., 12/13/2011) on the suggestion of my contact at their Brooklyn headquarters. However, in quotations I use the original author's spelling in spite of inconsistencies. Note also that the complex of buildings in Brooklyn is known as the Watchtower, and the magazine which Witnesses study is entitled *The Watchtower*. (Complicating the picture even further, this magazine has undergone a number of name changes since 1879, and several of its prior names spelled *Watch Tower* as two words.)

Chryssides (2008: 136-7) defines Watch Tower Society as "The abbreviated name for the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Inc., which determines and coordinates the international affairs of Jehovah's Witnesses." He also notes that "The 'Watchtower Society' – with 'Watchtower' as a single word – is the abbreviated name for the totality of legally incorporated instruments worldwide, which comprises the Witnesses."

array of magazines, tracts, brochures, and booklets. Indeed, proselytizers are known as *publishers*, which indicates the centrality of the written word (Stark and Iannaccone 1997: 137).

Jehovah's Witnesses are one of the fastest-growing religious movements in the world, with particularly high rates of growth in Latin America (Cragun and Lawson 2010; Lawson and Cragun 2012; Stark and Iannaccone 1997). Several scholars have sought to explain the rapid expansion of the Witnesses. Stark and Iannaccone (1997) provide ten factors they feel explain Witness growth, including: continuity with existing Christian faith as well as relatively low church attendance; ability to recover from failed prophecies;<sup>10</sup> high fertility and effective socialization of youth; an army of motivated and effective proselytizers who take advantage of a relatively open social network; a level of strictness that simultaneously deters those who are not committed and makes compliance possible, and which has been maintained over time; and an authoritative leadership. Holden (2002c) suggests that the Witnesses' message is fundamentally anti-modern and appeals to those who, for one reason or another, feel that modernity has passed them by, often due to economic marginalization; the strict and authoritarian nature of the movement provides a sense of security to those who feel lost in a quickly-changing world. Cragun and Lawson (2010; Lawson and Cragun 2012) focus on "demand-side factors", that is, qualities of particular regions or countries that lead them to take up this message, suggesting that developing countries will be particularly attracted to authoritarian religions "due to a breakdown in mechanical solidarity and an increase in existential insecurity" (2010: 354).

What all three of these accounts have in common is an emphasis on the strictness and authority of the Watch Tower Society, but they fail to address how this authority is created and

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<sup>10</sup> The ability to recover from failed prophecies is an important factor precisely because the Watch Tower Society has repeatedly linked Biblical eschatology to specific dates, which has allowed these prophecies to be proven demonstrably false. As Holden (2002c: 1) observes, "the years of 1874, 1914, 1918, 1925 and 1975 were all earmarked, to a greater or lesser extent, as times for the Second Coming of Christ, yet all brought bitter disappointment."



maintained. I argue that the Jehovah's Witnesses produce their moral authority through their use of language, particularly through a *globalizing textual community* (see Chapter Two) that defines not only legitimate sources of knowledge and ways of understanding that knowledge, but also legitimate speakers. What role does translation play in their textual economy? I argue that translation is deliberately differentiated from authorship to avoid any challenge to the Watch Tower Society's top-down authority.

## **1.2 Arriving at Kingdom Hall: "You Came to Study Chontal, but You Are Studying the Truth, Too"**

I began attending weekly Jehovah's Witness religious meetings in Santa María Zapotitlán because they were one of the few spaces where Chontal was used publicly. However, my attendance was interpreted as interest in the group's message. The heritage language, it seemed, could be a means to the end of conversion, but the same was not true of religious meetings: attendance was always an end in itself.

I was often asked if I had a religion, and which. I always replied that I was Jewish, or that my parents were Jewish and that I was not sure what I myself believed. Uncertainty and curiosity are not common religious stances in Zapotitlán, but neither are they foreign: the community contains Pentecostal and Catholic congregations in addition to the three congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses, and some individuals alternate their attendance for long periods of time.

Perhaps most tellingly, all three groups use *cristiano* 'Christian' as a synonym for 'decent person'.<sup>11</sup> Catholics, Pentecostals, and Witnesses alike were shocked on occasions when I would explicitly reject any sort of Christian identity; my stated beliefs turned out to be so foreign as to be unrecognizable. For example, I drew a careful distinction between believing *in* Jesus and

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<sup>11</sup> This is hardly unique to this location, and the three groups differ in who counts as a Christian.

believing *that* a man named Jesus existed as a historical figure. Yet the response was always the same: "So you *do* believe in Jesus."

Susan Harding, who worked with evangelists in the United States, encapsulates common experiences of conducting fieldwork in a religious community:

[When I started my fieldwork], I was naïve enough to think I could be detached, that I could participate in the culture I was observing without partaking of it. I could come and stay for months, talk mainly to church people, attempt to "learn the culture," ask questions based on respect and knowledge; and still remain outside, separate, obscure about what I believed and disbelieved. But there was no such ground. I might think there was, but the church people did not, no matter what I said. It was inconceivable to them that anyone with an appetite for the gospel as great as mine was simply "gathering' information," was just there "to write a book." No, I was searching. *God works in mysterious ways*. In my case, he seemed to be letting me find my way to him through this book I said I was writing about them. Several people told me as much; others just seemed amused when I told them what I was doing and gave me a look that suggested they knew better. My story about what I was doing there, instead of protecting me from "going native," located me in their world: I was a lost soul on the brink of salvation. [Harding 2000: 39-40]<sup>12</sup>

I could – and did – tell people in Zapotitlán that I had come to study their language and learn about their religion. Most Witnesses asked the same follow-up question: "Are you studying?" At first I misunderstood this question, and answered simply: yes. Later, I learned that, for Witnesses, the term *studying* refers to a long process of learning Watch Tower theology that ends in baptism (see Holden 2002c: 64-69). In the name of honesty, I began to answer this question with a wordy clarification about the goals of my research.

Later still, I discovered that Witnesses must not only report the time they spend proselytizing and conducting Bible studies but are also strongly encouraged to meet minimum standards,<sup>13</sup> and that several people considered me their student. By this point, I was also aware

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<sup>12</sup> Compare Cahn 2003: 11-12; Crapanzano 2000: 324-5; Ewing 1994; Holden 2002c: 3-7.

<sup>13</sup> To remain active, Witnesses must report only a single hour each month, and those with physical limitations can be considered active with only fifteen minutes of monthly service (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of

that Witnesses expect people in the early stages of studying to be resistant to some of their teachings, and that many never follow through with baptism. Crane (2013:21) asks how honest we ought to be about our resistance to conversion; she finds no easy answers, and neither do I.

"I enjoy learning about your beliefs," I would say, when asked to account for myself. "I am happy to tell you about mine, and I don't plan to change them."

"Give it time," Witnesses would answer, or, "Keep studying."

"Studying" is, in short, a term that describes legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) in Witness religious life. Conscious that most Witnesses would comfortably describe my status as "studying," I began to answer simply once more: yes.

How can we simultaneously convey respect for others' beliefs and an unwillingness to take up those beliefs ourselves? How much participation is appropriate? Different religions vary in their answers. For some, going through the motions without belief is disrespectful; for others, the action is more important than internal thoughts or beliefs. In many cases, both will be true, to varying degrees. If I attend a Catholic mass, I ought to sit and stand and kneel at appropriate times, but I must not take communion. If a man attends any Jewish service, he should cover his head, but he is under no obligation to join in communal prayers and songs. "One needs to know how one's informants interpret specific act of participation. Does this particular action constitute a statement of belief within a context of shared meaning, or is this action less significant?"

(Wiegele 2013: 85). As researchers, our best hope of answering this question is to "use ourselves as guinea pigs, cultural newcomers who must be taught now to properly belong" (Bielo 2013: 3).

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Pennsylvania 2005a: 87). While there exists no specific minimum, "a person who spends just an hour or two in field service each month may be very pleasing to Jehovah if that really is all his health allows him to do" ("Are You Fully Following the Christ?" *The Watchtower*, 4/15/2010, pp. 24-28), suggesting that such a small amount of time is acceptable only in extenuating circumstances. In fact, I have heard of disciplinary action taken against individuals who consistently reported low hours (cf. Holden 2002c: 72).

Jehovah's Witnesses' meetings are extensively participatory in nature. Few publishers<sup>14</sup> would consider attending without making an effort to contribute, and many children and new attendees who are not yet publishers still prepare answers to questions and volunteer to read highlighted Bible verses. Because of the Witnesses' fundamentally evangelical nature, they encouraged me constantly to participate more extensively in meetings; participation indexes belief. I stood and sat at appropriate moments, sang along from the songbook, and joined the chorus of amens at the end of prayers (cf. DiCarlo 2013:79). Congregation members often fed me answers to questions to encourage me to raise my hand and speak up, but I never did.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, when individuals were assigned the task of answering particular paragraphs in Chontal, one congregation elder was especially excited to see me take part. Since I had repeatedly offered my help in any aspect of the linguistic project he could think of, I found myself unable to say no. I was assigned a paragraph, and he translated the answer for me and had me write it out. The next day, as we came closer and closer to the paragraph in question, I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable. I failed to raise my hand, and he failed to call on me. However, after the meeting ended, half a dozen concerned congregation members asked me why, if I had prepared an answer, I had chosen not to give it.

I was uncomfortable, I said. Initially, they interpreted this as embarrassment about speaking Chontal in public, which I hastened to correct. I was uncomfortable, I said, because I was not a Jehovah's Witness and I felt that participating to such a degree was close to lying about my faith, which was not something I was able to do. My discomfort was, of course, rooted in my own ideologies of sincerity, intentions, and ethical behavior, but I had reason to believe we might

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<sup>14</sup> A publisher is a Witness who is authorized to evangelize door-to-door; one typically becomes an unbaptized publisher as an intermediate stage on the way to baptism.

share this ideology: Christian practice emphasizes "the presence of sincere intentions in the worshipper" (Keane 1997a: 689; see also Keane 2002; Robbins 2001).

Rather than interpreting my discomfort as definitive, the Witnesses were gentle and encouraging. "Maybe next week," they said. Their narrative of my attendance at meetings, as slow but steady progress they hoped would lead toward baptism, did not change. They saw my unwillingness to speak as a temporary setback in my spiritual growth rather than a rejection of their beliefs. Harding (2000: 60) writes: "Listening to the gospel enables you to experience belief, as it were, vicariously. But generative belief, belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality, belief that becomes you, comes only through speech: speaking is believing." For me, it was just the opposite: I did not believe, and so I could not speak.

As religion became more central to my project, it became harder to convince people that I was not open to conversion. I largely stopped trying. As Harding notes, the totalizing worldview of believers does not allow for any interest other than the spiritual. Witnesses, who are used to doors slamming in their faces, always see respectful outsiders as potential converts, even if this potential goes unrealized in the short term. My increasing involvement in Witness activities – including not only attendance at formal meetings but also active participation in family Bible study and rare forays into door-to-door preaching (albeit as a silent tag-along) – made it difficult for Witnesses to see my proclaimed lack of faith as anything but denial, or vestigial resistance.

Non-Witnesses, meanwhile, nearly always assumed from the company I kept – and my observable adherence to many Witness behavioral norms – that I was not only a Witness but a devout one at that. Berreman (2012[1972]: 165) observes that people locate anthropologists socially in part by our association with individuals who are "more conventional and hence comprehensible as a person than [us,]" and I lived in a household of devoted Witnesses,

including two congregational elders. I was often mistaken for a pioneer, a full-time Witness volunteer who had come from elsewhere to support the Zapotitlán congregations. In fact, even Witnesses occasionally made this assumption. When I attended large Witness gatherings held in other cities, strangers would approach me to introduce themselves to "the sister from far away."

My family status was dual: I was an honorary daughter of this family, and known to have a husband back in Los Angeles. In truth, my boyfriend played the role of husband, but the lie was only partial; in this community, cohabitation is considered marriage. In fact, my host family was never fully convinced that my marriage lived up to Witness standards. "Are you legally married or do you just live together?" they asked, more than once. I never felt comfortable admitting that I was not legally married, but my host parents often implied that they knew better.

My absent partner loomed large in household conversations. I often had to invoke his approval when local community members, especially my host family, were not sure I ought to do something. In this community, women are never fully autonomous adults; at marriage, they simply "change allegiances or masters" (see Shoaps 2004: 192). The paternalism – and community surveillance – of a strict sect<sup>15</sup> like Jehovah's Witnesses chiefly reinforces pre-existing patterns in this type of small town, rather than creates them. Had I been honest about my single status, I would have been seen as an unmarried daughter of my host family – a child rather than a full adult, in spite of my age<sup>16</sup> – and would have had to obey more restrictive rules, often at the cost of my work. For example, the words "I talked to my husband and he says I can" won me the freedom to socialize widely, to attend Pentecostal and Catholic events, and to take long

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<sup>15</sup> 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).

<sup>16</sup> I was in my late 20s at the time of my fieldwork, and my lack of experience with – or interest in – small children was also a topic of frequent questioning.

walks alone, despite the family's strong disapproval of all of these. Even so, I was sometimes chided for being "disobedient."<sup>17</sup>

Fieldwork requires not only heightened self-monitoring but also an attempt to suspend our own criteria for normative evaluation and sense-making. Simply put, fieldwork is an attempt to live up to social standards that do not come naturally. In religious settings, where these standards speak not only to our social competence but also to our moral worth, the stakes are higher. If the fieldworker is judged morally deficient, he or she may be cut off from all social intercourse.

Yet the moral standards I had to live up to were often in direct contrast with my own values,<sup>18</sup> and I walked a very delicate ethical line. As Jennifer A. Selby (2013: 46) observes, "It was not solely that I, in respecting my informants, altered my behavior and bracketed my own religious, feminist, or political convictions; my public identity, my identity as an ethnographer, and my work were all partially shaped by my informants' perceptions of my 'Otherness.'" For example, I rarely offered opinions on any topic unless I was certain they would give no offense; an honest expression of my liberal politics would have strained my relationships at best and made it impossible for me to remain in Zapotitlán at worst. Like Deana Weibel (2013: 100), I admire those fieldworkers who are fully open about their own convictions, yet I preferred to change the subject away from my own beliefs when possible.

I attempted to behave as a guest by conforming to local and household standards; others have described this practice as "impression management."<sup>19</sup> Berreman (2012[1972]: 173)

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<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, in mainstream U.S. culture, this is an epithet that does not apply to adults.

<sup>18</sup> For example, women have a very circumscribed role not only within the religion but in every sphere of life.

<sup>19</sup> Goffman (1990[1959]) suggests that all social interaction requires deliberate impression management; we always choose how to represent ourselves to others who in turn will evaluate us based on local standards. In this case, I intended an attempt to show respect by taking a "your roof, your rules" approach.

describes lying about such details as his use of toilet paper and dislike for local liquor for the sake of building rapport. Similarly, I wore exclusively long skirts (see Selby 2013: 46), accepted compliments on the modesty of my clothing, agreed with criticism of a schoolteacher's overuse of makeup, and expressed the shock Witnesses expected me to feel when told of a different former schoolteacher's "indecent" serial relationships.

Although I found the Witnesses warm, generous, and pleasant to spend time with, I sometimes felt a need to remain guarded. During my fieldwork, I experienced two concurrent personal crises that highlighted the distance of the Witnesses' worldview from my own: I split up with my partner, and my mother and stepfather divorced. I tried to speak about these events with my host family precisely once, and their heartfelt attempts to comfort me left me with a profound sense of alienation. "I bet your husband's found another woman," they said, and, "It's a shame that your stepfather is a bad person and cheated on your mother."

I could not draw any comfort from these accusations. In both cases, I felt sadness that two wonderful people were unable to live together, and that even love was insufficiently powerful to reconcile the differences. Witnesses, on the other hand, only allow divorce in cases of infidelity. By accusing my partner and stepfather of infidelity, my hosts were offering both me and my mother the possibility of a moral divorce and a new start. Even so, I found these accusations not comforting but isolating, and I did not share my personal concerns with anyone except one non-Witness schoolteacher after that point.

I share this story not to condemn my warm, lovely hosts but to emphasize that all fieldwork contains such moments of acute alienation. Finding ourselves unable to relate, or missing our own way of handling a situation, are how we learn what is most central to others'



view of the world. I could – and did – understand this response as one of the kindest things a Witness could say, even as I found it personally hurtful.

Vincent Crapanzano (2000: 324-5) writes of his personal reaction to Fundamentalist seminarians and preachers: "Theirs was a preclusive discourse: they had the truth. Either I accepted their terms or I didn't. If I didn't, they ultimately had nothing to say to me, nor I to them. I found their dismissal of all other points of view profoundly divisive." It was, he says, impossible to create true friendships in such a context (cf. Rabinow 2012[1997]). In moments like these, I felt much the same, but for me, alienation was the exception rather than a constant companion. Simply put, I liked and respected the people who I spent time with.

Yet I was often uncomfortably aware that much of their acceptance of me was based on what felt like untruths. Respecting others' cultural beliefs sometimes meant actively hiding my own. However, I was mindful that fieldwork is at its heart an attempt to understand people on their own terms, and an attempt to leave our own cultural frameworks behind, in spite of the knowledge that such a full transformation is impossible and, indeed, often considered professionally undesirable.<sup>20</sup>

In secondary sites, notably Jehovah's Witness headquarters in Mexico City and Brooklyn, NY, I inhabited a very different role than in Zapotitlán. If in Zapotitlán I was complimented earnestly on my modest dress, in Brooklyn I was gently teased for my efforts to dress respectfully. These complexes are located in two of the largest cities in the Western Hemisphere, in contrast with rural Zapotitlán, and the individuals I spoke to there were not only cosmopolitan

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<sup>20</sup> I refer here to the extensive literature on the historical anthropological taboo against "going native" (see Sluka and Robben 2012: 14-16 for an overview), although our current understanding is more sophisticated and recognizes that "total objectivity is, by definition, a myth" (Bernard 2006: 349). Indeed, some scholars have proposed "going native" as a deliberate methodology (Tresch 2001) or a counterhegemonic maneuver that "challenges the hierarchies of knowledge that science constructs and enforces" (Stanley 1995: 181).

but familiar with the conventions of academic research. In both sites, I was understood to be a social scientist conducting academic research.

Even so, my status as a sympathetic and respectful outsider sometimes eclipsed my academic identity. Every single person I spoke to at both headquarters sites offered me Watch Tower literature and encouraged me to study, in the Witness sense of the word. For example, an editor in the Brooklyn Writing Department encouraged me to undertake a Bible study in Chontal and compare it with the written Spanish and English texts because he thought it would be useful for my project and "interesting to see what doctrinal differences in understanding exist."<sup>21</sup> He hoped, I am certain, that I would be receptive in more ways than one.<sup>22</sup>

### **1.3 Arriving at Methods: An Overview**

This project was based on approximately eight months of fieldwork in Santa María Zapotitlán, Oaxaca, Mexico, including short trips with my hosts to stay with family members in nearby Salina Cruz and attend large Jehovah's Witness events there. Additional data come from several visits to a Chontal-language congregation in Oaxaca City over a six month period, as well as short visits to Jehovah's Witness headquarters both for Mexico and worldwide. The Mexico Branch Office is located in Texcoco, just outside Mexico City. The worldwide offices, meanwhile, are located in three cities in New York State: Brooklyn, Patterson, and Wallkill; I was only able to visit the Brooklyn offices.

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<sup>21</sup> Personal communication, 4/2/2011.

<sup>22</sup> I was also often struck, upon playing back interviews, by proselytizing that had gone unnoticed in the moment. For me, such experiences also emphasized the sheer impossibility of claims that an interviewer fully controls an interaction. See Harding (2000: 37-60) for a detailed portrayal of how one minister "reframed my appointment to interview him into his opportunity to witness to me for an hour and a half" (37-38). See also Briggs (1984; 1986) on the often problematic nature of the interview as a genre.

In Zapotitlán, I regularly attended most meetings of one Jehovah's Witness congregation as well as occasional meetings of the other two; socialized widely; participated in a variety of community events including many that were unaffiliated with the Jehovah's Witnesses; and conducted a number of interviews, chiefly with individuals who were very involved Witnesses. Interviews were informal: I audio-recorded these as well as taking notes, and often spoke to multiple members of a household together in a conversational setting. In total, I recorded 17 hours of interview data with 29 different individuals.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to extensive notes from dozens of Jehovah's Witness religious meetings and events, I was able to audio- and video-record various types of formal and informal religious events. Video recordings include approximately 60 hours of Chontal-language religious events (including the full contents of one two-day and one three-day event held in Salina Cruz for all the Chontal congregations as well as religious meetings held in Zapotitlán) and an additional 12 hours of Spanish-language religious events, primarily drawn from a two-day event held in Salina Cruz for Spanish-language congregations with the same content as the two-day Chontal event. Furthermore, I was able to audio-record five hours of personal Bible study (including but not

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that the interview is, at least for Jehovah's Witnesses, a local genre (cf. Briggs 1984; 1986). In Assemblies, it is common for Witnesses to interview each other on stage, particularly about their history as Witnesses, and they prepare by practicing these interviews before performing them.

For example, the outline one Witness allowed me to photocopy (Beto, "Las Asambleas nos ayudan a permanecer cerca de Jehová", talk given on 12/17/2010), contains the instructions: "NOTE: This talk includes interviews. Follow the instructions from the assignment letter. Try to select, as soon as possible, brothers who are best able to express how last year's District Assembly helped them...." and later gives detailed instructions for all three interviews. For one interview, the outline reads: "(3 min.) Briefly interview a couple who have benefitted from the series "'Let's stay awake" as Christian families'. Ask them to relate how they have improved the attitude and activity of the entire family in terms of meetings and field service, thanks to having put in practice some of the key points from this series of talks. Have them also explain how Biblical conversations during family worship has helped both them and their children to be more spiritual and make positive changes."

"NOTA: Este discurso incluye entrevistas. Siga las instrucciones de la carta de asignación. Trate de seleccionar cuanto antes a los hermanos que mejor puedan expresar cómo les ayudó la asamblea de distrito del año pasado." and "(3 min.) Entreviste brevemente a un matrimonio que se haya beneficiado de la serie de discursos "'Quedémonos despiertos" como familias cristianas'. Pídales que relaten cómo ha mejorado la actitud y la actividad de toda la familia en lo que tiene que ver con las reuniones y el servicio del campo gracias a haber puesto en práctica algunos puntos clave de esa serie de discursos. Que expliquen también cómo las conversaciones bíblicas durante la adoración en familia les han ayudado, tanto a ellos como a sus hijos, a ser más espirituales y hacer cambios positivos."

limited to the Chontal-language Bible study the Brooklyn editor suggested), three additional hours of sitting in on family Bible study in two households, and nearly six hours of multi-person translation tasks. I participated in these activities to a greater or lesser extent: I was often called on to answer questions from the text in the personal Bible study, while I might ask a very few questions during a translation session, and I did little more than sit quietly and take notes during formal religious events.

In Oaxaca City I attended the Chontal-language congregation's meetings sporadically and took notes as a means of spot-checking my Zapotitlán data, but I did not spend time with congregation members outside of meetings. My short field visits to national and international headquarters in Brooklyn and Texcoco included private tours. In Brooklyn, an editor in the Writing Department who I call Michael S. was able to give me the tour, and I conducted a recorded interview with this same individual; I have been in contact with him to verify details and he has provided feedback on some sections of this dissertation. In Texcoco, I was able to take a tour with a member of the Translation Department but was not allowed to record an interview; I sent a list of written questions and never received responses. In both headquarters locations, I was able to eat a meal in the communal dining room and talk casually with a number of members of the Writing and Translation Departments, and I took extensive notes.

I have also made use of the wealth of Witness publications, many of them available via the Watchtower Online Library (<http://wol.jw.org/>) and the Watchtower Library 2012 CD-ROM, in my discussion of institutional discourse. Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to respect Witness ideologies of translation (see Chapter Six) on three key points. First, all Bible citations are given as they appear in the English-language New World Translation. Second, I have used the English-language versions of all Watch Tower Society materials that I analyze; in

some cases, I have also considered the Spanish-language versions. Third, where my ethnographic data contain quotations from Spanish-language Watch Tower materials, I have used the corresponding English materials in the body of the text, rather than my own translation. (The Spanish-language text appears in footnotes.)

As sociologist Lewis F. Carter (1998) has observed, academic research on religious movements must, of necessity, triangulate between insider, outsider, and ethnographic accounts. The story I tell incorporates the voices not only of Watch Tower texts, but also of former Witnesses who have authored memoirs and exposés,<sup>24</sup> academic ethnographers and historians, and current Witnesses who speak throughout the text, in addition to my own observations. Scholars of new religious movements have made the point that the former member "must always be seen as one whose personal history predisposes him to bias with respect to both his previous religious commitment and affiliations" (Wilson 1994: 4). Yet individuals who leave organizations may inhabit different roles with respect to them. Introvigne (1999) distinguishes between *defectors*, who negotiate the exit process with an organization and typically continue to hold the organization in high regard; *ordinary leave-takers*, who do not negotiate their exit but "simply [lose] interest, loyalty, and commitment to an old experience and [proceed] to a new one" (Introvigne 1999: 84); and *apostates*, who are aggressively hostile towards their former organization and devote great energy to challenging it. I identify former Witnesses as such when I cite them throughout this text; nearly all of these authors fall into this third category. However, I would characterize historian James M. Penton's 1997 book an academic rather than apostate

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<sup>24</sup> Botting and Botting 1984; Dickerson 2010; Franz 1983; Grizzuti Harrison 1978; Quick 1989; Reed 1986; 1996; 2010; Wilson 2002; and others.

work: he is the only author among the former Witnesses who takes a stance that is not explicitly opposed to the organization.<sup>25</sup>

## 1.4 Chapter Overview

Chapter Two provides the theoretical antecedents of this dissertation and introduces several new concepts. In this chapter, I begin by tracing several threads connecting language to the Anthropology of Christianity, particularly studies of missionary linguistics and Bible translation, before moving to conceptions of community. I synthesize the strengths of a number of different definitions of community to introduce the concept of *textual community*, and then look at how this community actually functions in the following sections. I connect concepts of linguistic economy and literacy to introduce a theoretically grounded definition of the *textual economy*, suggesting that the Witness economy is so totalizing that we might better imagine it as a *textual regime*. Finally, I touch on scholarly conceptions of participation and moral personhood before bringing in the Jehovah's Witnesses as a specific textual community.

In Chapter Three, I describe the main field sites in which I conducted research. Most of the chapter is devoted to a description of the community of Santa María Zapotitlán, but I also summarize the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Mexico and describe secondary research sites in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca City, and Texcoco, as well as Brooklyn, New York.

Chapter Four describes language ideologies circulating in Santa María Zapotitlán and the Highland Chontal speech community as a whole. The Highland Chontal speech community consists of all those individuals who share evaluations of Spanish and Highland Chontal, that is, the residents of historically Highland Chontal-speaking communities and their descendants. Not all of these individuals are currently competent speakers of Chontal, but the language retains

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<sup>25</sup> The Watch Tower Society considers all former members apostates (Holden 2002a: 15n9; Holden 2002c: 163).

symbolic value for all of them. This community's ideologies tend to objectify language, and this objectification also places emphasis on the authority of writing over speaking, in part because writing represents a physical objectification of language.

Chapter Five, meanwhile, explores Witnesses' own sense of what makes them a community: the "pure language." I consider Witness textual sources, academic analyses of Witnesses, and interactions with individual Witnesses to outline this discourse, which can be spoken in any human language. As Elliott (1993) writes, "an important means by which [Jehovah's Witnesses] constitute themselves and maintain symbolic distance from 'the World' and 'Christendom' is through the cultivation and deployment of a communal dialect." Similarly, Harding (2000: 34) suggests that conversion is always "a process of acquiring a specific religious language or dialect." To acknowledge how such a "dialect" can transcend human language barriers, I introduce the concept of the *transidiomatic authoritative discourse*.

Chapters Six through Nine are dedicated to an analytic view of the *textual community* of Jehovah's Witnesses, exploring both organization-wide ideologies and economies, as well as ethnographic observations of local practices. I begin with the ideologies of the *textual regime* in Chapter Six. These ideologies are institution-wide and create a unified picture of the significance of authorship and translation as well as the role of the Bible and other Watch Tower Society publications in the lives of Witnesses.

Chapter Seven, meanwhile, explores the relationship between written text, performance, and participation in Witness religious practice. Using Bauman's concept of *mediational performance*, I explore the affordances of written text for standardization across the contexts in which these texts are performed. These performances are structured with multiple participant roles – ways of engaging with texts – which are hierarchically ranked. Who can inhabit particular

roles depends on the nature of the event and the characteristics of other participants.

Furthermore, the legitimation of participants and the authorization of the texts are intertwined, and help to constitute the textual community.

In Chapter Eight, I look at tensions between local and institutional ideologies regarding the use of indigenous languages. The Watch Tower Society takes an instrumental orientation towards languages: the value of any particular language lies with the people that it can be used to reach. In Zapotitlán, however, the institutional imperative to use Chontal conflicts with the sociolinguistic reality of advanced language contraction. Rather than orienting solely to the conversion of the few remaining Chontal monolinguals, Zapotitlán Witnesses are also attuned to Armageddon, a large-scale resurrection, and the opportunity to convert their ancestors that this resurrection represents.

Chapter Nine, looks at how Chontal is actually used in this community and considers how the use of this language manages the tensions described in Chapter Eight. I show that Witnesses are able to engage multiple strategies that allow them to perform "speaking Chontal" in spite of limited competence. They may speak without understanding; produce metadiscourses *about* Chontal *in* Spanish; or pepper a chiefly Spanish discourse with symbolic elements of Chontal, particularly lexical items that are widely understood.

Chapter Ten, finally, looks both backwards and forwards. I begin by examining what census data can tell us about Chontal use in Zapotitlán in the last twenty years, and then I return to the questions that have guided me for the last three years. Why are some people more successful at maintaining or revitalizing their languages than others? By what mechanisms do Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide see themselves as a community?



## Two

# The Totalizing, Globalizing Textual Community

Towards the end of my fieldwork, when I was leaving Santa María Zapotitlán to spend a year in Oaxaca City, my host mother Florencia<sup>26</sup> told me, "Look for the congregation. They'll take care of you."<sup>27</sup> *The* congregation, not *a* congregation.<sup>28</sup> Oaxaca is home to more than a dozen Jehovah's Witness congregations; her use of the definite article only has meaning if she imagines Witnesses everywhere as a single, enormous congregation. Easily a dozen others echoed her sentiment on other occasions: a few told me to keep studying, suggesting that the burden was mine and mine alone, but the majority encouraged me to associate myself with a Witness congregation. "Jehovah's Witnesses, we're good people," they would say, or, "we live well."<sup>29</sup> I had also observed that family members who had migrated within Mexico or even to the US had typically found their jobs through Witnesses who were more rooted in these locations. "They'll take care of you" was heartfelt and rooted in direct experience; individual Witnesses see Witnesses worldwide as a single congregation, as a community, one in which they feel membership and about which they feel entitled to generalize.

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<sup>26</sup> I have changed the names of all participants, including all Zapotitlán residents and all Witnesses in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, Mexico City, and Brooklyn.

<sup>27</sup> My recollection – and unfortunately this particular instance is nowhere to be found in my fieldnotes – is that she said, "Busca la congregación, te va a cuidar." The known unreliability of human memory keeps me from a close analysis of this sentence beyond the use of the definite article, which is confirmed by numerous other anecdotes in my notes.

<sup>28</sup> On other occasions, she encouraged me to find *a* congregation. Still, this use of the definite article is very telling.

<sup>29</sup> What I have translated into English as a cleft ("Jehovah's Witnesses, we're good people") might also be rendered "We Jehovah's Witnesses are good people" and is typically expressed in Spanish with first person plural agreement on the verb and an overt noun phrase subject:

*Los testigo-s de Jehová somos buen-a gente*  
ART.M witness(M)-PL of Jehovah COP.1PL good-F people(F)

I translate it here as a cleft to emphasize the simultaneous (third-person) characterization of the group and (first-person) identification with it.

In order to understand the worldwide community of Witnesses as a community, I begin by locating my research on Jehovah's Witnesses within a larger academic discussion on the anthropology of religion and more specifically the anthropology of Christianity. I also situate Jehovah's Witnesses in the historical context of missionary linguists and Bible translators. Next, I turn to academic conceptions of community, addressing the different types of phenomena encompassed by the term *community* and proposing the concept of the *textual community*. This concept is useful to explore the cohesion of religions of the book and other communities that are structured closely around not only shared reading content but also shared reading practices. I then consider the properties of Jehovah's Witnesses as a textual community and explore in more detail how such a community gains and maintains its community-ness: through a particular totalizing textual economy, or a textual regime; through constraints on participation; and through a particular relationship of language choice to morality. Finally, I consider briefly the implications of the present study for language maintenance as well as for those who seek to create a unified anthropology of Christianity.

## **2.1 The Anthropology of Christianity**

While a great number of anthropologists have conducted ethnographic studies of Christians, only recently have scholars begun to call for an anthropology of Christianity "as a self-conscious, comparative project" (Robbins 2003: 191). Such a project might, Robbins (2003) suggests, address such disparate concerns as the tensions between the mundane world and the world to come, or those between the global and the local.<sup>30</sup> Engaging with this project allows us to "explicitly [address] what it means for people to be Christian..." and "...[set] aside the

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<sup>30</sup> For some discussion of both of these tensions, see Chapter Eight.

assumption that we know in advance what Christian experience, practice, or belief might be" (Cannell 2006: 5).

There has been some debate as to whether differentiating such a subfield has merit. I am sympathetic to Robbins's claim that "Christians, almost wherever they are, appear at once too similar to anthropologists to be worthy of study and too meaningfully different to be easily made sense of by the use of standard anthropological tools" (Robbins 2003: 192). However, an anthropology of Christianity runs the risk of reifying the religion or defining it in a commonsense, under-theorized fashion. Asad (1996: 397) rejects an anthropology of Islam based on similar notions:

If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Quran and the Hadith. Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition.

Christianity, like Islam, can be approached as a discursive tradition. Such an argument, indeed, provides further support for viewing religious phenomena through the lens of a *textual community* (discussed below) rather than the anthropology of Christianity.

The second major critique of the anthropology of Christianity is that it amounts to "Christian exceptionalism" (Hann 2007). Christianity is taken to be a special kind of social organization that can only be understood on its own terms. Furthermore, Hann (2007) notes that this field of study has largely neglected two major strains of Christianity: mainstream Western Christianity and Eastern Orthodox groups. Instead of claiming a special status for Christianity, he calls for a problem-based approach that does not reify Christianity or other major religions.<sup>31</sup>

I follow Hann, taking as a starting point one of the problems identified by Bialecki et al. (2008: 1146-7): the connections between Christianity and linguistic practice. I limit my

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<sup>31</sup> For a Christian anthropologist's perspective, see Howell (2007); for a missiologist's, see Jørgensen (2011).

discussion, then, to studies within the anthropology of Christianity paradigm that explicitly focus on language and text. "If conversion is a process of acquiring a specific religious language" (Harding 2000: 57), membership in a faith community is membership in a linguistic community.<sup>32</sup> But what kind of linguistic community?

Three strands of research on the connections between Christianity and linguistic practice are relevant to answering this question. The first is concerned with language ideology, and connects to research on religion and language more generally (e.g. Keane 1997b). One element of a particularly Christian language ideology is an emphasis on sincerity.<sup>33</sup> Witnesses, however, take an absolute view of language: it is not enough to speak sincerely, but one must also speak the truth. When they speak of "the truth" they refer to their own understanding of, specifically, Biblical truth. In addition to this question of sincerity, studies of language ideology and religion have also often focused on the connection of particular languages to moral personhood (Bunin Benor 2009; Fader 2006; 2007; Kroskrity 1993; 1998; 2000a) or the appropriateness of particular languages in a religious context (Spolsky 2003: 83-6 gives an overview); these issues are relevant for Witnesses as well.

The second strand explores the role of the Bible as a sacred text (e.g. Ammerman 1987; Bielo 2009b; c; Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2000; all papers in Levering 1989; Malley 2004). As Malley (2004: 67) points out, "the Bible" is itself a stereotype, referring to various Bibles all of

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<sup>32</sup> Hanks (2010), Keane (1997a), and Robbins (2001; 2007) also discuss conversion as language learning, or as language change. Harding (2000: 58-60) argues that listening represents a first step, an openness to Christian conversion, but that only speaking is synonymous with belief. This is, however, specific to Christianity; compare Hirschkind (2006: 40), who argues that for Muslims in a particular tradition, "all moral action is in some sense a listening, the reverberation of the words of God within human souls and actions."

<sup>33</sup> See: Bialecki, et al. (2008: 1146); Bielo (2011); Harding (2000); Keane (1997a; 2002); Robbins (2001); Shoaps (2002). In practice, however, not all Christians share this notion (Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal 2011; Schieffelin 2007). I myself have spent time with Mexican Catholics who taught me how to cross myself so I could do so when entering the church. I asked if it was acceptable to cross oneself without belief or if it would be preferable to refrain, and they told me that the action itself communicated respect.

which are 'translations' or 'versions' although "the *same thing* of which they are all putative versions is little understood, in no case fully known, and may never have existed in the form evangelicals imagine."<sup>34</sup> James Bielo, in the introduction to an edited volume on this very topic, asks us: "How do people – as conflicted and complex individuals, as inheritors of institutional and cultural resources, as practitioners of distinct expressions of Christianity – interact with the Bible?" (Bielo 2009a: 1). I attempt to answer this question ethnographically for one community of Jehovah's Witnesses, an evangelical<sup>35</sup> Christian sect whose required religious reading includes not only the Bible but also publications produced at regular intervals by the Watch Tower Society. To understand Witnesses' relationship with the Bible, we have to understand their relationship with religious texts and religious language more generally.

The third strand of research that informs my project has considered the role of missionary linguistics and Bible translation. Although much of the research on Bible translation does not situate itself within the anthropology of Christianity,<sup>36</sup> its emphasis on language ideologies and linguistic practices is in dialogue with this body of literature. Since the community of Witnesses

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<sup>34</sup> It is also connected to physical stereotypes ("leather bound, ribbon marker, text layout, etc."), textuality, and an idea that "the various texts called Bibles are expected to have (basically) the same contents and to say (basically) the same thing" (Malley 2004: 67). We will return to this idea of "the same thing" in Chapter Six.

<sup>35</sup> 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.)

<sup>36</sup> As the anthropology of Christianity gains traction as a subfield, more and more of these works engage it directly even if their authors might prefer not to label their own work as such. Robbins (2003: 195) suggests that stigma may be the main reason why scholars avoid identifying themselves as anthropologists of Christianity. Unfortunately, Robbins is unnecessarily dismissive of those who, like Asad (1996), Hann (2007), and myself, prefer to situate their work primarily within a larger anthropology of religion to avoid exceptionalism and essentialism. (Another equally troubling concern is that anthropologists' concept of religion itself has been heavily influenced by Christianity; see Anidjar (2009) for discussion.)

I studied was in the process of translating much of their religious discourse, we must also locate their literacy practices in the wider context of Bible translation.

## **2.2 Missionary Linguistics and Bible Translation**

### **2.2.1 Missionary Linguistics, Bible Translation, and the History of Indigenous Languages in Colonial Latin America**

Historical studies have explored both Catholic and Protestant missionary linguistics in Mexico (Hanks 2010; Heath 1972; Warren 1983), North America (McKevitt 1990; Tomalin 2008), Europe (Salmon 1985), Africa (Irvine 2008; Pennycook and Makoni 2005), and Australia (McGregor 2008). Wonderly and Nida (1963), Grey (2000), and Errington (2001) have also considered missionary linguistics in worldwide longitudinal perspective.<sup>37</sup> The history of linguistics as an academic discipline is intimately bound up with the history of missionization and Bible translation.<sup>38</sup> To understand modern-day missionary projects in Mexico – and the state of indigenous languages in general – we need to begin with a historical understanding of Bible translation and religious approaches to linguistic diversity.

Before the Conquest, there was significant contact between many different Mesoamerican groups (Kaufman 1973; Suárez 1983), and at the time of European contact, the Triple Alliance<sup>39</sup> controlled the central and northern regions of what is now Mexico, while the Mayas controlled the south (Baldauf and Kaplan 2007: 15). As a result, Nahuatl variants<sup>40</sup> were

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<sup>37</sup> As Bible translators, Wonderly and Nida are among the few authors who take a generally uncritical view of missionization, although they do critique both the linguistics and translation of many mission projects.

<sup>38</sup> As is the history of anthropology, albeit with a longer history of self-examination. See Burton and Burton (2007) and Higham (2003).

<sup>39</sup> The Triple Alliance is often known as the "Aztec empire" but this term is misleading on both counts (Magnus Pharao Hansen, p.c., 5/6/2012).

<sup>40</sup> See Canger 1998 for more description of the historical situation of Nahuatl. The description I sketch out here is lacking in several key dimensions: Nahuatl was not a single language but a continuum of varieties even before the

used as a lingua franca in most of Mexico, although other languages were allowed to exist as a substrate (Heath 1972: 4-5); Canger (1988) suggests that Nahuatl dialect differences may reflect pre-Columbian class rather than ethnic differences. Furthermore, the spread of Nahuatl as a pre-Columbian administrative language during this period encouraged linguistic fragmentation, such that many indigenous varieties were spoken in only one or two towns even before the arrival of the Spanish (Garza Cuarón and Lastra 1991: 100).

At this time, there were also at least ten separate Mesoamerican writing systems (King 1994: 25-7), which various indigenous groups used for different purposes (Collins and Blot 2003: 132-4).<sup>41</sup> The Spanish claimed to bring literacy to Mesoamerica, but their contribution was in fact much more modest: alphabetic literacy. Instead of using existing writing systems, they both created new orthographies in order to write indigenous languages in alphabetic script and explicitly defined earlier writing systems as non-literate (Collins and Blot 2003: 132). While the replacement of pictographic writing with alphabetic writing may have been motivated chiefly by convenience (King 1994: 43), a critical perspective suggests that it was an intentional and ideological necessity that allowed the Spanish to replace one religion of the book with another (Collins and Blot 2003: 129-30; cf. Hanks 2010: 280).<sup>42</sup> The result of this type of literacy campaign was that "languages and literacy practices [were] brought into practice as Christian

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Conquest, and many Nahuatl-speaking communities were not politically integrated (Magnus Pharao Hansen, p.c., 5/6/2012).

<sup>41</sup> See also the papers collected in Boone and Mignolo (1994).

<sup>42</sup> "For the missionaries to remake the conquered population, to render them salvable, entailed ... the stamping out of an indigenous literacy: one religion of the book (the painted codices) was to be replaced by another (the Bible). For the colonizing power, one religion was a false religion, its worshipers suffering obeisance to false gods; the other, Christianity, was the true religion, and the Bible was the word of God. Both were religions of the book, but each sacred book exemplified a different literacy and spoke of different deities. The codices were pictographic representations of Aztec lord-deities and rituals of sacrifice, while the Bible recorded in an alphabetic script the tales and prophets of Christendom" (Collins & Blot 2003: 130-131).

languages and literacy practices, moulded along Western lines" (Pennycook and Makoni 2005: 151-2).<sup>43</sup>

While the friars encouraged bilingualism, it was a different type of bilingualism than that already in place. Rather than bilingualism between multiple indigenous languages, colonial missionaries supported a more diglossic and less equal bilingualism between indigenous languages and colonial ones (see Pennycook and Makoni 2005: 144-5). In this context, the Catholic friars' early realization that it was simpler for a small number of religious men to learn indigenous languages than for a relatively large population to learn Spanish created frequent conflicts with the Crown.<sup>44</sup> The Spanish agents working most closely with indigenous populations in the New World were priests, for whom spreading Christian doctrine was a more urgent goal than spreading Spanish. Many of these priests argued that Nahuatl (and Maya within the Yucatán (Hanks 2010)), as a lingua franca,<sup>45</sup> was better suited to this task (Heath 1972); even those indigenous persons who did not speak any Nahuatl variety were thought to learn it more easily than Spanish (Collins and Blot 2003: 135).

Despite shifting policies of the colonial period, the priests had to work as linguists in order to learn the indigenous languages (King 1994: 47-8). Vernacular-language scripture was forbidden beginning in the mid-16th century, and translations were seized and often destroyed (Hidalgo 2006c: 67). The priests' role, therefore, was either to teach *about* Latin scripture *in*

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<sup>43</sup> Adam Shapiro (p.c., 6/4/2012) notes that the key question of the Reformation was precisely this issue: Who is entitled to read the Bible?

<sup>44</sup> The Spanish reversed their policies nearly a dozen times in a hundred year period, between 1550 (the date of the first royal decree naming Spanish the official language of New Spain) and 1634 (when Spanish became the sole official language once more). See Heath (1972) for an exhaustive history of colonial era language policy, as well as the papers collected in Hidalgo (2006b), especially Hidalgo (2006c).

<sup>45</sup> I use the singular for the sake of clarity, but neither Nahuatl nor Maya existed as a singular, standardized entity before (or even, perhaps, after) the arrival of the Spanish. (The Spanish language itself became increasingly standardized during the colonial era. Although Antonio de Nebrija published the first grammar of Spanish in 1492, the Real Academia Española was not founded until 1713.)



indigenous languages using *doctrinas*, or to first teach Spanish in order to later teach *about* Latin scripture *in* Spanish. For any of these roles, some knowledge of the languages spoken in Mexico would be necessary.

Roman Catholic missionaries wrote nearly all of the (extant) early linguistic works, but they "were also responsible for the destruction of most of the pre-colonial documents on the American continent, which if preserved would have been invaluable to linguists today in the study of American languages" (Wonderly and Nida 1963: 117). These early linguistic works often failed to represent key distinctions: although many of the friars were remarkably adept users of indigenous languages, their written works reflect a Classicist bias. Antonio de Nebrija published the first grammar of Spanish in 1492, which contorted Spanish grammar to fit a Latin standard, and the friars often followed this model and erroneously described the structures of indigenous languages as if they were parallel to Latin (Hanks 2010: 207-209; Heath 1972: 6; Wonderly and Nida 1963: 119-20). Indeed, early grammars described "the varieties of those languages which the missionaries themselves spoke, rather than what was spoken by indigenous people" (Baldauf and Kaplan 2007: 19).<sup>46</sup>

The friars were, however, aware of indigenous constructions that could not be explained away with reference to Latin, although they typically did not mention these in the prescriptive grammars known as *artes*. Hanks (2010: 213) reminds us that the missionaries "knew or had access to more Maya than they could explain." Given Nebrija's influence (and the influence of Latin more broadly), a realistic understanding of missionary language ability requires us to keep in mind:

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<sup>46</sup> Compare Hanks (2010: 240): "Rather than reduce Maya to Latin, therefore, the missionaries attempted to reduce it to its own rules for speaking *well*...the Maya in question was ambivalent between Maya as its speakers spoke and *Maya reducido* as its speakers *should* speak."

that the *arte* is not a proxy for missionary knowledge of Maya. The analytic work of formulating the rules of a grammar is different from the interactive work of producing and understanding utterances in the language. The two kinds of knowledge are distinct, and two equally competent speakers of Maya could produce *artes* with widely differing degrees of accuracy. [Hanks 2010: 210]

The missionaries' written works are unlikely to reflect their ability to use these languages; they were likely remarkably adept speakers in many cases.

In addition to writing grammars of indigenous languages, colonial missionaries in the first half of the sixteenth century also trained a number of indigenous students in secondary schools, where they taught Nahuatl, Spanish, and Latin literacy (Heath 1972: 28-31; Parodi 2006: 39-40). Some of these students used their knowledge to write secret books, recording indigenous languages in alphabetic script (Collins and Blot 2003: 131, 138; see also Hanks 2010: ch. 11 for a detailed treatment of the Maya case). Rather than copies of earlier documents, these books may have been "transcriptions of the oral accompaniment to the most important codices into the phonetic alphabet" (King 1994: 48). Resentment of the indigenous students' scholarship – particularly in Latin, which represented the ability to challenge priests' authority directly – ultimately led to the closure of these academies in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and the end of any positive feelings towards indigenous languages on the part of colonial powers (Heath 1972: 30-31; Parodi 2006: 40).

### **2.2.2 Modern Missionary Linguistics: Academia, SIL, and Ideologies of Translation**

Modern-day missionary-linguists are the clear heirs of the tradition described above, in both their ongoing support for particular types of bilingualism and their ties to academic linguistics (Pennycook and Makoni 2005). Studies of more recent missionary linguistics and Bible translation have focused largely on the Summer Institute of Linguistics / Wycliffe Bible

Translators (SIL / WBT),<sup>47</sup> who have represented themselves as academic linguistics and education specialists in spite of their commitment to evangelization and Bible translation.<sup>48</sup>

While these twin organizations once sought to hide their religious goals, they currently argue that there is no contradiction between their two motivations.

The very double identity of the SIL / WBT demonstrates the close connections between academic linguistics and Bible translation. The two organizations share a board and membership, but their dual incorporation allows them to present themselves simultaneously as an ecumenical organization of Bible translators (WBT) and as secular academic linguists (SIL). The WBT was the arm that appealed to a US evangelical audience for funds to support their mission, while the SIL entered into contracts with Latin American governments to provide bilingual education (Stoll 1982: 71-9).

The SIL was involved in Mexican bilingual education from 1936 to 1979, first in an advisory role and later in an official capacity (King 1994: 113-15). As SIL member Kenneth Olson (2009: 650) notes, "the way SIL is incorporated has a pragmatic function: it allows us to partner formally with governments and institutions in ways that may not be possible otherwise. For example, we were able to do our scholarly work in Mexico in our early days at a time when Protestant mission organizations were prohibited from working there." Although governments were aware of SIL's missionary intentions, they were willing to look the other way both because of the quality of work produced (Svelmoe 2009: 633-4) and because evangelical Protestantism

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<sup>47</sup> Now known as SIL International.

<sup>48</sup> Including – but not limited to – Barros 2004; Dobrin 2009; Dobrin and Good 2009; Epps and Ladley 2009; Errington 2001; 2008; Handman 2007; 2009; 2010; Hartch 2006; the papers collected in Hvalkof, et al. 1981; Kray 2004; Olson 2009; Pennycook and Makoni 2005; Rutherford 2000; Samuels 2006; Stoll 1982; Svelmoe 2009.

was seen as more "modern" than the reigning syncretic Catholicism (Hartch 2006: 13).<sup>49</sup>

However, in the 1970s, and the SIL was charged with being not only pseudo-scientific and imperialist but even a potential CIA front (Stoll 1982: 226). Their contract was ultimately terminated under pressure from both indigenous organizations and social scientists (e.g. Bonfil Batalla, et al. 1977).<sup>50</sup>

The SIL's activities have been critiqued throughout the world for similar concerns. They have created and promoted particularist orthographies that many see as divisive, and "paint a picture of extreme dialectal and linguistic fragmentation" (Bonfil Batalla, et al. 1977: 117).<sup>51</sup> Their strategy furthermore requires them to "sustain an ideology of the regressive, static, and ahistoric character of indigenous languages, according to which they would be incapable of dynamically absorbing the new collective experiences that oppressed peoples are faced with" (Bonfil Batalla, et al. 1977: 117).<sup>52</sup> Scholars have also accused them of encouraging assimilation and conversion rather than community self-determination (England 1996: 183; Epps and Ladley 2009), to the point where they have been accused of ethnocide (Smith 1981), although the AAA Committee on Ethics formally found in their favor in 1975 (Headland 2001: 508). In short, the SIL can justifiably be accused of continuing on an earlier missionary trajectory of creating and enforcing linguistic hierarchies (Errington 2003: 727; Pennycook and Makoni 2005).

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<sup>49</sup> "It is important to note that [Lázaro] Cárdenas was not blind to the SIL's religious purposes and that the SIL did not try to obscure its desire to translate the Bible...At the very least [Cárdenas] saw this Bible-based religion as a superior alternative to Catholicism." (Hartch 2006: 13).

<sup>50</sup> However, SIL members continue to operate in Mexico on a strictly volunteer basis. Gilda Rodríguez (p.c., 5/27/2012) reminds me that the PRI, the party that ruled Mexico during the entire 20th century, has become less committed to the separation of church and state as they have lost their monopoly on government.

<sup>51</sup> "...presenta un cuadro de extremada fragmentación dialectal y lingüística..." For similar statements from Mexico and Guatemala alone, see also: Cojtí Cuxil 1996: 38-9; England 1996: 183-4; Flores Farfán 2006: 305-6; King 1994: 79-80, 90-1, 113-21; Warren 1998: 81.

<sup>52</sup> "...sustentar la ideología del carácter ahistórico, estático y regresiva de las lenguas indígenas, según la cual estas serían incapaces de absorber dinámicamente las nuevas experiencias colectivas que confrontan los pueblos oprimidos."

In spite of these concerns, the fields of anthropology and linguistics have never been able to fully separate themselves from missionaries. Both fields have a long history of reliance not only on data provided by missionaries but also on the infrastructure they have set up in hard-to-reach communities. Linguists, in particular, depend on the SIL for technological infrastructure like IPA fonts and documentation programs; the Ethnologue (Lewis et al. 2013) remains the most exhaustive catalogue of the world's languages; and the SIL's coding system has become the worldwide standard for language identification, with the SIL its appointed custodian (Dobrin and Good 2009). As long as scholars use these resources, however, we continue to legitimize the SIL as a secular academic organization, and as long as we allow the SIL to take responsibility for practical applications, we are supporting their evangelical mission in our practice (Epps and Ladley 2009).

The SIL's evangelical mission and the language ideologies underlying this mission connect them to other, seemingly divergent, traditions of missionary linguistics. The relationship between a speaker and his or her mother tongue is essentialized, perhaps even fetishized:

A speaker's first, native language holds a special place in Christian translation literature, as the language in which the Scriptures and other materials can best be understood by receptor communities. Heart languages are understood as repositories of the kind of sincere, intentional, and truthful language that Robbins (2001) and Keane (1997a) in particular have identified with Christian missionization. The mother tongue will also help speakers to maintain their community identity through periods of transition. [Handman 2009: 637]

For the SIL, the mother tongue bears a privileged relationship to identity, as well as a privileged epistemic status that makes it the most appropriate way of reaching people (Handman 2010: 578-9). And in contrast with Catholic bans on vernacular translation during the colonial period, Protestants see the fact that God gave us language – and therefore must understand all tongues – as a mandate for translation, although humans are responsible for the accuracy of such

translations (Errington 2003: 727; Samuels 2006: 538; Smalley 1991: 93-94).<sup>53</sup> In spite of these bans, the colonial Catholic language ideology has much in common with the SIL: bans on vernacular translation did not question the special status of the mother tongue but rather certain low-status groups' (and languages') right to direct access to the Bible. If anything, colonial friars' insistence on using indigenous languages in spite of these bans points to a deep-seated belief in the importance of the mother tongue.

Jehovah's Witnesses share their privileging of the mother tongue with these earlier traditions. Phraao Hansen (2010: 130) suggests that Witnesses are aware of the intimacy and solidarity implied by knowledge of indigenous languages, and take advantage of it in their preaching. Indeed, the Witnesses' concept of one's "mother tongue" is perhaps even more essentialist than that of the SIL: an ethnic Chontal who is a monolingual Spanish speaker and has been since birth is still conceived of as a native speaker of Chontal (see Chapter Eight). Unfortunately, there has been little academic research that specifically addresses the translation politics and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses and less still that situates them within the history of missionary linguistics;<sup>54</sup> this is one gap I seek to fill. Furthermore, the continuity of Bible translation practices and missionary linguistics across theologically diverse Christian groups (who, in many cases, see themselves as entirely separate religions) requires us to revise our own notion of what unites Christianity.

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<sup>53</sup> Many Bible translators consider their work "interpretation" rather than "translation" even when this work is written (Samuels 2006: 534). In spite of this word's suggestion of a single correct translation, even quite small communities often display multiple, very different entextualizations (Handman 2010; Nevins 2010).

<sup>54</sup> In addition to Phraao Hansen (2010), see also Mubimba (1987).

## 2.3 Community

What does it mean for people to be part of a Christian community?<sup>55</sup> What does it mean for people to be Jehovah's Witnesses? After all, Witness practices fit into the larger landscape of what we think of as Christian practices, particularly as regards translation and language. At the same time, Witnesses see themselves – and their more than seven million brethren worldwide<sup>56</sup> – as forming a community, or congregation, of all the true Christians in the world. Harvey Whitehouse (2006: 302) provides us with one possible understanding: "Christians do not see themselves as members of an exclusive group of adherents, who know each other personally. One's identity as a Christian is premised on the presumed commonality of forms of worship and belief within a vast population of anonymous others."

To understand Christianity, or any Christian sect, as a community, we first need to understand what we mean by this term. Scholars of language and social life have conceived of "community" in several broadly different ways. Indeed, any given individual typically identifies with many different types of community. Here I consider these types of communities and suggest a definition that will allow us to understand how individual Jehovah's Witnesses locate themselves within a community of seven and a half million others who share their beliefs.

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<sup>55</sup> Compare Cannell 2006: 5.

<sup>56</sup> According to <http://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/> there were 7,538,994 active baptized Witnesses as of 3/16/2013.

### 2.3.1 Models of Community Based on Shared Communicative Resources

Scholars of language have conceptualized community in two broadly different ways: as *language communities* and *speech communities*.<sup>57</sup> Silverstein (1996a; 1998a) synthesizes prior work and clears up the theoretical confusion between these two types of community. Language communities are "groups of people by degree evidencing allegiance to norms of denotational (aka 'referential,' 'propositional,' 'semantic') language usage" (Silverstein 1998a: 402); speech communities are "based on patterns of indexical facts of linguistic usage-in-context...[patterns] of who, normatively, communicates in which ways to whom on what occasions" (Silverstein 1996a: 129). A language community is oriented to what we think of as a language, typically a Standard language. Consider as an example the Spanish language community, which includes approximately four hundred million native speakers worldwide, and an additional million second language speakers. With the exception of the one Chontal monolingual, all members of the Zapotitlán community are part of the Spanish language community, and a subset of these are part of the Chontal language community.

A speech community, on the other hand, shares more with commonsense notions of "community" since it depends on shared social action. Members of a speech community engage in "regular and frequent interaction" (Gumperz 2001[1968]: 43), and interaction occurs on the basis of "a shared set of norms, local knowledge, beliefs, and values" (Morgan 2000: 36). Although individuals may belong to multiple speech communities (Morgan 2004: 4), the members of a speech community participate in a single shared speech economy: a single system

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<sup>57</sup> In a sense, these terms illustrate how powerless we are to escape our own professional ideologies. The dualism between *language* (referring to a widespread, standardized code) and *speech* (which is always local, language-in-interactional-context) has been at the heart of linguistics since its founding.



of distribution, circulation, and evaluation of different language varieties.<sup>58</sup> The entire population of Zapotitlán and the other towns in the Chontal region are part of a speech community – they all consider Chontal the defining language of this community in spite of the large number of Spanish monolinguals, and they are all imagined to speak Chontal. Since this speech community overlaps with an imagined language community, I call them the community of "Chontal speakers" in quotation marks.

### 2.3.2 From Speech Community to Community of Practice

Bucholtz (1999), following Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), critiques the notion of *speech community* as one that reduces social divisions and identities to linguistics and, as a result, has little currency outside academic sociolinguistics and related fields. Instead, Bucholtz argues, a *community of practice* framework (Bourdieu 1977a) allows us to analyze communities that align more closely with individuals' sense of their own (multiple, overlapping) identities. By considering "language as one of many social practices in which participants engage" (Bucholtz 1999: 210; cf. Morgan 2004: 15-16), this framework connects studies of language to other studies of social life (cf. Woolard 1985). Unlike the language community, it does not privilege standardized codes over other language varieties, and unlike the concepts of both language and speech community, it does not consider a particular linguistic variety sufficient basis to form a community unless speakers themselves consider this a central practice.

However, this framework includes communities that have little or no phenomenological reality for participants. Students in the same course, for example, form a community of practice: they are "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor"

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<sup>58</sup> Everyday value judgments like "I hate it when people say *aks* when they mean *ask*," "I like Spanish accents in English better than Mexican ones," and "Southerners speak the worst English" are examples of evaluation. The fundamentally social nature of these judgments is clear: one does not become marginalized by "mis"-pronouncing the word *ask* but rather this pronunciation is stigmatized because it is only marginalized individuals who use it (Alim and Smitherman 2012: 37-38; Lippi-Green 1997: 179-180).

(Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464). Yet almost nobody would answer the question "Who are you?" by saying "a member of Anthropology 33." Communities of practice are often limited temporally, spatially, or both, which means that they are unlikely to align with individuals' own ideas of the essential cores of identity.

### 2.3.3 Models of Community Based on Mass Media

A notion of community must also be able to accommodate groups like nations whose members articulate a collective identity, in spite of the impossibility of frequent interaction between all members on such a large scale. Mediation is one way to connect a community of this size. Benedict Anderson (1983) first proposed a view of the nation as *imagined community*, in which widely-read novels and newspapers provide common points of reference and a sense of a shared Standard language.<sup>59</sup> However, there is nothing special about the newspaper as a form, and any mass media may play this role (Appadurai 1990). Shared media consumption is not itself sufficient to create community unless audiences are active in recontextualizing media content (Spitulnik 1996). It is not, then, the act of reading the same newspapers (or listening to the same radio shows) that creates the community, but the act of referring to them.

This is closest to Witnesses' own understanding of themselves as a community. Indeed, Witnesses often observe that they all "read the same thing" and hear the same public talks (themselves performances of written outlines which are centrally distributed), and they discuss the content of both readings and religious meetings regularly. For outside analysts, Anderson's

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<sup>59</sup> The idea that language is fundamental to the modern nation-state can be traced back to Johann Gottfried Herder, best known for the Romantic conception that a nation must comprise (exactly) one people who share (exactly) one language. Herder's view of language "also encompasses history, culture, and politics and ... views the place of language and literature as foundational to all of these dimensions of human existence" (Bauman and Briggs 2000: 166). Herder's and Anderson's images of the nation share an assumption of internal homogeneity that is largely unwarranted; both present the nation as a unit that is both natural and objective, based on a shared peoplehood rather than simply on shared territory. In this view, "the ideal model of society is monolingual, monoethnic, monoreligious, monoideological" (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998: 195).

model is problematic: he relies heavily on a shared Standard language (Silverstein 2000), while Witness publications are available in 595 languages.<sup>60</sup> Witnesses, however, see themselves as united by a "pure language"<sup>61</sup> of Biblical truth that they all speak. This language is semantic rather than social or structural; the term "pure language" refers to talk about a system of beliefs that Witnesses feel can be expressed in any human language. However, this ideology is problematic for anthropological analysis: the "pure language" is not a language in the sense that we use the term, but rather a *discourse*, a coherent and systematic way of talking about things that constrains what can be said about them.<sup>62</sup>

I will return to Witnesses' understandings of what defines them as a global community in Chapter Five. Here, I consider alternative models of community that can accommodate this complex view of language from a Witness-external point of view.

### **2.3.4 The Interpretive Community**

Scholars of Christianity have typically relied on either the community of practice concept or the concept of the *interpretive community* (Fish 1976; 1980). Interpretive communities comprise individuals who "share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (Fish 1976: 483). The important insight of this model is that "such communities operate on common procedures for engaging texts, sharing hermeneutic assumptions, interpretive strategies and performative styles. It is from this collective reading context that meaning ensues, not from the individual reader and not from the text itself" (Bielo 2009c: 13). However, this model has several

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/> accessed 3/5/2013.

<sup>61</sup> "Are You Speaking the 'Pure Language' Fluently?" *The Watchtower*, 8/15/2008, pp. 21-25.

<sup>62</sup> Although this term is used in this sense by Hanks (2010), Hill and Hill (1986), Messing (2007), and other linguistic anthropologists, none provides a definition.

limitations: it does not address the question of whether these individuals consider themselves a community, it fails to consider the issue of multiple languages, and it has typically been used for small-scale communities in which face-to-face interaction is the norm, such as the classroom (Fish 1980) or the Bible study group (Bielo 2009c). Indeed, most of the scholars who have used this term have not fully theorized the meaning of *community* in general.

### 2.3.5 The Textual Community

In order to understand the worldwide community of Jehovah's Witnesses *as a community*, I propose the notion of the *textual community*, which combines insights from the community of practice, the interpretive community, and the imagined or mediated community. Like the imagined community, the textual community's identity relies heavily on shared media consumption: each week, all Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide are expected to read articles in *The Watchtower* as well assigned segments of Bible textbooks and particular Bible chapters. However, the textual community does not simply read the same thing<sup>63</sup> but reads it *in the same way*: that is, members engage in shared practices of reading, interpretation, and recontextualization. However, the *textual community* is not simply a community of textual practice: this community has a phenomenological reality for its members that is often absent in communities of practice.

While the members of a nation may have voluntary access to the same mass media, Jehovah's Witnesses are obligated to read the same literature to remain members of the community in good standing. The mandatory nature of shared reading means that Witnesses have shared points of reference in fact, not only in theory. As Holden (2002c: 66) notes, "So uniform is the Society's theology and content of meetings that, in principle, every Jehovah's Witness in

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<sup>63</sup> Given the extent of Jehovah's Witnesses' translation, the conception of *The Watchtower* or even the Bible as "the same thing" regardless of language is itself a shared literacy practice.

the world will read the same literature during the same week in preparation for the same programme at their local Kingdom Hall." Witnesses are acutely aware of the vertical nature of this communication: in meetings, prayers, sermons (known as "public talks"), and interviews, Witnesses often thank the Watch Tower Society for providing them with "spiritual food"<sup>64</sup> at the appropriate time." Indeed, congregational elders thank the Watch Tower Society<sup>65</sup> for a public talk more often than they thank the speaker himself.

The textual community also has a phenomenological reality for its members. Individual Jehovah's Witnesses see themselves as members of a worldwide collective, a single enormous congregation or community about which they may speak authoritatively. Furthermore, they are oriented to the role that texts and textual practices play in the global cohesion of this community:

Conversation often centred on recent articles in *The Watchtower*, sermons at meetings and experiences on the door-to-door visits. References to 'the world', 'the Kingdom', 'the ministry', 'Armageddon' and 'the truth' were frequently used, as were scriptural quotations. Equally, the terms 'brother' and 'sister' are dominant terms of reference during door-to-door ministry and at the Kingdom Hall. These personal references enhance the authenticity of the community and affirm the boundaries that set it apart. Images, metaphors and verbal exchanges lend themselves to the Witnesses' ultimate objective of preparing for the New Kingdom. Language, visual imagery and metaphor are the tools used by the Witnesses to disseminate their millenarian beliefs. These cultural resources enable the Society to present itself as an authentic community.

[Holden 2002c: 96-97; see also Chapter Five of this dissertation]

Andrew Holden emphasizes the use of specific linguistic practices, including particular terms of address, to "enhance the authenticity of the community." Yet what is even more striking in his description is the centrality of the written word. The conversation topics he describe all

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<sup>64</sup> "Spiritual food" is a widely used Witness metaphor for theological content, including both Watch Tower Society publications and all public talks, since talk outlines are provided directly from the Watch Tower Society to speakers. 1 Corinthians 10:1-5 is the source of this metaphor. Ted Everhart (p.c.) pointed out that this term is also in common use among Anglicans and Catholics, for whom it refers to something entirely different: the Eucharist.

<sup>65</sup> Technically, they address their thanks to *the faithful and discreet slave*, a term which comes from Matthew 24: 45-47 and which refers to the Governing Body ("Who Really Is the Faithful and Discreet Slave?" *The Watchtower*, 7/15/2013, pp. 20-25).

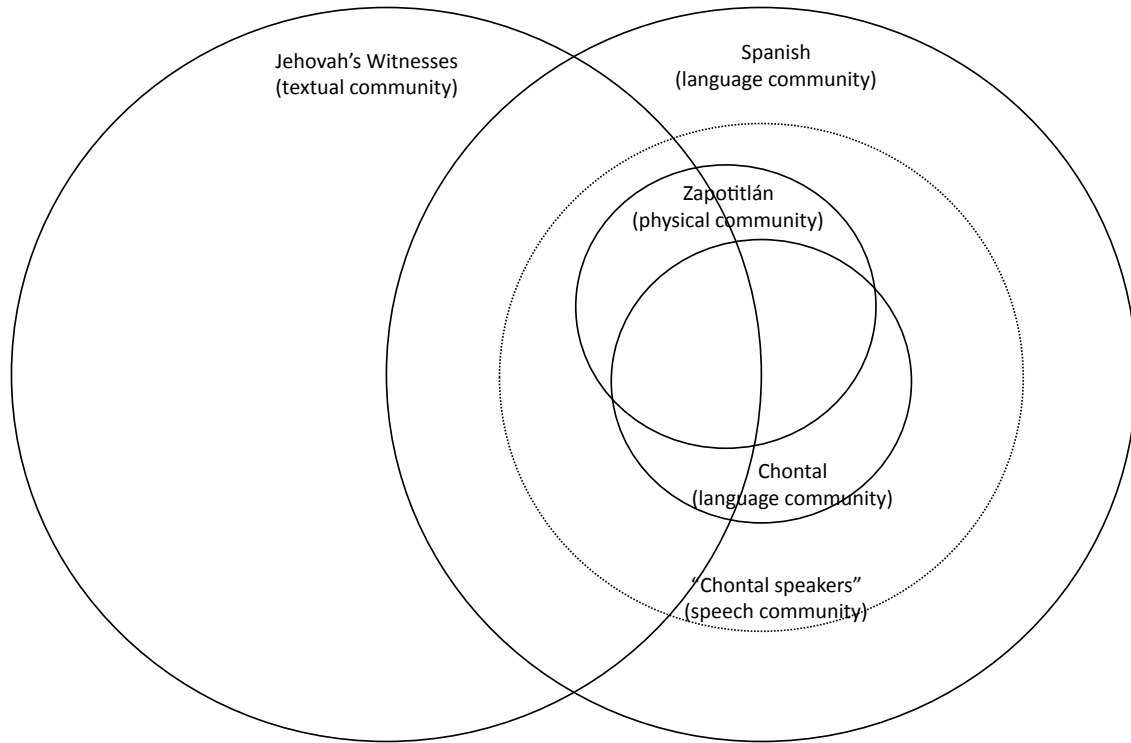
emphasize Watch Tower Society textual materials: sermons are developed from centrally produced outlines, and the goal of door-to-door ministry is to convince potential converts to accept written materials.

Shared literacy practices are as important as the shared content in constituting the Witness community. Non-Witnesses might read *The Watchtower* skeptically or even mockingly, and the act of reading it hardly makes them Witnesses. Instead, for an individual to be a Jehovah's Witness, he or she must continually (attempt to) read the same literature in the same guided ways.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the Witness textual community functions through three primary mechanisms: a totalizing textual economy, or textual regime; constraints on participation; and a particular relationship of language choice to morality. I explore these mechanisms in the sections that follow.

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<sup>66</sup> Compare Kirsch (2007: 514): "Becoming a Jehovah's Witness and attaining socioreligious empowerment through this denomination ... meant learning how to proceed in one's reading as well as, to a certain extent, how to make productive use of markings for orientation in a text."

**Figure 2.1:** Individuals have multiple memberships and affiliations. The dotted line represents the Chontal ethnic community, which shares norms of Chontal and Spanish use (and is thus a speech community); its members are imagined as Chontal speakers even though this group contains many Spanish monolinguals and speakers with only passive Chontal competence.<sup>67</sup> See the discussion of the implications for Chontal later in this chapter.



## 2.4 Linguistic Economies, Literacies, Textual Economies, and Textual Regimes

### 2.4.1 (Political) Economy of Language

The Marxist turn that the field of anthropology took in the seventies, and political economy in particular, have played a large role in helping anthropologists connect the small-scale phenomena we observe directly with large-scale political and historical

<sup>67</sup> It is technically untrue that the Chontal language community is a subset of the Spanish language community, but the number of Chontal monolinguals is vanishingly small. The 2000 census reported 21 monolinguals out of a total Chontal-speaking population of 4,394 in the state, or less than half a percent (INEGI 2000); the 2010 census reports that among the 1,002 Santa María Zapotitlán residents over the age of three, only 345 spoke Chontal and only one of those was monolingual (INEGI 2010).

processes (Ortner 1984). Linguistic anthropologists in particular have been aware since that historical moment of the value of a political-economic conception of language and linguistic resources. As Dell Hymes observed:

One could consider the whole [of a community's ways of speaking] from the standpoint of persons; ... from the standpoint of beliefs, values, and attitudes, a vantage point which might bring out most saliently the respect in which ways of speaking constitute symbolic forms; or from the standpoint of contexts and institutions. This last vantage point could support an alternative conception and name for the focus of the descriptive enterprise, which might be expressed as the study of the *speech economy* of a community. [Hymes 1974: 46; emphasis added]

In short, the circulation and evaluation of what Hymes calls "ways of speaking" are appropriate and important objects of study.

Before scholars can fruitfully conceive of a *speech economy*, we need critical conceptions of both *economy* and *speech*. As Keane (2002: 85n1) reminds us, "the idea of an 'economy' ... is meant to capture the way in which practices and ideologies put words, things, and actions into complex articulation with one another." And what do we mean when we talk about *ways of speaking* (Hymes 1974)? A more general term is *language variety*, which collapses languages, dialects, registers, accents, styles, and the like, allowing us to avoid the value judgments behind these words. A language variety is, in short, "a set of communicative forms and norms for their use that are restricted to a particular group or community and sometimes even to particular activities" (Duranti 1997: 70). We can also think of these as *linguistic* or *communicative resources*,<sup>68</sup> since individuals are able to draw on multiple varieties in order to accomplish particular ends. Given these definitions, a study of speech economies must include an examination not only of the distribution and evaluation of different language varieties (and communicative resources more broadly), but also of their circulation.

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<sup>68</sup> I use the term *communicative resources* to emphasize the multiple forms that communication can take, for reasons that will become clear in the next section.



Early political-economic conceptions of language suggest that different linguistic varieties operate within a market where the scarcest varieties tend to hold the highest value (Bourdieu 1977b). For instance, relatively few speakers of any language in the world control the Standard variety – the unmarked and highly socially valued variety of a language used in public discourse – of that language, and yet the Standard is held up as an ideal (Silverstein 1996b). It is possible to control the hegemonic variety of language without accepting its superiority, just as it is possible to believe that it has inherent value while failing to control it (Woolard 1985). Indeed, this latter is often the case. For example, many of the English speakers who are most committed to the superiority of the Standard variety are those who do not speak it and yet are able to see the access to material resources it provides (Silverstein 1996b; see Collins 1999 for an example).

Language varieties have no inherent value; their worth comes from the social standing of the groups they are associated with. Standard languages do not demonstrate a better fit between "linguistic words and the extralinguistic 'reality' they represent, but do not affect" (Silverstein 1996b: 288), although economists have argued for just such a connection.<sup>69</sup> Suggesting that the economic value of Standard languages comes from an inherent communicative advantage – and that individuals simply choose not to speak them – is problematic. Such a view neglects not only the political inequalities that cause certain varieties to become stigmatized, but also the underlying truth that judgments about varieties always reflect judgments about their speakers. For the notion of a linguistic economy to have analytic value, we must also reject the assumption that all individuals have access to all varieties of language and value these varieties equally.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> The emphasis on referentiality in such ideologies is highly ironic, since it is precisely the multifunctionality of language that allows different varieties to take on different values (Irvine 1989).

<sup>70</sup> For a clear example of members of the same community evaluating one language variety in very different ways, consider the controversy over the use of "Ebonics" in U.S. schools. For some, "Ebonics" was a language distinct from English that should be recognized, tolerated, and otherwise accounted for" in the school system (Collins 1999:

In spite of these common – and troubling – assumptions about access, the concept of a political economy of language allows us to recognize that the evaluation and circulation of communicative resources rests on social factors and not on any sort of inherent superiority (Bourdieu 1977b; Gal 1989; Irvine 1989). It also reminds us that this evaluation can be fluid, and quick to change. However, in most linguistic economies, "even those who do not control the legitimated variety accept its authority, its correctness, its power to persuade, and its right to be obeyed" (Gal 1989: 353). For example, individuals who do not speak Standard English may refer to their own speech as "broken" or "bad" English, rather than recognizing that it has the same communicative potential as any other variety of English.

#### **2.4.2 Literacies**

For a study of the political economy of language to be complete, it must include not only spoken but also written language, and not only the content of texts but also the relationships that readers have with them. Recent research on literacy has emphasized the fact that literacy, much like language, is multiple. We speak in the plural – of *literacy activities* and *literacy events* (Heath 1983; 2001[1982]), *literacies* (Collins and Blot 2003; Gee 1990; Street 1984), or *literacy practices* (Ahearn 2012) – to emphasize the many different ways readers interact with written texts. Any individual is exposed to many different kinds of texts, yet does not read them all in the same way: traffic signs, nutritional information, birthday cards, and novels require different practices.<sup>71</sup> Individuals from divergent backgrounds may also relate to the same text in very different ways (Heath 2001[1982]), and the same individual may also read the same text differently at different moments in time.

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202). For others, this attempt to value the way students spoke at home was nothing less than "legitimizing gibberish" (Collins 1999: 208).

<sup>71</sup> See also Ahearn (2012: 140): "From cereal boxes, billboards, and newspapers to the internet and words written on clothing, many people engage more frequently with the written word than they realize."

Importantly, literacy seems to be extremely well-suited as a challenger to older and more traditional forms of authority. Anderson (1983) suggests that shared textual practices are special in their ability to unite people with those they presume to be reading the same thing at the same time. I argue a more subtle version of his point: literate content and literacy practices have the potential to create community, but we must always be mindful of the source of literacy, which is never free of ideologies about text and language (Morgan 2009: 17-20; Schieffelin 2000). In non-Western societies, books often come to represent powerful instruments created by outsiders for the purposes of control (Collins and Blot 2003). For example, the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea saw three waves of outsiders – the government in the 1950s, anthropologists in the 1960s, and missionaries in the 1970s – who arrived with books that represented new forms and sources of knowledge, and challenged local ideas about truth (Schieffelin 2001; see also Schieffelin 2000; 2007). Before any of these groups arrived, elders were the most authoritative source of knowledge.<sup>72</sup> While the timing and the groups involved differ, books and other literate technologies – backed up by the entire colonial apparatus – served the purpose of supplanting older forms of authority in many places, including rural Mexico.

In many colonial encounters, alphabetic literacy was introduced by missionaries intending to convert local populations (Collins and Blot 2003: ch. 6). Conversion requires suppressing traditional epistemologies that compete with Christian ways of knowing; if Christianity is to take full hold, knowledge from books has to become the ultimate authority. Yet such challenges to traditional authority do not simply arrive from the outside. Instead, they are the joint products of hegemonic interests from the outside and relatively disenfranchised insiders who see such a venture as their entrée to power (Schieffelin 2001: 123). The insiders' positions

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<sup>72</sup> It is no coincidence that Jehovah's Witnesses, like a number of Christian religions, call their lay leaders "elders."

within their communities give them an incentive to align with outside interests, although the balance of power typically remains with the outsiders in such collaborations.

Hanks (2010) describes the role of texts in colonial Yucatán, distinguishing between two discourses, two cohesive sets of texts and genres. Spanish-speaking priests wrote grammars and dictionaries *about* Maya and *doctrinas* (catechisms, prayers, scripts for sacraments) *in* Maya, all for Spanish speakers, often with Spanish as a metalanguage. Meanwhile, Maya authors wrote both the bureaucratic documents that Hanks designates "notarial" genres and officially-forbidden native genres, all in Maya and principally for Maya audiences (Hanks 2010: 16-22). For Hanks, a coherent discourse includes extensive intertextual links. Throughout this dissertation, I make a similar distinction between the secular and religious textual economies: while a number of people participate in both economies and read both types of texts, the texts themselves hold different values and people see engagement with them as different types of activities. In the context I describe, these economies do not correspond to a local-imperial distinction; both economies are primarily wide in their scope, with the Chontal language limited to the local. Importantly, the Jehovah's Witness textual economy has a much denser and more coherent set of intertextual connections and references than the secular one, as the Bible functions as a core text that underlies each and every other text. I am primarily concerned with the Witness textual economy, whose denseness and rigidity are most easily understood by contrast with the secular.

Authors who have explored specifically religious texts recognize that what makes a text religious is not its content, but rather the relationship between reader and text. James Bielo (2009a: 4), an anthropologist of American evangelicalism, writes: "Scriptures rely on communities of practice to recognize them as such. For a text to be scriptural it must be endowed, and continue to be endowed, with the appropriate significance by a defined group of

interlocutors." Brian Malley (2004: 13), a cognitive anthropologist who has studied Bible use among Christians, makes a similar claim: "An anthropological theory of scripturalism would be quite different from the theological, literary, phenomenological, and historical studies available at present. ... An anthropological theory would focus instead on *scripturalists*, the people behind the texts who make the texts special by their beliefs and practices." Leadership positions within such groups play a role in creating the authority of scripture:

Protestant scriptural readings are not generated through individual study of the Bible, but via the interpretive community in which the individual evangelical is situated. From this perspective, the interpretive community – under the leadership of its interpretive authorities such as pastors and theologians – determines the "ground rules" for scriptural interpretation. [Bartkowski 1996: 269-70]

What these three divergent authors share is an understanding that scripturehood is not intrinsic to texts, but to communities and economies.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, ways of reading scripture – scriptural literacy practices – may spread outward from scriptures and apply to other types of texts:

The Fundamentalist's critique ... does rely on questionable assumptions about textual meaning, interpretation, and objectivity. It assumes, for one, that there is a single correct interpretation of Scripture. I have found that many Fundamentalists extend this mode of reading to other texts – to life generally. Their critique also assumes, and in a corollary fashion, that meaning (as distinguished from personal significance) is timeless. [Crapanzano 2000: 19]

For those who see the Bible as ultimately authoritative, ways of reading the Bible are authoritative ways of reading. These literacy practices may inform their engagement even with non-scriptural texts. Given the Bible's singular role in the lives of Christians, Crapanzano suggests, understanding how Christians read the Bible may be key in understanding how they interpret everything that happens to them.

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<sup>73</sup> Benedict Anderson (2006: 13), too, notes that the religious community is "imaginable largely through the medium of a sacred language and written script."

### 2.4.3 Textual Economies

As Brian Street (2003) reminds us, there are good reasons to move away from (spoken) language as the sole focus of any study of communication and to consider other modalities, including writing. Providing and denying access to literacy has long been a way of maintaining hegemonic power structures; convincing people that literacy is "an autonomous, neutral, and universal set of skills" (Street 2003: xiii) is a more subtle method of achieving the same goal. Focusing on the notion of the *textual economy* – a synthesis of valuable insights from studies of the political economy of language and of literacies – allows us to explore the specifics of power relationships.

A *textual economy* refers to "the different social capital ... communities invest in the category of text, individual authors, individual works, and distinct genres, ... in which value is constantly reevaluated, and texts and authors move in and out of favor" (Bielo 2009c: 110-111). The study of a textual economy is not simply the study of the written texts themselves, but also of talk about texts, practices of reading texts, and events in which they texts are used or referred to. To discuss the role of the Bible, for example, we need to consider not only its content but also the variety of occasions in which it is read, discussed, or quoted.

Textual economies are more limited than linguistic ones in one important dimension: everyone produces some form of language, but not everyone who consumes texts produces them. This creates an asymmetry in which readers' relationships to texts have more everyday importance than writers'. The process of creating a text-artifact such as a printed book authorizes (Bucholtz and Hall 2004) its content. Relatively few people have access to a printing press, and the multiple authenticating steps in between drafting the content and seeing it in print allow us to ascribe authority to the written word even with relatively little knowledge of its author. Print as a

form is not inherently authoritative; rather, this authority emerged over time and has more to do with the publishing industry and its controls than with the physical properties of books (Eisenstein 1979; Johns 1998; Adam Shapiro, p.c., 3/8/2012). If editors and publishers are willing to put their reputation at stake to authenticate this text, readers assume it contains something of worth.<sup>74</sup>

Textual economies and the asymmetries involved play a role in creating community on as large a scale as the national. Benedict Anderson (1983) "locates the link between language and nation not in the sharing of a language per se but rather in the unifying effects of print" (Gal 1989: 355; cf. Lee 2001). By reading the same newspapers and novels, the citizens of a nation come to see themselves as members of a community. A standardized language makes such shared reading practices possible; as the Standard language becomes hegemonic, diversity is experienced as divergence (Silverstein 2000: 121-122).<sup>75</sup> While Anderson does recognize that Standard languages emerge from print media rather than the other way around (Kroskrity 2000b: 26-27), he fails to recognize that "homogeneous language is as much imagined as is community" (Irvine and Gal 2000: 76).<sup>76</sup>

Textual authority is also rooted in *intertextuality*, connections to other texts (see Bauman and Briggs 2003). Indeed, one of writing's most valuable roles is as "a means of codifying knowledge and practice in bureaucratic settings and in imbuing institutional speech with authority" (Briggs 1997: 523), and one way to do this is by referring to or echoing other writing

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<sup>74</sup> Those who do not control any valued language varieties are especially unlikely to receive this authentication, and furthermore, we are limited in what we can read by our knowledge of particular language varieties. Anderson suggests that this is one reason that political alliances were often reinforced by marriages: "One can sleep with anyone, but one can only read some people's words" (Anderson 2006: 78-9).

<sup>75</sup> Note that in this view, all nationalist subjects are similar, for they all conceptualize difference in the same way (Silverstein 2000: 110).

<sup>76</sup> Highland Chontal is not only not homogenous but not even standardized.

that is already seen as authoritative. Academic writing, for example, takes much of its authority from citations of other authoritative academic texts.<sup>77</sup> In religious textual economies, non-scriptural texts become authoritative by means of references to scripture.

The Witness textual economy (described in detail in Chapters Six and Seven) is particularly strict. Consider once more Bielo's (2009c: 110-111) definition: "the different social capital ... communities invest in the category of text, individual authors, individual works, and distinct genres, ... in which value is constantly reevaluated, and texts and authors move in and out of favor." For Witnesses, all of these determinations are made centrally, rather than negotiated and reevaluated locally; individual Witnesses have no social capital with which to affect these evaluations. As a result, the textual economy in which they participate is totalizing. Individuals have agency inasmuch as they can always choose not to participate, but if they accept the tenets of this system they have very little power to alter it.

#### **2.4.4 Textual Regimes**

Given the high degree of centralization and totalizing nature of the Witness textual economy, we might also consider it a *textual regime*. Coulmas (2005: 7) defines a language regime as "a set of constraints on individual choices" that consists of habits, legal provisions, and ideologies. The Witness textual economy, meanwhile, incorporates three parallel components: textual practices, institutional regulations and consequences, and textual ideologies. The ways in which the Witness textual regime functions will be described in detail in Chapters Six and Seven, including the mechanisms of enforcement.

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<sup>77</sup> This gatekeeping function is also performed by peer review, editors, disciplines, and universities (Adam Shapiro, p.c., 6/4/2012).



## 2.5 Participation

By their very nature, written texts afford a different kind of participant structure than small-scale spoken communication, which requires participants to coincide in space and time. Goffman (1979) provided an early typology of forms of participation, breaking down earlier conceptions of hearer and speaker. Goffman considers whether hearers are addressed or unaddressed, and ratified or unratified; that is, whether speakers intend for them to be hearers or not. The speaker, meanwhile, consists of three chief roles: animator, author, and principal (or agent).<sup>78</sup> The animator is the individual who physically speaks the words, while the author is the individual or entity who phrases the talk, and the agent is the party who takes responsibility for what is said. Hanks (1996) and Irvine (1996) both suggest that secondary roles can be derived from overlapping frames of more complex speech events; the recontextualization of written texts is one such complex event (Bauman 2004; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Briggs and Bauman 1992).

New technologies create "new forms of sociality" (Eisenlohr 2004: 38), and writing is no exception. Where written texts are recontextualized, referred to, or animated, new forms of participation appear, and Watch Tower Society meetings epitomize this phenomenon. I consider here the Watchtower magazine study as an example; Chapter Seven provides a full analysis of how participation functions in Watch Tower Society literacy practices. In the *Watchtower* magazine study, a male congregation member in good standing reads aloud from the magazine, while another man (almost always an elder) reads the questions given in the text and mediates the discussion, calling on congregation members to comment, typically with contributions they have prepared ahead of time. In this type of literacy event, participant roles display a hierarchy: congregation members can only participate as *commenters* who may talk about the text – and

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<sup>78</sup> Goffman himself consistently uses the term "principal"; Paul Kroskrity (p.c.) suggested "*agent*" as a more evocative term given work by Laura Ahearn (e.g. 2001), Alessandro Duranti (e.g. 2004), and others.

quote from it – but cannot give voice to it, while a select few baptized men can *animate* the text in full. The even more select group of congregational elders, meanwhile, can participate as *mediators* who make sure that commenters' remarks appropriately reflect the text and attempt to ensure that the community has a shared understanding. The *author* of the text is the Watch Tower Society as an institution; individual writers never receive credit. Finally, the *agent* of these texts is also the Watch Tower Society (in etic perspective). For Jehovah's Witnesses, however, the Watch Tower Society is God's instrument on this earth, and so the agent of *The Watchtower* magazine is Jehovah himself,<sup>79</sup> in emic perspective.

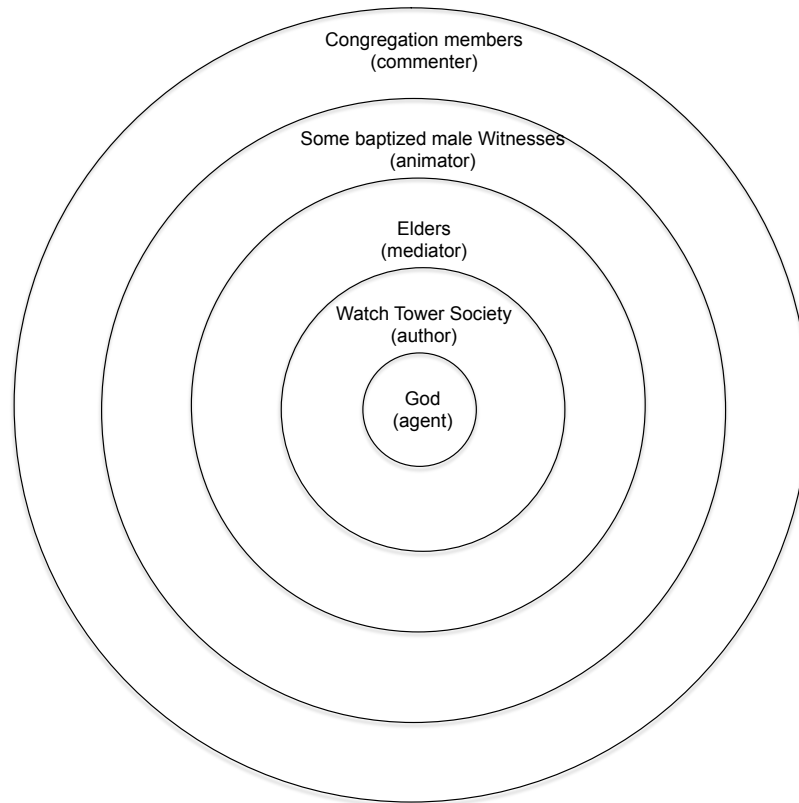
The Witness textual community, then, creates an economy of participant roles, which in turn creates a class of legitimated speakers who are not legitimate authors. Such a breakdown of roles allows Witnesses to feel they are part of the authority structure yet simultaneously maintains a top-down hierarchy:<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Witnesses consistently use male pronouns to refer to Jehovah.

<sup>80</sup> While this diagram includes all participant roles for *The Watchtower* magazine study, as a study of Jehovah's Witnesses as a whole it fails to include several other circles. A more complete diagram would include publishers (Witnesses who are authorized to preach door-to-door), baptized Witnesses, ministerial servants (a position of congregational responsibility that is typically a step on the way to becoming an elder), and various hierarchical positions within the Watch Tower Society such as pioneers (who have to meet a minimum number of preaching hours each month), circuit and district supervisors (who supervise groups of congregations), and administrative positions in the Branch Offices and the Watchtower in Brooklyn all the way up through the Governing Body (the ruling council of the Watch Tower Society). See Chapter Seven.

**Figure 2.2:** The concentricity of participation within the textual economy. Members of each interior circle are entitled to participate in the ways that all exterior circles are. There do exist some intermediate levels of participation as well as leakage in particular contexts; these will be discussed in Chapter Seven.



### 2.5.1 Writing, Translation, and Authorship

For the Watch Tower Society to retain its position as the only legitimate author, writing must be separated from authorship. All Watchtower Society literature is anonymous, as are outlines of public talks<sup>81</sup> distributed to individual elders from the Watchtower Society and all correspondence emanating from Brooklyn headquarters to individual congregations. While this practice ostensibly avoids glorifying individuals, it also positions God as the 'real' author of all

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<sup>81</sup> The term "public talk" refers to what non-Witnesses would be inclined to call a sermon: a half-hour text performed by a man of senior standing in the congregation on a topic of moral importance. These are always based on outlines distributed by email from the Watch Tower Society.

these texts (Elliott 1993). From a Watch Tower-internal perspective, Jehovah is not only the agent of all religious texts, the one whose position is spoken, but also the author of the words themselves.<sup>82</sup> From an external perspective, the Watch Tower Society is both agent and author; the individual identities of the men and women of the Writing Departments in Brooklyn and in other Branch Offices are entirely erased, that is, made invisible (cf. Irvine and Gal 2000).<sup>83</sup>

Since the Witnesses translate and interpret in more than 595 languages worldwide,<sup>84</sup> translation provides a second potential point of contention. Elsewhere, translators often conceive of translation as creative work, and consider it a particular type of authorship (Jaffe 1999a; b). However, the Watch Tower Society views translation as commensurate, ensuring that translation is *not* the same as authorship. Translators of written materials, like authors, are not recognized. Hanks (2010: 101) observes that "there are evangelical genres for which the author position is either suspended or greatly reduced." In these cases, the only known author might be "merely the translator, responsible for the accuracy and aptness of the Maya." For Jehovah's Witnesses, even the translators' names are unknown. Written texts such as *The Watchtower* magazine are translated by committees in a number of locations; *The Watchtower* is available in several of the indigenous languages spoken in what is now Mexico, and these are translated from Spanish and English at Mexican headquarters. When I asked one woman at a December 2010 Assembly if elders wrote their own talks, she said this task was too important to be left to mere men,<sup>85</sup> instead, these talks are written centrally and outlines are distributed to speakers. Yet each speaker

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<sup>82</sup> One might even argue that Watch Tower Society publications amount to a Third Testament that is generated on an ongoing basis. See Harding (2000: 28).

<sup>83</sup> See Shapiro (2012) for a description of how anonymity helps contribute to the "objectivity" of secular textbooks.

<sup>84</sup> In Witnesses' official usage, *translation* is written while *interpretation* is oral. As of 3/5/2013, jw.org listed the number of languages in which Witnesses "publish Bibles and Bible-based literature" as 595. Only four months earlier, this number was listed as 540.

<sup>85</sup> "No cabe pensamiento humano."

at Assemblies and at weekly meetings is responsible for interpreting (or not) the talk he will give, illustrating translation's and interpretation's secondary importance. Indeed, even women, who are relegated to the outer ring of participation in public contexts, are able to play a role in backstage translation activities, both in Zapotitlán and in Watch Tower Society Headquarters. See Chapters Seven through Nine for further discussion.

## **2.6 Language Choice and Moral Personhood**

Given the number of languages in which the Witnesses work, we must ask how language choice fits into their textual economy. In terms of efficiency, many of the languages they use are superfluous: according to the 2010 census, only 980,894 Mexicans (ages five and older) are monolingual in an indigenous language. That is to say, only 14.7% of the indigenous-language-speaking population of Mexico is monolingual, and less than 1% of the total Mexican population. In short, we might reasonably ask: "Why do Jehovah's Witnesses spend so many resources producing literature for populations that could largely be reached effectively through Spanish instead?" (Pharao Hansen 2010: 130). Such a language policy must either mean that (a) the particular languages have a special epistemic or moral status or (b) an individual's first language has a special epistemic or moral status for that individual. These ideologies have different consequences for the languages in question.

Minority language varieties are often maintained for long periods of time despite strong pressures because they are construed as necessary to moral personhood. We see this perhaps most strongly in the case of Biblical Hebrew, which remained fairly stable – but only in a limited number of domains – for centuries; these domains were liturgical and scholarly, and therefore directly connected to morality and full membership in the social group, particularly for men (Bunin Benor 2009; Fader 2006; 2007). Similarly, the Pueblo language Arizona Tewa enjoys a

relatively high number of speakers despite a long diasporic existence, due largely to its association with the kiva and indigenous religion (Kroskirty 1993; 1998; 2012; etc.). In some cases states have also positioned particular languages as necessary for moral citizenship and membership in the national community (Woolard 2004).

For Witnesses, however, what is important for moral personhood is a particular relationship between speaker and language: the mother tongue. Namely, the mother tongue is the most "sincere" and "heartfelt" for religious activities, including prayer, study, and proselytizing, a belief shared with the SIL/WBT.<sup>86</sup> A sign in the Mexico Branch Office reads: "With the goal of reaching people's hearts, we provide them with the Bible's message in their mother tongue."<sup>87</sup> An editor in the Brooklyn Watchtower also used this language, as did a Jehovah's Witness couple serving as full-time volunteers in Zapotitlán:

Marisa: We've seen that people, when someone preaches to them, if they preach in their language, it reaches their **heart** more, like, even if they understand Spanish, no- if someone speaks an indigenous language, if you speak to them in their indigenous language, it opens their, their, like, they're more receptive to what you're saying because you're speaking in their indigenous language. Or even if they see that someone's not from, from here and tries to, to speak it, then they see that he, he's making an effort and so, (they'll say) 'well, it's important, then, what he's going to tell me because he's even trying to say it to me in my own language.' So, then, that's why. When someone speaks to them in their indigenous language, it reaches their **heart** more and, well, that's the goal when we preach to people about what the Bible says, about what God thinks, that it reaches their **heart**. So, if, well, in their mother tongue, it's more likely that that happens, than if someone speaks to them in, like, Spanish, which isn't their mother tongue.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> THE SIL/WBT refers to individuals' "heart language" (Handman 2007; 2010), and an echo of this concept is found among US Fundamentalists as well, for whom religion is "'heart knowledge,' not 'head knowledge'" (Ammerman 1987: 73).

<sup>87</sup> "Con el propósito de llegar al corazón de las personas se les suministra el mensaje de la Biblia en su lengua materna."

<sup>88</sup> Lucas and Marisa interview, 2/2/2011, 00:33:10-00:34:30:

Marisa: "Se ha visto que las personas, cuando uno les predica, si les predica en su idioma, les llega más al corazón, por ejemplo, aunque entienda el español, no-si una persona habla una lengua indígena, si tú le hablas en su lengua indígena, se abre más su, su, como que es más receptiva a lo que le estás hablando porque le estás hablando en su lengua indígena. O hasta si ven que uno no es de, de aquí y trata de, de hablarlo, entonces ven que uno, uno se esfuerza y entonces (dirá) 'pues es importante entonces lo que me va a decir porque hasta está intentando decírmelo

In this case, it is the particular relationship between speaker and mother tongue rather than the original language of the religious text or ritual that makes it meaningful.

It is perhaps ironic that many Witnesses who are secure in their faith are encouraged to take up new languages so that they can serve in congregations "where need is greatest." However, such Witnesses are typically native speakers of majority languages and may have the opportunity to attend services in their own mother tongue in addition to those in the language community they are supporting. If translation work were not complete for a Witness's mother tongue, or if there were not sufficient numbers of people preaching door-to-door in that language, no amount of need elsewhere would trump that individual's skill in that language.

Within the Witness textual community, the forms of literacy and the participation constraints described above are also necessary for moral personhood. The section that follows outlines the Witness textual community in particular, through the theoretical lenses provided above, and Chapters Five through Nine describe it in detail.

## **2.7 Jehovah's Witnesses: A Totalizing, Globalizing Textual Community**

One strength of this notion of textual community is that it allows us to understand Jehovah's Witnesses as they see themselves. Witnesses consider themselves a worldwide community centered around (the construction of) shared texts, shared reading practices, and a shared textual economy, in spite of language differences. Indeed, Witnesses of all backgrounds often report that their identity as Jehovah's Witnesses eclipses other types of group membership;

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en mi lengua.' Entonces, pues, es por eso. Cuando uno le, le hablan en su lengua indígena, le llega más a, a su corazón y pues ese es el objetivo, que cuando nosotros les prediquemos a las personas, de lo que dice la Biblia, de lo que piensa Dios, pues que les llega a su corazón. Entonces si pues en su lengua materna, es más probable que eso pase, que a uno les hable en, por ejemplo, en español, que no es su lengua materna."

prohibitions on all forms of political participation<sup>89</sup> encourage them to identify first and foremost as Witnesses. A notion of a textual community based in shared texts, textual economies, and reading practices allows us to better understand this phenomenon.

Jehovah's Witnesses represent a textual economy – and resultant textual community – that combines elements of participation and moral personhood. This economy and community are simultaneously totalizing (in that they provide no room for disagreement)<sup>90</sup> and globalizing (in that they seek to erase cultural differences between local groups of Witnesses). For individuals to participate fully in this community, they must fully agree with Witness teachings and obey them as completely as possible, and they must also see themselves as Witnesses first and members of other types of communities second. Indeed, Witness identity is so totalizing that it is explicitly defined in opposition to "the world" or "this world" (Sprague 1946),<sup>91</sup> which includes all other Christian sects and denominations.

In nearly any political economy of communicative resources, text occupies a position of relatively high authority. For Jehovah's Witnesses, Watch Tower literature occupies a place nearly as high as that of the Bible, due in no small part to various intertextual connections. In addition to the Bible, Watch Tower literature also often includes quotations and cross-references

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<sup>89</sup> For example, Witnesses are not allowed to vote, serve in the military or in government office, salute their nation's flag, sing national anthems, or celebrate secular holidays. I have attended sermons discouraging Witnesses from being fans of any sport team for the same reason, although national teams are seen as particularly problematic by the Watch Tower Society in this regard.

<sup>90</sup> Goffman's (1961) *total institutions*, which include prisons, asylums, and the military, all have some physical reality that is conspicuously absent for the global community of Jehovah's Witnesses, although the various headquarters complexes bear more than a passing similarity to the phenomenon Goffman describes. In Goffman's *total institutions*, "all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same central authority" (Goffman 1961: 17), and it is true that all Witnesses answer to the same central authority in all aspects of life even though they are not conducted in the same place.

<sup>91</sup> As Sprague (1946: 119) observes, Witnesses' need to proselytize means that they are in some sense dependent on their relationship with outsiders. Furthermore, the hostility of outsiders to Witnesses encourages internal cohesion (Sprague 1946: 125).



to other Watch Tower publications, further reinforcing its authority with explicit intertextual links to the ultimately authoritative text (cf. Bakhtin 1981).

To be a Witness means committing oneself to a community centered around texts. Witnesses everywhere read the same texts at the same time in the same way, which allows them to see themselves as members of a global community. Witnesses also accept restrictions on their reading imposed by the Watch Tower Society: they are prohibited from reading anything written by former Witnesses who have left the organization, and strongly discouraged from reading anything that is critical of Witness beliefs, as well as many works written about Witnesses by non-Witness authors. Even studying the Bible without the guidance of the Watch Tower is prohibited (Holden 2002c: 157; Whalen 1962: 99), and the Watch Tower Society has been known to suggest that reading its publications is more important than reading the Bible (*The Watchtower*, 10/1/1967, 2/15/1981, and 12/1/1981; Reed 1986: 99-100). Since media largely shape our ideas of what the world is like (Appadurai 1990), restricting a community's media consumption places constraints on how its members view the world. Indeed, Holden (2002a) suggests that Witnesses typically leave the organization when they do study the Bible independently and begin to consider interpretations separate from those of the Watch Tower Society. In short, these prohibitions help maintain Watch Tower authority.

Within the ranks of the Witnesses, participation is highly structured and also helps maintain the Watch Tower Society's singular authorship. Text creates new types of participation, and all types of participation amount to privileges that belong to concentric circles of Witnesses with ever-higher accomplishments and status within the religion. This tightly controlled hierarchy of participation also maintains the Watch Tower Society's singular authorship of all authoritative publications. Although humans participate in the writing and translation, these

activities are stripped of any potential challenges to authorship in two ways: by a policy of anonymity, and by representing translation in particular as a question of finding commensurate words rather than of compositional skill.

The Watch Tower Society also designates participation in these textual practices as the mark of a moral person. Witnesses, like many religious groups, designate their own faith *the truth*. Unlike most of the groups of Christians who refer to scripture in this way, Witnesses make the subtle distinction of including under this rubric *only* their own idiosyncratic reading of the Bible. This usage itself is totalizing, as it does it a considerable amount of presuppositional work: one who does not participate in Witness literacy practices is, by definition, one who does not believe the truth and must therefore be irrational or even immoral.

### **2.7.1 Implications for Chontal**

The Watch Tower Society's policies are unlikely to have a long-term impact on the maintenance of Chontal. Because the emphasis is on the relationship of a speaker to his or her mother tongue rather than on Chontal in itself, there will be no reason to continue to have Chontal-language congregations once there are no more native Chontal speakers. The language is a means to an end, not an end in itself, as Pedro, the Circuit Overseer, explained:<sup>92</sup>

Obviously the indigenous language population is getting smaller and smaller. The reason, well, the little ones, the kids, they're not being taught the language, so as the years pass, it gets lost. It's- it's not something that matters to us in itself, right? Or because our goal really, as the moment in which there are no people who speak the language, eh, some indigenous language, gets closer, we'll keep on preaching in, in Spanish. The goal is to try to reach as many people as we can.

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<sup>92</sup> Pedro & Cata, interview, 5/9/2011.

"...obviamente cada vez la población en lenguas indígenas va disminuyendo. La razón, pues los pequeños, los niños ya no se les ha estado enseñando el idioma, entonces a medida que pasan los años, va perdiéndose. no- no es algo que nos preocupe en sí, verdad? O porque nuestro objetivo realmente, llegando el momento en que no haya una, personas que hablen el idioma, eh, la, alguna lengua indígena, se seguirá predicando en, en el español. El objetivo es tratar de llegar a cuantas más personas podamos."

The Watch Tower is fundamentally indifferent to Chontal except as far as it remains the native language of some number of people. Additionally, the Watch Tower Society's language ideology allows for speakers with very little competence to perform "speaking Chontal," which in turn may hasten the loss of the language by providing no incentive for non-minimal competence.<sup>93</sup>

The Chontal congregations are imagined to include only native speakers of Chontal and to evangelize in a territory made up of this same, but this is far from the case. In truth, all Chontal congregations contain individuals with a range of competences: Chontal-dominant bilinguals, balanced bilinguals, Spanish-dominant bilinguals, individuals with passive competence in Chontal, and Spanish monolinguals. Chontal monolinguals are not simply absent among the Witnesses; census data shows that they represent less than 1% of all Chontal speakers. I repeat Pharao Hansen's (2010: 130) question: "Why do Jehovah's Witnesses spend so many resources producing literature for populations that could largely be reached effectively through Spanish instead?" The answer is found in two Watch Tower ideologies: a belief that individuals learn the Bible more thoroughly in their mother tongue (discussed above), and a belief that Chontal is the mother tongue of ethnic Chontals<sup>94</sup> regardless of actual language competence.

This second ideology is a variant of the widespread "genetic fallacy" (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998: 84) that suggests that a language will come naturally to a person of a particular background when he or she reaches the appropriate age. Household language use is not directly connected to transmission, and being a speaker has little to do with actual competence. This model does not rule out the possibility of bilingualism, but it suggests that certain people will have an easier time learning certain languages. Indeed, just such an ideology has a long

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<sup>93</sup> Lucas (Lucas & Marisa, interview, 2/2/2011) also suggested that so many years of attending meetings – and reading publications – solely in Spanish may have played a role in the current state of Chontal.

<sup>94</sup> Compare Fishman (1991) on the notion that Xish (language) is necessary for Xmen (identity).

history among the Lowland Chontal (Waterhouse 1949), although it remains unclear whether it predates Jehovah's Witnesses among the Highland Chontal. The idea that all ethnic Chontals are native Chontal speakers means that the Chontal speech community (which shares norms and evaluations of Chontal and Spanish usages) is imagined as a Chontal language community in which all individuals share Chontal competence.

A congregation that is supposed to meet exclusively in Chontal even as Spanish is members' only common language in fact needs to find a way to perform "speaking Chontal" while producing content that is intelligible to monolingual Spanish speakers. One way to achieve this goal is to allow very small amounts of Chontal to take a symbolic role.<sup>95</sup> Public talks given chiefly in Spanish with a smattering of Chontal allow speakers to index a Chontal-speaking identity, and such participation provides two advantages: speakers with imperfect Chontal competence can participate as "Chontal speakers" (Ahlers 2006) and even redefine what it means to speak Chontal (cf. Hill and Hill 1986).

As I will show in Chapter Nine, the limited nature of most participants' contribution allows them to participate appropriately in Chontal without much actual language skill. The vast majority of congregation members participate only as commenters, who prepare their contributions ahead of time; it is only mediators, who must synthesize these comments, who participate in a spontaneous way. As a result, many commenters simply read aloud from the text, and they also have the option to memorize a short commentary in Chontal even if they are not actually capable of producing spontaneous Chontal or even understanding the content of their commentary.

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<sup>95</sup> This phenomenon is described in detail in Chapter Nine. In one particularly instructive case, a little girl was given a two-word role in a skit. This girl was held up as an example for her peers for weeks thereafter; to the best of my knowledge, those two words comprise approximately half of her Chontal vocabulary.

### **2.7.2 Implications for Language Maintenance and Education**

The Witnesses' translation practices have implications not only for Chontal maintenance but for questions of indigenous language education more broadly. Errington (2001) reminds us that we need to be skeptical of translation and literacy practices that are motivated from outside any given community. What are the motivations of such external groups to take on indigenous languages? What are the goals? Indeed, the same projects and ideologies can have different impacts depending on the positioning of the actors who are seen as responsible (Barchas-Lichtenstein 2005). Chapters Eight and Nine, which explore the use of Chontal, consider tensions between the local and the institutional regarding language use.

### **2.7.3 Implications for the Anthropology of Christianity**

The self-styled anthropology of Christianity has largely limited itself to mainline and evangelical Protestants, although an understanding of para-Protestant groups like the Witnesses can contribute greatly to this field. Para-Protestants – corresponding to the Mexican census category of "non-evangelical Biblical" religions – consider themselves Christians, yet mainline Christians would question this classification for both doctrinal and scriptural reasons.

In particular, a study of para-Protestants can contribute a new perspective to the question of how different groups of Christians read the Bible (Bielo 2009b). Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are regularly criticized by mainline Christians for supplementing Biblical authority with their own canon, and both function as very similar kinds of textual communities. The Mormon Scriptures include the Book of Mormon and teaching textbooks written by Joseph Smith (Cannell 2005); the Witnesses strongly prefer their own translation of the Bible (the New World Translation) and also rely on a vast array of quasi-scriptural texts published by the Watch

Tower Society. The reading practices of these and other para-Protestant groups differ drastically from those of more prototypical Christians.

However, para-Protestants and their translation and interpretation policies display continuity with a centuries-old missionary-linguist tradition. The history of Christian missionary linguistics begins with Catholics in the 16th and 17th century and continues to this day with the Summer Institute of Linguistics and other large-scale Bible translation institutions. Exploring the language ideologies that Witnesses and other para-Protestants share – and those they do not – with other missionary-linguists can also help us begin to understand what is common to Christianity.

Finally, the concept of the *textual community* gives us a new way of understanding religions of the book without reifying them (see Asad 1996).<sup>96</sup> This notion of community brings together individuals who share texts and practices, explores the mechanisms that authorize those texts, and acknowledges members' own sense that those texts create community. These elements help us consider various subsets of Christianity, Islam, and other religions as "the same kind of thing" without considering any one of them a fundamentally different phenomenon. Instead of an anthropology of Christianity, a theoretically-grounded concept of *textual community* allows us to maintain simultaneously (a) a larger anthropology of religion and (b) a sense of Christianity's uniqueness as a religion.

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<sup>96</sup> Not all Christianities are "religions of the book." Engelke (2007) describes a group of Christians that values literacy yet rejects the concept that books might be spiritual. "For them, texts are dangerous. They deaden faith: they take the spirit out of things; they are, quite literally, physical obstacles" (Engelke 2007: 7).

# Three

## Introducing Santa María Zapotitlán and the Watch Tower Society

### 3.1 Santa María Zapotitlán: The Community

#### 3.1.1 Location and Geography

Santa María Zapotitlán, affectionately known as Zapote by residents of the region, is located in the Chontal Highlands of the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca State; however, the Chontal Highlands are often considered part of the Isthmus region rather than the Sierra Sur because one can only travel there by way of the Isthmus. Reaching Zapote from Oaxaca City is about a ten-hour drive:<sup>97</sup> Zapote-bound travelers take the Panamerican Highway southeast towards Santo Domingo Tehuantepec and turn off towards the south at Magdalena Tequisistlán, or Tequis. Once in Tequis, halfway to Zapote, the highway becomes a dirt road that curves up the mountain in switchbacks, through Asunción Tlacolulita, San Miguel Ecatepec, and San Juan Alotepec, to a fork: San Matías Petacaltepec is to the right, and Zapote to the left. This road is relatively well maintained, but most of the traffic is close to the towns – work animals, people on foot, and pick-up trucks suitable to farmwork – although government vehicles and delivery trucks come through as well, and people take their trucks down to the nearby cities on occasion.

Zapotitlán (pop. 1,104) is the largest town in its municipality<sup>98</sup> by a significant margin. At an altitude of 1448m (INEGI 2010), it has a comfortable climate: days are warm and nights are chilly. This relatively low elevation makes farming more productive than in most of the

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<sup>97</sup> The distance from Oaxaca to Tequisistlán is approximately 200km, and the distance from Tequisistlán to Zapotitlán, although it takes five of those ten hours, is only 40 or 50km.

<sup>98</sup> A *municipio*, or municipality, is an administrative unit roughly equivalent to a county. Zapotitlán belongs to the *municipio* of Santa María Ecatepec.

region, especially because rainfall is more certain on this side of the range (Turner 1972: 7-8). Because of the altitude and the relatively steep terrain, the town is compact, and buildings – made of adobe, wood, bricks, or cement – are quite close together.

The main road of Zapotitlán runs through the town, and a higher road branches off parallel to this road; these are the only roads which are accessible to cars. Most of this higher road is paved, although there are large rifts in the concrete in several places. On foot, one can cross between the roads in several places by means of steep, rocky paths that cut narrowly between the houses. At the top of the high road are the medical clinic and the *telesecundaria*, a type of middle school which shows televised lessons as a supplement to the teachers' knowledge; the distant location of both these buildings illustrates their relative newness. The medical clinic, which opened in the early 2000s, is run by a doctor and two nurses, none of whom are from the town and all of whom are in residence only on weekdays. This professional staff is supplemented by a committee of the local government who take turns being on call.

The *agencia municipal* (municipal agency) lies along the low road, relatively close to where the roads meet. It is a large L-shaped two-story building, one of the only two-story buildings in the town, whose rooms open out onto balcony-like open hallways. This building houses not only the local government but also other public services, including the town museum, the internet center, and the federally-subsidized store.

The town is compact, with farming tracts located outside the town. *Milpas* – small plots with a variety of food crops, especially corn, beans, and squash – are located to one side of the community, while *cafetales* (coffee plots) are further away on a shadier side of the mountain. All of the land within a certain distance of the town is designated as a *zona de reserva* (reserve zone) in which hunting and collecting firewood is strictly forbidden.



**Figure 3.1:** Map of central area of Santa María Zapotitlán.  
Map © 2013 DigitalGlobe, © 2013 Google Earth; Legend © 2013 Jena Barchas-Lichtenstein



### 3.1.2 Community Institutions

#### 3.1.2.1 Political Institutions

The local government has two branches, both housed on the second floor. To one side lies the *agencia municipal* and to the other the *comisaría de bienes comunales* (commissary of communal goods). The *agencia* is the local branch of the municipality, and as such is an arm of Oaxaca State; the *comisaría* deals chiefly with land and is an organ of the federal government. Each entity has approximately six officials serving at any given time; *agencia* officials serve for one year, while *comisaría* officials serve for three. Both sets of officials are elected in *asambleas* (town-wide meetings) by nomination. Individuals are typically nominated based both on their general competence and on their fitness to serve, as demonstrated by having held prerequisite

positions in the local *cargo* system, or political hierarchy.<sup>99</sup> Each entity also sponsors various committees that deal with issues of local interest, and the individuals are nominated in the same way. New projects often bring new committees, and with them, new service obligations.

There is some rivalry between these two entities, as illustrated by the tile flooring in the rooms of the *comisaría* as well as the part of the hallway that these rooms are connected to. It stops just at the turn in the hallway, and the rest of the building is floored with cement. Due either to convention or availability of rooms (no one could tell me clearly which), the town museum is under control of the *comisaría*, while the internet center belongs to the *agencia*.

### **3.1.2.2 Cultural Institutions**

The town museum is only one room, but it is packed full of objects. The bookshelf is filled with dictionaries, pamphlets, and various ethnographic works about the region. Some are about the Chontal people directly, but most are more general books about the Isthmus region. There is a laptop full of yet more documents as well as photos and videos; the committee in charge went about interviewing all sorts of people in Spanish and Chontal about their lives and especially their crafts, resulting in dozens of instructional presentations. Finally, there are multiple glass display cases, containing all sorts of artifacts and sherds, as well as local crafts that are still produced, and local clothes. There is also a long text about 'Who We Are' and another detailing the history of the town, as well as a copy of a colonial map of the region that's in the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City, and recent panoramic and satellite photos of the town and the surrounding hills.

The museum is a local gathering place. Whenever the doors are open, children come in to look around, ask questions, and simply be present. Adults do the same, but with more restraint.

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<sup>99</sup> The *cargo* system is often described as a civil-religious hierarchy, but these two hierarchies have become entirely uncoupled in Zapotitlán as a result of the large percentage of non-Catholics.

The museum committee holds its meetings in this room, and the language committee also began to hold open sessions here in Fall 2010, at my urging, although they fell off quickly.

Unfortunately, the museum was open less and less frequently as my time in Zapotitlán went on, since the men<sup>100</sup> in charge had other responsibilities that were more pressing, including both their farms and jobs outside the community.

The internet center is also quite a gathering place. While it is sponsored by a government initiative to give cheap computer classes in isolated towns, its staff also hold open internet hours for a small charge in the evenings.<sup>101</sup> At these times, there are usually four teenagers to every computer. Adult men sometimes come by, as many of them have some computer skills, while adult women rarely do. Both men and women may peek in if they need an official document typed and printed.

The one place in the *agencia* where adult women are likely to be found is in the communal store, on the first floor. The store is still known locally as *la CONASUPO* after the government branch that opened it, although this agency changed name more than ten years ago and the store's official name is now *la DICONSA*.<sup>102</sup> The store sells a variety of goods, including maize, packaged foods, cleaning supplies, and personal care items like shampoo, most at a heavily subsidized price.

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<sup>100</sup> In Zapotitlán, only men ever hold this type of post.

<sup>101</sup> In March 2011, internet service was cut off due to local political conflicts. While it had not been reinstated by the time I left the community in July 2011, the computer center remained a gathering place for teenage boys to listen to music, play games, or work on projects.

<sup>102</sup> CONASUPO stands for *Compañía Nacional de Subsistencia Popular* (National Company of Popular Subsistence); DICONSA is *Distribuidora Conasupo, S.A.* (Conasupo Distributor). (S.A. stands for *sociedad anónima*, which designates a public company.)

### 3.1.2.3 Educational Institutions

The remaining rooms in the *agencia* are rented out as living quarters to some of the town's teachers, none of whom are originally from Zapotitlán. The teachers have an uneasy relationship with the town, not only because they are outsiders but because they are widely perceived as lazy and willing to invent all manner of excuses to suspend classes and leave town. Nobody is certain what percentage of the allegedly mandatory meetings, trainings, and courses that seem to happen every few weeks are real; the primary school teachers are seen as the boldest shirkers.

The town has public schooling available for children from age 2 through 14 or 15. The *inicial* is a one-year program for the youngest children, who then go to the *preescolar* (pre-school) for three years, including kindergarten. The *primaria* (elementary school), which sits right next to the *agencia municipal*, contains six grades, and the *telesecundaria* contains a further three grades, which are taught in large part by televised lessons, as specialized teachers are in short supply. Students who wish to continue their schooling must travel at least as far as Tequisistlán; as the bus ride takes five hours, only those who have family members living in close proximity to a *preparatoria* (high school) have any chance of attending.

Only four individuals currently residing in Zapotitlán have post-secondary education, yet only 44 of the 152 adults who did not finish primary school are illiterate (INEGI 2010). In other words, in spite of relatively low educational attainment, Zapotitlán boasts a 93% adult literacy rate, higher not only than the municipio of Santa María Ecatepec (90%) and the state of Oaxaca as a whole (83%), but also roughly equivalent to the national literacy rate (92%).

### **3.1.3 Households**

#### **3.1.3.1 Physical Characteristics**

Zapotitlán's habitation comprises 239 dwellings (INEGI 2010). A household is typically a compound of several structures, rather than a single building. Outside of public buildings, which are of relatively new construction and always built from cement rather than older materials such as brick or adobe, it is often hard to tell which structures are affiliated with which. In many rural Mexican communities, households consist of multiple small structures surrounding a central patio. Rooms typically do not connect to one another internally even if they are part of the same free-standing structure, but each room will have a door leading out to the patio, and possibly a second door to the street if the room is used as an entrance room or a store. In communities built on flatter ground, these compounds are typically gated or fenced, such that it is quite clear which structures belong to which household.

Because of Zapotitlán's hilly topography, few households are fully fenced off; it would be impractical, as often the rooms of a single household are on different levels, which in turn means there is relatively little patio space. In the house where I rented a room, for example, the main house consists of four bedrooms arranged around a patio, as well as a dining room and kitchen. One must climb a rocky footpath to reach the separate latrine and bathing area, as well as the chicken coop, and another set of structures higher up this path belong to one of the grown children and her family; members of both households come in and out freely. While most individual rooms can be locked, the patio is open to the main road. Many other houses have internally connected rooms and no patio space to speak of; in some cases, footpaths cut in between structures belonging to the same family.

Many families grow a few plants in their patio space or directly outside their homes, although this is not their main farming plot. The family I lived with, for example, had a handful

of corn plants, some chiles, a nopal cactus, and some fruit within their compound. Most houses in Zapotitlán have electricity and some form of bathroom, typically a latrine. Furnishing and appliances, on the other hand, vary widely. More than half of the houses have televisions, but as of 2010, only 59 had refrigerators, 44 had washing machines, 23 had telephones, and 2 had computers (INEGI 2010).

### **3.1.3.2 Social Characteristics**

Households are often multigenerational, and residence is primarily patrilocal. However, after marriage many couples establish separate households, although these are nearly always close to at least one set of parents. Unmarried adult children – and some married ones, especially those who have lost a spouse to death or divorce – stay in their parents' household for as long as they remain in the village.

Although most children finish secondary school, they begin to learn the skills they will need as adults by the time they are seven or eight. Children have an increasing set of farm and household responsibilities, such that by the time they finish school at 15, they will be ready to take on most adult tasks. Women marry between the ages of 16 and their early-to-mid-20s, while men may marry somewhat older. Most older women had one child every two years from marriage to menopause, leading to families of eight to fourteen children; with increasing access to birth control and decreasing infant mortality, younger couples may have half as many children, or even fewer. Even *abuelitos* (grandparents, a respectful term for older people) continue to work as much as their physical health allows; I regularly saw one woman approaching her hundredth birthday out to collect firewood, although she walked with a cane and often used her machete as a crutch in the other hand.

### 3.1.3.3 Resident Outsiders

In addition to the town's permanent inhabitants, there are a number of outsiders who live in the town on a fairly permanent basis. The three schools employ between them approximately thirty teachers and administrators, and the clinic employs a doctor and two nurses; nearly all of these individuals leave Zapotitlán every weekend.

A Jehovah's Witness couple, Lucas and Marisa, from elsewhere in Mexico, are long-term residents of the town in a missionary capacity, and the Circuit Overseer (a Witness administrative post) and his wife, Pedro and Cata, come for two-week visits every six months. Both couples met in Zapotitlán, when they were serving in various Witness roles. Lucas, Marisa, and Cata were all *precursors* (pioneers), a volunteer role in which devout Witnesses are expected to perform a high monthly number of hours of field service (which includes proselytizing and congregational support). Lucas and Marisa's full-time role is to work with congregants to translate religious materials into Chontal, and to provide Bible study for various members of the community who are not yet baptized as Witnesses, including the children of many adult Witnesses. Pedro and Cata, on the other hand, make only short trips to Zapotitlán in which they visit widely with members of the three congregations.

Finally, there are foreign scholars – at the time, I was the only one present, but my colleague Danny Zborover has been visiting the community regularly for ten years, and many consultants and friends regularly asked after a third colleague, Aaron Huey Sonnenschein, who had visited the town with us in November 2009.

### 3.1.4 Economic Life

#### 3.1.4.1 Work

There is significant labor migration, but most of it is to the nearby cities of Magdalena Tequisistlán, Santo Domingo Tehuantepec, and especially Salina Cruz,<sup>103</sup> and these migrants are able to visit frequently.<sup>104</sup> Migration to the United States has begun only in the last ten years, and while it grew quickly at first, it has slowed to a trickle due to the worldwide recession of the late 2000s, coupled with the lack of an entrenched network from the region. At this point, most migrants to the US return to Zapotitlán rather than establishing permanent households abroad.

Many people do remain in town and work locally. Adult men work their families' fields, and adult women spend their days cooking and cleaning. Men also have other occupations available to them: the buses to Tehuantepec and Salina Cruz are driven and managed by local men, and a number of men have specialized skills as carpenters or builders in addition to their agricultural work. Some older men weave hammocks or do other such work when they grow too weak to walk back and forth to the fields. Women may also work in the fields, but they have fewer options to earn an income, although some make and sell clothing and other local goods, and others may travel to the city to sell cash crops, including tomatoes, chiles, and coffee. One woman runs a *comedor* (restaurant), which means that she cooks for many of the town's teachers, and any visitor in search of a hot meal is sent to her house. When the teachers are in town, she cooks large and varied meals; when they are not, a paid meal will consist of whatever is easily accessible, minimally black beans, eggs, and tortillas. Many women and men also run small

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<sup>103</sup> Salina Cruz attracts a great deal of labor migration since it is home to both an oil refinery and a large port. These cities, between four and six hours away, are the closest opportunities for jobs that pay a wage on a long-term basis.

<sup>104</sup> While in much of Mexico, migrants time their visits to coincide with ceremonial obligations, the relatively small percentage of Catholics in Zapotitlán means that participation in the ceremonial system is no longer mandatory for all adult males.



stores out of their homes: women do the bulk of the selling, but it is typically men who go down to the city to resupply. Women also work in the subsidized store in the government building, and both men and women may gain a small income by renting out rooms to long-term visitors, including teachers, Jehovah's Witnesses, and academics.<sup>105</sup>

#### **3.1.4.2 Government Aid**

In addition to these sources of income, most of the town receives aid from at least one governmental or non-governmental aid program. Almost everyone is enrolled in *Oportunidades* 'Opportunities', which pays women a cash subsidy as long as their children remain in school and the entire family meets medical benchmarks. *Setenta y Más* 'Seventy and Older' provides subsidies and supplies for older adults. Other programs occasionally offer seed money and apprenticeships for various kinds of entrepreneurial undertakings, like selling prepared food or making clothes. Many people are now working for a for-profit coffee cooperative, which requires them not only to attend workshops and training sessions but also to submit to unannounced audits; they suffer these inconveniences gladly, as the program trains and certifies them to meet strict international standards for organic coffee and allows them to sell at a much higher price than they could otherwise hope for

All of these organizations share an orientation to a narrative of progress through (Spanish-language) education and subsequent participation in a wider (Spanish-language) economy. Jacqueline Messing describes a meta-discourse of *salir adelante*, 'forging ahead', a term that is in common usage throughout Mexico, including the region where I work. This orientation is concerned with "creating a better life today that is juxtaposed with a life in the past that was more difficult, both socioeconomically and personally" (Messing 2007: 560; see also

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<sup>105</sup> During my fieldwork, a typical month's rent for a furnished room, including water and electricity, was about USD\$20, or two days' wages, so this is not a principal source of income.

Messing 2003); as such, the past and its traditions are viewed as 'backwards' and undesirable, to be left behind in this process of moving forward.

### 3.1.4.3 Communal Labor

The local economy also relies on men's communal labor obligations. Men are regularly called upon to participate in public works projects, known as *tequio*; women have such obligations only when wide-scale cleaning and cooking are called for. For the inauguration of the community museum in 2009, for example, women were asked to sweep the main roads as well as to prepare giant pots of barbecued venison and sauce to feed the entire community and all the invited guests. (Hunting the deer, of course, fell to the men.) Private construction projects also draw on (unofficial) communal labor; when someone needs to pour cement for the roof of a house, most of the adult men participate, running the cement mixer, carrying gravel and bags of dry cement, or carrying full buckets of cement up and down to the site. Women also have a role: they prepare large quantities of food for these men.<sup>106</sup>

### 3.1.5 Political Life

Adult men are also the only ones who participate in most local politics; women only serve on committees that administer education and certain social welfare initiatives. Of Zapotitlán's total population of 1,104 (INEGI 2010), only 270 are *ciudadanos* (citizens) who have the right to vote in local elections.<sup>107</sup> Zapotitlán follows a system known as *usos y costumbres* (uses and customs), which protects indigenous forms of political organization and is not subject to the involvement of any national political party. Under this system, each household

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<sup>106</sup> Those who helped are seen as deserving food. On one occasion, I was encouraged to "help" by carrying a half-full bucket of cement; the man pouring horchata for the workers insisted that I partake as well, saying I had earned it. (I joked in response that I had only earned half a cup, and he laughingly agreed and served me a smaller portion.)

<sup>107</sup> This number, received from the local government, corresponds almost perfectly with the census count of the male population age 18 and over (INEGI 2010).

has approximately one vote, although this correspondence is not exact.<sup>108</sup>

### 3.1.6 Religious Life

The town population is divided along religious lines. The 2011 *agente municipal* estimates that between 50 and 60 percent of the population are Jehovah's Witnesses, with the remainder divided between Pentecostals and Catholics. Other individuals have estimated 45 percent Witnesses, 30 percent Pentecostals, and 25 percent Catholics. While the numbers vary, most people seem to agree that Witnesses have a plurality if not a majority, while the numbers of Pentecostals and Catholics are fairly similar.<sup>109</sup>

Pentecostals differ from Catholics in that they believe that gifts of the spirit continue to exist to the present day, particularly healing. As a result, most Pentecostals do not believe in secular medicine and will refuse to see a doctor, preferring to receive spiritual healing. Pentecostals also typically have a charismatic leader who gives sermons that appear to be spontaneous, and they may not use a physical Bible book at all in these sermons. Their religious events generally involve a band playing spiritual music, and as they believe in the gift of tongues, their worship services are often noisy and decentered. Most Pentecostals in Zapotitlán refer to the Bible frequently in everyday speech, and will refer to the miraculous healing of several of their leaders as one of many proofs that their faith is the only true Christianity.

Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other hand, contradict several basic Christian doctrines that are shared by most Christians, including Pentecostals. They are non-trinitarian and do not

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<sup>108</sup> Some adult men never marry and live with their parents their entire lives, some married couples take a long time to establish separate households, and some women whose husbands have migrated to larger cities in Mexico or the United States live in households with no adult men at all.

<sup>109</sup> The Mexican census differentiates among various types of non-Catholic Christians at the state level but not, unfortunately, at the level of the town. According to the 2010 census (INEGI), there are 291 Catholics (26%); 518 non-Catholic Christians (47%), a group including both Pentecostals and Witnesses; and 295 individuals with no religious affiliation (27%). This last classification probably includes most children of Witnesses: since they have not yet been baptized, they would self-identify, and be identified by their Witness parents, as unaffiliated.

recognize the divinity of either Jesus or the Holy Spirit. They also use Old Testament readings far more than most Christian groups, and are heavily focused on textual sources. They do not celebrate any secular holidays or major Christian holidays, and their religious services (described in detail in Chapter Seven) are staid and studious where those of Pentecostals are raucous and uninhibited.

### **3.1.6.1 Jehovah's Witnesses**

Jehovah's Witnesses from elsewhere in Mexico first arrived in Zapotitlán in the mid-1940s and had converted approximately half the population by 1959 (Turner 1972: 90). Community members seem to get along well despite these divisions, but there are some aspects of life in which they are strongly felt. For example, most Mexican communities hold large festivals on the holiday associated with the town's patron saint. In Zapotitlán, however, since Catholics are not a majority and adherents of other religions do not want to contribute or participate, these events are no longer held. Nor is obviously sectarian division the only source of communal tension, as the following incident illustrates.

2010, when I began my fieldwork, marked the 200th anniversary of Mexican independence as well as the 100th anniversary of the Mexican revolution. The commemorations of these events (September 16th and November 20th, respectively) are patriotic national holidays; in 2010, the government placed particular emphasis on these holidays, due not only to the important anniversaries but also as a means of promoting national unity in spite of a climate of increasing political strife and dissent stemming from the government's perceived failure to control paramilitary narco-trafficking operations.

November 20th was a Saturday, and so the schoolchildren of Zapotitlán held their commemorative event the day before. For two weeks beforehand, the elementary school teachers

had spoken of nothing but the parade they were to hold. Girls from the oldest class led the parade with a flag, while slightly younger children represented the main figures of the revolution – radical peasant leader Emiliano Zapata, dressed in white, holding a sign reading *Tierra y Libertad* 'Land and Freedom'; a bearded Pancho Villa; armies with banners; boys and girls in traditional regional dress holding signs proclaiming the need for effective voting instead of automatic reelection. In the back, the largest group of children, who held streamers and home-made rattles, followed teachers' cues to march and gesture in unison.

This group marched up the main street of the town, stopping every few meters to repeat the short skits they had practiced. This scene could have happened in any small town in Mexico, but for two details: only half the children in the school were participating, the rest kept home by their own moral scruples or their parents' orders, and I was the only adult who made a point of watching. Some adults went as far as avoiding their own patios so they would not have to see the parade, while many others simply went about their days and considered it nothing remarkable.

At the time, I was puzzled. A parade made for an exciting variation on a relatively monotonous daily life, and I couldn't see any harm in participating. Some well-meaning questions brought me up against a wall. "We don't participate because we're Jehovah's Witnesses," I was told. I pressed harder: it wasn't another religion's celebration, but a civil holiday. "Well," they explained, "these civil holidays celebrate our freedom, but we are not free: there is still sickness and poverty and death in the world." Not only that, but participating in a parade with a flag at the head constitutes idol worship, and the fact that the Mexican Army often uses the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe makes it especially so.

This incident was the first of many that would mark my fieldwork. Things that I found religiously inoffensive were seen as highly problematic, or even an intentional offense to the

Witnesses. (For example, some Witnesses believed that the teachers encouraged student participation in patriotic events as an intentional criticism of Witness families; most, however, saw this insistence as a reflection of the teachers' cluelessness and the need to proselytize to them.) And the slightest thing could serve as an excuse for lectures about how to live, with a heavy emphasis on reading the Bible, learning the Truth as defined by the Jehovah's Witnesses, and preaching to others about this Truth. Jehovah was ever-present and all-encompassing, entering the conversation through what often seemed to me flimsy pretenses. Early in my fieldwork, when I thought I could examine the Witnesses' translation project in isolation, I tried to avoid conversations about religion, but later resigned myself to their inevitability.<sup>110</sup>

The Jehovah's Witnesses are numerous enough that they are split into three congregations, although these three congregations meet in the same Kingdom Hall near the center of town. There are three Sunday meetings, one at 9:30am, one at 1:00pm, and one at 4:00pm, each lasting for two hours. Each group also meets a second time at 4:00pm on Thursday, Friday, or Saturday. Of these three groups, one conducts meetings almost solely in Spanish; one includes some Chontal prayer and introduction; and one makes relatively heavy use of Chontal.<sup>111</sup> This third congregation, Congregación Sur, was the focus of my research; I attended their meetings regularly and spent much of my time with members. There are also

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<sup>110</sup> Not all Jehovah's Witnesses I encountered were equally strict in either their adherence to the rules (in addition to patriotism, Jehovah forbids participation in other seemingly innocuous events like birthday parties) or their insistence on discussing their beliefs at every possible turn. However, the household where I lived was particularly observant, and particularly diligent in their search for any opportunity to bring Jehovah into the conversation, especially when speaking with their non-believing tenant for whose soul they feared (me). For example, in this household, I could not describe a personal disagreement with a friend or a family member without someone ascribing the disagreement to one party being "bad" or "evil", which in turn could always be traced to that person's unwillingness to follow Jehovah's will. I once mentioned that a particular distant family member is not very nice, and the response I received was, "Does she read the Bible?"

<sup>111</sup> Congregations are supposedly divided on a geographic basis, but the division seems to be based on family connections and historical residence rather than current residence. See also the discussion of the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Zapotitlán in Chapter Eight.

regular regional meetings which take place in Salina Cruz and are held in both Chontal and Spanish on separate weekends.

### **3.1.7 Language**

#### **3.1.7.1 Sociolinguistics**

That different congregations should use different amounts of Chontal is not surprising, given the variation in Chontal language ability within Zapotitlán as a whole. According to the town government, there are two Chontal speakers who know very little Spanish and are, for all intents and purposes, monolingual. The 2010 census (INEGI 2010) reports one monolingual and 345 total speakers of Chontal out of a population of 1,002.<sup>112</sup> Since 65.6% of the population is Spanish-speaking monolinguals, Spanish is used in many social contexts outside the home, even between Chontal speakers. The town government in place as of October 2010 was very interested in language revitalization, and actively encouraged the use of Chontal for both government business and casual conversation among men in the *agencia*. Many of the men who spoke Chontal in this context, however, expressed some linguistic insecurity, even to a point where they did not consider themselves speakers. These men, the youngest of whom were in their late thirties, spoke despairingly of "the youth" and their lack of interest in the language, although they themselves had not tried to speak it with their children. While there was a committee charged with language revitalization, this committee was not very active and typically met only at my behest.

At the time of my research, Chontal speaking ability followed a gradient roughly linked to age. Young children had at least some passive competence and could usually produce a few words, while those in their 60s and older frequently paid social calls purely in Chontal. These

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<sup>112</sup> These numbers only include individuals age three and up, and so do not agree with the total population figure.

older individuals controlled a large range of spoken genres: they made small talk and told stories, and the Witnesses among them proselytized door-to-door in Chontal; they also served as resources for younger speakers translating sermons from Spanish. The intermediate generations' speaking ability varied, based on such factors as the age of their parents, the size of their families, their relationships with their grandparents, and whether they moved away for their schooling at some point. In general, those with older parents spoke more Chontal, as did those who lived in the same household as their grandparents. Studying or working elsewhere for a significant period of time was typically linked to less comfort with Chontal. Active involvement with the Jehovah's Witnesses, finally, was typically associated with a higher level of Chontal and particularly with control of certain formal genres like sermons and talk about the Bible.

Schoolteachers had actively discouraged parents from speaking Chontal to children in the mid-20th century, often with corporal punishment, which may account for some of the sudden decline between those individuals in their 60s and those in their 50s or younger at the time of my research.<sup>113</sup> This first generation of Spanish-dominant speakers had parents who spoke to each other in Chontal, even if they were careful to use only Spanish with their children; many members of this intermediate generation began to use Chontal later in life with relative ease, while their children typically find it much more challenging (cf. Waterhouse 1949).<sup>114</sup>

The community's current educational system is bilingual in name only. While several teachers have expressed interest in learning Chontal, none actually spoke the language at the time of my research, and the few teachers who considered themselves ethnically Chontal – and

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<sup>113</sup> Compare the treatment of speakers of Indian languages at boarding schools in the U.S. for many years (Zepeda & Hill 1991).

<sup>114</sup> The relationship between age and generation is inexact. There are currently teenagers whose parents use Chontal with each other (e.g. a 17-year-old who is the last-born child of thirteen) and people in their late 30s whose parents rarely used Chontal when they were growing up, although they make an effort to speak it with one another now.



who had Chontal-speaking family members<sup>115</sup> – were from Tequisistlán. However, Chontal is not currently spoken in Tequisistlán, and some scholars believe that Tequisistlan Chontal, or Valley Chontal, is a third Chontal branch, mutually unintelligible with both Highland and Lowland Chontal (Waterhouse 1985). Even if these teachers had spoken Chontal, dialect differences would have made them unable to communicate with the community except in Spanish.

### **3.1.7.2 Structure and Classification of Chontal**

Highland Oaxaca Chontal has mostly VSO word order, and complex agentive and aspectual systems that are poorly understood by outside analysts.<sup>116</sup> It has one close relative, Lowland Oaxaca Chontal; a third branch of this family, Tequistlatec or Valley Chontal, is no longer spoken. Within the Highland region, there is considerable dialect diversity, and the extent of mutual intelligibility remains unclear. The only dialect survey ever undertaken (Turner 1973a) considers mutual intelligibility vis-à-vis only one town, San Matías Petacaltepec, rather than all possible mappings.

The genetic classification of Oaxaca Chontal has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly debate during the last hundred years. The language has been associated with the Hokan family, but this classification is not universally accepted; the most recent Ethnologue (Lewis et al. 2013) lists Oaxaca Chontal as unaffiliated. The history of this debate bears summarizing, as it comprises the bulk of scholarly discussion of this language.

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<sup>115</sup> Typically grandparents and earlier generations. To the best of my knowledge, no teacher in Zapotitlán in the 2010-2011 school year spoke Chontal themselves or had Chontal-speaking parents.

<sup>116</sup> Myself included. By contrast, both systems are relatively well understood in Lowland Oaxaca Chontal, on the other hand, thanks to the work of Loretta O'Connor (1999; 2000a; 2000b; 2004a; 2004b; 2006; 2007a; 2007b; etc).

Both Alfred Kroeber (1915) and Edward Sapir (1920) suggested that Chontal was a member of the Hokan stock. The Hokan hypothesis remains controversial at best.<sup>117</sup> It seems possible that Chontal is related to either Seri (Kroeber 1915; Waterhouse 1976) or Jicaque (Bright 1970; Campbell and Oltrogge 1980; Greenberg and Swadesh 1953; Oltrogge 1977), both of which have been tenuously linked with Hokan (Greenberg and Swadesh 1953; Kroeber 1915). All of these relationships, however, remain in doubt. Several of those scholars who accept a relationship between Chontal and either Seri or Jicaque do not accept the larger Hokan hypothesis (Campbell and Oltrogge 1980; Oltrogge 1977; Suárez 1983).<sup>118</sup>

Turner and Waterhouse, the best-known scholars of Highland and Lowland Chontal, respectively, differ in their appraisal of such claims. Turner (1967; 1969; 1976) argues against a relationship between Chontal and Seri, and Chontal and Hokan by association. However, Turner's grasp of historical linguistic methodology is imperfect (Bright 1970). Waterhouse (1969) revises Turner's (1969) reconstruction slightly, and she finds the connection between Chontal and Seri more plausible than does Turner, although she remains at least somewhat skeptical about their relationship to a wider Hokan grouping (Waterhouse 1976).

Several recent review articles have weighed claims on both sides. Kaufman (2006) supports the Hokan hypothesis, although he notes very clearly that this grouping remains unproven. Marlett (m.s.) finds Hokan much less compelling, although he suggests that certain subgroupings may be worthwhile, particularly the relationship between the Yuman languages and Cochimí. He too finds the relationship between Seri and Chontal speculative at best.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Langdon (1974) best summarizes the areas of disagreement up to the time of publication; O'Connor (2007b: 9) specifically addresses the challenges of classifying Chontal in particular.

<sup>118</sup> Seri is spoken in Northwestern Mexico; Jicaque is spoken in Honduras.

<sup>119</sup> It is precisely those scholars with the most direct experience with Chontal (Turner and Waterhouse) and Seri (Marlett) who are the most skeptical of claims of relatedness.

### 3.1.7.3 Local Spanish

Returning to the local population in Zapote, even those individuals who speak the least Chontal speak the idiosyncratic Spanish favored by their elders. It differs from both Standard Mexican Spanish and Standard Oaxacan Spanish in several ways. First, the dialect of Spanish spoken locally almost always requires subject pronouns, while in Standard Mexican Spanish they are redundant except for focus and emphasis; this may be due to interference from Chontal, which makes fairly heavy use of subject pronouns in spite of the fact that verbs mark their subjects. Second, local Spanish only occasionally recognizes a distinction between formal and informal forms of the second person, and mixed constructions are common;<sup>120</sup> Chontal has no such T-V alternation. Third, adjective predicates are often used without a copula, in what amounts to VS word order; where speakers of Standard Spanish would say, *el elote es dulce* 'the corn is sweet', speakers of the local dialect say, *dulce el elote* 'sweet the corn'. Chontal also appears to prefer verb-initial constructions.<sup>121</sup> Fourth, speakers use nonstandard modal constructions that appear to be grammatical calques directly from Chontal.<sup>122</sup> There are also a number of local lexical idiosyncrasies.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> For example, *Usted no te vas*, ('You won't go') which uses a V-form for the subject pronoun but a T-form for both verbal agreement and the reflexive pronoun that refers back to it.

<sup>121</sup> Spanish in Zapotitlán also exhibits many of the features that are common in many different indigenous Spanishes, such as a lack of subjunctive in older speakers' Spanish (cf. Lastra 1994; Riegelhaupt et al. 2003; as well as the work of José Antonio Flores Farfán, Dora Pellicer, Klaus Zimmerman, and many others). However, as early as 1961, Viola Waterhouse found that Chontal interference was only minimal in the Spanish spoken in the coastal region.

<sup>122</sup> For example, *No se puede voy a escribir* (roughly, 'It's not possible I'm going to write') instead of *No puedo escribir* ('I can't write'). Compare the Chontal:  
ay m-i'ya ki-nijli-ya  
neg neg-be.possible 1sg.npast-write-neg.fut  
'No puedo escribir.'

<sup>123</sup> For example, the use of *otro* 'another' instead of either *otra vez* 'again' or a construction using the verb *volver* 'return, do again'.

### 3.1.8 Zapotitlán in the Sierra Chontal, the Isthmus, Oaxaca State, Mexico, and the World

Hill and Hill (1986: 37) observe that "students of Mesoamerican communities are today in universal agreement that the development of the form of those communities cannot be understood in isolation from regional and world systems in which they are embedded." This section locates Zapotitlán in the region, the state, the nation, and the world.

Oaxaca State is divided into eight regions, each of which is thought to comprise some sort of cultural unit. The Chontal Highlands are located in Yautepec District, technically part of the Sierra Sur region (Figure 3.2), yet residents of Santa María Zapotitlán feel more connected to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. At the southeastern edge of the Sierra Sur, the *municipios* where the Chontals live are contiguous with the Isthmus region, whose major cities are much more accessible. Miahuatlán de Porfirio Díaz (pop. 23,940),<sup>124</sup> the largest city in the Sierra Sur, is nearly as far away as Oaxaca City itself, and has much less to offer. When people from Zapotitlán go to the city, they nearly always go to Magdalena Tequisistlán (pop. 3,829),<sup>125</sup> Santo Domingo Tehuantepec (pop. 42,082), or Salina Cruz (pop. 76,596), all of which are in the Isthmus. There is significant labor migration from Zapotitlán to these three cities, and most people travel occasionally to see doctors, purchase goods not found locally, visit family members, or attend religious events. Those who run small stores out of their houses travel more frequently to purchase stock, and anyone who has cash crops to sell must do so in a city. Men who hold official positions in the local government – and women who serve on certain committees – also have to travel frequently to the seat of the *municipio*, Santa María Ecatepec, and to Oaxaca City; some people have migrated to Oaxaca City as well.

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<sup>124</sup> All population numbers from INEGI (2010).

<sup>125</sup> Tequisistlán is considered a city chiefly by virtue of its location on the highway from Oaxaca City to the Isthmus; it's "a big *pueblo* but not a real city" (fieldnotes, 11/16/2010).

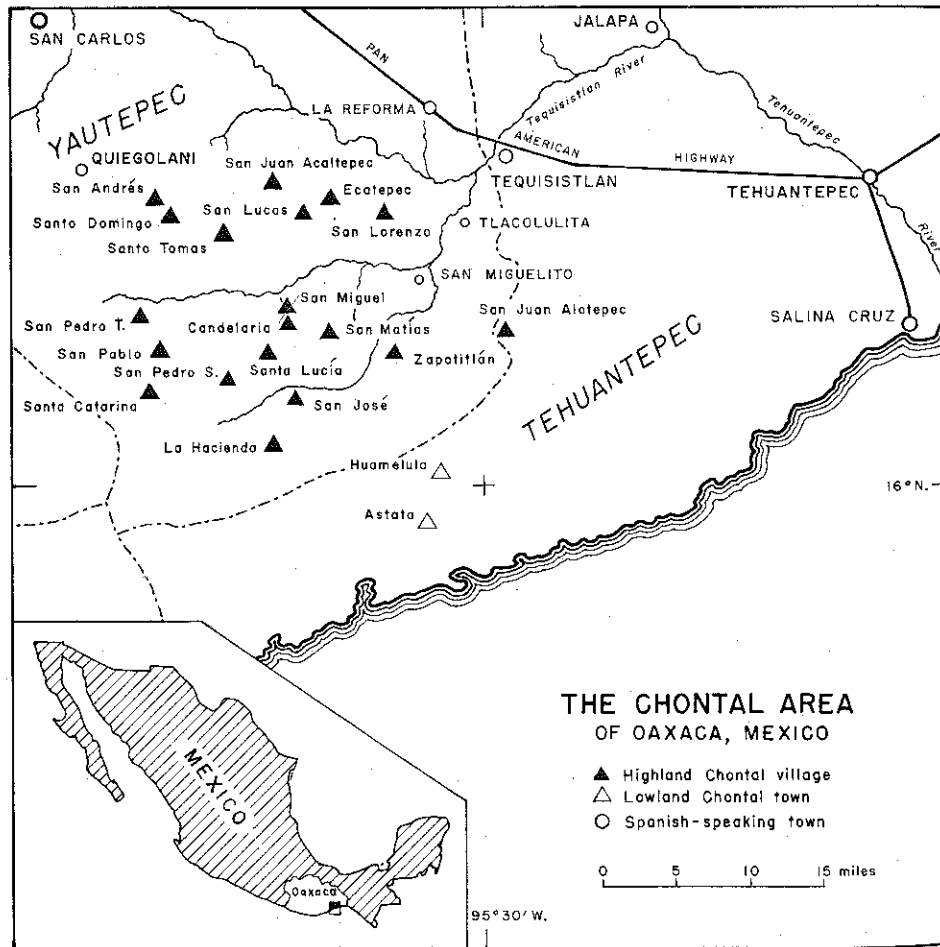
Few people from Zapotitlán speak positively of the city lifestyle, even among those who now live there. Everything in the city is expensive and nobody farms, people say; in the city, you don't know what's in your food, and everything is chemicals.<sup>126</sup> People who knew I was from a major city sometimes asked me what my life was like there, and I would suggest that access to resources and being able to buy things you might need were advantages of city life. Nobody ever thought those benefits could outweigh the value of living in a place where you knew everybody.<sup>127</sup> Only youths who were born in the city or moved there at a very young age speak positively of the city's virtues of mobility and entertainment, as opposed to the safety, tranquility, and intimacy that everyone agrees are characteristic of small towns (cf. Hill and Hill 1986: 39-40). Whenever I traveled to any city, my host family and others would warn me of its dangers and lecture me about safety risks. I was from a large city and used to navigating alone, I would remind them, but they never stopped trying to protect me from the city's dangers.

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<sup>126</sup> Paloma, in fieldnotes, 5/31/2011; Fernando, in fieldnotes, 1/20/2011.

<sup>127</sup> Fieldnotes, 12/11/2010.

**Figure 3.2:** Map of Chontal region (Turner 1972: ii). See Appendix C for more information about the communities included in this map.  
 From TURNER P. *THE HIGHLAND CHONTAL PB*, 1E. © 1972 Wadsworth, a part of Cengage Learning, Inc. Reproduced by permission. [www.cengage.com/permissions](http://www.cengage.com/permissions)



If the cities of the Isthmus, and Oaxaca to a lesser degree, represent nearby sources of economic opportunity, then Mexico City and the United States represent the limits of ambition. Migration to the US is recent and limited; US policy makes legal status unattainable for unskilled workers like the men of Zapotitlán, and the worldwide recession of the late 2000s made it even more difficult for unskilled, undocumented migrants to find work. However, the promise of much better pay still encouraged some men to attempt the risky trip. Returning migrants spoke fondly of the jobs that they held and the food that they ate; they understood the massive size of the US to contain infinite opportunities.

Most people, however, had lived their whole lives within a small radius. Many people in Zapotitlán have traveled to Mexico City for administrative purposes, to visit family, or for religious tourism (see Section 3.3), but many have never been even as far as Oaxaca. Adults who had visited the port city of Salina Cruz countless times told me they had never actually seen the ocean.

For this majority, the scale of a journey across the border is inconceivable. Before I flew to New York for a visit, friends asked how far it was by car. I told them it would take close to a week, with stops to rest each night. That distance was, to them, almost impossible. I was asked for countless favors I could not carry out, all predicated on the assumption that the US is small: seek out a daughter's delinquent husband and convince him to leave his new wife, make sure that a son's boss was not abusive, track down a brother who had not called in too many months. Later, when a friend's son was deported, she called me in Oaxaca City and asked if I could drive his car from Oregon to the border. Glossing over the legal complexities, I told her I couldn't take two weeks off work. "Two weeks?" she replied. "What do you mean, two weeks?" She had never been more than half a day's travel from home.

### **3.2 Jehovah's Witnesses, Worldwide and in Mexico: Historical Background**

The religious movement today known as Jehovah's Witnesses was founded in 1872 by Charles Taze Russell, who saw his goal as restoring old Bible truths rather than discovering new ones (Michael S., p.c., 5/12/2013), and as such did not intend to found a denomination but only a fellowship of loosely affiliated Christians (Penton 1997: 24ff). It was Joseph F. Rutherford, the second president of the Watch Tower Society, who was largely responsible for transforming the

movement into its current centralized and highly structured, or *theocratic*,<sup>128</sup> form (Holden 2002c: 20; Penton 1997: 59-64). As of 2011, there were 7,224,930 Witnesses worldwide,<sup>129</sup> and Mexico had the 3rd largest population of Jehovah's Witnesses, with 696,749 (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2011: 40-47).<sup>130</sup>

The Witnesses differ from most other major Christian sects in that they reject the notions of the trinity and of immortality of the soul. For Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus is the son of God but separate from God, rather than another facet of God himself. The Witnesses believe that our souls die with our bodies, but we will be resurrected in the millennium of Jesus's rule on earth, at which point the 144,000 chosen ones will rule with Jesus in heaven, while the rest of humankind will be either rewarded with eternal paradise on earth or will cease to exist.

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<sup>128</sup> Andrew Holden (2002: 187) defines *theocratic*: "Literally, 'governed by God'. Devotees use the term to describe their Society."

David A. Reed (2010), a former Witness, defines *theocracy*: "The kingdom of God, perceived by JWs as a present-day functioning government headed by God himself and represented on earth by the Watch Tower society." His definition of *theocratic* is "1. Connected with God's rulership. 2. Showing appreciation for God's rulership by obedience to organizational instructions." His dictionary also includes entries for *Theocrat*, *the*; *theocratic brother*; *theocratic haircut*; *theocratic language*; *Theocratic Ministry School*, *the*; *theocratic order*; *theocratic organization*, *the*; *Theocratic School*; *theocratic sister*; and *theocratic war strategy*.

George D. Chryssides's (2008: 129-130) definition of *theocracy* is a page long; I include here key points: "Government by God. . . . The key feature of theocratic rule is headship: it is not dictatorship, since God wishes to secure willing obedience from his subjects, motivated by love . . . . God's visible organization on earth, the Jehovah's Witnesses, endeavors to organize their affairs along theocratic lines, regarding God and Christ as the head, with the anointed class as his faithful and discreet slave and the Governing Body as a subgroup, responsible for their members' spiritual well-being. Witnesses teach that there can only be one theocracy, not several, since God will rule the entirety of heaven and earth." The only other term his dictionary includes is *Theocratic Ministry School*.

<sup>129</sup> I give here the "average" number of publishers (Witnesses who are qualified to proselytize door-to-door) rather than the maximum. As Stark and Iannaccone (1997:138-9) point out, if anything, the Witnesses' own numbers are likely to be low estimates, since these counts only include members who maintain a relatively high level of activity.

<sup>130</sup> After the U.S. (1,115,786) and Brazil (706,699). Mexico also has a relatively high percentage of Witnesses, with one publisher for every 153 people. This is a particularly impressive feat when you realize that only two of the countries with a higher percentage of Witnesses have populations significantly larger than 1 million (compared to Mexico's 108 million) and in fact, most are island nations. (The countries/territories with a higher percentage of Jehovah's Witnesses are: Aruba, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Bonaire, Cook Islands, Cuba, Curacao, Guadalupe, French Guyana, Hawai'i, Martinique, Niue, New Caledonia, Puerto Rico, Saba, San Marino, St. Martin, Santa Elena, Tahiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos, the British Virgin Islands, and Zambia.)



However, they also share certain core values with other evangelical Christians:<sup>131</sup> Biblical inerrancy, or the idea that the Bible is the literal word of God and has remained uncorrupted in centuries of transmission, and a focus on reading Scripture in services; a belief that we are living in the last days; and an emphasis on proselytizing that follows directly from the conviction that the end is near (cf. Cahn 2003: x-xi).

The Witnesses are known for following a staggering number of prohibitions and guidelines, although few of these are easily observable by outsiders. They are prohibited from participation in anything considered worldly, which includes not only voting and military service but also celebrations of birthdays, Christmas, Easter, and national holidays; saluting a flag or singing a national anthem is considered idol worship. Witnesses are also strongly discouraged from pursuing higher education or career success, as these are seen as taking time away from the much more important work of spreading the "good news," and the organization publishes guidelines on everything from physical appearance to child-rearing to the use of slang. As James Penton (1997: 280) reminds us in his scholarly description of the Witnesses:

No Witness may serve in the military, work in the direct employment of another religious organization, hold elective governmental office, work in a munitions factory, produce or sell tobacco, engage in certain violent sports such as boxing or wrestling, participate in gambling activities or those involving the commercial exploitation of sex. In addition, he must not join a political party, vote for public officials, perform jury duty, attend bull fights, fence, stand for the national anthem, salute the flag, offer toasts, smoke, chew tobacco, use hallucinogenic drugs, celebrate holidays, engage in improper sexual relations (as defined by the Watch Tower Society), accept a blood transfusion, or, as mentioned earlier, participate in certain types of dancing or listen to certain types of music.

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<sup>131</sup> This term is not used consistently in either academic or religious literature. See Cahn (2003: ixn1) and Harding (2000: xv-xvi, 19n15, 21) for discussion. I follow Cahn in emphasizing the similarities and thus "refer to all those non-Catholic Christian churches that engage in proselytizing activity as evangelical."

### 3.2.1 Jehovah's Witnesses in Mexico

By the end of the 19th century, Jehovah's Witnesses were active in parts of Mexico, and the *Watch Tower* magazine became available in Spanish by the end of World War I, while the Mexico Branch Office opened in 1929 (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1993a: 414, 436). The 1995 Yearbook (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1995) presents the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Mexico as one of persecution, citing laws that did not allow Witnesses to go door-to-door or sing in public meetings. However, this and other Witness texts do not point out that the organization chose to accept these restrictions. At the time of their legal incorporation in Mexico, laws prevented religious organizations from holding property, and the Witnesses chose to become a "cultural" organization to circumvent this restriction, although doing so curtailed the full expression of religious activities (Penton 1997: 149-50, 320-22).

As of 2010, *The Watchtower* was being published in three indigenous languages in Mexico (Yucatec Maya, Isthmus Zapotec, and Tzotzil), with some literature available in a further twelve languages; another sixteen languages were used in congregations that had only Spanish-language literature available (Pharao Hansen 2010: 129). According to Magnus Pharao Hansen (2010: 129): "Jehovah's Witnesses' approach to the linguistic endeavour of translating and publishing materials in indigenous languages is strictly pragmatic. It is a question of reaching the largest possible number of individuals with the message that they find so important." Yet this explanation fails to address a critical question: why now? Jehovah's Witnesses began using indigenous languages in Mexico in the late 1990s; as of the 1990 census, 7.5% of Mexicans older than 5 years old spoke an indigenous language, with only 1.2% monolingual; in 1930, when the Mexican branch office began operating, 7.7% of men were monolingual in an indigenous

language, as were 9.1% of women. If it were simply a question of access, we would have expected the Witnesses to use indigenous languages from their earliest days in Mexico, when there were four times as many monolingual speakers of indigenous languages as there are today.

However, the Witnesses originally taught indigenous people Spanish, with the eventual goal of converting them. The goal of the Witnesses' Spanish literacy classes was "to do more than simply hold meetings where discourses were given. They wanted people to be like those Bereans in the apostle Paul's day who were able to 'carefully examine the Scriptures to see whether the things taught them were really so' (Acts 17:11)" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1993a: 466). For many years, learning Spanish was seen as the only way that indigenous Witnesses could "carefully examine the Scriptures". Indeed, the Witnesses, like the SIL, have been recognized by the Mexican government for their contributions to improving literacy rates nationwide: in 1974, a director in the General Office for Adult Education (part of the Department of Public Education) wrote a letter congratulating the Watch Tower Society for doing just that (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1993a: 466-7).

However, one of the motivating factors in the use of indigenous languages was an increasing realization that it would be simpler for a small number of already-dedicated Witnesses to learn, or re-learn, indigenous languages than for a much larger number of non-Witnesses to learn Spanish.<sup>132</sup> Translation of the Bible into indigenous languages, then, became an alternative route to this "careful examination of the Scriptures."

In this regard, the Witnesses' history with indigenous languages parallels that of the Catholic Church in preceding centuries. Colonial language policy went back and forth between favoring the use of Spanish and taking advantage of Nahuatl's status as a pre-colonial lingua franca (Hidalgo 2006a: 358-60). Spreading the Spanish language was one major objective of the

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<sup>132</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011.

Spanish Crown, and an element of official policy, but putting this policy into practice was difficult (King 1994: 45). The Spanish agents working most closely with indigenous populations in the New World were priests, for whom spreading Christian doctrine was an even more urgent goal. Many of these priests argued that Nahuatl was better suited to this task. After all, it was more efficient for small numbers of friars to learn Nahuatl than for large numbers of indigenous people to learn Spanish (Heath 1972: 23-4, 34), and even those Indians who did not speak Nahuatl were thought to learn it more easily than Spanish (Collins and Blot 2003: 135). As a result, the Spanish reversed their policies nearly a dozen times in a hundred-year period (Heath 1972; Hidalgo 2006c; King 1994).

During this period of shifting policy, priests had to work as linguists in order to learn the indigenous languages (King 1994: 47-8). Whether they were to translate scripture or teach Spanish, some knowledge of the languages spoken in Mexico would be necessary. However, early linguistic work often missed key distinctions: friars erroneously assumed that the structure of indigenous languages would be parallel to Latin and Spanish. Indeed, early grammars, ironically, described "the varieties of those languages which the missionaries themselves spoke, rather than what was spoken by indigenous people" (Baldauf and Kaplan 2007: 19).

Similarly, many of the Witnesses most invested in the translation project are young, Spanish-dominant ethnic Chontals, or non-Chontals who hold prestigious Witness posts as precursors and overseers. Even the most Chontal-dominant speakers typically prepare talks in Spanish before translating them into Chontal, and thus word order is often calqued from Spanish. These older speakers have also spent years reading dozens of pages of Spanish-language Watch Tower publications every week, and thus are quite accustomed to the conventions of Spanish and

specifically of the Witness register.<sup>133</sup> The Spanish dominance of most of these speakers, then, means that the complicated aspectual system of Chontal is most likely becoming simplified so that it more closely resembles the Spanish system.

### **3.3 Secondary Research Sites Outside Zapotitlán**

In addition to the three Zapotitlán congregations, I also conducted some fieldwork in a Chontal-language Witness congregation in Santa María Atzompa, close to Oaxaca City. Most of the members of this congregation live in Atzompa, close to the Kingdom Hall, and trace their roots back to the Chontal Highlands, particularly to San Andrés, which is the other Highland town with a large concentration of Witnesses. I attended this congregation sporadically in Fall 2011 to confirm that the phenomena I observed in the Zapotitlán conversations were representative of the broader range of Chontal congregations, or possibly of indigenous language congregations as a whole.<sup>134</sup>

Additionally, I visited both Jehovah's Witness worldwide headquarters in Brooklyn, New York and the Mexico Branch Office near Mexico City. Worldwide headquarters, collectively known as Bethel, include collections of buildings in three New York cities: Brooklyn, Paterson, and Wallkill, where a total of nearly four thousand Witnesses live and work. Bethel is, by design, a total institution (Goffman 1961): the residents, known as Bethelites, are baptized Witnesses who live in dormitories and must follow a regimented schedule of meals, worship, and work. The term "Bethel"<sup>135</sup> also refers to the hundred or so Branch Offices that oversee particular regions, and all of them follow the same schedule: in addition to work responsibilities on the campus and

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<sup>133</sup> Interview, Lucas and Marisa, 2/2/2011.

<sup>134</sup> Pharaoh Hansen's (2010; p.c.) experiences in a Nahuatl-speaking congregation suggest that many of these phenomena are widespread.

<sup>135</sup> Context typically makes it clear whether a Witness is referring to the nearest Branch Office or to Brooklyn.

service in nearby congregations, all Bethelites must attend morning worship from 7:00-7:15am every day and family worship on Monday evenings. During my first visit to the Brooklyn campus, in March 2011, I received a tour from an Associate Editor in the Writing Department; he not only explained the various functions of the Writing Department and the translation process, but also graciously granted me an interview. I remained in contact with him, and he offered comments on many sections of this dissertation; I made a second visit in December 2012 to talk with him about some of my findings.

In May 2012, I visited the Mexico Branch Office in Texcoco, just outside of Mexico City. This complex consists of four massive buildings dedicated between 1973 and 2003, which house a total population of 1,200, larger than the entire population of Santa María Zapotitlán. Here, too, I was given an extensive tour of the facilities; Mexico Bethel, like Brooklyn Bethel, aims to provide every necessary service so that workers need not leave or spend money elsewhere. In addition to the printing press and the Writing Department, I also saw the Sewing Department, which makes sheets and towels and alters all workers' clothes; the barber and the salon, where men are assigned haircuts once every three weeks and women can make appointments at leisure; and the shoe and leather workshop, where Witnesses can bring the portfolios they use to transport literature for repair.

While the dozen or so buildings of Brooklyn Bethel are scattered around an upper-middle-class neighborhood where neither the grandeur of the buildings nor the formal dress of the Witnesses stand out, the Texcoco campus contrasts sharply with its surroundings. The streets of Texcoco are dusty and not all of them are paved; the houses that surround Bethel are small and boxy, and look much like the dwellings in Zapotitlán, Yet beyond Bethel's massive walls lie a lobby with marble floors and rich purple carpets, where Witness tourists can sit on baroque

couches and look at the gardens through walls of windows. I visited in mid-May, during the last few weeks of the dry season – the hottest, dustiest weeks of the year, when breathing rasps your throat and your skin cracks with thirst – and the poppies were velvet red, the grass lush and verdant.

Many Zapotitlán Witnesses had visited Mexico Bethel, and those who hadn't been aspired to go; everyone encouraged me to visit. Similarly, whenever anyone learned that I was from Brooklyn, their response was the same: "Have you been to Bethel?" Brooklyn has an almost mythical status for Witnesses, who visit Bethel as tourists from around the world and who can imagine no higher religious honor than working there. The Witnesses I lived with dreamed of receiving visas that would allow them to make this pilgrimage, although they knew they never would. When I visited Brooklyn Bethel for the first time, I felt almost reverent, as if I were attending in their stead.

If the Atzompa congregation provided horizontal comparisons, the two Bethels suggested vertical ones. In fact, Zapotitlán Witnesses had another motivation for encouraging me to visit either Mexico or Brooklyn Bethel: they thought that many of my difficult questions could be answered there. In interviews, some Witnesses deflected institutional questions with this very suggestion. Everyone, in short, felt comfortable allowing either Bethel to speak on their behalf. I wanted, then, to see for myself: to what extent was this true? How did the Zapotitlán congregations fit into the global hierarchy? How real was the centralization and standardization of which they spoke so fondly? And how were this centralization and standardization – or at least the myth of them – maintained?

## **Four**

# **"We Have Just Started Looking for the Words": Language Ideologies in the Chontal Speech Community**

In this chapter, I contextualize the concept of *language ideologies* in more detail, beginning with its relevance to communities undergoing language contraction and shift, and provide an ethnographic description of the language ideologies circulating in the Zapotitlán community. This description of the local community, including Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other religions, provides a background for the discussion of the Witness-specific textual economies described in the following chapters.

### **4.1 Language Ideologies**

Any study of an unstable linguistic situation must begin with a deceptively simple question: why do people care what language they speak at all? Both academic linguists and speakers of a language are troubled by language shift, but the reasons why may be very different. Linguists typically want to preserve diversity for scientific reasons (Hale 1998; Hale, et al. 1992), while speakers are often more concerned with "language as spirituality, culture, and recognition" (Rice 2009: 43; see also Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998 and Hinton 2002). Even when speakers do not see an essential link between languages and identities, they may care deeply about maintaining them, for reasons that have nothing whatsoever to do with diversity writ large. For example, the historical multilingualism of some Australian aboriginal groups is



connected to a worldview that connects particular languages to resources, rather than identities (Evans 2001: 253).

While scholars of language used to place little emphasis on speaker motivations, we have come to realize that local ideas about language do, in fact, affect not only language use but also language structure. Indeed, social factors override purely linguistic concerns<sup>136</sup> as the causes of language change (Irvine and Gal 2000: 77), which means that it is vitally important to consider local understandings of language, or language ideologies. This term "refers to the situated, partial, and interested character of conceptions and uses of language" (Errington 2000: 115; cf. Silverstein 1979). These "representations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world" (Woolard 1998: 3) affect both grammatical structure and patterns of use, for they include motivations to speak particular languages – and motivations not to.

Ideologies exist at a range of levels of awareness and explicitness. Some ideas about language are made explicit, while others lurk in subtext or grammar, like the ideas about gender encoded in generic *he* in English (Silverstein 1985). If we admit those ideologies that can only be read from "more implicit metapragmatics" (Woolard 1998: 9) as objects of study, are we continuing to privilege scholarly understandings? Irvine (1998) suggests that language ideologies remain an analytically useful concept only if they are clearly distinguished from patterns of use. Similarly, Briggs argues that "viewing ideologies of language simply as part of the linguistic background shared by the members of a speech community...figures among the means by which scholars naturalize their own interpretive authority" (Briggs 1998: 230). On the other hand, Kroskrity (1998; 2000b) has argued that dominant ideologies are more likely to be naturalized,

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<sup>136</sup> That is, there is no ideal linguistic structure towards which all languages converge. We do not find a universal preference for any particular word order or phonemic inventory, although there do seem to be some tendencies. See also Thomason and Kaufman 1988.

or assumed to be natural and fixed, and as a result these ideologies are less likely to be explicitly stated. He writes: "Any rethinking of language ideology that would exclude naturalized, dominant ideologies and thus analytically segregate beliefs about language according to a criterion of consciousness seems to me to be unwise" (Kroskrity 1998: 117).<sup>137</sup> Following Giddens (1984), Kroskrity differentiates between ideologies that operate on the level of discursive consciousness and those that operate at the level of practical consciousness. I do the same in order to examine those issues where misrecognition plays a central role.

#### **4.1.1 Language Ideologies, Native Americans, and Language Shift**

Language ideologies have been explored in a number of Native American contexts (Kroskrity and Field 2009), particularly as they relate to language renewal movements. Kroskrity (2009a) has noted that language revitalization projects are often sites of intense ideological activity; even when communities strongly support language renewal movements, there may be great variability within the community (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998). Particular ideologies that counter the stated goals of language maintenance or revitalization may be completely naturalized, masquerading as common sense (cf. Hill 2008: 33-34). In colonized or indigenous communities, hegemonic ideologies that do not serve community interests are often so naturalized as to be invisible. Since ideologies that are expressed more explicitly may be more open to contestation (Kroskrity 1998), successful language revitalization projects may need to raise speakers' consciousness about the ideologies that are circulating more covertly within communities (Kroskrity 2009a).<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> The work by Jane Hill (2001[1998]; 2008) on covert racism provides an excellent example of the importance of a study of naturalized, dominant ideologies that can easily go unspoken.

<sup>138</sup> This process may be internal to a community.

Although the secular Chontal language projects in the regions were not highly active in the community of Zapotitlán, Zapotitlán residents are acutely aware of ongoing language shift. As described in Chapter Three, the members of the Zapotitlán town government often referred to the changes they saw taking place (cf. papers in Duchêne and Heller 2007), and the community as a whole often remarked on generational differences in Chontal language ability. These and other ideologies of language in general, and Chontal in particular, are described in this chapter.

## 4.2 Ideologies about Speech and Speaking

### 4.2.1 Speaking

Rather than describing the community of "Chontal speakers," it might be more locally salient to talk about the community of "Chontal pronouncers." Simply put, it is much more common for members of this community to use the Spanish word *pronunciar* 'pronounce' than the word *hablar* 'speak' to describe their relationship with the Chontal language. By the end of my first week in the community, I had noted this tendency in my fieldnotes:

[During the first language committee meeting,] Carlos made the same distinction I hear a lot between *entender* and *pronunciar*, which speaks to an interesting language ideology – it's not about grammar but about pronunciation. And similarly, when I say something, people tend to compliment my pronunciation in particular. People rarely talk about speaking, only about 'pronouncing' or 'interpreting' (*interpretar*) or 'translating.'<sup>139</sup>

This term recurred regularly long after I first noticed it.

Speakers of all ages and genders used forms of the word *pronunciar* (as opposed to *hablar*) to describe their own abilities. An older man noted in an early language committee

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<sup>139</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/23/2010. Note that this sense of *interpretar*, as an oral equivalent of the written practice of translation, is very different from *interpretar* as exegesis, or the act of determining the underlying meaning of the Bible, a point I return to in Chapters Six and Seven.

meeting: "I speak it, I pronounce words of it, but I do understand everything,"<sup>140</sup> and Almita, in her 40s, told me that "not even those of us who are older and speak well ... are good when it comes to *pronunciar*."<sup>141</sup> Younger speakers also used this term: Almita's 21-year-old daughter Mariela is aware that she speaks better than most of her peers, yet she told me that she doesn't speak very well, that she needs to be guided and told how to pronounce, and that she cannot speak unless someone tells her what to say, despite her best efforts.<sup>142</sup> Mariela's sister-in-law Elena, who is close to the same age, describes herself as understanding everything but unable to pronounce Chontal well,<sup>143</sup> as do many others.

A wide range of speakers also used this word *pronunciar* to assess my Chontal ability, and even when they used other words, they made it clear that pronunciation was seen as metonymic for overall language ability. My host parents, both in their 70s, observed that I work hard, and as a result I "speak clearly," which is "what matters a lot."<sup>144</sup> While they did use the word *hablar* rather than *pronunciar*, the emphasis was on my clarity rather than my grammatical ability here. Their daughter Paula, a few years older than me, observed a month into my fieldwork that I was already able to converse because "it [Chontal] comes out very clear."<sup>145</sup>

In fact, pronunciation was sometimes a proxy for overall language ability even in cases where it was clearly misleading. In December 2010, six weeks after I arrived in Zapotitlán, I went to nearby San Matías Petacaltepec hoping to find Paul Turner, an SIL linguist active in the

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<sup>140</sup> "Lo hablo, lo pronuncio por palabras, pero sí entiendo todo" (Fieldnotes, 10/25/2010).

<sup>141</sup> This does not represent a direct quote from Almita but rather from my own notes. Fieldnotes, 11/20/2010.

<sup>142</sup> Fieldnotes, 04/07/2011.

<sup>143</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/10/2010.

<sup>144</sup> "One important thing that Jacinto and Florencia said, while they were talking about how I work very hard: Florencia said 'habla claro' and Jacinto said 'este es lo que vale mucho' - so again with the pronunciation!" (Fieldnotes, 12/05/2010).

<sup>145</sup> "Te sale bien claro" (Fieldnotes, 11/20/2010).

1960s who had later returned to San Matías to live. Turner, or Don Pablo as he is known locally, had left town, and so I spent the day quietly following Josefina and Tere, two of the Jehovah's Witnesses I had ridden to town with.<sup>146</sup> At every house, the people we visited were curious about me, which allowed me to make inquiries into Turner's whereabouts before Josefina and Tere began to proselytize. After we left one house, Josefina told me that the man had been impressed with my limited Chontal, and she translated his observations as, "You are already beating Don Pablo, you speak very clearly and he stammers."<sup>147</sup> Ironically, I did not understand what he said in Chontal, which is why she had to explain it to me when we left; I can only imagine that Paul Turner, who had lived in this community for many years and who I never did manage to meet, has much better comprehension and conversational ability than me.

Speakers also used pronunciation as a criterion to evaluate each other informally. Don Gregorio, a man in his 70s with strong purist tendencies, was the person who most frequently gave explicit judgments of others' Chontal language ability. He was unhappy with the selection of the members of the language committee due to their poor speaking ability, which he described in terms of both pronunciation (*pronunciar*) and speaking (*hablar*) on multiple occasions.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Josefina was about 50 at the time; Tere, at 16, was her youngest child. Josefina typically did most of the talking, due to her age, her greater experience going door-to-door, and her superior command of Chontal.

<sup>147</sup> "Ya estás ganando a Don Pablo, hablas muy claro y él tartamudea" (Fieldnotes, 12/02/2010).

<sup>148</sup> "He also objected to all of the committee members except Rolando on the grounds that their pronunciation is not good (just like mine) and told me I should only spend my time with *abuelitos* [older people, lit. grandparents]" (Fieldnotes, 12/9/2010).

"As for the committee, the only one he considers a good speaker is Rolando. (Yet he [Gregorio] himself doesn't go out at night and isn't willing to show up for the meeting unless we come by his house.) Rolando speaks 'desde que nació, es chontaleño' [since he was born, he's a Chontal speaker] whereas he claims that Daniel 'apenas pronuncia' [barely pronounces] and 'entienden pero no hablan' [they understand but they don't speak]. As for Fernando [who was not an official committee member], 'sí habla pero no se demuestra' [he does speak but he doesn't show it] and Uriel 'si lo preguntas, dice que hay palabras que no pronuncia' [if you ask him, he says that there are words that he doesn't pronounce] and also he 'habla pero no habla así mero' [he speaks but he doesn't really speak] although he wants to use it in *asamblea* and the like, which few others do. But at the end, it's because they didn't grow up speaking it." (Fieldnotes, 1/18/2011).

Furthermore, when I asked him to help me transcribe sermons, he critiqued the speakers' pronunciation extensively.<sup>149</sup> On one occasion, a neighbor came by his house when I was there, and he chastised her for not speaking as well as her sister; her immediate response was to acknowledge that "there are some words that we don't pronounce."<sup>150</sup>

Pronunciation was also one of the criteria that Jehovah's Witnesses used to evaluate the sermons of students in the Theocratic Ministry School (see Chapters Six and Seven). If a student who was being evaluated on this particular lesson was doing their presentation in Chontal, the superintendant would observe that Chontal was particularly difficult to pronounce.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, many young speakers were repeating a memorized text or reading aloud from notes whose content they may not have understood; in this context, an emphasis on pronunciation allowed the community to include less competent speakers.

#### **4.2.2 Knowing**

Don Gregorio told me time and again that every single individual in Zapotitlán actually knows Chontal, but that many of them choose not to demonstrate this knowledge. In particular, he believes that everyone age 25-30 and older knows the words for animals, trees, and things in the country.<sup>152</sup> He suggested that individuals might be lazy, or ashamed to speak the language for some reason. Indeed, as I describe in Chapters Eight and Nine, the members of the Chontal ethnic community are often imagined to be Chontal speakers although the sociolinguistic reality is more complex.

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<sup>149</sup> Fieldnotes, 01/27/2011. My overwhelming sense is that he is particularly attuned to the pronunciation of phonemes that simply do not exist in Spanish, but I have very little data on which types of mispronunciation he found particularly unacceptable.

<sup>150</sup> "Hay palabritas que no pronunciamos" (Fieldnotes, 01/27/2012).

<sup>151</sup> Fieldnotes, 06/10/2011, 06/24/2011, and 06/25/2011.

<sup>152</sup> Fieldnotes, 01/18/2011.

Both the limited ethnographic literature on Chontal and some anecdotal examples from a pilot study conducted in 2009 suggest that in the past, children who grew up speaking and being addressed in Spanish learned to speak Chontal in their early twenties (Turner 1972: 57; Waterhouse 1949). Such a pattern of socialization would also encourage a belief like Don Gregorio's in the ability of all community members to speak Chontal.

A similar model of language learning is common among many groups undergoing language shift, and furthermore seems to contribute to it: the belief in an innate ability to learn a particular language. This "genetic fallacy" (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998: 84) suggests that the language will come naturally to a person of the particular background when he or she reaches the appropriate age. As a result, household language use is not seen as directly implicated in maintenance. In such a model, some languages are more difficult to learn than others for particular people; this model is attested in a wide range of language shift situations.<sup>153</sup>

#### 4.2.3 Translating (and Interpreting): Finding Words

Much of what bilinguals do with language is translation, or interpretation: rendering words spoken or written in one of their named language varieties into another. Community members preferred the word *interpretar* 'interpret' to *traducir* 'translate', to the extent that when I used the latter to describe a task, people would rephrase using the former (cf. Samuels 2006).<sup>154</sup> Indeed, translation is seen more generally as interpretation in this community, a process of

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<sup>153</sup> A non-exhaustive list includes: Haida (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998); Isthmus Zapotec (Augsburger 2004; Saynes-Vásquez 2002); Kaska (Meek 2007); Kwéyòl (Garrett 2005); Quechua (Rindstedt and Aronsson 2002); Shoshoni (Loether 2009); Taiap (Kulick 1992); Tlingit (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998); and Welsh (McEwan-Fujita 2010).

<sup>154</sup> I suspect this comes from the Watch Tower Society, which reserves the word "translation" for texts that others will see in their written form. The process of preparing a sermon to be given in a language for which there is little or no literature, however, is considered "interpretation" even if the sermon is written first in the language of the Society-provided outline and transferred to the target language in writing. See Chapters Six through Nine for more discussion.

finding what is seen as the single correct way of saying things, and both of these words are often metonyms for speaking.

In town assemblies and language community meetings, members would often use the concepts of translation and interpretation as synonymous with bilingual speaking ability more generally. Rolando offered on several occasions to help children whose teachers would assign them homework using Chontal, observing that some words are hard for youth to "translate." During a discussion of the overall Chontal language ability in the community, Uriel said: "It's difficult for us to translate certain words. There are people who still have a good command of it, and those who don't."<sup>155</sup> Translation, here, is parallel with having a command of the language, or being a fluent speaker, which is made clearer by a comment that he made later in the same meeting: speakers "can interpret."<sup>156</sup> During a language committee meeting, Daniel informed us that he had written something, and that he would read it to us in Spanish and then "interpret" into Chontal.<sup>157</sup> He had written out the Chontal version previously, and after he read it, he suggested that I copy it directly from his notebook. During another meeting, when we were working through bilingual stories printed in Francisco Belmar's *Estudio de el Chontal* (1900), committee members suggested that the next week we'd continue "interpreting" one of these stories.

Many community members also suggested in interviews that translation was a question of "looking for" and "finding" words. When I asked one Witness what he found most difficult about using Chontal in services, he told me:

Pablo: That is, as it is a lot of information, there are words that aren't...that we don't know, well, how to express it in Chontal, yes. That's it, we don't know how

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<sup>155</sup> "Si, nos dificulta traducir ciertas palabras. Hay personas que lo dominan todavía y los que no..." (Fieldnotes, 10/25/2010).

<sup>156</sup> "pueden interpretar" (Fieldnotes, 10/25/2010).

<sup>157</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/31/2010.



to express it...and there are simple words that, yes, more or less we can say it. And there are words that it isn't possible, well, no. We have still just started looking for it. That's how it is.

Jena: And...what do you do to search?

Pablo: We look for words like, um, synonyms. (J: Mmhmm.) Synonyms, and from there we look for it more or less. Where the word coincides, like synonyms, it directs us, and like this... (J: Mmhmm.) Yes.<sup>158</sup>

Learning new words is a process of looking for them; even words for new concepts are not "created" or "invented" but rather found.

When the community museum opened in November 2009, a pressing concern was the designation of a Chontal name and the creation of bilingual signage, a community-wide translation project that provides ample evidence of a concern with finding the "correct" translation. The Spanish language signage says "Museo Comunitario Educativo Centro de Investigación Chontal Santa María Zapotitlán" ('Santa María Zapotitlán Educational Community Museum and Center for Chontal Research'); in smaller letters, the same sign designates the museum "Ewespika Fojlia Jlumshajma Kijlijma Lajlpijlya Juala Witu". Don Fernando, the town mayor at the time, was one of the community members most concerned with "figuring out" words, and he had come up with this name after consulting a monolingual Spanish dictionary for ideas.

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<sup>158</sup>Jena: Bueno, eh, qué parte lo ve más difícil usted?

Pablo: O sea, como la información es mucho, hay palabras que no se...no sabemos pues expresarlo, en chontal, sí. Ese es, no sabemos expresarlo. (...) Y hay palabras sencillas que sí, más o menos lo podemos hablar, y hay palabras que no se puede, pues, no. Le buscamos apenas todavía. Así es.

Jena: Y...cómo hacen para buscar?

Pablo: Buscamos palabras así, este, sinónimos,

Jena: Mmhmm

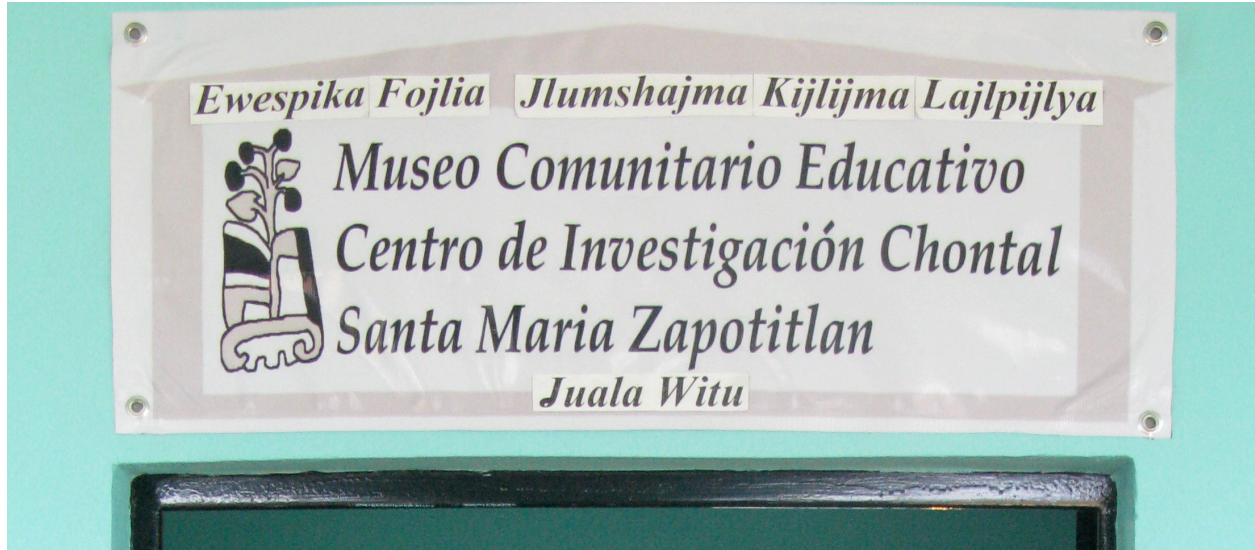
Pablo: Sinónimos, ya de ahí lo buscamos más o menos. Donde concuerda la palabra, como sinónimos ya nos dirige, y así

Jena: Mmhmm

Pablo: Sí.

(Pablo and Alfredo interview, 06/25/2011, 00:03:10-00:04:07)

**Figure 4.1:** Community Museum Signage.



The first word, *ewespika*, designates a place where things are kept, a person who owns many things, or perhaps communal goods. *Fojlia*, in Don Fernando's explanation, "is about people being united, or meeting together", and *jlumshajma* means "center, like the center of a town." Several different people explained the word *kijlijma* to my colleagues<sup>159</sup> and me in different ways, but all agreed that it was a good translation for 'educational'. The word might refer to someone who is educated, well-mannered, or a good person; apparently when someone gets lost on the road, this word can be used to refer to the process of getting back on the path in a literal sense, but it also seems to refer to living morally. *Lajlpijlya* means 'our town', and *juala witu* is 'the hill of the zapotes', or Zapotitlán. While *juala witu* by itself refers only to the hill, *lajlpijlya juala witu* can refer to the town. Don Fernando had also wanted to translate "Santa María" using the name of a flower that is called "Santa María" in Spanish, but others convinced him this was incorrect, and it does not appear in the sign.

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<sup>159</sup> Aaron Huey Sonnenschein, Danny Zborover, and I attended the inauguration as part of a pilot study for an eventual language documentation project.

These debates went on for most of the week; I give here the final version, although many of these words were added, subtracted, and respelled a number of times. One of the hardest words to translate turned out to be 'Chontal'; when pressed, we suggested Spanish glosses like 'our language' and 'our people'. Finally, *lajlpijlya* was deemed sufficient for this purpose.

This entire process was marked, start to finish, by the "discovery" of new words that were felt to be correct. In a committee meeting, Rolando remarked that he feels that he speaks at an 80% level, and reminded the others that "the work we have as a committee is to find the words" and to reach 100% competence, and that we have to "designate their names [of things] in Chontal."<sup>160</sup> Words, in this view, are absolute: they exist outside of speakers and social life, waiting to be "found" and used. Although the process looked, from the outside, like a week-long negotiation of meaning and reference, those participating in it erased the role of metalinguistic interaction altogether. Doing so allowed them both to maintain an absolutist view of language and avoid assigning agency for making these decisions to any individual or group of individuals.

## **4.3 Ideologies about Form and Language**

### **4.3.1 The Salience of Words and Nouns**

Speakers of a language tend to be more metapragmatically aware of (able to talk about) certain aspects of that language, and speakers are typically more aware of vocabulary than grammar. Silverstein (2001[1981]) lays out five linguistic features that play a role in determining awareness. First, people are more aware of forms that are "unavoidably referential," that is, forms with a clear and consistent referential meaning; if concrete nouns are at one end of this spectrum, functional morphology is at the other. Speakers are also more aware of forms that are

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<sup>160</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/28/2010.

"continuously segmentable," or both discrete and continuous. Words fit this criteria, as do individual morphemes, but much grammatical meaning is derived in ways that may not do so. For example, in Chontal, the first person plural object is expressed by a circumfix, *ajl- ... -onga*.<sup>161</sup> Third, speakers are more likely to be aware of forms that presuppose social relationships rather than constituting those relationships in their use, which again privileges vocabulary over other linguistic levels. Fourth, people are more aware of forms whose presuppositions can be understood even when these forms are decontextualized. Functional morphemes are hard to define beyond what they do in specific contexts, while lexical words are, again, relatively easy to isolate. Finally, speakers tend to be more aware of forms that are metapragmatically transparent (i.e. forms that can be used to describe their own social function, like English *promise*). Simply put, speakers are often aware only of those functions of language that can easily be described within a particular language. This last feature once more privileges words: the word *promise* is metapragmatically transparent in a way that tense marking is not, although they may serve the same social purpose of promising.

Indeed, some people thought that words were quite literally all there was to Chontal. Nine-year-old Leonel, whose grandparents had recently taught him Chontal numbers, came home from school one day and announced, "My teacher asks me if we know Chontal and we tell her yes and then I tell her, **one two three ten nine**."<sup>162</sup> For him, reciting the names of the numerals was sufficient proof that he knew the language, although he could not even count in the correct order. (On another occasion, Leonel asked an older family member if she spoke English

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<sup>161</sup> With allomorphs *li- ... -onga*, *lu- ... -onga*, and *la- ... -onga* for other verb classes. More precisely, the suffix indicates a first person plural object and must co-occur with one of the allomorphs of the prefix, which indicates a first person object unspecified for number (assumed to be singular in the absence of the suffix).

<sup>162</sup> "Me dice mi maestra si sabemos chontal y le decimos que sí y le digo **anuli oke afane imbama peela...**" (Fieldnotes, 6/14/2011). **Boldface** represents words in Chontal.

and she responded, "Yes," and counted to ten.<sup>163</sup>) Lucas, a Jehovah's Witness pioneer<sup>164</sup> originally from Mexico City who was considered part of the Zapotitlán community, told me once: "The thing is that there are no grammar rules."<sup>165</sup> He later agreed that there were rules, but not written rules, but he and his wife Marisa told me they learned the language by using a Bible as a reference and asking about specific words rather than by conjugating verbs, which they did only as a last resort.<sup>166</sup> Not only is vocabulary more salient than grammar, Wertheim (2003a; b) further specifies that nouns tend to be the most linguistically salient words, and when people in Zapotitlán spoke about language, they spoke most frequently about nouns and numbers.<sup>167</sup>

Quite simply, nouns were seen as what was most important for language learning. In the fall of 2010, when the language committee was meeting regularly, members would typically choose to provide long lists of nouns on some semantic theme. I often brought in ideas for other activities that I thought would form the basis of pedagogical materials, as did committee members: Rolando encouraged us to elicit verb paradigms;<sup>168</sup> Uriel suggested "diaries" or taking turns providing short sentences about how members spend their time;<sup>169</sup> we tried riddles and tongue twisters on several occasions;<sup>170</sup> and I thought the group might create sample dialogues to

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<sup>163</sup> Fieldnotes, 1/26/2011.

<sup>164</sup> A person in full-time field service, which includes going door-to-door, often serving as a ministerial servant or elder in a congregation, and conducting Bible studies.

<sup>165</sup> "Es que no hay reglas de gramática" (Fieldnotes, 10/23/2010).

<sup>166</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/10/2010.

<sup>167</sup> This is perhaps more surprising since Chontal is, at least in some contexts, a pro-drop language. See also Gómez de García, et al. (2009) for a discussion of a case where verbs are more salient for ideologization, possibly due to extensive polysynthetic morphology.

<sup>168</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/28/2010 and 11/18/2010.

<sup>169</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/28/2010.

<sup>170</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/31/2010, 11/06/2010, 11/18/2010, and 12/08/2010.

use in particular situations.<sup>171</sup> We might work on these tasks for some time, but eventually the discussion would always return to lists of nouns: animals, especially snakes and birds and insects;<sup>172</sup> plants and other types of food;<sup>173</sup> foods that can be fried specifically;<sup>174</sup> furniture;<sup>175</sup> body parts and illnesses;<sup>176</sup> clothing;<sup>177</sup> or types of people.<sup>178</sup>

Nouns were used as a benchmark, as a way to test someone's ability. Anyone who wanted to see how much Chontal I spoke would test me by asking me to provide a few nouns, typically common ones like *lashku* 'tortilla' or *galtejua* 'food'. Children were also encouraged to display their language competence by prompting of this sort: "How do you say *tortilla*?" A few members of the community wanted me to teach them English, and when I asked what they wanted to learn, they too would come to me with long lists of nouns (and, occasionally, greetings and politeness formulas).

Most community members agreed that Chontal was a difficult language to learn, and they were very interested in my progress. Early on, I would tell people that what I found hardest was that the verbs didn't match up with Spanish at all. Such a comment was met with polite incomprehension. At first, I provided examples of tense/aspect mismatches, but I soon realized that this type of grammatical distinction was simply not accessible even to the most linguistically inclined of my teachers. Nouns were simply the most salient linguistic element to most people.

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<sup>171</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/18/2010.

<sup>172</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/28/2010, 11/04/2010, and 11/06/2010.

<sup>173</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/31/2010 and 11/07/2010.

<sup>174</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/20/2010.

<sup>175</sup> Fieldnotes, 10/28/2010.

<sup>176</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/18/2010.

<sup>177</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/20/2010.

<sup>178</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/20/2010.

### 4.3.2 Purism: Older is Better

As in many places, people in Zapotitlán display strong purist ideologies suggesting that older forms of the language are better forms of the language and that any mixing is deficient. Older individuals are held up as the best speakers, or as the only good speakers; old books are assumed to be more authoritative than old people.<sup>179</sup> Even good speakers defer to their elders, and the eldest speakers often wish aloud for access to their own parents and grandparents to confirm their Chontal. Furthermore, young speakers' Chontal is often described in terms that suggests that it is "mixed up" and perhaps no better than a complete lack of Chontal knowledge.

During my first visit to the community in November 2009 and again when I returned in October 2010, the local government sought to connect me with individuals they thought were the best speakers. Unfortunately, the two individuals they recommended I work with were almost entirely deaf. I often preferred to work with men in their 40s and 50s, in part because these individuals held most of the prominent positions in the community. Many of these men were good speakers, and all were happy to work with me, but all consistently suggested I find older speakers to work with. It was not uncommon for people to suggest I spend all my time with *abuelitos* (grandparents). In fact, when I said I wanted to know about Chontal as spoken today, people would describe it as "mixed up" or "not good" and continue to encourage me to meet only with older men and women.

Don Gregorio, an older man who took his role as a Chontal expert seriously, often denigrated the speaking ability of those around him, as described in Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2. He would ask neighbors passing by to read my notes aloud and critique their pronunciation, and he would tell me about the language lessons he offered his young relatives, but he was so disparaging of their abilities that I wondered if he might unwittingly contribute to their lack of

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<sup>179</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Sections 4.6 and 4.7.

interest in Chontal. Indeed, he would describe his role in lessons with me not as "writing" or "translating" or "explaining" but rather as "correcting."<sup>180</sup> Similarly, Rolando, a member of the language committee, told me not to bother finding young transcribers to work with me on the recordings I had made, as they would write everything incorrectly.<sup>181</sup>

In addition to an emphasis on older speakers and older forms of the language, many individuals in Zapotitlán were also concerned about language mixing. In our discussion of transcription and my need to transcribe the many recordings I made, Rolando also told me that it was important not to use Spanish, even if it meant editing it out. I replied that I needed to transcribe what was actually said rather than what should have been said, and he made it clear that he did not agree with this approach. Indeed, many speakers used the word *revuelto* ("mixed up"), which is frequently associated with purist ideologies (Hill and Hill 1986: 99). For example, one of Don Gregorio's neighbors responded to his criticisms with agreement: "we don't understand the real thing, it's mixed up."<sup>182</sup> Wenceslao, in his 80s, differentiated "real" (*mero*) or "original" Chontal from current ways of speaking, which are *revueltos*.<sup>183</sup>

As Bucholtz (2003) and Collins (1998) describe, scholars are often the source of purist ideologies depicting older speakers as more authentic or more competent, and indeed, these purist ideologies appear not to be indigenous to the Zapotitlán community. The long-term presence of educational institutions and evangelical churches in the community makes it difficult to determine when and how these ideologies were introduced, as does the fact that the Chontals are one of the least-studied groups in Oaxaca. The historical record suggests two distinct

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<sup>180</sup> Fieldnotes, 01/27/2011.

<sup>181</sup> Fieldnotes, 12/13/2010.

<sup>182</sup> "No entendemos el mero mero, está revuelto" (Fieldnotes, 01/27/2011).

<sup>183</sup> Fieldnotes, 02/12/2011.



possibilities. On the one hand, the Chontals had a contentious relationship with their pre-colonial neighbors and furthermore displayed a strong resistance to conversion and assimilation to the Spanish political economy. On the other hand, there is evidence of a long history of Chontal bi- or multilingualism.

Both before and during the colonial period, the Chontals were characterized by resistance to any sort of conquest. The Chontals were never tributaries of the Aztecs or Zapotecs (Bartolomé and Barabas 1996: 168), and they were historical enemies of most other indigenous groups in the region (Vázquez Dávila 1995: 15). However, the modern-day Chontal territory overlaps significantly with that of Zapotec groups, and Highland and Lowland groups currently interact more with Zapotecs than with each other (Bartolomé and Barabas 1996: 184-186; Vázquez Dávila 1995: 12; Zborover 2006). Similarly, during the colonial period, the Spanish had to put down a number of rebellions and ultimately congregated the Chontals into small communities to better manage them (Zborover 2006: 24-31). This history of resistance might also be linked to an unwillingness to use words from any other language, that is, purism.

Yet in spite of this fierce independence, there is also evidence of a long history of Chontal bi- or multilingualism. Tequisistlán "seems to have been a Zapotec-Chontal bilingual town since very remote times" (Zborover 2006: 69),<sup>184</sup> and at least a few Chontals spoke Nahuatl as early as the end of the sixteenth century (Turner and Turner 1971: 347). Furthermore, all present-day toponyms for Chontal communities come from Nahuatl. No Chontal community has a Chontal name that is in common usage, although mountains and other geographical features do have Chontal toponyms (Zborover 2006: 75-6).<sup>185</sup> The Chontal language also contains at least

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<sup>184</sup> "...parece haber sido un pueblo bilingüe zapoteca-chontal desde tiempos muy remotos."

<sup>185</sup> But consider *lajlpilya juala witu* 'Zapotitlán', described in section 4.2.3. This name for the town may be a recent back-formation from the name of the hill, however.

some Nahuatl loanwords that do not appear in the varieties of Zapotec spoken nearby, which might also suggest a historic openness to syncretism that was later lost (Turner 1973b: 12-13; cited in Zborover 2006: 76).

## 4.4 Ideologies about Language Learning

### 4.4.1 The Role of Parents

Most adults connected their Chontal ability or lack thereof to their parents. In particular, the generation of adults who claim to understand Chontal but to pronounce it only "in parts" often claimed that the reason they do not speak is because their parents did not teach them or speak it to them. Uriel, in his early 40s, who says he is now as comfortable in Chontal as in Spanish, pointed out: "Parents slipped up a little bit, yes? Or a lot, I can say, because to their children, ... we weren't taught any more, yes? We weren't taught as their children to speak Chontal, the mother tongue, so in that way it was very neglected."<sup>186</sup> Another woman of similar age told me that she wished her parents had taught her, and compared the Chontals with Mixe<sup>187</sup> children she had seen in Oaxaca City, because even the smallest Mixe children speak their language.<sup>188</sup>

Adults who did speak, especially young adults, also gave their parents credit for their ability. For example, Danny Zborover asked Carlos, a thirty-ish man, how he learned his Chontal

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<sup>186</sup> "Los padres descuidaron un poquito, sí? O mucho, puedo decir, porque a, a sus hijos ya no, no se, no se nos enseñó, sí? No se nos enseñó como hijos hablar el chontal, la lengua materna, tons por ahí se descuidó bastante." (Uriel and Sara interview, 06/10/2011, 00:04:20-00:04:40.)

<sup>187</sup> Another of Oaxaca's dozens of ethnic groups.

<sup>188</sup> Fieldnotes, 02/01/2011.

vocabulary, and he told us, "My father, my mother, it's their dialect, they talk."<sup>189</sup> Carlos later asked this same question of a peer of his, Saúl, who speaks more fluently, and Saúl also credited his parents. Their attitude, he said, was: "We're Chontals, why aren't we going to speak our language?"<sup>190</sup> A man of similar age noted during this discussion that the reason he does not speak equally well is that his father does not speak, and that he speaks it at all because his mother and grandmother speak it at home.

At least some parents felt that they had sole responsibility for teaching their children.

Uriel and Sara, in their early 40s with children from toddlers to teenagers, argued precisely this:

Uriel: For us, for us, like, for us parents, (yes), we have that responsibility until the present. You have to begin at home, at home, you have to speak with your children, and already thinking that this, this same arrangement (xxx) to go on participating in the Chontal meetings but you have to begin (from) the family, yes. (...)

Sara: Each father is the one in charge of his family, of teaching the kiddies, like, the little ones, you have to teach first with the very easiest words. From there, there, little by little (you go on getting harder) so that they learn.<sup>191</sup>

Language learning, then, is a family affair, the responsibility of parents towards their children.

The emphasis that Sara places on fathers in particular is most likely rooted in Witness beliefs that the father is the head of the household, the person who is ultimately responsible for the

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<sup>189</sup> "Mi madre, mi padre, es su dialecto, platican" (Fieldnotes, 10/23/2010). *Dialect* here is being used in contrast to *language*; the choice between these two words is always political. Because individuals in Zapotitlán were not consistent in their use I refrain from discussing this concern here.

<sup>190</sup> "Somos chontales, por qué no vamos a hablar nuestro idioma?" (Fieldnotes, 10/23/2010).

<sup>191</sup> Uriel: A nosotros, a nosotros, por ejemplo, a nosotros los padres, (sí,) tenemos esa responsabilidad hasta ahora. Hay que empezar en la casa, en la casa, hay que hablar con los hijos, y ya pensando que ese mismo, ese mismo arreglo (xxx) ir participando en, en las reuniones en chontal pero hay que empezar (desde) en la familia, sí. [Not included above:] De hecho, la organización de Jehová tiene (en), este, arreglos de (impartir), este, clases en chontal, imprimir literatura en chontal... entonces nos permite ya (a) conocer más la lengua materna. [In fact, Jehovah's organization has (in), um, arrangements to impart, um, classes in Chontal, to print literature in Chontal... then that allows us now (to) learn more of the mother tongue.]

Sara: Cada padre es el responsable de su familia, de enseñar los niños, por ejemplo los chiquitos hay que enseñar primero con las palabras más facilitos. De ahí, ahí, poquito poquito (va subiendo) para que aprenda.

(Uriel and Sara interview, 06/10/2011, 00:10:17-00:11:25.)

comportment of all family members. However, a strong belief in the role of parents as opposed to peers, teachers, or other environments was pervasive in the community across religious affiliations.

#### 4.4.2 Interactions with Children

Although adults say that parents play a decisive role in teaching Chontal to children, they do not necessarily speak it extensively with their own children. When children are taught, they are generally encouraged to repeat words or phrases verbatim, as Schieffelin (1990) describes for Kaluli children. At one point I was sitting with 3-year-old Lili; her 21-year-old aunt Mariela; and Mariela's 40-something mother, Lili's grandmother, Almita. Lili was sucking on a chili lollipop.

Mariela:	Tell her " <b>spicy</b> ."
Lili:	<b>Spicy</b> .
Jena:	<b>Also sweet?</b>
Almita:	Tell her " <b>sweet</b> ."
Lili	<b>Sweet</b> . <sup>192</sup>

Not long after, Lili fell, and Almita encouraged her to tell her mother about it, using one-word sentences: I fell down, I cried. Older children are taught words and phrases in the same way if they show interest, and the same formulation is used for children who are asked to take messages to neighbors in Spanish. Children may arrive home and announce "She says, I thank your mother" rather than "She says that she thanks you" or "She says that she thanks my mother."<sup>193</sup>

Children who do not speak well are teased regularly as part of their language socialization. One three-year-old boy with a moderate speech defect was often imitated by his family members. His *tortilla* often sounded like *tu tía* (your aunt), which was a source of much

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<sup>192</sup> This interaction may not be verbatim as it comes from fieldnotes (12/06/2010). Translations of Chontal words are in **boldface**, while normal font represents words spoken in Spanish.

<sup>193</sup> Fieldnotes, 12/06/2010. The indirect quotation is common in Spanish, yet children rarely use it.

teasing.<sup>194</sup> Other mispronunciations were often repeated affectionately. However, I rarely heard anybody encourage him to repeat correct pronunciations as was done to encourage children to speak Chontal.

#### **4.4.3 Writing and Learning**

In the Zapotitlán community, writing is seen as a vital tool for learning in general, and language learning in particular. In secular meetings associated with social welfare programs like Oportunidades, attendees are required to take notes, often verbatim. In fact, those running the meetings will repeat themselves until they are satisfied that all in attendance have been able to copy down what they have said.<sup>195</sup>

Writing was also seen as important in learning languages specifically. Rolando, the president of the language committee, and Don Gregorio, who was one of my language teachers, were both very insistent that I write, and write correctly. Rolando often brought his notes from regional committee meetings, and both men regularly inspected my writing to confirm that it met their standards. In fact, one fourteen-year-old boy told me that Don Gregorio charged one of his classmates one soda per page to teach him Chontal; that he would quantify lessons in pages rather than time suggests an emphasis on the written word.

#### **4.4.4 Scaffolding for Non-Speakers**

Support for non-speakers took two forms: a type of scaffolding, and spontaneous translation. The type of scaffolding I observed most frequently also displayed an emphasis on writing: speakers would repeat words or phrases one syllable at a time until they confirmed that we learners had written down what they said and could repeat it correctly. Spontaneous

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<sup>194</sup> Fieldnotes, 01/15/2011.

<sup>195</sup> See Section 4.6.3 for further detail.

translation was also a common way of accommodating non-speakers. In Jehovah's Witness meetings, where long monologues were given in Chontal, speakers would quietly whisper a running translation for me, their children, and other younger or non-speaking relatives nearby.

## 4.5 Evaluative Stances

### 4.5.1 The Sacred

People of all religious affiliations pray before meals.<sup>196</sup> If I was served food alone at someone's house, there might be no prayer, but if we sat down to eat a meal together, one of the adults of the household would say a prayer of gratitude. Women may lead these prayers, but they typically do so only when adult men are not present. However, any adult man may be asked to say grace. Among Jehovah's Witnesses, men with high positions in the congregation are more likely to lead this prayer; if a household contains more than one such man, they may alternate.

Such prayers of thanksgiving are remarkably similar in content across religious affiliations. They are brief, spoken aloud, and contain little more than an expression of gratitude for the food, with optional good wishes for family members or coreligionists and special mention given to those undergoing health problems or other troubles. For example, when I hurt my hand, whoever led the prayer would ask God to help me heal quickly. However, Catholics and Pentecostals often address their prayers to Jesus, while Jehovah's Witnesses, in keeping with their non-trinitarian beliefs, always address all prayers to Jehovah.<sup>197</sup> Pentecostals and Catholics are also more likely not only to give thanks for their own food but to ask specifically that God provide food to the poor, the sick, and others in need.

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<sup>196</sup> Because I address Jehovah's Witness institutional practices in Chapters Six and Seven, here I discuss only everyday religious practices, specifically prayer.

<sup>197</sup> See Section 7.4.

Even Chontal-dominant speakers seem to be more likely to say these prayers in Spanish than Chontal, although both languages are used. I asked Paloma, a Pentecostal woman in her late 70s or early 80s, if she ever said her prayers in Chontal. She taught me to say "bless the food!" but did not tell me if she did so regularly.<sup>198</sup> She did say that she had grown up hearing prayers in Spanish, and was used to it. She and many other older speakers told me that God knows all languages, so the choice of language is most important to the person praying.

#### 4.5.2 The Profane

Most people in Zapotitlán believe in the existence of a category of "bad" or "rude" words – in Spanish, *groserías* or *leperadas* – that one should never use. These words include not only vulgarities but also words to talk about violence, such as 'hate' and 'kill,' at least for some individuals. However, my language teachers took two different approaches: some wanted to censor these words to such an extent that I would never hear them at all, while others thought I needed to learn them to know when they were being used against me, but should refrain from using them myself.

Jehovah's Witnesses often took the most extreme approach, suggesting that the ideal language would be entirely free of all such words. My host father and some of my other Witness language teachers requested on several occasions that I show them my notes so that they could review these notes and remove any words they thought were not appropriate for me to know. On one occasion, I let a curse slip under my breath in front of a family member;<sup>199</sup> two hours later, I received a lecture from my host father on this very topic. He never mentioned my own use of foul language, but he took me aside and told me that in paradise we will have a pure language

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<sup>198</sup> Fieldnotes, 02/01/2011.

<sup>199</sup> The dog had dragged my freshly washed skirt off the clothesline and into the mud an hour before I needed to wear it to a Witness Assembly. What I said was "pinche perro," which is roughly equivalent to "damn dog." The word *pinche*, like English *damn*, falls solidly within the category of "curse words" but at this category's milder end.

that contains no curses, words that offend or hurt people, or even words about hurting people, because we will have no need for them.<sup>200</sup> Their censorship of these words may have been based partly in discomfort with the existence of swearwords in their language (cf. Muehlmann 2008), but the reference to paradise and the fact that Witnesses were the only ones to encourage such extreme censorship suggests that this practice was based largely in religious Puritanism.

My non-Witness teachers, on the other hand, saw practical reasons to know these bad words. Don Gregorio also offered to review my notes, in case others had given me misleading definitions of bad words, although he said he would not erase them. In fact, he thought I would need to learn them in self-defense. As a cautionary tale, Don Gregorio and two of my other non-Witness language teachers, Don Tomás and Don Wenceslao, told me that Paul Turner was tricked into learning bad words early in his fieldwork.<sup>201</sup> These three men all told me that they themselves would be truthful with me, but that others might teach me bad words. For a long time, they resisted telling me precisely what Paul Turner had learned, but Don Wenceslao eventually told me that he had wanted to say "Please give me a tortilla to eat." Using pantomime to act out the obscenity, he then explained that the people of San Matías had taught him this exact sentence, replacing only the word *lashku* 'tortilla' with a crude term meaning 'your vagina.'<sup>202</sup> Don Tomás, who had worked with Muriel Parrott and Viola Waterhouse to edit the Chontal New Testament published by the SIL, also warned me that early drafts of this document had contained crass words that Parrott and Waterhouse were simply unaware of.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Fieldnotes, 12/22/2010.

<sup>201</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/20/2010, 12/03/2010, 12/09/2010, and 02/04/2011.

<sup>202</sup> Fieldnotes, 02/04/2011.

<sup>203</sup> Fieldnotes, 12/09/2010.



Don Gregorio also told me about a former bus driver who would greet passengers who he knew were not Chontal speakers with a long stream of obscenities, which he would insist were Chontal greetings.<sup>204</sup> This type of challenge is common elsewhere in Mexico as a way of differentiating insiders from outsiders. Hill and Hill (1986: 116-118) describe the use of obscene challenges in place of greetings as a sort of shibboleth test: Nahuatl speakers should be able to use these words to challenge others, and they should know the proper response as well.<sup>205</sup> Similarly, when the Cucapá of northern Mexico need to perform indigenous language knowledge for outsiders, including government officials,<sup>206</sup> they produce swearwords and translate them as innocuous words or phrases (Muehlmann 2008). Knowing such words, then, allows one to pass this test and be accepted as a member of the community, an insider.

#### **4.5.3 Different Codes: Chontal and Spanish**

Community ideologies considered Chontal not only in isolation, but also as it relates to Spanish, the national language. In a community where nearly everyone speaks Spanish well, and with a more limited distribution of Chontal competence, speakers are concerned with finding a place for Chontal that justifies language skills beyond monolingual Spanish; with classifying people based on which languages they know or are likely to know; and with the relative difficulty of these two languages.

##### **4.5.3.1 What is Chontal Good For?**

The Zapotitlán community emphasizes two key functions of Chontal: the Chontal language is an emblem of Chontal identity, and it is also vital for communication with those who

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<sup>204</sup> Fieldnotes, 01/20/2011.

<sup>205</sup> Speakers may not actually be able to perform both these tasks, as Hill and Hill (1986: 143) describe.

<sup>206</sup> And, incidentally, Jehovah's Witnesses.

are monolingual Chontal speakers. Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular, value the Chontal language as a tool for proselytization. Furthermore, the community's schoolteachers, whose institutional ideologies have the potential to have a strong influence on community language use, shifted their position over time. Where earlier generations of teachers had actively tried to eradicate Chontal, the teachers working at the time of my fieldwork spoke in favor of linguistic diversity but did not have the skills to provide practical support.

The emblematic status of the Chontal language is more frequently tacit than explicit: Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, often assume in their calls for more Chontal that Chontal is the first language of all ethnic Chontals, which was demonstrably untrue at the time of research. (As Lucas, the Witness pioneer, put it, the Watch Tower Society informed the Chontal ethnic community, "Well, if you are Chontals, then (in) your meetings you have to speak Chontal, you have to comment in Chontal, you have to preach in Chontal, because you are Chontals."<sup>207</sup>) Such an ideology was also expressed overtly in meetings and interviews where the Chontal language was at stake. In the town assembly where I received permission to work with the language committee, Saúl noted that the language "identifies us"<sup>208</sup> and others agreed. Similarly, Uriel observed at one point that Chontal "is a language of our ancestors and it identifies us, (maybe) we are Chontals, the Chontals...that is, (I) consider that it's important."<sup>209</sup> These men, and others who expressed similar viewpoints, see Chontal identity as a valuable end in itself. Saúl was also the person who suggested a direct link between Chontal language and Chontal identity when he

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<sup>207</sup> "Pues si ustedes son chontales, entonces (en) sus reuniones tienen que hablar chontal, tienen que comentar en chontal, tienen que predicar en chontal, porque ustedes son chontales." (Lucas and Marisa interview, 02/02/2011, 00:32:18-00:32:31).

<sup>208</sup> "nos identifica" (Fieldnotes, 10/25/2010).

<sup>209</sup> "Es un idioma de nuestros antecesores y nos identifica, (puede que) somos chontales, los chontales...es decir, (yo) considero que es importante" (Uriel and Sara interview, 06/10/2011, 00:06:21-00:06:36).

noted that his parents taught him to speak Chontal because "We're Chontals, why aren't we going to speak our language?"<sup>210</sup>

Both as an institution and as individuals, Jehovah's Witnesses typically take an instrumentalist approach to the language. For the Watch Tower Society, the Chontal language is not valuable in and of itself, or as an emblem of Chontal identity. Rather, it makes proselytizing to monolinguals possible, and Chontal-dominant bilinguals are seen as more receptive in their mother tongue. However, many (although by no means all) of these monolinguals do not populate the present but live in both the past and in a post-apocalyptic future. Witnesses believe that during the millennium, the dead will be resurrected and given a final chance to accept Witness beliefs. There is widespread local concern that since many people died as Chontal monolinguals, the ability to proselytize to those individuals in the future depends on the existence of individuals with fairly high Chontal competence. I discuss these ideologies in much more detail in Chapter Eight.

Teachers' ideologies regarding the value of Chontal are complex and have changed over time. Past generations of teachers are blamed for language contraction, because students were punished for speaking in school. One woman told me that students were forced to stop speaking Chontal in the 1960s because teachers assumed that anything students said in Chontal was rude or offensive to the teachers.<sup>211</sup> Others told me quite simply that the reason the language was being lost was because the teachers used to tell children not to speak it, or tell parents not teach it. However, the current teachers are supportive of bilingualism and of the Chontal language, but they do not have sufficient training to know how to foster the language. Guests who had come to a wedding from elsewhere in the region told me that teachers in other communities in the region

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<sup>210</sup> "Somos chontales, por qué no vamos a hablar nuestro idioma?" (Fieldnotes, 10/23/2010).

<sup>211</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/24/2010.

have sponsored workshops and brought in good speakers to work with their classes.<sup>212</sup> In Zapotitlán, however, teachers' support is typically limited to assigning homework that requires students to ask their parents and grandparents about the language. In spite of this nebulous support, teachers told me in private conversation that they disliked what had happened to indigenous languages in Mexico, but they felt hesitant to try to teach Chontal for two reasons: they did not speak Chontal and did not feel qualified, and they were hesitant to grade their students' knowledge of a language whose disappearance was blamed on the educational system. As a result, teachers' influence on students' Chontal knowledge has probably been minimal.

#### **4.5.3.2 Who Speaks Spanish, and Who Speaks Chontal?**

For the Zapotitlán community, the prototypical Chontal speaker is an older person, especially an older woman, from the Chontal highlands. Certain communities are known to have more Chontal speakers than others, but age and to some extent gender seem to factor most immediately into calculations of who is likely to be a Chontal speaker. Anyone who is known to be from outside the region will be assumed to speak Spanish and not Chontal, as will many young people from this region. While there are a number of competent speakers in their 20s and 30s within Zapotitlán, many of these individuals have had exceptional experiences and grew up in a household with older adults than most of their peers. One of the best young speakers, Mariela, grew up in the same household as her mother's parents, who insisted on speaking to her in Chontal; another, Adiel, grew up with his grandmother and great-grandmother; a third was the youngest of ten children and thus her parents were in their late 40s when she was born. The community is small enough that most people are aware of these exceptional circumstances. Similarly, most people are aware of those few outsiders who have some Chontal competence and

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<sup>212</sup> Fieldnotes, 03/05/2011.

may speak to them in Chontal, but these individuals would never be assumed to be speakers if they were not known to the community.

#### 4.5.3.3 What is Chontal Like?

According to both ethnic Chontals and community members, the Chontal language has two key traits: it lacks grammatical regularity, and it is difficult to learn. Lucas and Marisa, the pioneer couple who believed that Chontal had no grammar, tended to misrecognize a lack of metalinguistic awareness as a lack of grammatical rules. They interpreted speakers' inability to explain the rules as evidence that there were no rules. As Marisa explained: "It's that, more than anything, that's what has been missing, that someone could know the grammatical rules well, in order to explain them, because then [Lucas] asks them, 'How do you say this?' No, well, like this. 'And in the future? And in the past?' And they can't explain (it)."<sup>213</sup> She paused between nearly every word of "someone could know the grammatical rules well," choosing each word deliberately. In the same conversation, Lucas suggested that Beto, the older Witness who had taught Chontal classes to a group of pioneers, had a hard time explaining grammar because of his lack of formal schooling:

Ah, (he) knows Chontal, but as he had very little schooling, well it does make it a little hard for him... the grammatical rules, that was what was, was a little hard for him, but he knows Chontal. He commands it well, (then) then in his way of speaking you, you see that, that he does command it and now in the grammar well it does make it difficult for him because, um, well he, he didn't go to school.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> "...es que más que nada eso es lo que ha faltado, que alguien (0.8) pueda (.) saber bien las (.) reglas (.) gramaticales, para que las pueda explicar, (Jena: pues sí) porque luego les pregunta, 'cómo se dice esto?', no, pues así, 'Y en futuro? Y en pasado?' Y no (lo) pueden explicar."

(Lucas and Marisa interview, 02/02/2011, 00:30:11-00:30:32)

I have included pauses in this transcript and not others because they were not characteristic of her speech but rather limited to one clause, providing a sense of particular deliberation.

<sup>214</sup> " Ah, (él) sabe chontal, pero como tiene muy poca escuela pues sí se le hace un poquito difícil ... las reglas gramaticales, eso fue lo que se le, se le dificultó un poquito, pero él sabe el chontal. Lo, lo domina, (luego), luego en su forma de hablar se, se ve que, que sí lo, lo domina (pues) y ya la gramática pues sí se le hace difícil porque eh, pues no, no fue a la escuela."

(Lucas and Marisa interview, 02/02/2011, 00:12:17-00:12:50)

Like Marisa, Lucas assumed that Beto's inability to explain the grammar meant that he found the grammar difficult.

Indeed, the difficulty of Chontal was a constant in the conversation of nearly all community members. Those who did not speak blamed the complexity of the language in part. Teachers did not attempt to learn the language because they, too, found it hard to learn, and they assumed their students' lack of Chontal was connected in some way to the language's difficulty. Community members were also quick to praise my halting Chontal and reassure me that the language was not easy to learn. However, acknowledgment of the difficulty of Chontal did not translate into tolerance for the "mixed up" nature of the modern language. That is, many of the the same people who reassured me that the language was hard to learn also criticized others' language, or their own, for being "mixed up" or otherwise deficient. Instead of acknowledging the effort made and weighing it against the difficulty, they simply rejected the output.

## **4.6 Ideologies about Text and Writing**

### **4.6.1 Literate Epistemology: Books as Sources of Knowledge**

Education, and particularly literacy, seem to be extremely well-suited as challengers to older and more traditional forms of authority (Collins and Blot 2003; Schieffelin 2000; 2001; 2007). Consider the example of the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, for whom books represent powerful instruments created by Whites for the purposes of control (Schieffelin 2001). Three waves of outsiders – the government in the 1950s, anthropologists in the 1960s, and missionaries in the 1970s – arrived in Bosavi with books that represented new forms and sources of knowledge, and challenged local ideas about truth. Before any of these groups arrived, elders were the most authoritative source of knowledge. Ultimately, books replaced them.

Papua New Guinea is representative of many colonial encounters, in which alphabetic literacy was introduced by missionaries intending to convert local populations (Collins and Blot 2003: ch. 6). Conversion requires suppressing traditional epistemologies that compete with Christian ways of knowing; since missionaries and ministers derive their authority not from their personhood but from their books, knowledge from books has to become the ultimate authority if Christianity is to take full hold. Yet such challenges to traditional authority do not simply arrive from the outside. Instead, they are the joint products of hegemonic interests from the outside and relatively disenfranchised insiders who see such a venture as their gateway to power (Schieffelin 2001: 123). The insiders' low positions within their communities give them an incentive to align with outside interests, although they rarely succeed in removing the balance of power from the outsiders in such collaborations.

By the time I arrived in Santa María Zapotitlán, such conflicts had long been resolved, and the written word was unambiguously authoritative. I cannot describe the pre-literate epistemology of Zapotitlán in any satisfactory way. Indeed, a significant number of Zapotitlán residents had become Jehovah's Witnesses by the late 1950s, suggesting that a fairly strong reliance on written text was already in effect by this time. In Zapotitlán, as Schieffelin describes for Bosavi, it is often the case that residents see themselves as part of the structure of authority that produces the books, although they rarely have any direct involvement with the production process.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> This is particularly true of Jehovah's Witnesses, an idea developed in my next few chapters.

#### 4.6.2 Authoritative Genres and Institutions

As Bourdieu (1977b: 652) points out, "a language is worth what those who speak it are worth, i.e. the power and authority in the economic and cultural power relations of the holders of the corresponding competence." In Zapotitlán, nearly all secular texts are linked directly either to the school system or to other governmental agencies – authoritative institutions with scope far beyond the community – and the texts draw their authority from these connections. Teachers and textbooks, for example, are mutually reinforcing sources of authoritative knowledge. While the people of Santa María Zapotitlán are aware of the existence of newspapers, novels, and other forms of pleasure reading, I never saw any of these in the community.<sup>216</sup> Instead, all books circulating in the community instantiate highly authoritative genres: textbooks, dictionaries, instruction manuals, academic works, and Bibles and other religious texts.

Community members cannot produce these types of texts; they have access neither to the linguistic competence nor the physical resources required. The closest they come to legitimate authorship of these texts is legitimate speakership; in certain contexts, community members are able to voice the printed word appropriately. However, community members do write and produce other types of texts. Most of the writing that people do is "taking notes", either from these physical text artifacts, or from lectures and workshops. These lectures and workshops are always performances of some kind of text, and the audience is more oriented to the text-artifact than to the performance on these occasions.

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<sup>216</sup> While Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that it is precisely novels and newspapers on which the consciousness of the nation is built, I would contend – and Anderson's discussion of what he terms the "last wave" of nationalisms suggests he would agree – that with the spread of compulsory education, textbooks are even more important. Simply put, they have a wider reach, because even the many members of a nation who do not read newspapers must still attend school, and absorb models of the citizen in every textbook.



### 4.6.3 Text as Literal Authority

One woman's behavior in a workshop in February 2011 exemplifies a view of text as both literal and authoritative. On this occasion, the woman leading the workshop failed to distinguish metacommentary from content, and she did not take up visual cues that the text contained an error. Both episodes illustrate a presumption of the text's authority and a concomitant discomfort with behavior that might be construed as interpreting or changing the text.

The *Oportunidades* 'Opportunities' program, which pays women a cash subsidy in exchange for children's school attendance and regular medical appointments, requires recipients to attend monthly workshops.<sup>217</sup> The program is locally administered by a committee of women, and at the time of my fieldwork, these women led the workshops, using pamphlets received from the government. In theory, these women are trained in how to present the material, but they rarely receive any instructions beyond those contained in the pamphlet itself. Everyone who attends these meetings is supposed to bring notebooks and take notes, although it is unclear whether this is a local requirement or one instituted by the larger government agency. This obligation is itself indicative of the literate epistemology that treats the text as the ultimate authority: leaders of meetings often require participants to write every single word and repeat it back. Furthermore, leaders rely on a question-and-answer format that ensures that every item of information is repeated multiple times.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Other organizations, including the coffee-growers' cooperative and all municipal entities, hold similar workshops. As these take place far from town and are attended exclusively by men, I was unable to attend them, but I saw many of the textual materials used in these events. These materials are somewhat more sophisticated in presentation, and typically address procedural issues and government bureaucracy. The *Oportunidades* workshops, however, are typical of workshops held by *salir adelante* (Messing 2007) aid organizations that function in rural communities.

<sup>218</sup> This catechistic presentation of information resembles the way articles are studied in Jehovah's Witness meetings even more than school material. Many of the women who administer this program are Jehovah's Witnesses; it is impossible to determine conclusively if familiarity with this question-and-answer format in a religious setting has influenced the presentation of information in these workshops. See Chapter Seven for a discussion of the role that performance of written text plays in religious meetings.

The emphasis on repetition and on copying the text verbatim is consistent with the *Oportunidades* organization's orientation to Spanish-language schooling. As in Mexican primary schools, rote learning and the performance of writing and note-taking are valued over critical thinking or understanding. Chontal is sometimes mobilized in these workshops to clarify points that are not well understood. However, leaders emphasize writing over discussion, sometimes at the expense of comprehension.<sup>219</sup>

Lorena, one of the *Oportunidades* committee members, took a particularly literal approach in the meetings that she led. At 59, she was one of the older and less-educated members of the committee, and her meetings lasted much longer than those directed by other women. Her orientation to the literal authority of the text meant that she did not summarize or skip parts of the pamphlet, even when they were not relevant to group members.<sup>220</sup>

When Lorena led meetings, she would fail to distinguish metacommentary from content. At least one meeting, she made all of the assembled women copy word-for-word not only the content they were meant to learn but also the instructions intended for the meeting facilitator, and repeat it back to her. Among other such texts, she required the attendees to write the following:

1) Support your companions by communicating the following information: those who turned in their documents by June 20th and received incomplete or no support should present themselves immediately at the nearest *Oportunidades* office.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> One group contained almost exclusively older women, who are not accustomed to writing. Several of them told me that having to write everything down made it harder for them to assimilate the information.

<sup>220</sup> For example, her group consisted mainly of older women who were grandmothers – rather than parents – of school-aged children, with a few young mothers in the group. No woman in the group had a child currently enrolled in high school, and yet she doggedly went over procedures for parents of high-school students to receive their aid.

<sup>221</sup> "Apoya a tus compañeras comunicando la siguiente información – quienes entregaron sus documentos antes del 20 de junio y recibieron el apoyo incompleto o no lo recibieron, deben acudir inmediatamente a la oficina de Oportunidades más cercana." (This text, and the one that follows, comes from my notes rather than from the original pamphlet, so the punctuation may differ from the original.)

2) Support us with a review of addiction prevention: asking your companions how they have applied what they've learned and reviewing the suggestions to prevent your children from consuming alcohol and drugs.<sup>222</sup>

Had she followed the instructions and not understood them as further content to be copied and assimilated by all the women, the workshop would have taken much less time.

At the same meeting, one page of the pamphlet had been photocopied in haste, and a word along the bottom edge of the page was cut off. What should have read *apoyar* 'support' read, instead, *apovar*, which has no meaning in Spanish. Lorena was confused by this word, and the group discussed it for more than five minutes. The whole group, and Lorena in particular, were inclined to assume it was simply a word they didn't know; they pointed out explicitly that the author of the pamphlet was better educated than they were. Eventually, they turned to me for an opinion, presumably as the most educated person in attendance,<sup>223</sup> and I suggested – without having seen the pamphlet – that it was probably an error, and should read *apoyar*, based on the context. They were skeptical of this explanation, and ultimately, Lorena asked me to come up to the front and explain this segment. When I looked at the pamphlet, it was abundantly clear that the page had been aligned badly when it was copied.

Both incidents illustrate Lorena's subordination to the authority of the text. Even where the text explicitly suggested that she should paraphrase, she shared the original with the group rather than relying on her own voice. Similarly, she was so uncertain about her own grasp of formal Spanish, and so certain of the text's authority, that she assumed she must not know a word, rather than considering the possibility of an error in the text.

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<sup>222</sup> "Apóyanos con un repaso de tema prevención de las adicciones: preguntando a tus compañeras como han aplicado lo aprendido y repasando las sugerencias para prevenir el consumo de alcohol y drogas con sus hijos."

<sup>223</sup> Lorena did not make it explicit why she called on me, but I assume from repeated references to the education of the writer that my education may have had something to do with it. Although I was far from the most competent Spanish speaker in the group, I may well have been the most experienced at reading and writing in Spanish.

## **4.7 Ideologies about Chontal-Language Texts and Expertise**

### **4.7.1 Local Initiatives, Authority, and Iconicity**

Chontal speakers from several Highland communities have published pamphlets containing some literacy materials, including an orthography that the local government is promoting (Mendoza Flores 1993; Zárate Pérez 2004; 2009). These materials are cheaply produced paper booklets consisting of several folded sheets that are stapled together. Ramiro Zárate Pérez, a local activist, is well-known in Zapotitlán, and those community members who write in Chontal use his orthography.

Zárate's pamphlets were greeted with both skepticism and interest in Zapotitlán. Some community members suggested that, although he kept receiving government money, he was recycling the same pamphlet year after year. Not only Zapotitlán men but also staff members at the governmental agency that funded Zárate's work suggested that he was not a particularly competent speaker. They might cite his young age or his occasionally halting speech style, or simply make these claims in an unsubstantiated fashion. Yet all of these individuals acknowledged that the workshops he ran, which focused on developing (or "discovering") neologisms, were extremely useful and enjoyable.

Zárate himself has some insecurity about his knowledge of Chontal, as do other speakers who are recognized as linguistic experts. Zárate attended the inauguration of the Zapotitlán community museum, and while he gave a speech in Chontal, he told me and my colleagues beforehand that he was nervous about being understood, as there is wide dialectal variation in the Highland region. He also said that he often consults with his father and other elders because there are many words he is not sure how to pronounce. Another expert speaker, Don Jacinto, ne of my primary consultants in Zapotitlán and a generation older than Zárate, often spoke of missing his father for precisely this reason.

A second key feature of Chontal linguistic activism is a great interest in emphasizing the differences between Chontal and Spanish. Zárate's orthography is Spanish-based where possible, but the phonemes not found in Spanish are represented in a variety of ways. The compound letter *jl* usually represents a voiceless lateral fricative (written ɬ in IPA), although it sometimes represents a lateral affricate [tɬ], which is also written *tl*. The compound letters *jm* and *jn* represent glottalized nasals, and *ju* represents a voiceless labiodental fricative (IPA ɸ). Meanwhile, one phoneme that is found in Spanish as well as Chontal, the bilabial glide, is represented with the letter *w*, which is almost never used in Spanish orthography, where this sound is most typically written *hu*. Similarly, *sh* is a voiceless alveopalatal fricative (IPA ɕ), typically represented in Spanish by *x* (Zárate Pérez 2004; 2009).

The Chontal name of the community museum – *Ewespika Fojlia Jlumshajma Kijlijma Lajlpijlya Juala Witu* – was iconic in precisely this fashion. This name neither looks nor sounds as if it could be Spanish, as nearly every word contains both phonemes and graphemes that are unique to Chontal. Like all Mesoamerican languages, Chontal has borrowed a significant number of vocabulary items from Spanish. The sign's iconicity represents the community's commitment to reverse the trend of borrowing wherever possible in favor of a new Chontal vocabulary.

#### **4.7.2 Outside Initiatives: The Chontal-English-Spanish Dictionary**

The secular Chontal-language text in widest circulation in Zapotitlán is Paul and Shirley Turner's (1971) dictionary. A number of households have copies and refer to them regularly. As books go, it lacks certain material hallmarks of authority: its cover is matte orange cardboard and contains only text, in contrast with the glossy full-color covers of many other textual materials in local distribution, particularly schoolbooks and Watch Tower Society materials. This dictionary contains grammatical and orthographic errors in both Spanish and English, which makes it feel

less authoritative still. The font of Turner and Turner's dictionary looks as if it were typewritten, and what illustrations this book contains are rough black-and-white line drawings. This dictionary was impressive at the time of publication, but readers in the current historical moment are unlikely to take that historical context into account. Currently, it represents a middle ground between the highly amateurish pamphlets produced locally and the glossily professional materials published by the Mexican government and the Watch Tower Society.

The dictionary is trilingual, which makes it unwieldy to use: most information is provided in only one of the three languages. The front matter – including the introduction, guide to using the dictionary, and pronunciation key – is exclusively in English, and the appendices vary: a grammatical sketch is available exclusively in English while a historical sketch is provided in both English and Spanish. The metalinguistic information that would make the dictionary more useful for purposes of language maintenance and revitalization (Hinton and Weigel 2002) is simply not provided in a language that community members can read or understand. However, dictionary entries are trilingual, with Chontal language headwords, and there is a Spanish-Chontal index (but no corresponding English-Chontal index.)

Turner and Turner include significant detail within each entry (see Frawley et al. 2002). Each entry contains a Chontal language headword, a phonetic transcription, Spanish and English glosses, a sample Chontal sentence using a form of this word and Spanish and English translations, as well as an abbreviation indicating the part of speech and the verb or noun class (Turner and Turner 1971: xiv-xvi). Consider the following entries as examples:

laŋxi (láf.ši) la medicina líquida [sic]; la canela; the [sic] liquid medicine; the [sic] cinnamon wood. (NOTE: mescal is also called medicine). Aymigwa mixnaya xoŋga laŋxi porque dihi aggwa ligo. No quiere tomar más medicina porque le hace amarga la boca. He doesn't want to drink more medicine because it makes his mouth bitter. See laŋxi (medicine [sic] solida [sic]; dry medicine). s inan IVa/ IIIa. laŋxi. [Turner and Turner 1971: 177]

dibanewo (di.bA.nÉ.wo) 1. quedarse: se quedará; he will stay, he will remain behind. Pues galxans janih dihua lane umuyda jouba, iximba galrancho dibaha, pues piya dibanewo. Si un hombre está caminando y ya es tarde, y ve que hay un rancho, pues se quedará allá. If a man is walking on the path and it is late, and he sees a ranch, he will stay there. 2. calmarse: se calmará (el dolor); it (the pain) will ease. Cuando galxans ixcayba lihmis dudaha edejboxih, ahorita dibanewo galdilga. Cuando el pié del hombre se corta, un poquito no más, en un ratito se calmará el dolor. When a man's foot is cut, (if) he cut himself slightly, the pain will cease in a little while. dibanenawo limu!a la menopausia; el [sic] cesación de la menstruación; the [sic] menopause, cessation of menstrual periods. dibanq'uehma se quedará por lo pronto; posará; le ayudará en el mancamiento; he will stay just a little while; he will aid (the woman) in giving birth, the act of midwifery. dimanegu vs pl. vs sg I. albanenamma. [Turner and Turner 1971: 62]

The citation form for nouns is the singular form. Verbs, on the other hand, have neither an infinitive nor any non-prefixed forms, and thus all verbs are listed in the "third person singular indicative non-movational remote aspect form" (Turner and Turner 1971: xiii; cf. Munro 2002).

The entry for *dibanewo* also illustrates that idiomatic expressions are listed as subentries.

However, the morphology that connects these various forms is not explained here, and the connection between related forms may be opaque even to speakers. Meanwhile, the Spanish-Chontal entries are quite brief:

medicina (f)

\_\_\_ líquida lafxi.

\_\_\_ solida [sic] lafxi.

\_\_\_ venenosa limmaya gafxi.

[Turner and Turner 1971: 291]

quedarse: se quedará (vr)

dibanewo.

\_\_\_ adentro ditsuc'ayhma.

\_\_\_ por lo pronto dibanq'uehma.

\_\_\_ suspensa la cabza, sin hablar denaguhma lajuac.

no queda bien ibayah.

queda bien edejmayda.

[Turner and Turner 1971: 304]

The brevity of this set of entries suggests that the dictionary was designed to be used primarily by individuals who know more Spanish than Chontal.

The language committee meetings that were held at the beginning of my time in Zapotitlán always focused on the dictionary as a physical object. Someone always placed the museum's copy where it would be visible, and it was referred to frequently. Committee members sometimes challenged the dictionary's usefulness or authority because it was based on data collected in San Matías. For example, the dictionary often contains voiced consonants where Zapotitlán speakers have voiceless ones, and committee members both mocked this pronunciation and systematically read these consonants as voiceless.<sup>224</sup> They also used the dictionary to challenge each other, asking for specific words and checking answers against the book. This type of shibboleth testing was particularly common among a few men with strong purist attitudes, but all would join in mocking the dictionary at times, especially where it included transparent Spanish loans.

The dictionary had the potential to be useful to the committee members, as when they used it to look up words they had forgotten. It was physically at the center of all meetings, typically passed from hand to hand, yet criticism and dismissal were more frequent than appreciation. Even so, most of the people in Zapotitlán encouraged me to use it in my studies, or even questioned the value of further linguistic study of Chontal after its publication.

The range of reactions to this text demonstrates the tensions of textual authority. On the one hand, it was a published book, and therefore a frequent object of reference. However, its author was not a Chontal speaker, and the Chontal it contained was not local to Zapotitlán.

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<sup>224</sup> Indeed, Turner and Turner (1971: xii) observe: "In the matter of the fluctuation of voiced and voiceless stops, we arbitrarily chose to represent the sound with a voiced symbol (b, d, g) but used the voiceless symbols (p, t, c/qu) whenever there was very little or no fluctuation to voiced sounds." In Santa María Zapotitlán, these consonants are only rarely voiced, and appear not to contrast.



Recall Zárate's concern about how dialect differences would affect the reception of his speech; this concern was not spurious, for dialect differences can be taken up precisely as a challenge to authority.

#### 4.7.3 "There used to exist a book, Chontal, legitimate Chontal"<sup>225</sup>

In keeping with local subordination to textual authority, particularly to older texts, many people thought that my study would benefit from seeking out a mythologized text, the "book in the original Chontal." Older individuals would often mention that when they were younger, they had seen a book which they described as containing *chontal legítimo* 'legitimate Chontal' or *el mero chontal* 'real Chontal.' This term refers to an idealized, ideologized variety of Chontal spoken in the past, and is used much like the term *legítimo mexicano*, which is what speakers call a variety of Mexicano (the local name for an indigenous language also known as Nahuatl) that they imagine was spoken in the past (Hill and Hill 1986; Messing 2009).

The book containing this variety of Chontal, my consultants suggested, would be helpful to my study. Wenceslao, a man in his 80s, told me about a man from San Lorenzo who came to Zapotitlán in the 1960s with a "book in the original Chontal, the real legitimate Chontal."<sup>226</sup> This book was like a dictionary, Wenceslao told me, but when I asked him if it had stories, he agreed that it contained many stories as well. Similarly, José, an elder of one of the Jehovah's Witness conversations, informed me more than once that people in San Lorenzo used to have a book from the ancestors with "legitimate Chontal."<sup>227</sup> If the people of Zapotitlán could get a copy of this book, he suggested, they would be able to translate with ease.

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<sup>225</sup> "Mas antes existía un libro, chontal, chontal legítimo" (José interview, 12/11/2010, 00:25:53-00:25:57)

<sup>226</sup> "el libro de chontal original, el mero legítimo chontal" (fieldnotes, 2/11/2011)

<sup>227</sup> "legítimo chontal" (fieldnotes, 6/24/2011)

On other occasions,<sup>228</sup> members of the town government and of the language committee also referred to such a book. I printed copies of selections from Francisco Belmar's *Estudio de el Chontal* (1900), which was hailed as this very book, and I brought these copies to the members of the language committee. The copies came from a digital version of the original text, and while the font and layout suggested an older book, I was only able to bind these with clear plastic covers and a plastic spiral binding. As we flipped through the pages, Daniel, a committee member who is also an elder of one of the Jehovah's Witness congregations, referred to this text as "the original Chontal that was spoken before."<sup>229</sup> Rolando, the committee's chair, agreed heartily that this was "the real Chontal, the book that used to exist."<sup>230</sup>

In spite of this book's mythical standing, the actual book was greeted with some skepticism. Many recognized the spelling as indicative of a dialect from elsewhere in the region, and the language committee wanted to "update" or "correct" the text rather than taking it at face value. Indeed, I wrote a cover sheet for this text explaining: (1) that the data it was based on was from elsewhere in the region, (2) that the book was more than a hundred years old and that languages change over time, and (3) that the book was not written by a native Chontal speaker. This cover sheet was intended to prevent community members from having doubts about their own Chontal after examining the book, but it seems to have been unnecessary: prior community claims that the book contained "the real Chontal" and that the community's own Chontal was deficient did not keep Chontal speakers from critiquing its contents.

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<sup>228</sup> Fieldnotes, 1/20/2011; 1/26/2011; 4/13/2011.

<sup>229</sup> "el chontal original que se hablaba más antes" (fieldnotes, 4/10/2011)

<sup>230</sup> "el mero chontal, el libro que hubo antes" (fieldnotes, 4/10/2011)

## 4.8 Patterns Across Ideologies

Chontal-language texts and events in particular demonstrate three seemingly contradictory ways of relating to the Chontal language that are widespread in Zapotitlán: (1) *Standardism*, or the idea that there exists a canonical Chontal and a single correct way to say things (cf. Silverstein 1996b), which can be discovered by systematic inquiry; (2) *linguistic insecurity*, or a fear on the part of the members of the Zapotitlán community that they are no longer perfectly competent speakers; and (3) *stewardship* (see Loether 2009), an ideology suggesting that this community, and particularly its older men, are responsible for the Chontal language and thus equipped to make challenges to non-canonical Chontal. These approaches are not disconnected; rather, they inform and strengthen each other.

Standardism is most visibly on display in the process of making the museum sign and in discussions of the mythical Belmar text. The discourse surrounding these texts suggested that there is – or at least used to be – a correct, legitimate, or original Chontal (cf. Hill and Hill 1980; 1986). Furthermore, this Chontal is discoverable, and participants in Chontal language workshops described the process of neologism creation as discovering what words really mean. This approach allowed the museum committee to look up the word *museo* (museum) in a Spanish dictionary, determine that the essence of *museo* is that it is a place where things are kept, and find a Chontal equivalent.

Even as Chontal speakers felt strongly that there was a correct way of saying things, they were not always certain of their own ability to command these correct forms. Their linguistic insecurity was evident at the museum opening: even Zárate, a locally recognized authority, acknowledged that he does not always trust his own Chontal judgments. Furthermore, many of the people who question Zárate's Chontal also concede his expertise relative to their own ability

and comfort. Speakers like Don Jacinto, in their late 70s, preferred to confer with their peers and elders instead of relying on their own instincts; this insecurity was one reason that a half-dozen men participated actively in the translation of the museum sign.

The community's feeling of responsibility for Chontal may actually be a consequence of these two ideologies. If there exists one correct Chontal, and if current speakers are less skilled than past generations, then current speakers must take particular precautions to avoid further contributing to its corruption or disappearance. Such concerns may well explain the community's skepticism – to the point of proposing corrections – towards both Turner's dictionary and Belmar's grammar. After all, the permanence of written language means that perceived errors have bigger consequences. If this community is responsible for the future vitality of Chontal, they have an investment in making sure that all available written materials contain the monolithic correct Chontal that they believe exists.

It is worth noting that the Zapotitlán community's approach towards Chontal has parallels in academic views of indigenous languages. Mary Bucholtz (2003) describes four ideologies of authenticity that appear repeatedly in academic work: scholars valorize the most isolated language varieties, as well as the most mundane; we suggest that interaction with linguists can never be fully authentic; and we view ourselves as the arbiters of authenticity. This last ideology, the received wisdom of our academic traditions, suggests that the "real speakers" are "always just receding on the historical horizon" (Collins 1998: 264), always just out of reach. Academics use their authority to "locate the real language prior to or away from current speakers, and locate an 'adequate description' elsewhere than in the one currently available, a product of local language activists" (Collins 1998: 265; see also Errington 2003; Muehlmann 2008). However current speakers speak is not seen as good enough.

The reception of the Belmar book best illustrates this receding horizon. When no copies of the book were available, it attained a mythical status and became an icon of "correct" Chontal. Yet speakers became concerned with updating and correcting the book once physical copies were available. The physical book was no longer an example to be held up; instead, it was flawed, as speakers see themselves to be.

#### **4.9 Language as Concrete, Discrete, and Absolute**

These divergent ideologies paint a consistent picture of what language is, which informs community relationships to languages, writing, and written texts. For this community, language is concrete, discrete, and absolute. By *concrete*, I mean that speakers orient to the most tangible elements of a language, the "sounds and nouns" (Wertheim 2003b) rather than the grammatical patterns or more abstract elements. By *discrete*, I mean that speakers value and enforce a separation between languages, and judge "mixed up" language as inferior to "pure" or "real" or "old" language. By *absolute*, I mean that community members believe that language exists apart from speakers and the social world (cf. Smalley 1991: 89-91), and that words can be judged as "correct" or "incorrect," "good" or "bad" independently of contexts and use. In short, this community's ideologies *objectify* language.

The objectification of language has consequences for the communities that orient to their particular language(s). As Maurer (2003) observes, the discourse of language rights presupposes an objectified view of language. However, this objectification can also be mobilized against speakers. If language is the key emblem of group identity, then eliminating the language is the simplest way to eliminate the group (Maurer 2003: 776; see also Whiteley 2003). Such objectified language can also be implicated in other types of rights or identity claims.

The emphasis placed on writing for learning illustrates another facet of this linguistic objectification. Writing is a physical objectification of language, the production of a tangible linguistic object; in some cases such objects may even function as talismans (Coleman 1996: 112). Furthermore, because one can return repeatedly to written texts, they can be judged more easily along an axis of "correctness" than spoken text. Community members' encouragement of "correct" writing, then, reflects a preoccupation with an objectified Chontal (cf. Reagan 2004). An emphasis on any given language as an object, a single correct thing (see Silverstein 1996b), disregards the fact that languages are both multiple and constantly undergoing change and undervalues all ways of speaking that are not frozen. Just as writing freezes an interactional moment, so do objectifying ideologies ossify language as a thing rather than a process, "a noun rather than a verb" (Maurer 2003: 776).

## Five

# The "Pure Language" Community

Jehovah's Witnesses consider themselves a global community not only because of the mediation of text but also because of a single shared language, known as the "pure language" or the "theocratic language."<sup>231</sup> The notion of a pure language recurs both in Watch Tower Society publications and in spontaneous Witness explanations of what unites them, illustrating the continuity between institutional and individual ways of speaking. As Elliott (1993) writes, "an important means by which [Jehovah's Witnesses] constitute themselves and maintain symbolic distance from 'the World' and 'Christendom' is through the cultivation and deployment of a communal dialect." Similarly, Holden (2002: 97) observes that "language, visual imagery and metaphor...enable the Society to present itself as an authentic community."

More generally, Harding (2000: 34) suggests that conversion is always "a process of acquiring a specific religious language or dialect." To consider the pure language a dialect, however, is to ignore the fact that its seven and a half million speakers cannot all understand one another, for the pure language is spoken in 595 human languages. In fact, the pure language overcomes three dimensions of difference: denotational, cognitive, and affective.

What is this pure language, then? The pure language is not, of course, a language variety in the anthropological or linguistic use of the term. As Bauman and Briggs (2003: 5) observe: "it

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<sup>231</sup> Anti-Witness activist David A. Reed (2010), himself a former Witness, provides the following definitions: **Pure language:** "Biblical truth, as defined by the beliefs, practices and lifestyle of Jehovah's Witnesses. 'Why should you be concerned about speaking the pure language? For one thing, because your life depends upon learning and speaking it.' (The *Watchtower* 5/1/1991, p. 13) This term is taken from Zephaniah 3:9, 'For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent.' (KJV) Compare *theocratic language*."

**Theocratic language:** "The unique vocabulary and word usage peculiar to Jehovah's Witnesses, viewed positively from their standpoint as a superior language supplied by God and required of those who truly serve him. (Yes, JW's recognize that they speak J.W.ese, but they call it their theocratic language.) Compare *pure language*."

is not the ontological status of supposedly 'pure' forms that interests us here, but rather the epistemological *work* of purification." In fact, the pure language represents an ongoing process of purification; it is what I call a *transidiomatic authoritative discourse*. A *discourse* refers to a coherent and systematic way of talking about things that constrains what can be said about them. That is, a discourse is fundamentally social, yet relies on the misrecognition and even erasure of the social nature of language in order to naturalize the constraints it places.<sup>232</sup> Its *authoritative* nature further constrains what can be said (see Bakhtin 1981).

By *transidiomatic* (Jacquemet 2005), I mean that this particular discourse can be expressed in any human language variety, and that it even transcends human languages. Such a discourse must be based on referentialism (Silverstein 1979; see also Bauman and Briggs 2003), an ideology that assumes that language is fundamentally referential and brackets its social and indexical functions. That is, the boundaries of the pure language are denotational rather than structural. These boundaries are furthermore assumed to be commensurable across all human languages, in spite of Witness ideologies that languages also differ cognitively and affectively.

Witnesses consider themselves a global community in the Andersonian model, a community that is formed through parallelism – or simultaneity, in this case – of reading practices. Such a community is "imaginable largely through the medium of a sacred language and written script" (Anderson 2006: 13). Witnesses, in short, see their community as a result of reading the same thing at the same time. Claiming an ontological reality for this transidiomatic pure language allows Witnesses to bracket the question of what, precisely, they mean by "the same thing."

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<sup>232</sup> Compare Bauman and Briggs (2003: 7), who characterize John Locke's view of *discourse* – here a mass noun rather than a countable one – as a language-society hybrid which "transformed words into sources of misunderstanding and vehicles for undermining the rationality and independence of thought" and was "the major source of ... religious factionalism."



## 5.1 The Pure Language as Language

### 5.1.1 From Pure Language to Human Languages at Babel, and Back Again

A 2008 *Watchtower* article<sup>233</sup> argues that Jehovah's Witnesses are attaining a sort of linguistic convergence. The story of the tower of Babel narrates the historical diversification of language, and the pure language reverses this divergence. Specifically, Witness texts mention three dimensions of linguistic divergence: referential or denotational, cognitive, and affective. Referential or denotational differences are easily overcome through translation, but the other two dimensions of difference call translation into doubt. However, the cognitive dimension is never made an issue of concern. Meanwhile, instead of questioning the validity of translation, the affective dimension actually provides a warrant for it:<sup>234</sup> one's mother tongue has an emotional value that simply cannot be matched by other languages.

Witnesses connect the Babel story to both denotational and cognitive differences. At the tower of Babel, Jehovah took away humans' ability to communicate universally because they began to glorify themselves instead of him. In fact, Witnesses see the Babel story as the explanation for not only linguistic diversity but also linguistic relativity:

Today, literally thousands of languages – some say over 6,800 – are spoken in the world. Each of these languages requires different thought patterns. It appears, then, that when Jehovah God confused the speech of those rebels, he blotted out all memory of their previous common language. He not only introduced into their minds new vocabularies but also changed their thought patterns and produced new grammars.<sup>235</sup>

Jehovah, in this view, is directly responsible for cognitive differences across speakers of different languages. Furthermore, these differences are represented in neo-Whorfian terms: it is

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<sup>233</sup> Given Witness ideologies and practices that paint translation as fully commensurable (see Chapter Six), I use the Witnesses' own English version of materials throughout this dissertation, rather than translating the Spanish myself. Where relevant, substantive differences in the two versions are discussed.

<sup>234</sup> As opposed to language teaching.

<sup>235</sup> "Are You Speaking the 'Pure Language' Fluently?" *The Watchtower*, 8/15/2008, pp.21-25.

"thought patterns" that differ across speakers of different languages, and affect is not discussed. Indeed, the lack of discussion of emotionality is one of the ways in which it is naturalized.

Speaking the pure language, meanwhile, reverses the events of Babel in two senses: it glorifies Jehovah rather than humanity, and it transcends human languages (see section 5.1.3):

The pure language is the truth about Jehovah God and his purposes as found in his Word, the Bible. That "language" includes a correct understanding of the truth about God's Kingdom and how it will sanctify Jehovah's name, vindicate his sovereignty, and bring eternal blessings to faithful mankind. What results from this change of language? We are told that people will "call upon the name of Jehovah" and will "serve him shoulder to shoulder." Unlike the events of Babel, this change to the pure language has resulted in praise to Jehovah's name and unity for his people.<sup>236</sup>

Indeed, the change to the pure language is framed explicitly in opposition to the story of Babel.

The last paragraph of the article makes this same point: "How grateful we are that no matter what language we normally speak, we are all united in speaking the pure language of Bible truth! In a way, this is a reversal of what happened at Babel." Furthermore, the quotation marks around the word "language" suggest an awareness that this phenomenon is something *other* than a language.

A distinction made when Witnesses talk about the pure language in Spanish helps to clarify.

### **5.1.2 "It's not an *idioma* [human language], it's a symbolic *lenguaje* [system of communication]"**

The English word "language" encompasses two very different Spanish terms: *idioma* and *lenguaje*. An *idioma* is a language in the sense of a particular set of denotational rules (cf. Silverstein 1998a), and typically a Standard language at that (in the sense of Silverstein 1996b). English, Spanish, Japanese, and French are all prototypical *idiomas*.<sup>237</sup> The term *lenguaje*,

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<sup>236</sup> "Are You Speaking the 'Pure Language' Fluently?" *The Watchtower*, 8/15/2008, pp.21-25.

<sup>237</sup> Highland Chontal would be, to many Mexicans, a fuzzier member of this category. Instead, Chontal might be described either as a *lengua* 'tongue', a near-synonym of *idioma*, or as a *dialecto* 'dialect', a term used very commonly among even educated Mexicans to refer to any non-Spanish indigenous language spoken in Mexico. While this term often implies a judgment of inferiority, many speakers are also unaware of its pejorative usage.

meanwhile, is more abstract and refers to any system of communication: body language, sign languages, and programming languages are all *lenguajes*, as are the languages of flowers and fans. Registers of particular *idiomas* are also *lenguajes*: academic language, vulgar language, flowery language. *Lenguaje* is also the only way to refer to the general human faculty of language. However, a particular *idioma* is never a *lenguaje*.

In an interview, Pedro, the Circuit Overseer, articulated a clear contrast between *idioma* and *lenguaje*. The pure language (*lenguaje pura*) is explicitly differentiated from human languages, or *idiomas*:

In fact, a prophecy from the Bible, in Zephaniah, the prophecy of Zephaniah says that there would arrive a moment in which all the peoples, the nations, would speak a single language [*lenguaje*]. It's about the pure language [*lenguaje*] of the truth. It's not a language [*idioma*], no? It's a, a symbolic system of communication [*lenguaje simbólico*], let's put it that way, but that language [*lenguaje*] is the Biblical truth.<sup>238</sup>

If the pure language is not a language, then what is it? The contrast between *lenguaje* and *idioma* points to a helpful conception: the pure language is a discourse, a coherent and systematic way of talking about things that constrains what can be said about them. The pure language is defined not structurally, as a grammatical system, but denotationally, as a set of meanings that correspond to Biblical truth.

### 5.1.3 Authoritative Discourse

What is truth, if not authoritative? Pedro defines the pure language as Biblical truth, and the single brief *Watchtower* article explicitly equates the pure language with truth not once or

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<sup>238</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:52:27-00:52:51:

"De hecho, una profecía de la Biblia, en Sofonías, la profecía de Sofonías dice (1.0) que:: llegaría el momento en que todos los pueblos, las naciones, habla- hablarían un mismo lenguaje. Se trata del lenguaje puro de la verdad==No es un idioma, no? Es una, un lenguaje simbólico, digámoslo así, pero ese lenguaje es la verdad bíblica."

twice, but nine separate times. Bakhtin (1981: 342) writes that the "authoritative word" is always grounded in the past:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word ... is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal. It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact.

In other words, authoritative language always echoes earlier language whose authority is not open to debate in the present. The Witnesses specifically locate the pure language in a prior discourse, a text that is – for believers – ultimately authoritative: the Bible. The Bible is imbued with "a presumption of authority, a claim to absolute language" (Bakhtin 1981: xxxiii). That is, one cannot logically arrive at the Bible's authority; rather, authority is inherent in the text.

A key element of authority is the impossibility of alternative understandings. Bakhtin (1981: 343) observes that "authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it." The *Watchtower* article treats the pure language in precisely this way, informing readers: "That 'language' includes a correct understanding of the truth about God's Kingdom..." If such a thing as a "correct understanding" exists, all other interpretations must be invalid. Furthermore, the Watch Tower Society does not allow believers to question its interpretations: anyone who does not fully accept Watch Tower theology cannot claim identity as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. This, too, is what I mean by *authoritative*: the pure language is strictly demarcated, black and white.

#### 5.1.4 The Pure Language as Transidiomatic

For Witnesses, the Bible's – and by extension the pure language's – authority comes from its content, from a sense that its meaning is absolute, rather than from an attachment to its particular form. Because the pure language is viewed as solely denotational, with no structural component, it can be expressed in any human language. In fact, it transcends particular languages (in the sense of *idiomas*); it is *transidiomatic*.

The term *transidiomatic* emphasizes the structural indeterminacy of this Witness discourse. To describe communication that takes place across multiple languages, Jacquemet (2005: 264-5) introduces the concept of *transidiomatic practices*, or "the communicative practices of transnational groups that interact using different languages and communicative codes simultaneously present in a range of communicative channels, both local and distant." Jacquemet is chiefly concerned with innovation and hybridity, while the Witnesses seek a spiritual standardization that can be calqued across different language varieties. Yet there is a kinship between these two apparently divergent multilingual modes:

Most contemporary linguistic studies are still under the influence of the Babel myth: of the ideological desire to maintain a linguistic boundaries, allocate people to their respective territories, connect languages with the emergence of the sense of national identity. In this essay, as instructed by Barthes, I have taken the side of Pentecost: of the xenoglossic need to share and communicate to all.  
[Jacquemet 2005: 273]

After all this is precisely the goal of the Watch Tower Society's standardizing regime: to share and communicate their truth worldwide. It is in this sense that the pure language is transidiomatic: it transcends language boundaries, ethnic and territorial boundaries, and even spatiotemporal distance.

**Figure 5.1:** Witness and non-Witness views of linguistic boundaries. Witnesses see their community as containing those who speak the pure language – that is, their version of Biblical truth. In this view, the horizontal division is more important than the vertical ones. Within any human language (Spanish, Chontal, Mandarin, etc.), Witnesses are able to mark these distinctions through the use of Watch Tower-specific jargon.

		<b>"pure language"</b>	
		<b>pure language</b>	<b>other language</b>
<b>human languages</b>	<b>Spanish</b>	pure language in Spanish	all other Spanish
	<b>Chontal</b>	pure language in Chontal	all other Chontal
	<b>Mandarin</b>	pure language in Mandarin	all other Mandarin

## 5.2 The Pure Language as Pure: Structural, Denotational, and Social Purism

The pure language is denotationally rather than structurally bound, and so is the purism that maintains it by denying any efforts at innovation (Douglas 1996[1966]: 162-3). In Chapter Four, I described a type of structural purism seen in ideologies that value older linguistic forms and a strict boundary between Chontal and Spanish; these same ideologies denigrate the syncretic language use that characterizes contemporary Chontal. Here I contrast it with a type of purism that is unconcerned with boundaries between languages and, in fact, operates across hundreds of languages at once.

All forms of purism are fundamentally social, by which I mean that they always involve the boundaries that separate self from other (Annamalai 1989). Structural linguistic purism focuses specifically on ethnolinguistic boundaries, and reifies both language and identity. It is connected to "essentializing discourses in which cultural identity is exclusively identified with language as a bounded, formal code" (Jaffe 2007: 63). Simply put, purist projects assume that

maintaining the separation between two varieties automatically differentiates their speakers.<sup>239</sup>

When these varieties coincide with particular named languages, purism delineates these two ethnolinguistic identities.

Furthermore, purism is always selective. Speakers of a language typically orient towards purging elements from another language when they feel the group who speaks this second language represents a threat (see papers in Duchêne and Heller 2007). In particular, speakers of endangered languages more commonly express purist sentiments regarding loans from the dominant language than loans from languages of similar status. For example, speakers of Mexican indigenous languages are much more concerned with words of Spanish origin than with loans from neighboring indigenous groups.

Jehovah's Witnesses are also preoccupied with delimiting group membership, but their concern is with the boundary between Witnesses and non-Witnesses to the exclusion of ethnic and national boundaries. According to Circuit Overseer Pedro, Jehovah's Witnesses are:

a globally unified community, without attention to linguistic, national, racial, or any other type of barriers. That is something so beautiful within the power of Jehovah, that isn't seen in any other place, true? While in other nations there are wars due to issues of ethnicity, nationality and things, this type of issue, in the people of Jehovah, not so. We are working more in unity, and it doesn't matter. Here there are no barriers for us.<sup>240</sup>

The transidiomatic nature of the pure language allows Witnesses to foreground this single social distinction. As Joel Elliott (1993) observes, "the heavily jargonized Theocratic discourse splits human society in two: the corrupt world system is dominated by Satanic forces, and the pure

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<sup>239</sup> See Barchas-Lichtenstein 2005; Das 2008; Hill and Hill 1980; 1986; Li 2004; Wertheim 2003a; 2003b; and many, many others.

<sup>240</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:51:00-00:51:33:

"...una comunidad (.) mundialmente unida, sin (.) importar barreras lingüísticas, nacionales, raciales, ningún otro tipo. Eso es algo tan hermoso dentro del poder de Jehová, que no se ve (.) en ningún otro lado, jaja, verdad?, Mientras que en otras naciones hay guerras por cuestiones de etnias, de (.) nacional, nacionales y cosas, cuestiones por el estilo, en el pueblo de Jehová, no. Estamos trabajando más en la unidad, y no importa. Aquí no hay barreras para nosotros."

theocratic order is currently manifested in those faithful witnesses of Jehovah separated from the world, recognizable by their righteous lifestyle and pure theocratic speech."

As a result of this emphasis, Witness purism is denotational. This denotational purism is a subset of what Cameron (1995) calls *verbal hygiene*: attempts to "clean up" language in some way.<sup>241</sup> The process of purification (Bauman and Briggs 2003) requires Witnesses to avoid particular types of denotational content and particular genres that are worldly and hence inherently impure. Witnesses are cautioned that they must steer clear of profanity,<sup>242</sup> worldly publications (Penton 1997: 279),<sup>243</sup> and "divisive politics and ... selfish attitudes, such as the racism and divisive nationalism characteristic of this world."<sup>244</sup> They must also avoid anger and other negative emotions that might lead to committing a sin: "The 'purity' of the language spoken by the Christian congregation was also because of its being free from words expressing malicious bitterness, anger, wrath, screaming, and similar abusive language, as well as being free from deceit, obscenity, and corruptness" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1988: 204). Similarly, my host father informed me that in paradise 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.<sup>245</sup>

Witness denotational purism contains not only prohibitions on certain types of language use but also specific exhortations to employ others. "Speaking the pure language involves

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<sup>241</sup> See also Burrige 2010.

<sup>242</sup> See, for instance, "Young People Ask: What's So Bad About Swearing?" *Awake!* 3/2008, pp. 19-21.

<sup>243</sup> Michael S. (p.c., 5/12/2013) observes that Witnesses do read newspapers, magazines, novels and the like. However, "Youths, Are You Building for the Future?" (*The Watchtower*, 5/1/2004, pp. 13-18) makes it clear that television, music, novels, movies, and websites all qualify as association and thus Witnesses are expected to be conscientious in their choices.

<sup>244</sup> "True Worship Unites People." *The Watchtower*, 9/15/2001, pp. 5-7.

<sup>245</sup> Fieldnotes, 12/22/2010. See section 4.5.2 of this dissertation.



believing the truth, teaching it to others, and living in harmony with God's laws and principles."<sup>246</sup> This denotational purism also encourages the use of Witness-specific words, "[including] the redefinition of standard English words, the emotional charging of words, the peculiar use of metaphor in argument, and the adoption of particular mannerisms of speech" (Botting and Botting 1984: 84; see also Holden 2002c: 96-7 and Reed 2010 on "spiritual food").

Body language, facial expression, and gesture are also included in the pure language (Botting and Botting 1984: 85-6; Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001b: 121-123). Watch Tower Society literature asks Witnesses to use gestures that are individual and spontaneous, and these are ideologized as a transparent reflection of inner emotional states: "Your gestures and your facial expressions should not be taken from a book. You never had to study how to laugh or how to be indignant. Gestures should also express feelings that are within you. The more spontaneous your gestures, the better." (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001b: 121). In spite of this ideology of transparency, the Watch Tower Society simultaneously locates the logic behind this use of gesture in Biblical models:

Gestures were natural to Jesus and his early disciples. On one occasion, someone reported to Jesus that his mother and his brothers wanted to speak with him. Jesus replied: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Then the Bible adds: "*Extending his hand toward his disciples*, he said: 'Look! My mother and my brothers!'" (Matt. 12:48, 49) Among other references, the Bible shows at Acts 12:17 and 13:16 that the apostles Peter and Paul also made spontaneous use of gestures. [Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001b: 121]

Gesture must be spontaneous, yet this very spontaneity has textual antecedents in the Bible.

As components of the pure language, gestures help Witnesses display a particular type of affect. This display is not the message itself, yet it is a key element in spreading the message. Appropriate gestures and facial expressions "can help people to relax and to be more receptive to what you say" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001b: 123).

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<sup>246</sup> "True Worship Unites People." *The Watchtower*, 9/15/2001, pp: 5-7.

What denotational and structural purism share is an emphasis on the social. More specifically, both take a very specific language variety as an emblem of identity and insist on prescriptivism to exclude those who cannot or will not conform. Purism, like all language ideologies, is not about the language it polices as much as the social boundaries that it construes. "For Witnesses the world is essentially composed of sheep and goats, insiders and outsiders, 'Babylon the Great' and the pure theocratic order" (Elliott 1993), and it is denotational purism that allows Witnesses to maintain these distinctions. What is unique to the Witnesses is the specific type of purism rather than the general phenomenon; the evangelical project is by its nature one of purification (Keane 2007).

### **5.3 The "Pure Language" Community as Imagined Community**

In the Witnesses' own view, both their pure language and their simultaneous reading practices contribute to the constitution of a global community. Anderson (2006: 13) has observed that religious communities are "imaginable largely through the medium of a sacred language and written script." However, this is an inadequate description of Witnesses, who see texts at the heart of their community even though they do not see any particular language or script as sacred. I argue instead that the "pure language" concept makes it possible for Witnesses to construe just such a single, shared sacred language.

In an interview with Circuit Overseer Pedro and his wife Cata, I asked if Pedro wrote his own talks or received pre-written talks that he was expected to deliver. He told me that he received pre-written outlines, but emphasized that this was a strength of Jehovah's Witnesses, since the centralization of preparation indicated a unified doctrinal understanding. Indeed, he explicitly credited shared "spiritual food" (a metaphor for "the publications and meeting programs provided by the Watchtower Society" (Reed 2010)) with making Jehovah's Witnesses

a "globally unified community." Cata then joined the conversation to ensure that I understood the metaphor, clarifying that Witnesses receive the same teaching and are brothers even when they share no common language, which motivated Pedro in turn to explain the doctrine of the pure language.<sup>247</sup>

Pedro: Well, everything comes already outlined. It's like *The Watchtower*. (Cata: Ahh.) It's the same. When a magazine arrives, *The Watchtower*, well, already the articles come already [there]. And one just has to prepare them to be able to feed ourselves well, assimilate it, what is already there, and that is, it's like a food that is served to us and we have to make the effort to eat it and nothing more. The food is put for us on the table and us with the spoon, we've got to slurp it, to put it one way. That is the task, just like the food is given to us already prepared, and our only responsibility is to learn to enjoy it. And nourish ourselves the best we can.

[[20 seconds omitted.]]

Pedro: But what is nourishing doesn't stop being bread, on a worldwide level. And that is what makes Jehovah's Witnesses a globally unified community, without attention to linguistic, national, racial, or any other type of barriers. That is something so beautiful within the power of Jehovah, that isn't seen in any other place, true? While in other nations there are wars due to issues of ethnicity, nationality and things, this type of issue, not in the people of Jehovah. We are working more in unity, and it doesn't matter. Here there are no barriers for us.

Cata: And I wanted to say that that is what unites us (in) a global brotherhood precisely, that we all have the same spiritual element, the same instruction. It's that what one Jehovah's Witness believes, another is going to believe the same thing although he is on the other side of the world. There's not going to be a difference. That unites us. Me, in my preaching, like, I have bumped into people from the same religion, who in some place believe one thing, and in another place believe another, and that is what is different about Jehovah's Witnesses. Since we receive the same teaching, it unites us, as much in worship, and that makes us, it makes us a global brotherhood. Anywhere that we are, although we don't speak the language [*idioma*], but we are already brothers. (In) the international Assemblies, where brothers from other countries meet, although they don't speak the language [*idioma*], but even so.

Pedro: In fact, a prophecy from the Bible, in Zephaniah, the prophecy of Zephaniah says that there would arrive a moment in which all the peoples, the nations, would speak a single language [*lenguaje*]. It's about the pure language

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<sup>247</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:49:51-00:53:28. Since this excerpt is lengthy, I provide the Spanish in full in Appendix D of this dissertation rather than in the footnotes.

[*lenguaje*] of the truth. It's not a language [*idioma*], no? It's a, a symbolic system of communication [*lenguaje simbólico*], let's put it that way, but that language [*lenguaje*] is the Biblical truth. That...what my wife said, here we have an understanding of a matter and in China, Japan, Holland, France, the Low Countries they have the same understanding. That is, we speak the same language [*idioma*], in that aspect. There's no variation. There's really no difference at all, like those that arise in languages [*idiomas*] themselves, no? That some speak one variant, and others another, here there are no variants. Here we have a united teaching, and well, of course, it's a healthy teaching to such a degree that it doesn't matter where one is, he can serve Jehovah in the same manner.

What is especially clear in this excerpt is the rhetorical connections between community, simultaneous textual practices, and "the same language." Witnesses see themselves as a "globally unified community" or "global brotherhood" which is unified by these two key elements of text and language. All Witnesses share "what is nourishing," "the same spiritual element," and "the same teaching." In parallel fashion, all Witnesses speak "a single language," "the same language," "the pure language of the truth" in spite of worldly language barriers.

#### **5.4 Linguistic Relativity: Language, Thought, and Affect**

For Witnesses, human languages differ not only denotationally and cognitively, but also affectively. Thus far I have glossed over this third dimension of difference. However, Witness ideologies posit a particular emotional closeness which is shared only with one's mother tongue and which cannot be translated. This mother tongue ideology (cf. Coulmas 1997) is Herderian in nature (Bauman and Briggs 2000; 2003): the mother tongue is intimately, essentially connected to one's very being. Furthermore, this connection is naturalized, which makes it harder to question. Jehovah deliberately created denotational and cognitive distinctions between languages at Babel, but emotional differences are not discussed. This silence makes them seem "only natural": surely the people who lived before the events of Babel felt just as strongly about their mother tongue as modern people do. I will discuss how this mother tongue ideology is realized in

Witness discourse at all levels of the organization in Chapter Eight, but I want to underline two points here.

First, this emotional relativity is precisely why the pure language must be transidiomatic. All languages are equally valuable to their speakers and this affective value cannot be translated. Furthermore, the emotional value of language lies not in any particular language, but rather in the relationships between speakers and languages. As a result, Witnesses can best reach potential converts through their mother tongues, even if they are bilingual, because the message benefits from this affective weight.<sup>248</sup> Congregation members frequently offered to order magazines and pamphlets in English for my benefit, even when others reassured them that I could read perfectly in Spanish.<sup>249</sup> "You'll understand it better that way," they'd tell me. If I only understood on a more deeply emotional level, I would remove the last impediment to belief. This logic provides the warrant for extensive translation.

However, for an adept speaker, the pure language *does* transcend even the affective weight of his or her first language. Witnesses whose faith is very strong are encouraged to serve as pioneers in congregations that speak other languages. Lucas and Marisa, a pioneer couple serving in Zapotitlán, are native speakers of Spanish, as are the Circuit and District Overseers and their wives. I met a young Witness in Salina Cruz who was studying English to serve as a pioneer in an English-speaking congregation, and Witnesses from all over the world who serve at Bethel in Brooklyn work – and often attend services – in English. All of these individuals regularly attend meetings and Assemblies in languages that are not their mother tongues.

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<sup>248</sup> Former Witness and anti-Witness activist David A. Reed (2010) endorses the same tactic for proselytizing to Witnesses: "Would you train missionaries in the Scriptures and then send them to China – without also teaching them the Chinese language? Of course not! By the same token you should not expect success if you try to take the Gospel to Jehovah's Witnesses without first studying the 'J.W.ese' language."

<sup>249</sup> Fieldnotes, 11/22/2010 and 6/12/2011.

## 5.5 The "Pure Language" Community in External Perspective

In this chapter, I have explored Witnesses' own view of themselves as a global community. I argue that this model is similar to the Andersonian imagined community in that it privileges simultaneous reading and a shared language. However, given Witnesses' use of hundreds of languages worldwide, this sense of a shared language is not automatically achieved. Instead, it is construed through the *transidiomatic authoritative discourse* of the pure language. By defining their shared language in denotational rather than structural fashion, they are able to transcend human language barriers. The claim that Witnesses are reading "the same thing" is also a powerful claim of decontextualizability (Bauman and Briggs 1990), which I will return to in the chapters that follow.

# Six

## "Spiritual Food at the Appropriate Time": Ideologies of the Witness Textual Regime

### 6.1 Textual Economies and Regimes

In Chapter Two, I observed that one of the key components of the textual community of Jehovah's Witnesses is a totalizing textual economy. The concept of a textual economy allows us to recognize that "practices and associated ideologies exist in dynamic relations with one another such that changes in one domain can have consequences for others" (Keane 2007: 18). In this chapter, I explore Witness textual ideologies, and the following chapter considers practices, participation, and performance.

In its hierarchical nature, the Witness textual economy contrasts with other Christian representational and textual economies (Bielo 2009c; Keane 2007). Bielo argues that most Christian communities participate in "a fluid textual economy in which value is constantly reevaluated, and texts moved in and out of favor" (Bielo 2009c: 111). While he specifically excludes scripture from his definition of textual economy, I argue that the role that scripture plays in Christian textual economies is vital in differentiating Christian groups from one another. While all types of Christians have less flexibility in evaluating scripture relative to other types of texts, the regimentation of scripture and scriptural interpretation varies widely among different Christian communities. In this chapter, I will show that the Jehovah's Witnesses' textual economy differs from Bielo's model: the values of different texts are dictated from the top of the hierarchy rather than disputed by individuals. Furthermore, those who do not agree with the values

proposed by the Watch Tower Society are excluded altogether from participation in the Witnesses' textual community.

I use the term *textual regime* to emphasize the totalizing nature of the Witness textual economy. As the terms *regime* and *totalizing* would suggest, the Witness economy relies upon unambiguous mechanisms of enforcement and regulation: Witnesses who violate communal norms are subject to discipline. As Holden (2002c: 77) notes: "The Society has an established set of rational procedures for reconciling and penalising those who stray from its teachings...there is an administrative system with clear guidelines for dealing with transgressions." These procedures range from counseling (meeting with elders to talk about infractions) to formal announcements of disciplinary action to disfellowshipping, which refers to formal expulsion, after which readmittance is extremely difficult.<sup>250</sup>

Yet all textual economies are coherent even if they are not totalizing. As Keane (2007: 20) observes: "That elements within a representational economy cohere at any given moment, or seem to, is always something that requires explanation. In some circumstances, it is one of the tasks of church doctrines and disciplines, for instance, to achieve this effect of coherence."

In the Witness textual economy, all evaluation comes from above. Bielo (2009c: 110-11) describes Christians' participation in the evaluation of non-scriptural Christian books, which is simply not the case for Witnesses. The only works admitted to the canon are those published by the Watch Tower Society. Reflecting the Society's evolving theology, even their own older works sometimes fall out of favor. In fact, Watch Tower Society publications, including *The Watchtower* magazine and the textbooks used in congregational and individual Bible study, have a quasi-scriptural status, as they form the basis of religious services.

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<sup>250</sup> Andrew Holden (2002c: 77-81) analyzes the disciplinary apparatus in great detail.



We might expect Witnesses to see themselves as part of a global Christian community centered on shared scripture, but this is not the case. Bielo (2009c: 111) observes, "Reading the same books has the ability to generate, quite immediately, a shared sense of belonging and Christian identity for individuals who have never met or might otherwise have no binding social ground." However, Witnesses use their own specific translation of the Bible, which is one of many ways they define their community in opposition to all other Christianities. Indeed, reading the same books provides an even stronger "shared sense of belonging and Christian identity" within the Witnesses than for other groups of Christians, because the overlap in Witnesses' religious reading is not partial but total. All Witnesses read the same Watch Tower literature, and no Witness reads any other Christian texts.

The Witnesses' totalizing textual economy also creates a hierarchy of participant roles, which I will return to in the following chapter. Goffman (1979) breaks down the speaker role into three roles: the animator physically speaks the words, the author phrases the talk, and the agent takes responsibility for what is said. For Witnesses, all authorized Watch Tower texts have God as their agent and the Watch Tower Society as their author. Certain Witnesses who hold a particular congregational status can legitimately voice these words in the context of the religious meeting. The outside observer's perspective differs in one crucial point: the *agent* of these texts, the entity whose perspective is contained therein, is not God but the Watch Tower Society.

## **6.2 The Divine Name**

One of the central tenets of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the origin of their name, is the belief that God has a personal name – Jehovah – which believers are supposed to use. The Witnesses' home Bible study course, *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, introduces this concept in the first chapter, asking: "If you want someone to get to know you, what might you do? Would

you not tell the person your name? Does God have a name?" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2005c: 12-13).

God's name occurs frequently in Witness speech. Spanish speakers use the phrase *Gracias a Dios* 'Thank God' more frequently than English speakers say 'Thank God', but in much the same contexts: to express both heartfelt gratitude to God and a more general sense of having experienced good fortune. Witnesses, however, rarely use this expression; instead, they say *Gracias a Jehová* 'Thank Jehovah' in these contexts. The use of the name is emblematic (Barth 1969). As Joel Elliott (1993) writes:

...for Witnesses "Jehovah" is the special name of God. For them the divine name possesses an almost mantric quality; frequent invocation of God's personal name is a regular feature of Witness discourse. One recent Watch Tower publication even counsels pronouncing the divine name aloud as an effective strategy for warding off demons.<sup>251</sup>

Witness prayers provide the most extreme example of this phenomenon. Prayers are always addressed to Jehovah, while many Christian groups pray at least on occasion to Jesus. A former Witness writes sardonically: "In fact, they often repeat the name many times during a single prayer, as if God might forget that he is the one being addressed, or as if the Witness might forget to which God he was praying" (Reed 1986: 28). Nearly all of the prayers I have recorded, in both Spanish and Chontal, share this trait, with the word 'Jehovah' occurring at rates between once every ten seconds and once every two minutes.

The repeated use of the name 'Jehovah' also serves an evidential function. In religious language, speakers may not have direct knowledge, and thus a variety of strategies are used to

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<sup>251</sup> Compare the first article in the January 15, 2011 issue of *The Watchtower*, "Take Refuge in the Name of Jehovah," although it makes clear that the divine name is not a "talisman" and that objects with the divine name written on them do not have magic powers: "Some of God's people who have been attacked by demons have found refuge in Jehovah by calling his name out loud. Still, an object that features God's name should not be considered a talisman or used as a charm in everyday life as if it had some magical power of protection. This is not what it means to take refuge in the name of Jehovah."

make religious discourse authoritative in the absence of more conventional evidentiality (Du Bois 1986). Religious discourse must be what Du Bois calls "self-evident": it must provide its own warrant. Witnesses' constant invocation of the name 'Jehovah' serves precisely this function. Even when Jehovah is not positioned explicitly as the authority behind the speaker's words, the repetition of the name provides discursive cohesion and distances the speaker from an agentive role (cf. Szuchewycz 1994). It suggests, however indirectly, that human agency is eclipsed by the divine ability to act (cf. Meigs 1995: 97).

Non-Witnesses often call this particular doctrine of God's personal name into doubt. The Hebrew tetragrammaton (יהוה), now pronounced *Jehovah*<sup>252</sup> is understood by many Jewish and Christian traditions as God's name, which is not to be uttered. Jews do not pronounce these four-letters in Hebrew as *Jehovah* or even as *Yahweh* but as *Adonai*, or 'the lord'; outside of religious contexts, Orthodox Jews avoid what they see as taking God's name in vain by substituting (השם) *hashem* which literally means 'the name'. Furthermore, many Christians point out that Jesus's model prayers are addressed to 'Father' or 'Our Father' rather than to Jehovah.

Indeed, the chief motivation for the Witnesses' New World Translation of the Bible was to restore the divine name, since few Bibles published at the time made use of it (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1993b: 124). Their publications often highlight this difference between their version of the Bible and other modern-language translations:

IN YOUR copy of the Bible, how is Psalm 83:18 translated? *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* renders this verse: "That people may know that you, whose name is Jehovah, you alone are the Most High over all the earth." A number of other Bible translations give similar renderings. However, many translations leave out the name Jehovah, replacing it with such titles as "Lord" or

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<sup>252</sup> The Hebrew pronunciation would have been closer to *Yahweh*. Although the use of "God's proper name" is one of the central points of Jehovah's Witness doctrine, Witnesses phonologically nativize this name in every language they use, pointing out that we commonly refer to *Jesus* when speaking English (or *Jesús* when speaking Spanish) rather than using the Hebrew form *Yeshua* or *Yehoshua* (Penton 1997: 184-5; Whalen 1962: 73-74). See also *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* Pp. 195-7.

"Eternal." What belongs in this verse? A title or the name Jehovah?

This verse speaks about a name. In the original Hebrew in which much of the Bible was written, a unique personal name appears here. It is spelled יהוה (YHWH) in Hebrew letters. In English, the common rendering of that name is "Jehovah." Does that name occur in only one Bible verse? No. It appears in the original text of the Hebrew Scriptures nearly 7,000 times!

[Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2005c: 195]

### 6.3 Biblical Inerrancy

Jehovah's Witnesses – like many other fundamentalist and evangelical Christians – base much of their theology on a belief in Biblical inerrancy, or "the status of Scripture as a God-breathed, verbally inspired in all parts, absolutely and totally inerrant, infallible, objective, propositional revelation that 'constitutes the only infallible rule of faith and practice'" (Crapanzano 2000: 60). Not only is the Bible the Word of God, but there is exactly one true and correct exegesis,<sup>253</sup> held to be equivalent to God's original intention. Indeed, a belief in Biblical inerrancy justifies the totalizing nature of the Witness regime.

Witnesses' public talks<sup>254</sup> often list "proofs" that the Bible is the original and inspired word of God, although many of these proofs are internal to the Bible, which gives them a circular and thus unconvincing feel to those who are not already believers.<sup>255</sup> In truth, even those

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<sup>253</sup> I use the term "exegesis" here and elsewhere to avoid "interpretation", which can also refer to oral translation.

<sup>254</sup> I base this discussion largely on three talks: (1) the public talk given by the Circuit Overseer at the 2010 District Assembly (*¿Cómo puede usted acercarse a Dios?* 'How can you become closer to God?'); (2) a talk given in Congregación Sur on 4/12/2011 (*¿Qué pruebas demuestran la autenticidad de la Biblia?* 'What proofs demonstrate the authenticity of the Bible?'); and (3) a talk with the same title delivered by a different speaker in Congregación Sur on 6/5/2011.

While I have recordings of both the first and third talks, I follow the order of the 2010 talk in presenting the 'proofs.' (The third presenter is relatively inexperienced in public speaking, and while I use examples from his talk, it was organized in a way that was sometimes difficult to follow.) Despite differences in the order of the points, I suspect that all of these talks may have been based on the same outline. Many of these points often came up in conversation with Witnesses as well, and are discussed at length in Chapter 2 of *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*

<sup>255</sup> Almost nobody in Zapotitlán had ever met anyone who did not consider him- or herself a Christian and who would be likely to challenge this assumption. Since more than 90% of the Mexican population as a whole identifies as Catholic or as a member of a Christian denomination or sect (INEGI 2010), this is likely to be true of most Mexicans, outside of tourist centers and the larger, more cosmopolitan cities. In the state of Oaxaca, for example, 94% of the population is Christian (INEGI 2010).

talks and texts that seek to prove Biblical inerrancy presuppose it; this presupposition is fundamental to the entire Witness textual economy.

The first proof is that the Bible speaks accurately on scientific topics. Witnesses seeking to establish that the Bible is divinely inspired will take a verse that makes passing mention of a mundane scientific fact and contextualize it by pointing out that this fact was not common knowledge at the time of writing. They may also emphasize prior beliefs that sound particularly preposterous to modern ears<sup>256</sup> to depict the Bible as ahead of its time.

Look up, please, Job chapter twenty-six, verse seven. Before I read you this text, I want to tell you a fact. This [text] that I am about to read to you was written one, well, some three thousand five hundred years<sup>257</sup> before man discovered what we are going to read here. Take notice: three thousand five hundred years before. Job twenty-six, seven says: "He" – Jehovah – "is stretching out the north over the empty place," and the following point is what interests us, "hanging the earth upon" what? Did you notice? It says there: "upon nothing."

[Chontal translation omitted]

You know, the very scientists used to say that the earth was, ehh, was sustained on elephants, sea turtles, or a strong man, an Atlas held it up, but Jehovah, (the) the author of the Bible, said, "no," three thousand five hundred y- years before, the world is not hanging on anything, and this is exactly so.<sup>258</sup>

Here, an isolated verse taken without context is used as an example of the Bible's scientific accuracy. Other verses are used in this way as well: Ecclesiastes 1:7 ("All the winter torrents are

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<sup>256</sup> By anachronistically placing these beliefs in the mouth of scientists, this rhetorical strategy also serves the function of de-authenticating science and scientists more generally, which supports the Watch Tower Society's anti-evolutionary views.

<sup>257</sup> By the Watch Tower Society's own Biblical chronology, the book of Job was written around 1473 BCE (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1987: 1537), so this number is somewhat exaggerated.

<sup>258</sup> Public talk at District Assembly, 12/19/2010. This particular talk was given with a Chontal-language interpreter alternating with this speaker, but I give here only the Spanish: "Busquen, por favor, Job capítulo veintiséis, versículo siete. Antes de leerles este texto, quiero decirles un dato. Esto que les voy a leer se escribió hace uno, bueno, unos tres mil quinientos años antes de que el hombre descubriera lo que vamos a leer aquí. Fíjense bien, tres mil quinientos años antes. Dice Job veintiséis siete: 'Él' – Jehová – 'está extendiendo el norte sobre el lugar vacío,' y el punto siguiente es lo que interesa, 'colgando la tierra' sobre qué? Ya se fijó? Dice allí: 'sobre nada.' [Chontal translation omitted] Usted sabe que antes los científicos mismos decían que la tierra era, ehhh, estaba sostenido sobre elefantes, tortugas marinas, o un hombre fuerte, un (Atlas) lo sostenía, pero Jehová, (el) el autor de la Biblia, dijo, 'no,' tres mil quinientos a- años antes, 'la tierra no está colgado sobre nada' y eso es exactamente así."

going forth to the sea, yet the sea itself is not full. To the place where the winter torrents are going forth, there they are returning so as to go forth.") is said to have explained the water cycle before scientists understood it, and Isaiah 40:22 ("There is One who is dwelling above the circle of the earth, the dwellers in which are as grasshoppers, the One who is stretching out the heavens just as a fine gauze, who spreads them out like a tent in which to dwell,") says that the world is round.

This logic is not unique to Witnesses but is, rather, shared with fundamentalist Christians:

Whatever is accepted as true must, of necessity, be in the Bible somewhere. Believers, for instance, do not suppose that the world is flat or that there are oceans above the skies. They accept as true and common understanding that the earth is round, but they are unwilling to think that theirs is a new truth, unknown to the writers of the Bible. After all, God wrote every word, and surely God knew that the earth is round. That dilemma is resolved by finding in the Psalms the phrase 'the circle of the earth.' That phrase proves to the believer that the earth's roundness is a fact contained in scripture. There simply are no truths for human beings to discover that are not already revealed in the Bible.

[Ammerman 1987: 55]

However, the Christians Ammerman describes differ from Jehovah's Witnesses in one key respect: they see this completeness as a consequence rather than a proof of Biblical inerrancy.

The second proof that Witnesses give is the internal consistency of the Bible. They emphasize that forty men wrote this book over a period of sixteen hundred years, which means that no single person's life spanned the entire production of the book, and yet its message is consistent. These men had little in common with one another, ranging from fishermen and shepherds to doctors, priests, and kings, and yet they managed to transmit a single message, that of hope for humanity. In all three talks, the consistency of the message was asserted rather than proved, which suggests that the goal of these talks was to bolster the faith of those who already believe in the inspiration of the Bible rather than to convince those who do not.

Another proof of the divine origin of the Bible is its candor. The authors of the Bible describe all sorts of human error, including many of their own. Although I have never heard this point discussed at length, it provides a glimpse of the Witness view of human nature. People are only willing to be honest about their own mistakes when a higher power obligates them to do so, which suggests that humans must be self-serving, proud, and dishonest.

The Witnesses also suggest that the conservation of the Bible over time is a fourth proof of its divinity. No other book, they suggest, has faced such strong opposition, and yet the Bible has not been destroyed. Rather, it has been translated more widely than any other book, into more than two thousand languages – including Highland Chontal – and is available to everybody who is interested in reading it.

In addition to scientific accuracy, Witnesses argue that Biblical prophecies of historical events have also come true, and this is a fifth proof. Witnesses regularly point to the fall of Babylonia as prophesied in the book of Isaiah<sup>259</sup> as an example of the Bible's precision in historical prediction. Witnesses also believe that the Bible predicted the Nazis' eventual loss, which is often dramatized in talks and publications.<sup>260</sup>

A man, an official of the Nazi S.S., the elite police, right, the secret police, Heinrich Himmler, proudly told one of Jehovah's Witnesses, "You will end up giving in." Well, after the collapse of the Nazi regime, Himmler, this man, was fleeing when he found the brother, a brother named (Luke) in, um, in a town, and he asked him, "Well, Bible student, what happens now? Because now (they see) that regime has collapsed." The brother gave him a thorough testimony<sup>261</sup> and

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<sup>259</sup> In particular, Isaiah 13: 19-22. See also *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2005c: 23-25)

<sup>260</sup> See Holden 2002c: 86-91. (Incidentally, the tract he quotes on page 87 was used almost word for word in a talk given at the 2010 District Assembly that I attended, although not as proof of the Bible's historical fidelity.)

<sup>261</sup> Since 'testimonio cabal' is homophonous with the Spanish name of a publication in wide use (titled '*Bearing Thorough Witness' About God's Kingdom* in English), it is potentially unclear whether the Witness gave Himmler a physical book or simply witnessed to him.

showed him that Jehovah's Witnesses had always counted on the failure of the Nazi regime and on their own liberation.<sup>262</sup>

Other world events supposedly predicted by the Bible are the birth of Jesus, the destruction and reconstruction of the temple, and the formation (and future downfall) of the United Nations.

One additional proof of inspiration – and one that is particularly unconvincing to those who are not already convinced of the Bible's divine origin – is found within the words of the Bible itself. A number of the authors of the Bible are explicit on this point, and still others repeat Jesus's comments on the use of Scripture, all of which the believer interprets as proof. Vincent Crapanzano (2000: 75-80) points out that for believers, this logic is *not* circular: the dual authorship of the Bible makes claims of inspiration simultaneously internal – since they are part of Scripture – and external – since they appear in different books with different (human) authors.<sup>263</sup> At the same time, he suggests that faith ultimately trumps logic, and "one must simply accept the revelations of Scripture as true and unquestionable and proceed to convince one's interlocutor" (Crapanzano 2000: 81).<sup>264</sup>

But which Scripture? Many fundamentalists believe that Biblical inerrancy holds for all versions and translations, but the Witnesses are somewhat equivocal on this point. They do not simply believe that "if God would never permit His Word to be falsified or perverted in

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<sup>262</sup> Public talk at District Assembly, 12/19/2010.

"Un hombre oficial de las ese ese Nazis la policía, la elite, verdad, la policía secreta, Heinrich Himmler, orgullosamente le dijo a uno de los testigo de Jehová, 'Ustedes acabarán por rendirse.' Pues, tras el de-, desplome del régimen Nazi, Himmler, este hombre, huía cuando se encontró con el hermano, un hermano llamado (Luke) en, este, en una población y le preguntó, 'Bueno, estudiante de la Biblia, qué sucede ahora? Porque ya (miran) ha desplomado aquel régimen.' El hermano le dio un *Testimonio Cabal* y le mostró que los testigos de Jehová siempre habían contado con que el régimen Nazi fracasaría y que ellos serían liberados."

<sup>263</sup> For example, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (written by Paul) and 2 Peter 1:21 (written by Peter) both claim that all Scripture is inspired; Matthew 4: 4, 7, 10 and John 17:17 describe Jesus's emphasis on Scripture. The question of "books with different human authors" is also more complicated than it appears at first. For example, historians believe that Paul only wrote seven of the thirteen books that bear his name.

<sup>264</sup> Similarly, former Witness David A. Reed (1996: 88) points out similar reasoning in the very name Jehovah's Witnesses, which is "not a mere denominational name, but rather a meaningful description of what they actually were: the witnesses or earthly representatives of Jehovah God."



Scripture, then translations ought to be as true as those in the original languages" (Crapanzano 2000: 67-8), but rather acknowledge that bad translations do exist. Indeed, one of the chief reasons they give for investing so many resources in Bible translation is that, for many languages, there is either no Bible translation available at all, or an inadequate one.<sup>265</sup>

However, scholars differ on whether the Witnesses consider the New World Translation itself inspired and inerrant. James Penton (1997: 176), a former Witness, writes: "They believe that the original text in the original languages were inspired, and they are willing to use textual criticism to attempt to discover what those texts were. They are honest in admitting that no translation is inspired, but they have long claimed that the New World is the best extant today." My impression, however, is closer to Andrew Holden's (2002c: 40):

The belief that the inerrant word of God has been correctly translated from original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts has earned Watch Tower theologians a deference not unlike that of papal infallibility... Scriptural literalism signifies a *revealed* truth that guards against polysemic beliefs by presenting a one true interpretation of the Bible that holds good for the whole of humanity.

That is, a fully *correct* and *commensurate* translation of the Bible is possible, although not all translations achieve this goal.

Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to respect this Witness ideology: all Biblical citations are quoted from the New World Translation,<sup>266</sup> and where my ethnographic data contain quotations from Spanish-language Watch Tower materials, I have used the corresponding English materials rather than my own translation.

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<sup>265</sup> "Our most important thing we want to try to translate is the Bible so we've devoted more of our translators – or the translators' time – to Bible translation, because either they do not have the Bible in that language at all – and maybe the Bible will be the only [Jehovah's Witness] publication in that language – or the translation is a very inaccurate one and really does not present clear Bible teaching." (Michael S. interview, 03/28/2011)

<sup>266</sup> Available online at <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/bible/genesis/1> in English; the reader is encouraged to explore the list of available language options for a sense of the sheer breadth of this project.

## 6.4 Translation and Translators<sup>267</sup>

Many Zapotitlán Witnesses told me they rarely or never used the Chontal New Testament even if they owned one because it was "badly interpreted"<sup>268</sup> or "badly translated." This term is polysemic: the Chontal New Testament might be a "bad translation" for orthographic, dialectal, or doctrinal reasons – or all three. In contrast with the practical orthography described in Section 4.7.1, the Chontal New Testament uses IPA characters that individuals are not familiar with. While the translators worked with speakers from all communities including Zapotitlán, SIL linguist Paul Turner was based in San Matías, which opens the translation up to the same dialectal challenges as the Turners' dictionary. And, finally, this translation was sponsored by the SIL and was thus vulnerable to charges of inaccuracy.<sup>269</sup>

The Witnesses' belief in a singular *correct* translation is, in some ways, similar to the widespread fundamentalist belief in a single correct exegesis (Crapanzano 2000: 19), which Witnesses also share. If a translation is either *right* or *wrong*, there is no room for a view of translation as exegesis. Indeed, this black-and-white view of translation paints the process as something more mechanical than agentive, which is reinforced by the lack of recognition translators receive. Not only translators' identities but their very existence is erased (Irvine and Gal 2000), and this erasure further emphasizes divine agency.

For Jehovah's Witnesses, a *correct* translation introduces elements not present in the original. Most obviously, the Hebrew tetragrammaton (יהוה) appears nowhere in the Greek

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<sup>267</sup> The distinction between authorship, translation, and interpretation is in some ways an artificial one; I use it here because, as I argue, it is a distinction that the Witnesses themselves make. Indeed, such a distinction is crucial to the maintenance of their moral authority.

<sup>268</sup> The word *interpretar* 'interpret' here refers to the oral equivalent of translation rather than exegesis, or the act of determining the underlying meaning of the Bible; these two senses of this word refer to very different practices, and a much larger set of people is allowed to engage in the first act. (See also section 6.7)

<sup>269</sup> Many Witnesses also admitted that it was more difficult to use than a Spanish Bible since they were not in the habit of reading in Chontal.

scriptures, yet was introduced into the New Testament in the New World Translation (Penton 1997: 175). Furthermore, all New World Translations are based on the original English New World Translation rather than the Hebrew and Greek texts, although sophisticated computer software and concordances are now used to keep track of certain key words and phrases. This tracking is essential since one of the Witnesses' principles of translation requires a one-to-one correspondence; that is, "they determined to attach one meaning to every word regardless of context" (Whalen 1962: 75; cf. Smalley 1991: 89-91).

In the eyes of the Watch Tower Society, a good translator – for both the Bible and other Jehovah's Witness publications – is a baptized Witness, who translates concepts rather than words, and who knows how to use simple, clear language. Academic credentials are of much less importance than knowledge of the subject, i.e. official Jehovah's Witness Bible teachings. In fact, translators who speak the source language (typically English) *too* well are thought to produce translations that are overly complicated for their target audiences.

Michael S., an editor in the Writing Department at Brooklyn Bethel, explained to me in an interview that the Watch Tower Society's ideal translator is "someone that can translate thoughts without trying to impress others with how well they can translate with fifty-dollar words when you really need a fifty-cent word." Translators work in teams of three to provide a consensus, thought to be more natural and more accurate than individual translation. Michael S. informed me that they are told "to concentrate more on the thought than trying to impress, how well you can translate from English, trying to keep the English words out or English concepts out when it ... would be foreign to the reader."

All translators are baptized Jehovah's Witnesses rather than non-Witness professionals, because familiarity with the concepts and doctrine is seen as crucial to providing an accurate

translation. Furthermore, a baptized Witness can bring not only understanding but passion to translation, so that the words are not only meaningful but also heartfelt:

Although someone may ... be more educated in translating a language, if they don't understand the basic teachings of the Bible and they're not dedicated to their God, which in our case is Jehovah, then there would be a certain passion, uh, not only an understanding, but a *passion* could be missing from it – although you can have people passionate about trying to help others who are not Jehovah's Witnesses and maybe have *no* religion – but to communicate what we feel are the basic teachings of the Bible, you have to have someone educated as a, in the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The mother tongue benefits from the affective value speakers place on it, but this value alone is insufficient. Only a Witness has the necessary emotional attachment to the content to create appropriately emotional translations.

While Michael S.'s office bookshelf contained several scholarly works written by non-Witnesses, he was careful to point out that the outsider status of these writers often meant that their work was flawed.<sup>270</sup> At one point, he compared writing a historical or ethnographic work to translating Witness publications (providing a cautionary tale for me in the process):

George Chryssides, a sociologist who studies new religions, did a masterful job but was not on target (...) and why I'm using this is because unless you have been taught for some time the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, it's hard to get it correct if you're dealing with something like a dictionary on Jehovah's Witness words or to use the translation of our teachings into another language, and we feel that's important because what we teach is not just (you know) understanding Bible prophecy, but how does it relate to a person's marriage or raising children or what their hope for the future is, so in those areas it's important that it be done correctly.

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<sup>270</sup> Compare the words of Carolyn R. Wah (2001: 162), who simultaneously encourages non-Witnesses to conduct research involving the Watch Tower Society and warns that we may be unable to understand our findings: "True, not everyone with a casual inquiry about the beliefs and teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses may want to wade through several feet of books to find an answer. Neither may they have the background and familiarity with the history and culture of Jehovah's Witnesses necessary to understand the answer they find." (See also Vincent Crapanzano's (2000: 87) discussion of fundamentalists' claim that Scripture is opaque to those who are not saved.)

A descriptive work, like a translation, might be correct or incorrect, but in any case, multiple exegeses of a single truth are considered impossible.<sup>271</sup>

The emphasis on baptized Witnesses being responsible for translation goes hand in hand with a de-emphasis on academic credentials and perhaps even linguistic skills. As Michael S. told me, "Academic credentials would be not at the top of our list, but more down five, six, seven, eight, nine, or ten. It would be more on the dedication of the individual and their humility<sup>272</sup> when it comes to translating." He repeated this point again and again over the course of the interview:

Michael

1 So we don't look at academic credentials as number one.  
2 It's, what's the sincerity of the person  
3 and how well do they know  
4 the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses  
5 then, of course, now you look,  
6 can they mechanically do the translating?  
7 And if you have academic credentials  
8 that's gonna make it much easier for you.

Jena

9 Right.  
10 Sure, but people who,  
11 you can be very fluent in two languages and  
12 not have  
13 gotten a lot of schooling  
14 and

Michael

15 And, and we've tried it.  
16 We've tried people that were very fluent  
17 as I've said in English  
18 and in their native language  
19 but English as their second language  
20 but they did not make very good translators.

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<sup>271</sup> Historically, the Witnesses have not been terribly open to the inquiries of outside scholars (Penton 1997: 103-8; Stroup 1945: 22) but this appears to be changing (Wah 2001; see also Knox 2011: 178-9).

<sup>272</sup> Presumably "humility" refers both to a lack of interest in receiving recognition and a willingness to be corrected.

Jena

21     Hmm.

22     That's really interesting.

Michael

23     I couldn't believe it, but

24     that's the way it works out.

25     They're l- their translation would

26     not

27     reach the per- the target audience

28     that they're trying to reach

29     as effectively as someone

30     that was not

31     as, as, as um

32     adequate in the English language.

33     Of course there's

34     always exceptions

35     but as a general rule

36     that seems to be the case.

One other point about translation stands out in an examination of Spanish-language texts, and that is the high level of standardization: with few exceptions, a single Spanish-language translation is used in 20 countries and territories.<sup>273</sup> As a result, texts sometimes lack necessary contextual information and assume a familiarity with U.S. culture in particular – or urban Western culture in general – or they may contain details that are irrelevant or even nonsensical. A talk on the importance of abstaining from politics referred to George H. W. Bush's infamous 1988 "lie" (Hill 2000) of "Read my lips, no new taxes," explaining only that he was running for election at the time but was not reelected in 1992 due to breaking this promise. The program from the 2010 District Assembly that I attended in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca contained an announcement about the Gilead Missionary School that was only applicable to United States residents, illustrating an inappropriate lack of localization. A discussion about supporting

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<sup>273</sup> Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spain, the United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela. To the best of my knowledge, the one time congregations using the same language might receive different publications is in the occasional service meeting that reports on their general region.

pioneers in the congregation suggested that when you go out together, you might offer to drive so they do not spend money on gas; this was simply not relevant to rural people, few of whom owned cars, and who never go out casually anywhere far enough to require one.

Translators do seem to attempt to use the most neutral forms possible, avoiding slang and regionalisms, yet the Spanish-language publications contain at least one prominent failure to do so. The name of the monthly magazine *¡Despertad!* 'Awake!' is a regionally-marked form, one almost never used outside of Spain. (In nearly all of Latin America, including the Spanish-speaking U.S., the unmarked translation would be *¡Despierten!*) In fact, the choice of this title was what first alerted me to the centralization of translation.

## 6.5 Authorship and Recognition

Translators are never recognized by name in Watch Tower publications or correspondence, nor are any other authors. This erasure, which reinforces divine agency, is relatively recent within the Watch Tower Society. Early Witness publications, particularly those written by the first two presidents of the Watch Tower Society, acknowledged their authors; the third president, Nathan H. Knorr, ended this tradition to ensure that Witnesses would remain loyal to the Society rather than to individuals (Penton 1997: 78-9).<sup>274</sup> The translation of the Bible into English was one of Knorr's projects (Holden 2002c: 20), and some have suggested that the translators' anonymity had as much to do with fear of having their credentials questioned (Penton 1997: 173-4; Reed 1986: 71-2) as with concern over individuals "exalting themselves" (Holden 2002c: 30-1; Penton 1997: 105).

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<sup>274</sup> Michael S. (p.c., 5/12/2013) pointed out to me that Russell stipulated in his will that authors be anonymous. Chryssides (2012: 189n6) writes that all authors of Watch Tower materials have been anonymous since 1942, the year that Knorr's presidency began. Penton (1997: 78-9), himself a former Witness, suggests that Knorr may have had a motivation beyond the interests of the Society, since he was not as powerful a writer as Russell or Rutherford. See also Reed (1996: 99).

In addition to discouraging loyalty to particular authors, erasing authorship also allows the Society to present their literature as naturalized, authoritative truth. Their Bible translation is controversial, and maintaining the anonymity of translators makes it possible to avoid accusations of bias against some particular individual. As Chryssides (2008: lix) points out, it is common for translations to emphasize a certain reading. To accuse the Witnesses of exceptional partiality is to forget that "every translation, even the most literal, consists of what the translator 'thinks the original writer might have said'" (Smalley 1991: 103).

Of course, few if any religious traditions recognize the translators or authors of the Bible. Bibles are generally published without any explicit acknowledgement of authorship, and the credit is always tacitly assumed to be dual: divine agency is recognized alongside human authorship. As Susan Friend Harding (2000: 273) notes, "The tension ... between an officially singular authorial voice in the foreground and multiple authors in the background ... [is] as old as the Bible." The Witnesses compare the writing of the Bible to a boss who dictates a letter to his secretary: "A businessman might have a secretary write a letter. That letter contains the businessman's thoughts and instructions. Hence, it is really his letter, not the secretary's. In a similar way, the Bible contains God's message, not that of the men who wrote it down" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2005c: 19-20).

The Watch Tower Society has extended this logic to all published theology and religious writing, unlike many traditions. That is, the Watch Tower Society produces only anonymous publications. One Watch Tower insider describes the process by which literature is produced as follows: "Writers reside in various countries, but the work of writing, editing, proofing, and production is coordinated at the world headquarters in Brooklyn, New York, under the immediate direction of the Writing Committee of the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses"



(Wah 2001: 163-4). She says little about the writing itself, instead emphasizing the Governing Body's role in coordinating the process. Although its members are identified by name,<sup>275</sup> the Governing Body itself retains a veneer of anonymity, for "Witnesses everywhere continue to believe that God is using the Governing Body as his channel of communication, and any correspondence for which it is responsible is endorsed only by the Society's official rubber stamp" (Holden 2002c: 32; cf. Whalen 1967: 71).<sup>276</sup>

An analysis external to the movement sees both agent and author of all of these texts – from tracts to congregational correspondence – as the institution, either the Governing Body or the larger Watch Tower Society. However, Witnesses do not always differentiate between Jehovah and the Society (Holden 2002c: 121); as far as they are concerned, the agent and perhaps even the author of these texts is Jehovah himself.<sup>277</sup> As former Witnesses Heather and Gary Botting (1984: 75) observe, "obedience to the organization ... eclipsed in importance the individual's perception of and relationship with Jehovah. ... God had become embedded in the corporate structure."

The one exception to the Watch Tower Society's policy of anonymity strengthens the claim that Witnesses attribute agency for its written texts to Jehovah. "No one but the top officers of the Society knows exactly who writes the books, magazine articles and tracts which flow from Brooklyn's presses. ... The only by-lines in the *Watchtower* are given to pioneers and Bethel residents who recount their conversions and happiness at being Jehovah's Witnesses" (Whalen

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<sup>275</sup> For example, "A New Member of the Governing Body" (*The Watchtower*, 7/15/2013, p. 26) provides a brief biography of Mark Sanderson and includes a photo of the Governing Body with all members identified.

<sup>276</sup> "That faithful slave is the channel through which Jesus is feeding his true followers in this time of the end. It is vital that we recognize the faithful slave. Our spiritual health and our relationship with God depend on this channel." ("Who Really Is the Faithful and Discrete Slave?" *The Watchtower*, 7/15/2013, pp. 20-25.)

<sup>277</sup> Compare Harding's (2000: 303) note that "[Jerry] Falwell's words, like the words of all men of God, are always already double-voiced in any case, in the sense that it is never entirely clear whether he or God is the author."

1962: 71). The only genre that is attributed to human authors is the personal narrative, which could not conceivably be authored by God.<sup>278</sup> However, any text that is even remotely theological in nature, including the articles printed in the purportedly general-interest *Awake!* magazine, does not have a recognized human author.

## 6.6 (Not) Just the Bible

We actually counted up all the material that the organization expected Witnesses to read. The books, magazines, lessons, and so on, added up to over three thousand pages each year, compared with less than two hundred pages of Bible reading assigned – and most of that was in the Old Testament. The majority of Witnesses were so bogged down by the three thousand pages of the organization's literature that they never got around to doing the Bible reading.  
[Reed 1986: 121]<sup>279</sup>

In spite of the Witnesses' claim that the Bible is the only source of authority (cf. Chrissydes 2012), they spend much more time reading Watch Tower publications than the Bible. Of the four hours of meetings that Witnesses attend each week, approximately fifteen minutes are dedicated to reading from the Bible. The rest of this time is dedicated to the analysis of Watch Tower texts, and talks given from outlines distributed by the Watch Tower Society.

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<sup>278</sup> For example, the article "Eager to Serve Jehovah, No Matter Where" (*The Watchtower*, 7/15/2013, pp. 27-31) contains the line "As told by Markus and Janny Hartlieb."

<sup>279</sup> David Reed (p.c., 5/15/2013) notes: "When I made that calculation JW's were expected to read a 32-page *Watchtower* magazine twice monthly, a 32-page *Awake!* magazine twice monthly, a 4-page to 8-page *Kingdom Ministry* internal publication monthly, and a new book of around 400 pages yearly – as well as re-read the 'study articles' in each of the periodicals in advance of meetings that considered them, and the weekly book study material for the weekly book study, and the articles assigned weekly for the Kingdom Ministry School."

Currently, the three monthly magazines (*Awake!* and the two editions of *The Watchtower*) alone comprise 768 pages annually. The books used for Congregation Bible Study typically run approximately 200 pages, the 2013 version of *Examining the Scriptures Daily* is 129 pages long, and the monthly editions of the newsletter *Our Kingdom Ministry* are typically 4 pages. The brochures and books released at annual district conventions might contain another few hundred pages. Witnesses also regularly review sections of texts like *Benefit from Theocratic Ministry School Education* (288 pages), *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* (223 pages), *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (445 pages), *Organized to Do Jehovah's Will* (224 pages), and *Insight on the Scriptures* (2550 pages between two volumes).

Michael S. (p.c., 5/12/2013) finds Reed's figure less than convincing, and it depends on which readings one considers to be truly required reading. He also notes that Witnesses are strongly encouraged to read all scripture cited in Watch Tower Publications and so the number of Bible pages that Reed gives is very low.

Although these activities include Bible quotations and proof-texts, they are framed within Watch Tower exegesis. The emphasis on Watch Tower texts, which are not shared with other Christian traditions, helps create a sense of community that does not extend beyond the Witnesses to encompass Christianity as a whole.

The authors who have paid the most attention to the Witnesses' reading practices are Christians – many of them former Witnesses – who take a critical stance, typically as part of detailed guides to introducing Witnesses (and others) to mainstream practices of reading Scripture (Reed 1986; Sire 1980).<sup>280</sup> For more mainstream Christians, a vast array of exegetical aids – "Christian magazines, books, concordances, Bible dictionaries, and so on" (Reed 1986: 99) – are useful in reading Scripture, but they are not necessary and do not replace the primacy of the Bible. The Witnesses, on the other hand, suggest that reading their publications is more important than reading the Bible.<sup>281</sup> Supplementing Biblical authority and rejecting it are often intertwined (Sire 1980: 115ff).

Indeed, Witnesses use language that frames the Bible as more central to their practices than it actually is. For most Christians, the term "Bible study" refers to close reading and

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<sup>280</sup> These authors' tone ranges from skeptical to outright dismissive. For example, James Sire (1980: 87) describes Witness reading practices as follows: "A slightly eccentric reading of one text of Scripture is linked with another slightly eccentric reading of another text, a few noneccentric readings are added and, as a traditional Christian we find ourselves in an odd forest of trees that look a bit like elms and oaks and pines and aspen but upon examination aren't really elms and oaks and pines and aspen but vegetation belonging to another planet circling another sun."

<sup>281</sup> "We all need help to understand the Bible, and we cannot find the Scriptural guidance we need outside the 'faithful and discreet slave' organization." ("Do We Need Help to Understand the Bible?" *The Watchtower*, 2/15/1981, pp. 16-19.)

"Thus the Bible is an organizational book and belongs to the Christian congregation as an organization, not to individuals, regardless of how sincerely they may believe that they can interpret the Bible. For this reason the Bible cannot be properly understood without Jehovah's visible organization in mind." ("Finding Freedom with Jehovah's Visible Organization," *The Watchtower*, 10/1/1967, pp. 585-591)

"From time to time, there have arisen from among the ranks of Jehovah's people those who, like the original Satan, have adopted an independent, faultfinding attitude. ... They say that it is sufficient to read the Bible exclusively, either alone or in small groups at home. But, strangely, through such 'Bible reading,' they have reverted right back to the apostate doctrines that commentaries by Christendom's clergy were teaching 100 years ago..." ("Serving Jehovah 'Shoulder to Shoulder,'" *The Watchtower*, 8/15/1981, pp. 25-30)

discussion of Biblical texts, sometimes with supplemental materials like concordances or dictionaries (Bielo 2008; 2009c). For Witnesses, however, the activities known as "Bible study" involve the close study of Watch Tower publications with a Bible used only as a supplement.

JW recruiters offer a *Bible study* to people encountered at the doors, but those who accept the offer find themselves actually studying a Watchtower textbook while opening the Bible itself only occasionally. Yet, because it is called a *Bible study*, impressionable people are led to think that they are studying the Bible. [Reed 2010: 110]

Similarly, one of the weekly meetings, known as the "Congregation Bible Study," requires group study of a textbook published by the Watch Tower Society rather than close reading of the Bible. A short segment within the Theocratic Ministry School, known as "Bible reading," begins with four minutes of important points presented by an elder or ministerial servant<sup>282</sup> and prepared based on a Watch Tower outline; the following ten minutes are left open for congregational comments, which are also prepared using Watch Tower sources.

The massive number of textual materials that the Witnesses use is illustrated by the portfolios – black leather briefcases or purses – that make them identifiable on sight. They carry these portfolios to meetings, as well as for door-to-door preaching; even children who are barely learning to read may carry one around. A portfolio will contain, at minimum, a hymnal (*Cantemos a Jehová* 'Sing to Jehovah'); a New World Translation of the Bible; a Bible study book such as *Ven, Sé Mi Seguidor* 'Come Be My Follower' or "*Testimonio Cabal*" *del Reino de Dios* "'Bearing Thorough Witness" About God's Kingdom'; and current editions of two newsletters used in meetings, *La Atalaya* 'The Watchtower' and *Nuestro Ministerio del Reino* 'Our Kingdom Ministry'. Many people also carry around assorted pamphlets and magazines for door-to-door preaching, especially the general interest magazine *¡Despertad!* 'Awake!'; a smaller

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<sup>282</sup> Elders and ministerial servants are positions in the Witness hierarchy that only men who meet certain allegedly Biblical qualifications can hold.

Bible study book (*Qué Enseña Realmente la Biblia?* 'What Does the Bible Really Teach?') used in home Bible studies; a daily Bible guide (*Examinando las Escrituras Diariamente* 'Examining the Scriptures Daily'); and other texts that are frequently used in meetings, including a public speaking textbook (*Beneficiese de la Escuela del Ministerio Teocrático* 'Benefit from Theocratic Ministry School Education'), a book of Bible reasoning (*Razonamiento de las Escrituras* 'Reasoning from the Scriptures'), and others. A Jehovah's Witness, in short, will not attend a meeting or go door-to-door without hundreds, maybe thousands of pages of written literature (cf. Cahn 2003: 156).

This array of texts serves multiple functions. Worldwide coordination of the organization would also be impossible without all of these texts (and others, such as talk outlines, described below). "So uniform is the Society's theology and content of meetings that, in principle, every Jehovah's Witness in the world will read the same literature during the same week in preparation for the same programme at their local Kingdom Hall" (Holden 2002c: 66). This uniformity is made possible only through the circulation of these texts, and allows Witness publications – and individual Witnesses – to boast of the fact that millions of Witnesses "receive the same spiritual food at the proper (i.e. the same) time." This emphasis on simultaneity and the worldwide community of Witnesses appears particularly frequently in the context of Assemblies, where a prayer before meals may well include a petition for the health and well-being of "all of our brothers and sisters around the world, who are so fortunate as to receive the same spiritual food as us in these three days."<sup>283</sup> Assembly speakers also place particular emphasis on the guidance of the Governing Body in providing the appropriate spiritual food (i.e. information about Biblical teachings) at the appropriate time, although this theme recurs in both talks and prayers throughout the year.

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<sup>283</sup> This is a reconstruction based on various sets of fieldnotes, rather than a direct quote.

Indeed, the Witnesses would be unable to sustain their exegesis of the Bible, much less proselytize with such efficiency, without substantial numbers of publications. Andrew Holden (2002c: 67) describes it thus:

These publications play an essential role in the teaching of Watch Tower beliefs. Despite the Witnesses' claim that the Bible is their only source of authority, they make constant use of a huge welter of both hard and paperback publications, tracts and *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines. In fact, without these aids it would be impossible for the Society to hold its meetings in their current format. It is also doubtful that devotees would be able to proselytize or to recruit new members. Materials such as *The Watchtower* are almost as significant to the Witnesses as the Bible, since the information is presented as the inspired work of theologians, and they are, therefore, believed to contain as much truth as biblical texts. Of all the literature published by the Society, articles from *The Watchtower* and various extracts from a circular entitled *Our Kingdom Ministry* provide the Witnesses with their weekly reading material. The weekly meetings are structured around these articles, which devotees spend a large amount of their own time reading in preparation. The content of these texts provides an important topic of conversation before the meetings begin and after they have ended. It is not uncommon for devotees to highlight certain paragraphs and key phrases in their tracts, and some even prepare their answers to the attached questions on notepaper. As usual, scriptural references are used to support the discussion.

This gargantuan array of texts provides a consistent vision of the meaning of the Bible, as well as assistance in reading it in ways that will lead the reader to the desired understanding.

All of these books and publications, however, derive their authority from the Bible (cf. Chrissydes 2012). They are peppered with Bible citations that legitimate their contents, for "Scripturalists cite their scriptures to demonstrate / signal that an idea or practice is authoritative" (Malley 2004: 149). For example, the internal book *Organized to Do Jehovah's Will* (*Organizados para Hacer la Voluntad de Jehová*), is a handbook of organizational procedures, yet every section uses Bible verses to justify these procedures as the only theocratic form of organization. Chapters of this book include proper procedure for filling out forms detailing 'service' (door-to-door preaching) hours; personal cleanliness, which includes not only grooming but also housekeeping; and "theocratic subjection", or the proper hierarchy within the

organization. All of these are justified with extensive Biblical citations as well as more informal references. For example, the Watch Tower Society's bureaucratic reporting requirements are explained as follows:

Some have asked: "Since Jehovah knows what I am doing in his service, why do I need to put in a report to the congregation?" True, Jehovah knows what we are doing, and he is able to judge whether our service is whole-souled or just a token of what we are really able to do. Remember, however, that Jehovah recorded the number of days that Noah spent in the ark and the number of years that the Israelites journeyed in the wilderness. God kept account of the number of those who were faithful as well as those who disobeyed. He recorded the progressive conquest of the land of Canaan and the accomplishments of the faithful judges of Israel. Yes, he recorded many details regarding the deeds and accomplishments of his servants. He inspired this written record of what took place, making clear to us his view of keeping accurate records.

Historical events recorded in the Bible demonstrate the exactness of reports and records kept by Jehovah's name people. In many cases, the full impact of the Bible account could not be conveyed without reporting the specific numbers. Consider the following examples: Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 12:37; Judges 7:7; 2 Kings 19:35; 2 Chronicles 14:9-13; John 6:10; 21:11; Acts 2:41; 19:19.<sup>284</sup> [Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2005a: 88-89]

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<sup>284</sup> Genesis 46:27: "And Joseph's sons who were born to him in Egypt were two souls. All the souls of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were seventy."

Exodus 12:37: "And the sons of Israel proceeded to depart from Rameses for Succoth, to the number of six hundred thousand able-bodied men on foot, besides little ones."

Judges 7:7: "Jehovah now said to Gideon: 'By the three hundred men who did the lapping I shall save YOU people, and I will give Midian into your hand. As for all the other people, let them go each one to his place.'"

2 Kings 19:35: "And it came about on that night that the angel of Jehovah proceeded to go out and strike down a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians. When people rose up early in the morning, why, there all of them were dead carcasses."

2 Chronicles 14:9-13: "Later Zerah the Ethiopian went out against them with a military force of a million men and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah. Then Asa went out against him and they drew up in battle formation in the valley of Zephathah at Mareshah. And Asa began to call to Jehovah his God and say: 'O Jehovah, as to helping, it does not matter with you whether there are many or [those with] no power. Help us, O Jehovah our God, for upon you we do lean, and in your name we have come against this crowd. O Jehovah, you are our God. Do not let mortal man retain strength against you.' At that Jehovah defeated the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians took to flight. And Asa and the people that were with him kept pursuing them as far as Gerar, and those of the Ethiopians continued falling down till there was no one alive of them; for they were broken to pieces before Jehovah and before his camp. Afterward they carried off a very great deal of spoil."

John 6:10: " Jesus said: 'HAVE the men recline as at meal.' Now there was a lot of grass in the place. Therefore the men reclined, about five thousand in number."

John 21:11: "Simon Peter, therefore, went on board and drew the net to land full of big fishes, one hundred and fifty-three of them. But although there were so many the net did not burst."

Acts 2:41: "Therefore those who embraced his word heartily were baptized, and on that day about three thousand souls were added."

Following a simple explanation of Jehovah's interest in keeping records, an extensive list of citations justifies this practice as Biblical and thus theocratic. By linking this requirement to the Bible – although readers may never check the cross-references – the text makes such a requirement authoritative and unquestionable.

## 6.7 A Singular Correct Interpretation, a Single Interpreter

The Fundamentalist's critique ... does rely on questionable assumptions about textual meaning, interpretation, and objectivity. It assumes, for one, that there is a single correct interpretation of Scripture. I have found that many Fundamentalists extend this mode of reading to other texts – to life generally. Their critique also assumes, and in a corollary fashion, that meaning (as distinguished from personal significance) is timeless. (Crapanzano 2000: 19)

Like Fundamentalists,<sup>285</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses are "monosemic" (Holden 2002c) or "monologic" (Elliott 1993). That is, they allow for no relativism or dissident points of view, and refuse any attempts at ecumenicalism due to their self-proclaimed monopoly on the truth. As Crapanzano describes, this authoritarian, monosemic "mode of reading" can certainly become, for some, a rigid self-righteousness that extends even to solidly non-doctrinal issues like recipes or dishwashing techniques.<sup>286</sup>

Witness ideology is so firm on this point that the Other against which they define themselves is the totality of other Christians. They reserve the term "Christian" to refer to

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Acts 19:19: "Indeed, quite a number of those who practiced magical arts brought their books together and burned them up before everybody. And they calculated together the prices of them and found them worth fifty thousand pieces of silver."

<sup>285</sup> For a study of conservative Christians who are less rigid in their interpretation – indeed, who "continually fail to produce defined, resolved readings of particular Biblical texts" – see Bielo (2008;2009c).

<sup>286</sup> One woman would correct my dishwashing any time she saw me do it; if I washed out of her sight, she would smell the plates and admit they were just as clean as when she washed them herself. However, I hardly wish to claim that all Witnesses are rigid, nor that the rigidity of some Witnesses is necessarily a consequence of their religion. I simply wish to observe that there is some continuity between inflexibility in religion and in other aspects of life.



themselves, and they depict all other Christian groups as idolaters, false prophets, and tools of the devil's manipulation. Christianity, the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, is contrasted with "Christendom." This latter term refers to "the Christian religion, as practiced by the churches, [which] ... [t]rue Christians ... do not want to be part of" (Chryssides 2008: 26).

Indeed, not only is the Watch Tower Society accepted as the only competent interpreter of the Bible, but Witnesses have no recourse if they disagree with the Society's interpretations. Stating a dissenting opinion is grounds for congregational discipline; even studying the Bible without the guidance of the Watch Tower is prohibited (Holden 2002c: 157; Whalen 1962: 99). Since Witnesses are trained to tattle on one another to congregational authorities, these authors and many others note that few would risk proposing an alternative interpretation even among close family or friends. Only the Governing Body in Brooklyn has the authority to establish doctrines, which "means that Jehovah's Witnesses around the world are recipients of an absolutist message rather than free-thinking agents who are actively involved in the formulation of religious ideas" (Holden 2002c: 22).

Witnesses are also prohibited from reading anything that is critical of Witness beliefs, and strongly discouraged from reading anything written about Witnesses by non-Witness authors. (The library of the Writing Department in Brooklyn, however, contains a number of such books; the exceptionally strong faith of those who serve there presumably protects them from the apostasy contained within.) In fact, one former Witness says that group study even of Watch Tower publications is forbidden; the circuit overseer disbanded his small group discussion of *The Watchtower* magazine (Quick 1989). These prohibitions are justified, in that Witnesses typically leave the organization when they do begin to study the Bible independently and consider interpretations separate from those of the Watch Tower Society (Holden 2002a). A

great number of autobiographies and memoirs of former Witnesses describe this experience (e.g. Dickerson 2010; Franz 1983; Quick 1989; Reed 1986; 2010; Wilson 2002, etc.).

Witnesses are well aware of this doctrinal centralization, and see it as further evidence of their accuracy. As Cata observed:

...what one Jehovah's Witness believes, another is going to believe the same thing although he is on the other side of the world. There's not going to be a difference. That unites us. Me, in my preaching, for example, I have bumped into people from the same religion, who in some place believe one thing, and in another place believe another, and that is what is different about Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>287</sup>

Precisely what makes Jehovah's Witnesses special is the globalized yet standardized unity of their belief. Others made similar observations: difference of belief indicated that someone was in error rather than the possibility of multiple correct understandings.

The monologic nature of Witness discourse is perhaps best illustrated by their most common way of referring to their own faith: *the truth*. While many groups of Christians refer to scripture in this way,<sup>288</sup> Witnesses make the subtle distinction of including under this rubric only their own reading of the Bible. Instead of asking new acquaintances when they became Christians or when they were saved (cf. Bielo 2009c: 38-9), Witnesses ask each other when they learned the truth (or, especially in the case of newer members, when they began to study the Bible). This name, of course, bears a heavy burden of presupposition: one who claims to have stopped believing in the truth must be irrational. I was often asked variants of the question "Do you believe the truth yet?" – to which I never found a comfortable answer. Their truth is so monolithic, so unaccepting of other truths or other ways of searching for truth, that whenever I

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<sup>287</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:51:42-00:52:04:

"... lo que un testigo de Jehová que cree, lo va creer el otro, que esté en el otro lado del mundo. No va a haber diferencia. Eso nos une. Yo, en mi predicación, por ejemplo, me he topado con personas de una misma religión, que en cierto lugar creen una cosa, y en otro lugar creen otra, y e::so es la diferencia de los testigos de Jehová."

<sup>288</sup> See, for example, Bielo 2009c: 52ff.

heard the words *the truth* I found myself mentally capitalizing the T,<sup>289</sup> although this is not common usage in Witness publications.<sup>290</sup>

The Watch Tower Society's brand of literalism differs subtly from that espoused by other conservative and fundamentalist Christians. Talks given in the Service Meeting during the week of May 30th, 2011,<sup>291</sup> which addressed the question of how to do research, best illustrate the Watch Tower Society's approach to the Bible. One speaker, in attempting to come up with a Chontal translation for 'research' (*investigación*), defined the word *information* as "what books say." The ultimate translation of 'research' was *lawejle pangka pe lokopa alje'e*, or 'search slowly for what books say.' Information is found not in experience or in discussion, but in books.

The Witnesses' principal textbook, according to these talks,<sup>292</sup> is the Bible. However, to read the Bible, one has a responsibility to consider the context, examine cross-references, and use a concordance. One should also use Watch Tower sources on other topics to round out this information. However, a researcher must be particularly careful not only with secular sources but also with older Watch Tower publications, as they may no longer be up to date. Not only is the Watch Tower Society the single appropriate source of information, but only its current set of beliefs at any given moment are to be consulted.

Harding (2000: 28) notes that interpretations espoused by particular preachers and churches are inextricable from the Bible: "The Bible is at once a closed canon and an open book, still alive, a living Word. Preachers and their peoples are third testaments, the authors of always

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<sup>289</sup> or the V (Spanish *la verdad*) or the J (Chontal *aljlinka*), for that matter.

<sup>290</sup> Elliott (1993) capitalizes this word, presumably for the same reason. It is also worth noting that Witness publications do not follow certain religious conventions of capitalization. Notably, pronouns that refer to God are not capitalized.

<sup>291</sup> This discussion is based on talks from all three Zapotitlán congregations. See discussion in Section 8.5.5.

<sup>292</sup> These talks themselves were based on the Theocratic Ministry School textbook (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001a; b).

unfolding chapters and verses." In this sense, the view that the theologians of the Watch Tower Society are divinely inspired is not unusual. The exclusiveness of this inspiration, however, is much less common. As James Bielo (2009c: 4) notes of most Christians: "Biblical texts are often the basis of discussion but are certainly not the only type of text that is read. Members are voracious readers, systematically working through Biblical texts, Biblical commentaries, devotional materials, best-selling Christian books, and print and online articles from Christian periodicals." Witnesses, however, do not have this flexibility.

As Kevin Quick (1989) describes, "'Hermeneutics' (the science of Biblical interpretation) is a foreign word to most Witnesses. Because the Watchtower Society is 'God's Organization,' they reason, all Bible interpretation that it supplies is therefore correct, being directed by God Himself. They therefore see no need for their own personal understanding of hermeneutics." Indeed, Witnesses do not have a consistent hermeneutic but rather "a tradition and nothing more ... [which] allows them to be arbitrary in using the Scriptures to explain what is wanted in terms of Witness doctrine or the notions of the dominant figures on the governing body" (Penton 1997: 179). That is, individual Witnesses do not interpret the Bible at all, but turn to the Society to interpret it for them:

If much of Scripture is to be applied "spiritually," or "symbolically," then how are we to know how to interpret the Bible at all? How are we to know which passages are to be understood 'spiritually' and which are to be taken literally? Hence arises the need for a special class of Bible interpreters, the "faithful and discreet slave class." The average Witness himself is very careful not to accept the Bible's teachings at face value. He will instead look to the "slave class" to provide all necessary interpretation for him. [Quick 1989]

In short, the Witness cannot trust his own reading of the Bible. As one Witness told me, "There's no room for human thought."<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> "No cabe pensamiento humano." Fieldnotes 12/17/2010.

## 6.8 Religion as Logic

Those who buy into the Witnesses' worldview have good reason to avoid other sources of knowledge about the Bible and Christianity. The Witnesses emphasize the logic and rationality of their own beliefs, claiming that their approach to the Bible is systematic and rational, as opposed to all other interpretations. This aspect of Watch Tower theology has been central since the founding of the movement, when Charles Taze Russell "establish[ed] a monosemic, scriptural theology which he argued was rational and irrefutable" (Holden 2002c: 22). Indeed, the Witnesses avoid all displays of mysticism and condemn superstition; they "study" rather than "worship."

Witnesses' descriptions of how they came to their faith exemplifies this point. Most conservative Christians "testify" or "witness" by speaking about their own conversion in terms of transformative personal experiences, typically as moments of epiphany that provide a break with a previous self (Ammerman 1987; Bielo 2009c; Robbins 2007). Witnesses, however, describe their conversions as a gradual process of reasoning and learning comparable to what is done in schools (Beckford 1978; Holden 2002c: 59-60). Many former Witnesses also describe feeling impressed by elders' and early mentors' ready command of the Scriptures and ability to provide answers to any and all questions.

The Witnesses' apparent rationalism, however, requires taking certain presuppositions on faith, most notably, the inspiration of the Bible and the reading practices described in this chapter. Since all of their logic is based on the Bible at some level, it can only make sense if one accepts the Bible as an authoritative source. Indeed, most Witnesses that I met live in a context where they almost never interact with someone who does not identify as a Christian of some sort, and so this was a presupposition they typically shared with their audiences.

A few days after a Theocratic Ministry School presentation on preaching to Jews, I had a long conversation with a devout Witness about who the Jews are and what we believe, much of which she found literally inconceivable. I am sure the conversation was frustrating for both of us: I kept suggesting that the Witnesses' message would be better received by Jews if Biblical citations were limited to the Hebrew Scriptures in these encounters, while she kept asking me to read from the Gospel of Luke, because Luke himself says that he was inspired by God and that should be sufficient proof.<sup>294</sup> In conversations with Witnesses, I would often make the empathetic point that believers of other faiths were equally convinced that their truth was the only truth and that the rest of us were in error. Although I never said that all religions were equally true, only that their followers were equally *certain*, only one or two Witnesses ever admitted to understanding this point even intellectually. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Witness proselytizing is much more successful among Christians than among adherents of any other religion (Holden 2002c: 45; Penton 1997: 254-5).

The linkage of religion and rationality is connected to a referential view of language. Keane (2007: 185) observes: "In its austerity and caution about syncretism, Calvinist preaching does not even have recourse to the passions, as in the ecstasy of the evangelical camp meeting or what the missionaries see as the seductions of Catholic ritual. Preaching can only convey true

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<sup>294</sup> That said, she is unlikely to find herself in a position to witness to a Jew ever again, since there are fewer than 2,500 in the entire state of Oaxaca, and almost all of them live in the capital (INEGI 2010). In fact, after a Ministry School presentation at a Circuit Assembly (5/28/2011) on preaching to Jews, the District Overseer noted that "(There won't be) Jews here in, in the meeting place, right? I don't know, some trader\* here in Salina Cruz, probably the brothers will meet (him). In the communities and villages where the brothers who go out and preach in Chontal live, it's unlikely."

("(No habrá) judíos aquí en, en la localidad, verdad? No sé, algún comerciante\* aquí en Salina Cruz, probablemente los hermanos (lo) encuentren. En las rancherías, en los pueblitos donde están los hermanos que van a predicar en Chontal, eso difícilmente.")

\* With hindsight, I interpreted the Overseer's commentary was a well-intentioned aside to his audience that he understood the lack of ongoing relevance of this topic to their ministry, but the choice of this word provided me with one of the most uncomfortable moments of my fieldwork. The word *comerciante* typically suggests a mercenary middleman rather than an honest businessman. Indeed, in terms of the racist stereotypes – however unintended – that it calls to mind, a better English translation might be 'moneylender' or 'pawnbroker'.

statements about the world and hope thereby to persuade." Witnesses, like the Calvinists Keane studied, do not believe in magic or mysticism; preaching is a question of logical persuasion.

When the Witnesses do appeal to emotion, it is so naturalized as to appear rational. The mother tongue, in particular, holds a special emotional status, and this status is taken for granted. Non-Witnesses are thought not only to understand the message better in their first language but also to be more accepting because "it reaches their hearts." Yet the connection of one's mother tongue to one's emotions is unquestioned, and fully accepted as truth. As such, the use of multiple languages is not syncretic but simply instrumental.

## Seven

# Performance and Participation

This chapter explores the relationship between written text, performance, and participation in Witness religious practice. This description of day-to-day Witness life is based in my own fieldwork, and ethnographic and memoir accounts allow me to generalize from this specific local community to the larger textual community of Witnesses. Indeed, I argue that the interdependency of the *authorization* of texts and the *legitimation* of participants is one of the mechanisms that constitutes the globalized textual community.<sup>295</sup>

Witness religious practices represent an extreme case of what Richard Bauman (2004) has called *mediational performances*, in which a prior utterance is inseparable from the current utterance. All Witness religious practices involve the performance or animation of various written texts that are centrally produced; they are "communicative routines that are regimented in such a way as to require a mediating relay, a routinized pass-it-on reiteration of a source utterance" (Bauman 2004: 128-9). In performance, Witnesses enact the authority of these written texts, which in turn legitimate them as particular types of participants. These performances are structured with multiple participant roles – ways of engaging with texts – which are hierarchically ranked. Individuals who hold higher positions in the overall Witness hierarchy can engage in more important roles in more contexts. Witness activities are also hierarchically differentiated along two dimensions: front stage and back stage (Goffman 1990[1959]), as well as the presence of Witnesses in the audience. Authorizing the Witness institutional structure, in short, legitimates these hierarchies and thus individuals' particular roles.

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<sup>295</sup> See Bucholtz and Hall (2004) on *authorization* and *legitimation*; see also Kuipers 1990.



## 7.1 Mediational Performances and New Participant Roles

Mediational performances are not just any utterance in which some decontextualized prior discourse is recontextualized. Rather, they are "processes and routines in which the recontextualization is deliberately managed, conventionally regimented, in performance" (Bauman 2004: 130). They are ceremonial, requiring the use of "specialized, esoteric, interpretively difficult registers saturated with traditional authority" (Bauman 2004: 146). Furthermore, the target utterances are framed as performances, and the public nature of the audience is key (Duranti 1986). They are traditionalizing: by framing the target as a reproduction of the source, mediational performances transcend the spatial and temporal limits of speech. Their formal features play a role in the socialization of knowledge. Mediational performances are also authorizing: if the target is a reproduction of the source, the animator does not take on an authorship role and can thus claim the authority of the prior utterance.

Bauman identifies several dimensions that are important to an understanding of such performances, and all will be relevant to my discussion of the Witnesses. First, they are highly conventionalized: participants share expectations, which play an important role in regimentation. Second, participants in later events (the *target dialogue*) may or may not have access to the original event in the sequence (the *source dialogue*). Greater access affords direct confirmation of expectations. Third, the textuality of utterances is a key index of just this sort of mediation: utterances are available for decontextualization and recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990) largely because of their connection to prior discourses (cf. Bakhtin 1981: 342). Finally, and most central to this analysis, mediation creates highly complex participation structures and roles.

All Witness religious activities, with the exception of prayer, center on the performance or enactment of various types of written texts. (I avoid the word *animation* here because animation is one of many types of textual performance.) Texts are at the center of activities geared towards the instruction of fellow Witnesses, including religious meetings and family worship. Activities like door-to-door proselytizing and Bible study, which are carried out with non-Witnesses, also rely on Witness textual materials. Keane (2004: 439) observes: "As they circulate, entextualized words are subject to recontextualization, as, for example, they are performed, read out loud, quoted, alluded to, or made the objects of silent meditation."

For Witnesses, participation in these types of recontextualization creates and reinforces a hierarchy of roles. Participation legitimates the hierarchy itself as well as their positions in it, and it authorizes the written texts around which it revolves. This hierarchy simultaneously allows all Witnesses to feel included in the authority structure and limits their participation (see Goffman 1979; Goodwin and Goodwin 2004). Witnesses are allowed to participate in the performance of these texts, increasingly so as they move up the hierarchy. However, certain roles always remain off-limits.

The written nature of Witness texts affords a very high degree of standardization. Briggs and Bauman (1992: 157) caution that the use of written texts does not necessarily promote a closer connection between the prior text and later recontextualizations. However, the use of written texts, and particularly texts that are accessible to participants at the time of the performance, means that performers can be accountable to their audiences for failing to minimize the intertextual gap. Since minimizing the gap is "a potent means of infusing the discourse with authority" (Bauman 2004: 167), the Watch Tower Society maintains its own institutional authority in part by providing such texts.

All Witness texts are produced centrally by the Watch Tower Society, with the goal of standardizing the content of Witness observance across the globe. Yet even a pretense of standardization across contexts requires decontextualization. Witness texts must contend not only with spatial gaps but also temporal and linguistic ones: the original English text may be written months or even years before it is translated into a vast array of languages and received by congregations worldwide. As Bauman (2004: 138-142) observes, mediational performances bridge spatial, temporal, and social distance. They are precisely what makes such standardization possible.

Bauman also notes that such a model necessarily complicates participant structures; the ways in which Witness texts may be performed include five major participant roles. These five roles are analytic categories rather than categories recognized by Witnesses themselves, and they are hierarchically arranged. Fewer individuals have access to each successive role for any given text and activity, which themselves are hierarchically arranged. Bauman and Briggs (1990: 76-77) note that "the issue of legitimacy is one of being accorded the authority to appropriate a text such that your recentering of it counts as legitimate. . . . Institutional structures and mechanisms confer legitimate authority to control texts," and this is precisely what we observe. Witnesses beyond the very top rungs of the hierarchy may only inhabit three of these five roles, and which ones they may take on is regimented by the institution. Furthermore, all three fall within Bauman's (2004: 132) *relayer* role.<sup>296</sup> They are simultaneously addressees of the source utterance and speakers of the target audience.

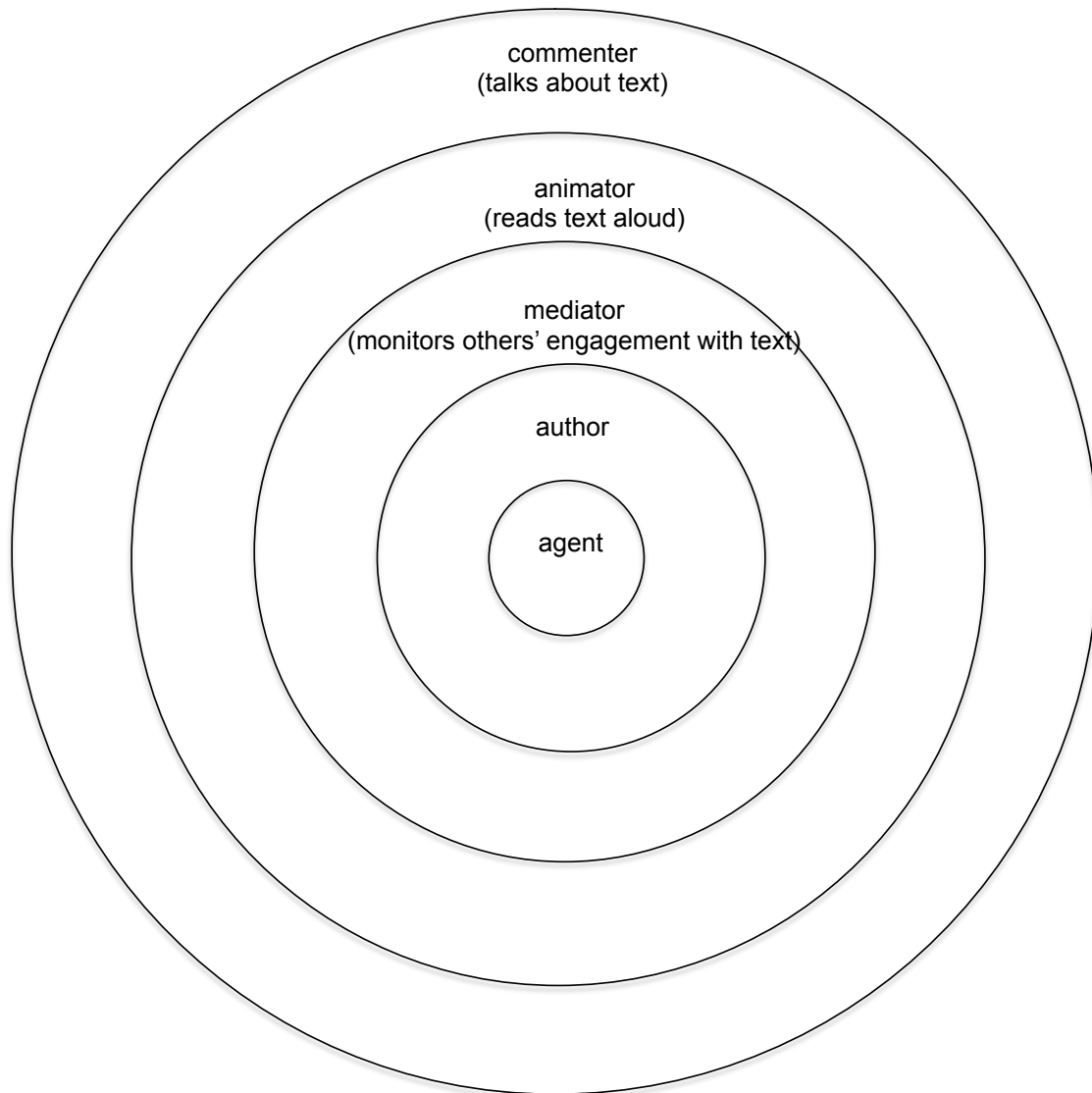
I present the five roles here from most to least inclusive, which corresponds to a distinction from most to least mediated. *Commenters* are allowed to talk about a text, answer

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<sup>296</sup> Bauman also calls this the *mediator* role; however, I use this term exclusively for a subset of Bauman's *relayer* category.

questions about it, and quote from it, but they may not give voice to it in full. I include silent audience members in this role, because all audience members may potentially comment even if they choose not to do so. *Animators* may read a text in full. *Mediators* are a more select group who have the privilege of monitoring commenters' engagement with the text and ensuring that their responses reflect the desired understanding of it. The *author* of all texts is the Watch Tower Society; the policies of anonymity described in the previous chapter ensure that this role is limited to the institution. Finally, the *agent* of all texts, the one on whose behalf texts speak, is either the Watch Tower Society or Jehovah; Witnesses do not always differentiate between the two (Holden 2002c: 121). Note that commenters occupy a position of second-order mediation: their role with respect to the mediator's utterances is similar to the mediator's relationship to the written text.

**Figure 7.1:** Participant roles in the performance of Watch Tower Society texts and their hierarchical ranking.



Witness religious activities are themselves hierarchically ranked along two dimensions: front stage and back stage activities, and whether baptized Witnesses are counted among the audience. While Goffman's (1990[1959]) front stage-back stage distinction is often seen as parallel to the public-private binary, much of what is back stage still takes place in "a social world, if not fully a public one, with its own forms of performance and ritual" (Wolfe 1997: 186). Rather than a public-private dichotomy, I consider *who* is being addressed as a key

dimension. I argue that both dimensions are necessary to understand Witness activities, and that a back stage is a back stage only with regard to the particular front stage context to which it is oriented.

All activities that take place at the Kingdom Hall have an audience that consists primarily if not exclusively of other Witnesses: these meetings are open to congregation members as well as to potential converts. However, "congregation members" and "Witnesses" are not coterminous: each congregation includes a large number of children and other unbaptized Witnesses, who are not considered full members. Meanwhile, preparation for Kingdom Hall meetings is an activity with no ratified audience at all, and door-to-door ministry and home Bible studies are activities whose sole purpose is to educate non-Witnesses and ultimately bring them into the fold by means of logical persuasion (see Chapter Six.)

The front stage-back stage dimension measures the degree to which performative aspects of behavior are foregrounded and made explicit (Goffman 1990[1959]). Any activity whose chief goal is to elucidate on and prepare for self-presentation in a second activity represents a back stage with regard to that second activity. Because back and front stages exist only with reference to another activity, these may be recursive (cf. Gal 2005): an activity may be performative in its own right yet oriented to another activity. For example, Witnesses who present in the Theocratic Ministry School and Service Meeting take great care in preparation, and these presentations take place on a literal stage within the Kingdom Hall. However, these meetings represent a back stage as regards the door-to-door ministry, where Witnesses can practice these techniques, evaluate one another, and provide overt instruction.

**Figure 7.2:** Witness activities according to these two dimensions

	<b>Front Stage</b>	<b>Back Stage</b>
<b>Audience contains baptized Witnesses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congregation Bible Study</li> <li>• Watchtower Study</li> <li>• Public Talk</li> <li>• family worship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theocratic Ministry School</li> <li>• Service Meeting</li> </ul>
<b>Audience of non-Witnesses (or no audience)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• door-to-door ministry</li> <li>• home Bible study</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• preparation for Kingdom Hall presentations</li> </ul>

The Witness hierarchy is strongest in contexts where the audience contains baptized Witnesses. Participation is somewhat more limited in front stage contexts relative to back stage contexts, but the audience dimension is more important. In all contexts, the author and agent roles are limited to the Watch Tower Society, while individual Witnesses' access to the other roles depend on the activity and its setting. For example, women are not allowed to teach other Witnesses (Botting and Botting 1984: 86), which limits their participation, particularly in front stage contexts. However, all overt instruction of non-Witnesses, including Witnesses' own pre-baptismal children, takes place on an individual basis, where baptized women can and do take on important roles. The goal of door-to-door proselytizing is to convince individuals to take on a home Bible study with Witnesses, and home Bible study is the chief activity by which Witnesses socialize new converts.

The hierarchy of privileges in terms of participation is connected to a worldwide institutional hierarchy. Andrew Holden (2002c: 30) observes:

The Witnesses have no ordained clergy. They refer to all members as ministers or publishers (or, more personally, brothers and sisters). This is based on the belief that hierarchies are contrary to biblical teaching. However, closer examination reveals that there is a visible hierarchy, and Witnesses in over fifty thousand congregations throughout the world are assigned responsibilities. The chain of posts and the graduation of authority upwards from Minister (or Publisher) to Pioneer, Special Pioneer, Circuit Overseer, District Overseer, Branch Official and Governing Body suggest a complicated system of command and promotion. Strange as it may seem to outsiders, all positions are viewed as positions of service with no visible or official exaltation of individuals. At every level of the

organization, those in authority oversee those below them, which means that every Witness is under official surveillance.

I would argue that Ministerial Servant and Elder should replace Pioneer and Special Pioneer in this otherwise excellent description.<sup>297</sup> The positions of Pioneer and Special Pioneer are connected to the number of hours spent in door-to-door ministry rather than responsibility for a congregation or larger unit, and a Pioneer can hold other positions in this hierarchy simultaneously. Furthermore, Pioneer and Special Pioneer positions are open to women.

As this chapter is chiefly concerned with activities at the congregational level, the positions of elder and ministerial servant are particularly important. Together, they run congregations with relatively little oversight; Penton (1997: 212) compares them to Catholic priests and deacons respectively. Each congregation has six specific offices that elders may hold; smaller congregations may have only one or two elders who hold all of these positions (Penton 1997: 237-239). These men – both elders and ministerial servants – are able to inhabit many participant roles that other congregation members are not allowed to take on.

## **7.2 Activities with a Witness Audience**

Jehovah's Witnesses attend two two-hour meetings weekly, and these meetings comprise five activities also known as "meetings." They also assemble in groups smaller than the congregation for *field service*, or door-to-door proselytizing. All three Zapotitlán congregations – and most congregations worldwide – hold their Public Talk and Watchtower Study meetings on Sundays, while the other three meetings (Congregational Bible Study, Theocratic Ministry School, and Service Meeting) were held on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday afternoons in Zapotitlán. Here I describe the general structure of Witness meetings and activities. I start with

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<sup>297</sup> Holden describes the positions of elder and ministerial servant in depth elsewhere.



activities with a Witness audience, beginning with the most prototypically front stage and moving to those that have back stage elements.

**Figure 7.3:** Schedule of Weekday and Sunday Meetings.

<b>Weekday Meeting</b>	<b>Sunday Meeting</b>
Song	Song
Opening Prayer	Opening Prayer
Congregational Bible Study	Public Talk
Theocratic Ministry School <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bible highlights</li> <li>• Bible reading</li> <li>• 2-3 short presentations</li> </ul>	Song
Song	Watchtower Study
Service Meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2-3 short presentations</li> </ul>	Song
Song	Closing Prayer
Closing Prayer	

### 7.2.1 The Public Talk

Sunday meetings begin with public talks, which are thirty-minute lectures.<sup>298</sup> Elders or ministerial servants typically give these talks, preparing them from outlines provided by the Watch Tower Society. Talks typically deal with some specific aspect of doctrine, for example, providing Biblical justification of the Witnesses' belief that most good people will spend eternity in an earthly paradise rather than in heaven.

Speakers are encouraged to follow the outlines closely, and in particular to be wary of inserting Bible references not given in the original outline. However, outlines contain extensive citations, and a speaker can easily fill the time given simply by referring to these. Speakers are also asked to be wary of speaking on their own behalf, or from personal experience:

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<sup>298</sup> Witnesses use the term "sermon" to refer only to the speech given in the act of proselytizing, and to the skits performed in preparation for this task.

Studiously avoid injecting speculation or personal opinion. Even God's Son, Jesus Christ, avoided speaking of 'his own originality.' (John 14:10)<sup>299</sup> Appreciate that the reason why people come to the meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses is to hear the Bible discussed. If you have come to be regarded as a fine speaker, likely it is because you make it a practice to draw attention, not to yourself, but to God's Word. For this, your talks are appreciated.—Phil. 1:10, 11.<sup>300</sup>  
[Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001b: 54]

Since one may not speak for himself, he must closely follow the outline provided. These instructions ensure that the Watch Tower Society's authority will not be undermined, and also encourage the speaker to see himself as voicing the words of a higher authority (either the Bible or the Watch Tower Society) rather than as the author of his own words.<sup>301</sup>

In short, personal erasure is the norm. Such erasure is also accomplished by underspecified deictic centering (cf. Bauman 2004: 138). Public talks, like other Witness texts, almost never contain first person singular pronouns. They do, however, contain first person plural pronouns, with either "Witnesses" or "people" as their antecedents, and second person pronouns that are typically understood as generic. Spatiotemporal deictics, meanwhile, ground all participants in Witness temporality and eschatology: Witness texts refer frequently to "this world" and "this system of things," both of which index the belief that Armageddon and a better world are not far away.

Public talks represent one of the simplest mediated participant structures. They have no explicit dialogic component and thus do not require all of the roles described in the beginning of this chapter. This activity has only a single speaking participant, who acts as both animator and

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<sup>299</sup> "Do you not believe that I am in union with the Father and the Father is in union with me? The things I say to YOU men I do not speak of my own originality; but the Father who remains in union with me is doing his works."

<sup>300</sup> "that YOU may make sure of the more important things, so that YOU may be flawless and not be stumbling others up to the day of Christ, and may be filled with righteous fruit, which is through Jesus Christ, to God's glory and praise."

<sup>301</sup> While elders may not write their own talks, each speaker at Assemblies and at weekly meetings is responsible for translating (or not) the talk he will give, illustrating once more the secondary status of translation.

mediator, and it does not allow for commenters. (On rare occasions, the man presenting the talk will ask an audience member to read a Bible verse aloud. In such a case, his mediator role becomes more explicit and the individual reading from the Bible acts as a commenter.)

### **7.2.2 Congregation Bible Study and Watchtower Study: Question and Answer Format**

A great number of these meetings, particularly the Congregation Bible Study and Watchtower Study meetings, use a question and answer format that encourages repetition and learning by rote. Participants are expected to prepare for the meeting at home by reading a study text about the Bible or about Witness practices and doctrines. These texts consist of numbered paragraphs with corresponding study questions for each paragraph or group of paragraphs, and Witnesses prepare answers to these questions before the meeting, often by simply underlining the relevant phrases or sentences.

Two baptized male Witnesses lead these meetings in the animator and mediator roles. One reads from the text, a paragraph at a time, and the other, who is nearly always an elder or ministerial servant, reads the questions and calls on individuals to answer until he feels the congregation has understood the text, at which point he asks the reader to continue. This mediator inserts follow-up questions, summary, and his own paraphrases as he sees fit.

Congregation members who answer in Spanish typically read their answers directly from the text provided, although they may insert discourse markers such as "It says" to make the answer flow more smoothly.<sup>302</sup> Even within the set of commenters, some hierarchical features are visible. The congregation members who were most likely to answer in their own words were men who already had significant responsibilities in the congregation: elders and ministerial servants. The only women who consistently answered in Spanish paraphrase rather than reading

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<sup>302</sup> Compare Kuipers (1993) on reported speech verbs as a way to locate responsibility for authoritative language.

aloud were sisters, and both were daughters of a man widely recognized as a founder of the Zapotitlán Jehovah's Witnesses.

Indeed, many individuals in all three Zapotitlán congregations would mark their answers in their texts or *Watchtower* magazines. In one family's Bible study, it was habitual for an older child to seek out the answers and underline not only her own but also her younger brother's text. During meetings, many people would compare the passages they had underlined with their neighbors, or would bring pens and carefully mark off the segments that others read aloud. Mothers would encourage their children to read answers the mother had prepared in her own notebook. Once, when I arrived early to a meeting, the woman next to me asked if I had underlined my magazine and offered to let me copy her underlining so I could participate.<sup>303</sup> In short, there was a sense that the text itself contained precisely one correct answer. This emphasis on comparing and sharing answers – and on conformity – reinforced a sort of fetishism of the literal words of the text (cf. Bauman 2004).<sup>304</sup> As Keane (2004: 440) observes, "direct quotation is often felt to be more deferential to the original speaker, since it does not impose an interpretation or mingle voices."

Often, the answers would involve a simple rereading of the entire paragraph. On one not atypical occasion, the written paragraph read:

This incident reminds us of the importance of organization among God's people.  
To this day, responsible men are selected to serve as overseers in the

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<sup>303</sup> I never participated in the question-and-answer segments of meetings, nor did I ever volunteer to read a citation aloud. My contribution was limited to an "amen" at the ends of prayers and joining in during the songs, the minimum contribution of any other attendee.

<sup>304</sup> This literalistic approach to the text may be widespread among Witnesses and not particular to the congregations I attended, since others describe a similar phenomenon. For example, Quick (1989) notes that in the Watchtower Study meeting, "the student(s) then answer the question, usually by reading what they have underlined in their own copies of the study material." However, publications encourage Witnesses to provide comments in their own words (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001b: 66-70; "Praise Jehovah 'in the Middle of the Congregation,'" *The Watchtower*, 9/1/2003, pp. 19-22; "Teach Your Children to Give Comments," *The Watchtower*, 11/15/2006, p. 31).

congregation. The elders carefully consider the Scriptural qualifications required of such overseers, and they pray for the guidance of holy spirit. The congregation thus views such men as appointed by holy spirit. For our part, we remain submissive and obedient to their lead, promoting a cooperative spirit in the congregation.—Heb. 13:17.<sup>305</sup>  
[Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2009a]<sup>306</sup>

The mediator first read the question aloud: "Why should we be submissive and obedient to those taking the lead in the congregation today?" He called on a woman, who proceeded to read the first three sentences of the paragraph aloud, word for word. He agreed that she was correct, since the election of elders was left in Jehovah's hands, and then asked if anyone else had a comment. A second woman raised her hand and read the remaining two sentences, also word for word: "The congregation thus views such men as appointed by holy spirit. For our part, we remain submissive and obedient to their lead, promoting a cooperative spirit in the congregation." Then the mediator asked if anyone could remind us what had happened in Hebrews 13:17 – the citation being the only part of the paragraph that nobody had re-read in their answer – and a volunteer read aloud from a Bible.

I suggest that even such reading should be viewed as commenting on *The Watchtower* rather than animating the Bible, for two reasons. First, which Bible verses are read is not left to

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<sup>305</sup> Hebrews 13:17 reads "Be obedient to those who are taking the lead among YOU and be submissive, for they are keeping watch over YOUR souls as those who will render an account; that they may do this with joy and not with sighing, for this would be damaging to YOU."

<sup>306</sup> The Spanish text used in the meeting reads:

Este suceso subraya la importancia de la organización dentro del pueblo de Dios. Hoy, como ayer, se necesitan más superintendentes en las congregaciones. Pero antes de recomendar hombres responsables, el cuerpo de ancianos pide a Dios la guía de su espíritu y se asegura de que reúnan las condiciones exigidas en la Biblia. Por eso, reconociendo que los hermanos que llegan a ser ancianos han sido nombrados por espíritu santo, aceptamos su autoridad y acatamos su dirección. Así contribuimos a que reine en la congregación una actitud cooperativa (Heb. 13:17).  
(Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2009c: 19).

In the Spanish text, the question reads: "¿Por qué debemos aceptar la autoridad y acatar la dirección de los hermanos que sirven al frente de las congregaciones?" The first woman read aloud from the beginning of the paragraph through "exigidas en la Biblia" and the second began where she left off.

While there are some differences in emphasis in the Spanish and English texts – notably, the second Spanish sentence reads, "Today, as in the past, more overseers are required in the congregations" – these variations are not relevant to the point under discussion.

the reader but rather indicated directly within the *Watchtower* article text. Second, these readers are selected by the mediator in much the same way as other commenters. Animators are responsible for reading longer stretches of text, and without extensive monitoring of what their performance reflects about their understanding.

Chontal responses, of necessity, followed the text significantly less closely than Spanish ones.<sup>307</sup> However, most people would base these responses as closely on the text as possible. When all three congregations moved to a new emphasis on Chontal in June 2011, younger Witnesses would prepare their Chontal contributions by studying with an older family member. In every case that I observed, the younger family members would read a Spanish answer and then an older one would translate it as faithfully as possible, maintaining the general sentence structure if simplifying some of the vocabulary.

This activity, which admits a wider range of participants than the public talk, is an unambiguously front stage activity. The purpose of this activity is for congregation members to learn about points of doctrine, and no explicit attention is paid to issues of presentation within this meeting. These events are performances, which means that speakers are accountable to their audience (Bauman 1975; Bauman and Briggs 1990), but this accountability is framed in terms of content. Once more, the referentiality of language is emphasized over other dimensions.

### **7.2.3 The Service Meeting**

The service meeting, which is held immediately after the Theocratic Ministry School, is based on the newsletter *Our Kingdom Ministry*. Each week, this meeting contains two or three short presentations from elders and ministerial servants on various aspects of *field service*, or door-to-door preaching. The program of each week's meeting, along with the program of the

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<sup>307</sup> See also the discussion in the following chapter.

Theocratic Ministry School, is provided in the newsletter. Each segment of a service meeting is typically based on other documents and texts. Talks on technical aspects of public speaking might be based on the text used in the ministry school or on *Razonamiento a partir de las Escrituras* 'Reasoning from the Scriptures', while talks on logistics and arrangements often come from *Organizados para Hacer la Voluntad de Jehová* 'Organized to Do Jehovah's Will'. Inspiring stories of Witnesses elsewhere are sometimes presented from annual *Yearbooks*, and the *Kingdom Ministry* newsletter itself contains short articles.

These meetings ultimately provide a back stage with regard to the door-to-door ministry. Talks given in these meetings focus on logistics, methods of offering particular magazines, and internal statistics on the preaching work. Cannell (2005: 347) observes of Mormons that they "see no necessary contradiction between the bureaucratic and the spiritual, but feel a strong pull towards both," and the same is true of Witnesses. That is, proselytization requires extensive record keeping, which is justified with scriptural citations as described in the previous chapter.<sup>308</sup> The range of topics covered in the service meeting is best illustrated by examining the program of a typical month. For example, the May 2011 ministry newsletter contains the program for five meetings. I give here the topics covered in these meetings.<sup>309</sup>

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### **Week of May 9th**

#### **5 min. Announcements.**

**10 min. We must obey God as ruler rather than men (Acts 5:29).** Analysis with the audience based on the *2011 Yearbook*, page 219, paragraph 4, to page 221, paragraph 2. After each experience, ask the attendees to comment on the lessons learned.

**10 min. Can you be an auxiliary pioneer this summer?** Analysis with the audience. Review briefly pages 112 and 113 of the book *Organized* and summarize the requirements. Ask those

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<sup>308</sup> See the example given in Section 6.6

<sup>309</sup> Translation from the Spanish mine. Quotation marks in titles of segments designate topics based on an article in the newsletter itself; this is the Watch Tower Society's own usage.

who have taken advantage of vacations from work or school to be auxiliary pioneers to relate how they have benefitted.

**10 min. "May your light shine."** Questions and answers. Ask the attendees to relate personal experiences about how their exemplary behavior opened the path to witness.

### **Week of May 16th**

**5 min. Announcements.**

**10 min. Use questions to teach efficiently (first part).** Analysis with the audience based on the book *Benefit*, page 236 to page 237, paragraph 2. Demonstrate briefly one or two points of the information.

**10 min. Ways of preaching the good news: revisits.** A talk based on the book *Organized*, page 96, paragraph 4, to page 97, paragraph 2. Include a brief demonstration in which an elder returns to visit someone who accepted the publications which are being offered this month.

**10 min. "What if I go out to preach on Sundays?"** Questions and answers.

### **Week of May 23rd.**

**10 min. Announcements. "How the form *Please Call On* (S-43) is used."** Analysis with the audience.

**10 min. Three details of efficient introductions.** Talk based on the book *Benefit*, page 9, paragraph 1. After covering the information, include two demonstrations of how the publication that will be offered in June could be presented.

**15 min. Have you tried it yet?** Analysis with the audience. In the form of a talk, briefly review the details of these recent articles from *Our Kingdom Ministry*: "Use it on every occasion" and "A new section to begin Bible studies" (km 12/10), as well as "For the good of the family" (km 1/11). Ask for commentary from the attendees about how they have tried to apply the suggestions from these articles and how it has benefitted them.

### **Week of May 30th**

**10 min. Announcements.** Demonstrate how to begin a study on the first Saturday in June, using the presentation on page 4. Encourage everyone to put this into practice.

**15 min. Effective research.** Analysis with the audience based on the book *Benefit*, pages 33 to 38. Include a monologue in which a publisher uses different tools to investigate the response to a question which was asked in the territory.

**10 min. Let's prepare to offer the magazines in June.** Analysis with the audience. Dedicate one or two minutes to review part of the content of the magazines. Then indicate two or three articles and ask the attendees to tell what questions and what texts they could use in a presentation. Include a demonstration for each magazine.

### **Week of June 6th**

**5 min. Announcements.**

**7 min. Use questions to teach efficiently (second part).** Analysis with the audience based on the book *Benefit*, page 237, paragraph 3 to page 238, paragraph 5. Demonstrate briefly one or two points of the information.

**18 min. Local necessities.** Talk based on the February 1st, 2011 letter directed to the bodies of elders. This should be presented in harmony with the instructions given in paragraph 2.



**5 min. What have we achieved?** Analysis with the audience by the superintendent of service. Congratulate the congregation for their activity during the time of the Commemoration and describe what was achieved. Ask the attendees to relate experiences which they had serving as auxiliary precursors during March, April, and May.

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These five meetings contain a total of seventeen segments. Three are based on brief articles within the newsletter, with a fourth based on previous newsletters; one is based on the *Yearbook* and allows Witnesses worldwide to learn about the efforts of their coreligionists elsewhere; two are based on *Organized* and address logistics; four are based on *Benefit* and focus on preaching skills; two demonstrate how to offer publications; one is based on a letter sent to congregational elders; and one is based on the particular congregation's service reports. Different individuals vary widely in how closely they follow these texts – some read wholesale, while others summarize and skip around, or ask congregation members to comment and provide details of the content – but all follow the text and only rarely provide examples not directly traceable to the text. Similarly, they assume that congregation members have either brought the relevant book or are familiar enough with its contents not to need it, which is often the case.

On occasions when I attended multiple congregations in a week, I was able to note that in practice there is more variation than these newsletters suggest. For the week of June 6th, for example, none of the congregations had the letter mentioned available, due to an internet outage. Each congregation used the time to address other topics they felt were of concern. One presented reminders about organizational procedures that are supposed to be followed before a newcomer is allowed to do field service. Since publishers are felt to represent the organization, these procedures are taken very seriously. Attention to this question is, of course, by its very nature a back stage concern. Meanwhile, the other two congregations spoke about the importance of following the lead of the Watch Tower Society and its hierarchy. (One of these talks was heavily

Biblical, based on Ezekiel 1; the Watch Tower Society is like a car driven by Jehovah, and if we do not follow its pace, we are saying that we do not trust Jehovah's driving. The other talk emphasized the notion of organization and illustrated that even in the 1st century the congregation was already organized and hierarchical.)

Similarly, different speakers have different presentation styles. Some are more inclusive and ask questions to encourage audience participation, while others prefer to speak at length. Differences in Chontal fluency and use also mean that the same information is sometimes presented with a very different emphasis in different congregations. However, the belief in consistency is strong enough that elders were puzzled when I attended multiple congregations in any given week.<sup>310</sup>

#### **7.2.4 The Theocratic Ministry School: Learning to Preach, Learning a Relationship to Text**

The Theocratic Ministry School is the context in which Witnesses "[rehearse] their doorstep sermons and [learn] how to use their personalities to sell their message" (Holden 2002c: 51-52). Students include both baptized and unbaptized publishers, and they must complete 53 lessons on different topics. The focus of this activity, which Holden (2002c: 73-4) compares to sales training, is the overt socialization of Witnesses into the norms of the door-to-door ministry.

An elder or ministerial servant heads this meeting, which contains four distinct segments. The first segment comprises the highlights of the week's Bible reading, presented by a senior male member of the congregation. The first four minutes of this segment consist of his presentation of the most important points, and then he calls on congregation members to present details they had found valuable in their week's reading. In theory, each commenter is supposed to speak for a maximum of 30 seconds to allow for twelve comments, although this was rarely

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<sup>310</sup> Ultimately, I explained that while the content might be the same, the specific words were different, and as a linguist the particular words mattered enough to me that I was willing to hear the same information multiple times.

achieved. The presenter has a certain amount of freedom as mediator, since he is encouraged to think about his congregation's particular needs and pray to Jehovah for guidance, but he is expected to base all of his points of Watch Tower literature rather than personal reflection (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001a: 47-8).

The next three segments are all prepared and presented by students in the School. In the second segment, a male congregation member reads from the Bible, typically a particularly important passage of the week's portion. The third and fourth segments are either brief talks or skits demonstrating how to preach on a particular topic. Only men are allowed to address the congregation directly, and so if the student is a man, he gives a short talk; female students participate in short skits in pairs, although only one of them is graded at a time. The skits represent best-case scenarios: nobody is ever less than unfailingly polite. Indeed, nobody ever refuses a publication or agrees to take one without giving a donation, much less shuts the door on the preaching Witness.

The topics of these presentations are assigned in the newsletter *Our Kingdom Ministry*, and each student focuses on one lesson at a time from *Beneficiosa de la Escuela del Ministerio Teocrático* 'Benefit from Theocratic Ministry School Education', which is essentially a public speaking textbook. The beginning of the book contains tips on preparing sermons and doing research, while the rest contains 53 lessons for Ministry School students. Lessons range from basic reading skills such as accurate pronunciation and use of punctuation, to elements of physical presentation such as dress and eye contact, to questions of tact and respect. For example, one lesson focuses on the appropriate use of questions to make the other person feel that their opinion is valued. Each lesson contains several pages of descriptive text and a few exercises to be done outside of meeting time, as well as a description of how to best display

knowledge of the skill in a Ministry School presentation. In short, these lessons represent a complete socialization into reading and speaking practices.

Students are graded on these lessons. Some Ministry School leaders provide public feedback, explaining the lesson in brief so the rest of the congregation knows what the student's emphasis was, and providing a few words of encouragement. Other Ministry School leaders give this feedback only in private.

The emphasis of the Ministry School is dual. Students learn simultaneously how to relate to a particular group of people, non-Witnesses, and how to relate to their own publications and Bibles. Non-Witnesses are potential converts, and all available resources must be marshaled to win them over, including reasoning and logic, insights from human psychology, and highly deliberate self-presentation (Goffman 1990[1959]). "The training involved in effective communication for the sole purpose of winning recruits is not unlike that undertaken by sales personnel in the secular world of business" (Holden 2002d: 8).<sup>311</sup>

The ministry school textbook explains the school's goals in terms of the preparation of ministers:

When the school was inaugurated in congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1943, its purpose was stated in these words: "To prepare all 'faithful men,' those who have heard God's Word and proved their faith therein, to 'be able to teach others' ... to the one end of making each one ... better equipped to publicly present the hope that is within him." (Course in Theocratic Ministry, p. 4) The school's objective has remained the same to this day.

[Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001b: 5]

However, the curriculum is meant to be applicable to one's daily life beyond the door-to-door ministry. More specifically, the course teaches a number of fundamental skills:

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<sup>311</sup> A friend from the US, a former Witness who now works as a community organizer, told me on multiple occasions that the Witnesses taught him everything he knows about organizing, and he continues to use the Ministry School textbook as a resource when he trains organizers and activists. Compare also Kamper (2002).

While public reading and the arts of speaking and teaching are given much attention in the school, the benefits of Theocratic Ministry School education are not limited to that. As you participate, you will be helped to cultivate such valuable skills as personal reading, listening and remembering, studying, doing research, analyzing and organizing, conversing, answering questions, and putting thoughts down in writing. The Bible itself and Bible-based publications will provide the basis for study and for comments and presentations given in the school. As you fill your mind with the precious truths found in God's Word, you will learn to think God's thoughts. How beneficial that can be in every aspect of life! [Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001b: 6]

Two points are worth emphasizing. First, even such fundamentals as how to read and listen are not left to chance or to the students' own skills. Even these are taught explicitly: the early sections of this textbook explain in great detail *how* and *what* to study. Second, as described in the previous chapter, Watch Tower Society publications are placed on equal footing with the Bible as "the base of study" and implicitly included as part of the Word of God.

The different segments of the ministry school also illustrate Jehovah's Witnesses' two techniques of Bible-reading. The Bible can be read narratively, linearly, in chronological order; Witnesses are supposed to read about five chapters in this fashion to prepare for the first ten minutes of each week's Ministry School meeting. In these ten minutes, an elder or ministerial servant speaks for about four minutes on the most important points and then asks the congregation for comments. In this fashion, Jehovah's Witnesses continually read the Bible from beginning to end. The Ministry School textbook also encourages Witnesses to read the Bible from start to finish, although such reading should always be accompanied by particular Watch Tower texts.

However, the more important reading technique is proof-texting, which contains presuppositions about what kind of text the Bible is and how it ought to be read. "The name [proof-text] comes from the idea of supporting an argument by finding the 'texts' that are the 'proof' of God's answer. Any portion of scripture, no matter how small, can be used. In fact,

small portions (verses or parts of verses) are most often cited" (Ammerman 1987: 53). Biblical concordances - essentially thematic indices - are vital for this technique. Here, the Bible is like a jigsaw puzzle; making sense of it requires finding the bits that "go together."

Take a verse, for example, Leviticus 19:18: "You must not take vengeance nor have a grudge against the sons of your people; and you must love your fellow as yourself. I am Jehovah."<sup>312</sup> Instead of reading it in the context of what comes before, Leviticus 19:17 ("You must not hate your brother in your heart. You should by all means reprove your associate, that you may not bear sin along with him.") and after, Leviticus 19:19 ("YOU people should keep my statutes: You must not interbreed your domestic animals of two sorts. You must not sow your field with seeds of two sorts, and you must not put upon yourself a garment of two sorts of thread, mixed together."), we are to consider it with other verses that address love, and especially love for humanity as a whole. In this view, John 15:12 ("This is my commandment, that YOU love one another just as I have loved YOU") is deemed more relevant to understanding Leviticus 19:18 than the rest of Leviticus, even though Witnesses believe that these two books were written about 1500 years apart.<sup>313</sup> The alleged consistency and single authorship of the Bible is what allows the Witnesses – and other Christians – to ignore chronological ordering in favor of thematic continuity.

This meeting takes place simultaneously front and back stage. All skits are performed on the stage at the Kingdom Hall, yet the emphasis is on internal reading practices and self-presentation. Particular attention is paid to interaction with non-Witnesses. Balch (1980: 142)

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<sup>312</sup> This example comes from Chapter 17, paragraphs 10 to 15 of *Ven, Sé Mi Seguidor* 'Come Be My Follower' (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2007a, b). This was read at a meeting on February 12, 2011.

<sup>313</sup> According to Witness Bible chronology, Leviticus was written in 1512 BCE while John was written in CE 98 (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1984: 1548-1549). Academic Bible chronology places the earliest texts around 1000 BCE, however (Talitha Phillips, p.c., 1/25/2013).

writes of a UFO cult: "Members are 'on stage' when they deal with outsiders. In their efforts to impress the public with a united front they suppress the doubts, questions, and inner turmoil that might reveal as many doubting Thomases as there are true believers." I do not mean to suggest that the Witnesses are a cult, but the same may hold true. Because the goal of interactions with non-Witnesses is nearly always to persuade these outsiders, such interactions are typically front stage activities. The Theocratic Ministry School provides a back stage in which a unified presentation style is socialized.

This socialization is particularly important to the maintenance of the globalized textual community. Beckford (1975: 48) notes that the Theocratic Ministry School:

...is also important in helping to create and to sustain a phatic community among Jehovah's [W]itnesses which derives its solidarity partly from their voluntary participation in esoteric forms of language use and partly from the overt positive reinforcement awarded by the Study Conductor for correct use of the shared language.

As I have argued, the use of particular types of language as well as reading practices play a central role in the Witness community. As a key site of socialization, the Theocratic Ministry School is central. It is precisely here that Witnesses receive explicit instruction on how to engage in mediational performances. Furthermore, it is the only Witness activity in which speakers are explicitly, overtly, "[accountable] to an audience for a display of communicative skill and effectiveness" (Bauman and Briggs 2000: 79). In fact, they are publicly evaluated on just these aspects of their performance.

### **7.2.5 Special Events: Assemblies, Holidays, and Weddings**

Jehovah's Witnesses attend Assemblies, gatherings of multiple congregations, three times a year. For the Zapotitlán congregations, these events are held in Salina Cruz, an eight-hour trip on public transit. The District Assembly lasts three days, while a Circuit Assembly lasts two days

and a Special Day Assembly lasts for one; all include six to eight hours a day of religious events. Because the District is a larger level of organization than a Circuit, District Assemblies are typically larger than Circuit Assemblies. However, as there are no Chontal-language congregations outside a single circuit, the attendance at District and Circuit events is roughly the same for this group of congregations.

The program at these Assemblies consists primarily of multiple public talks, although these are enlivened by the inclusion of interviews, monologues, and skits illustrating the points given in the talks. Longer Assemblies also include a drama, typically a live enactment of Bible stories, which most attendees look forward to. At District Assemblies, multiple new publications are released and distributed. A baptism ceremony is also held at each Assembly, and the special baptism talk is given even if nobody will be baptized at that particular event.

Jehovah's Witnesses only recognize one holiday, known as the Memorial, or the Lord's Evening Meal (see Chryssides 2009). This event, typically held on the same date as Passover, commemorates Jesus's death. An elder gives a talk explaining the symbolism of the event, and then bread and wine are passed around. Only anointed Witnesses – those who believe themselves among the minority of 144,000 who are destined to a heavenly future rather than an earthly paradise – may partake of the bread and wine. At the Commemoration I attended, which brought together the three Zapotitlán congregations, the bread and wine remained untouched. (Since there are more than seven and a half million Witnesses worldwide, and the 144,000 includes Christians born since the 1st century C.E., this is a relatively common occurrence.)

When two Witnesses marry, a public talk is given in the Kingdom Hall before the wedding reception. This talk is always based on a standard outline, and its topic is Biblical advice for couples, specifically the role of God in a marriage, strict gender roles, and male



headship. The husband's responsibility is to fulfill the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of his family, and to lead his wife and family. Meanwhile, the wife's responsibility is to love her husband, and to remember that her role as helpmate is honorable and worthy, and she must not resent this role or view it as slavery.<sup>314</sup> After this talk, the husband and wife say vows that reinforce these strict gender roles and communicate an explicit acceptance of them, and then a reception is held at the home of one of the families.

### **7.2.6 Family Worship**

Witness households are also supposed to hold a weekly Family Worship Night in which they may study for the week's meetings, practice songs from the songbook, or read and discuss articles from any Watch Tower publication. In practice, even my household, which contained two congregational elders, was not able to achieve this goal every single week, and I did not attend enough of these worship nights to generalize. However, a male family member always led this activity, since the goal was to instruct all family members, including multiple baptized Witnesses.

## **7.3 Activities with No Witness Audience**

Witnesses spend a great deal of time engaging with non-Witness audiences in the door-to-door ministry. Baptized Witnesses also conduct "Bible studies" from *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* or other study books with potential converts and as-yet-unbaptized children. Those activities that are both back stage and lacking in a Witness audience are typically the activities that have no ratified audience at all: baptized Witnesses are expected to conduct a daily

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<sup>314</sup> This talk is based on Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12; Ephesians 5: 22-25 and 28-29; and 1 Corinthians 11:3. In this talk, elders also make reference to Bible verses that promote a more egalitarian view of relationships (Colossians 3: 12-14; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8), but these are always secondary to male headship.

personal study based on *Examining the Scriptures Daily*, and all Witnesses rehearse extensively before any public presentation given at the Kingdom Hall.

### **7.3.1 Door-to-Door Ministry**

Although Witnesses are not separatists, they are discouraged from extensive voluntary contact with non-Witnesses. Living with non-Witness relatives often creates household tension (Holden 2002b), and many Witnesses will choose to limit the time they spend with outsiders beyond what they feel is necessary, due to a lack of consensus about how much contact is too much (Holden 2002c: 106-112). However, one type of contact with non-Witness is not only appropriate but necessary for Witnesses: proselytizing. As described earlier in this chapter, the Witnesses have access to a massive number of texts and activities that teach them how to win outsiders over.

Witnesses have a moral obligation to proselytize, which requires them to distribute Watch Tower literature to non-Witnesses. Typically, a visit is considered successful if someone accepts any publication. However, the ultimate goal of door-to-door proselytizing is for someone to accept a *Watchtower* magazine and the promise of a return visit (Holden 2002c: 74-76).

It is not enough simply to proselytize. Witnesses are required to carefully keep track not only of the hours spent, but of which publications they distribute when and at which houses:

Each member has a personal responsibility to spread the good news and to monitor their performance by recording the total number of monthly hours allocated to the ministry, the specific amount of literature left with the householder, the number of return visits made to a prospective convert's home and the number of home Bible studies conducted. These details are submitted on a monthly basis to the congregational secretary. Those who fail to devote a satisfactory amount of time to doorstep evangelism ... soon lose the respect of their co-religionists. The Witnesses are thus forced to think quantitatively about their salvation. [Holden 2002c: 72]

The circulation of Witnesses' written texts is carefully monitored and measured. Indeed, service meetings often emphasize these numbers, which simultaneously energize Witnesses by pointing to the fulfillment of prophecies about the spread of God's word, and encourage them to work ever harder by pointing to the great number of people who have yet to be reached.

### **7.3.2 Home Bible Study**

Bible study books, like *The Watchtower* and the books used in Congregation Bible Study, contain numbered paragraphs with corresponding study questions; teacher and student read the paragraph out loud, and then the teacher asks questions until he or she is satisfied with the student's answer. If the student gives expansive answers, the teacher may not feel the need to move beyond the questions provided in the text. However, many students give minimal answers, and so the person in the teacher's role will ask additional questions or provide further examples, in order to "confirm publicly that the transfer of knowledge has been achieved and that the knowledge in question has become a part of the receiver's usable repertoire" (Bauman 2004: 150). Because these studies are undertaken with non-Witnesses, even baptized women can take on the mediator role, and non-Witnesses are able to perform the commenter and often even the animator roles.

Bible study is one of a very few activities where a relatively large intertextual gap is tolerated. Students are encouraged to frame answers in their own words, rather than rely directly on the text. Drawing out answers from children, in particular, often requires the adult engaged in Bible Study to paraphrase creatively. Such an intertextual gap may actually aid in confirming the socialization of novices, for the decoupling of the precise form from the denotational content illustrates the novice's grasp of said content.

The following transcript comes from a Bible study conducted by Paula (a woman in her early thirties) with her nine-year-old nephew, Leonel.<sup>315</sup> Paula is teaching with the assistance of Linda, a girl about Leonel's age. First, Paula confirms Leonel's answer to the previous paragraph's question and summarizes the paragraph (lines 1-16). She then asks Linda to read the next paragraph (lines 17-32) before reading the study questions (lines 33-37, 69). She reformulates each question several times when she does not receive a response, or to elicit further details from Leonel (lines 38ff). Only when she is satisfied that he has fully understood the text does she summarize and propose moving on to the next paragraph (lines 133-140).<sup>316</sup>

Paula

- 1      Ándale, una enfermedad,  
Right, a sickness,
- 2      cualesquier problema que tengamos,  
any problem we might have,
- 3      sin lugar a dudas, la Biblia es  
there's no doubt about it, the Bible is
- 4      es confiable  
it's trustworthy
- 5      es, este (.) para todos trae  
it's, um, for everyone it has
- 6      consejos  
advice
- 7      no hay edad para leer la Biblia,  
there's no age to read the Bible
- 8      ajá,  
mmhmm,
- 9      muy bien,  
very good,
- 10     y la Biblia, fijate Leonel,  
and the Bible, pay attention Leonel,
- 11     nos explica que Jehová va a cumplir su propósito (2.5)  
explains to us that Jehovah is going to fulfill his purpose
- 12     y que va a haber mejores condiciones aquí en la tierra,  
and that there are going to be better conditions here on Earth

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<sup>315</sup> Paula and Leonel, Bible Study, 6/14/2011. This segment is approximately 6 minutes of an hour-long Bible study.

<sup>316</sup> In this transcript, SMALL CAPS represents a segment that comes directly from the text rather than one that is paraphrased or spontaneous.

13 que ahorita  
that right now  
14 la vida que vivimos no es  
the life that we life is not  
15 como Dios quería,  
how God wanted,  
16 y que va a llegar el tiempo en que va a cambiar.  
and that there will come a time when things will change.  
17 (Bien), ahora va a leer, te va a ayudar (.)  
(Good), now she will read, it will help you  
18 Linda?

Linda<sup>317</sup>

19 LA BIBLIA TAMBIÉN ES UN REGALO CONMOVE (.) DOR, CONMOVEDOR  
THE BIBLE IS ALSO A HEART (.) WARMING GIFT, HEARTWARMING  
20 YA QUE NOS ENSEÑA ALGO SOBRE LA PERSONA QUE,  
FOR IT REVEALS SOMETHING ABOUT THE PERSON WHO,  
21 QUE LO HIZO JEHOVÁ  
WHO MADE IT JEHOVAH  
22 AL  
WHEN  
23 AL DAR  
WHEN HE GAVE  
24 MO-  
MO-  
25 NOS (ESTE)  
US (THIS)  
26 NOS ESTE  
US THIS  
27 LIBRO  
BOOK  
28 DIOS DEMOSTRÓ QUE QUIERE QUE LO CONOZ-  
GOD DEMONSTRATED THAT HE WANTS US TO GET-  
29 -CAMOS BIEN, DE HECHO, LA BIBLIA NO-  
TO KNOW HIM WELL, IN FACT, THE BIBLE H-  
30 NOS AYUDA A,  
HELPS US TO  
31 A ACERCARNOS A ÉL.  
TO GET CLOSER TO HIM.  
32 (2.5)

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<sup>317</sup> The English gloss here is based on the English version of the Spanish book from which Linda is reading (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2005b, c), although I have made some changes to reflect Spanish syntax and her errors. The questions that Paula asks in lines 36-37 and 69 read in English: "What does the provision of the Bible tell us about Jehovah, and why is this heartwarming?"

Paula

33 Bueno,  
Okay  
34 dice la pregunta, Leonel,  
the question says, Leonel,  
35 el párrafo tres,  
paragraph three  
36 QUÉ DEMOSTRÓ JEHOVÁ  
WHAT DID JEHOVAH DEMONSTRATE  
37 AL PROPORCIONARNOS LA BIBLIA?  
WHEN HE PROVIDED US WITH THE BIBLE?

Leonel

38 (5.5)

Paula

39 Por qué nos dio (o) Jehová la Biblia?  
Why did Jehovah give us the Bible?

Leonel

40 (1.5)  
41 Para que apren-  
So that we would le-  
42 -damos.  
-arn.

Paula:

43 Mmm, para que aprendamos.=  
Yes, so that we would learn.  
44 =De qué vamos a aprender?  
What are we going to learn about?

Leonel

45 (4.0)  
46 Uh.  
47 Uuh.  
48 Uh.  
49 (14.0)  
50 Es que QUIERE QUE LO CONOZCAMOS.  
It's that HE WANTS US TO GET TO KNOW HIM.

Paula

51 Ah, QUIERE QUE LO CONOZCAMOS,  
Ah, HE WANTS US TO GET TO KNOW HIM,  
52 Jehová nos dio la Biblia para que lo conozcamos, imagina Leonel,  
Jehovah gave us the Bible so we would get to know him, imagine Leonel,

53 si Jehová no nos hubiera dado la Biblia,  
if Jehovah had not given us the Bible  
54 si (a) usted no te hubieran enseñado la Biblia,  
if they had not taught you the Bible  
55 ningún libro ni (.)...  
no book nor (.)  
56 tú habrías conocido a Jehová?  
would you have gotten to know Jehovah?

Leonel

57 No.  
No.

Paula

58 No, verdad?  
No, right?  
59 Bueno,  
Okay,  
60 gracias a que Jehová nos dio la Biblia,  
Thanks to Jehovah giving us the Bible,  
61 su palabra,  
his word  
62 (pues) ya lo conocemos,  
(well) now we know him,  
63 aunque son niñitos chiquititos ya están conociendo a Jehová,  
even if they're just little tiny kids they're already getting to know Jehovah,  
64 sí,  
yes,  
65 pero mediante...?  
but by means of...?

Leonel

66 (1.5)  
67 La Biblia.  
The Bible.

Paula

68 Mediante la Biblia,  
By means of the Bible  
69 POR QUÉ ES CONMOVEDOR ESE REGALO?  
WHY IS THIS GIFT HEARTWARMING?  
70 Dijimos  
We said  
71 que LA BIBLIA ES UN REGALO,  
that THE BIBLE IS A GIFT

72 por qué,  
why  
73 por qué nos conmueve ese regalo?  
why does this gift move us?

Leonel

74 (27.0)

Paula

75 A ver Leonel,  
Let's see Leonel,  
76 dijimos que LA BIBLIA ES UN  
we said that THE BIBLE IS A

Leonel

77 (1.0)  
78 REGALO.  
GIFT.

Paula

79 Un regalo que nos dio Jehová,  
A gift that Jehovah gave us,  
80 entonces  
then  
81 Jehová nos dio un regalo,  
Jehovah gave us a gift,  
82 que es su palabra, la Biblia,  
which is his word, the Bible,  
83 por qué nos conmueve ese regalo que nos dio Jehová?  
why does this gift that Jehovah gave us move us?  
84 A ver allá en, en el primer  
Look there on, on the first  
85 rengloncito.  
little line.

Leonel

86 (5.5)  
87 ENSEÑA,  
IT TEACHES  
88 ENSEÑA ALGO SOBRE LA PERSONA  
IT TEACHES SOMETHING ABOUT THE PERSON  
89 QUE LO HIZO,  
WHO MADE IT,  
90 JEHOVÁ.  
JEHOVAH.



Paula

- 91 Entonces  
Then  
92 la Biblia es un regalo y conmovedor para nosotros  
the Bible is a gift and it is heartwarming for us  
93 porque nos enseña...?  
because it teaches us...?

Leonel

- 94 (2.5)  
95 (Uh)  
96 (8.0)

Paula

- 97 Quién lo hizo, la Biblia?  
Who made it, the Bible?

Leonel

- 98 Jehová.  
Jehovah.

Paula

- 99 Ajá, Jehová,  
Mmhmm, Jehovah,  
100 dirigió que hicieran la Biblia,  
directed them to make the Bible,  
101 y todo lo que hay ahí en la Biblia, pues,  
and everything that there is there in the Bible, then,  
102 es de Jehová,  
is from Jehovah,  
103 verdad?  
right?  
104 Y nos enseña,  
And it teaches us,  
105 por eso nos conmueve,  
that's why it moves us  
106 cuando alguien te da un regalo,  
when someone gives you a gift,  
107 cómo dijiste que te sientes?  
how did you say that you feel?

Leonel

- 108 Contento.  
Happy.

Paula

- 109 Contento, te conmueve,  
Happy, it moves you,  
110 verdad?  
right?  
111 Bueno,  
Ok,  
112 entonces,  
then,  
113 cuando Jehová nos enseña mediante su palabra,  
when Jehovah teaches us by means of his word,  
114 cómo nos sentimos?  
how do we feel?

Leonel

- 115 (1.5)  
116 Contentos.  
Happy.

Paula

- 117 Contentos verdad?  
Happy right?  
118 Bueno, nos conmueve la Biblia,  
Ok, the Bible moves us,  
119 bueno, estamos aprendiendo en este párrafo,=  
ok, we're learning in this little paragraph,  
120 =qué estás aprendiendo en este párrafo?  
what are you learning in this little paragraph?

Leonel

- 121 (7.5)

Paula

- 122 Qué quiere Jehová?  
What does Jehovah want?

Leonel

- 123 (3.0)  
124 Que predicamos.  
That we preach.

Paula

- 125 Pero cuando nos, nos da la Biblia, qué quiere?  
But when he gives us, us, the Bible, what does he want?

Leonel

126 Que la estudiamos  
That we study it.

Paula

127 Que la estudiamos. Si nosotros no estudiamos, qué va a pasar?  
That we study it. If we don't study, what will happen?

Leonel

128 (7.0)

Paula

129 (whispered:) fíjate tu libro, aquí  
(whispered:) check your book, here  
130 (A) quién vamos a conocer si nosotros estudiamos?  
Who are we going to get to know if we study?

Leonel

131 Jehová.  
Jehovah.

Paula

132 Jehová verdad?  
Jehovah, right?  
133 Bueno y también aprendimos que es conmovedor porque  
Ok and also we learned that it's heartwarming because  
134 cuando  
when  
135 la Biblia la estudiamos  
we study the Bible  
136 aprendemos de LA PERSONA QUE LO HIZO,  
we learn about THE PERSON WHO MADE IT,  
137 sí,  
yes?  
138 bueno, vamos a seguir el párrafo cuatro,  
ok, we're going to go on to paragraph four,  
139 (2.5)  
140 lees?  
will you read?

This study session demonstrates the process of reading a paragraph or series of paragraphs, which has four phases:

- 1) One of the participants reads the paragraph aloud (lines 19-32).

- 2) The teacher asks the (first) study question given (lines 33-37).
- 3) The student answers this question. The teacher may refine or reformulate this question, depending on the student's answers, or provide additional questions or information. This phase amounts to an extended cycle of initiation-reply-evaluation sequences (Mehan 1979); here, further questioning amounts to an implicit evaluation of the reply as insufficient. In many cases, the teacher may provide extensive scaffolding, or step-by-step support, in order to elicit the desired reply (lines 39-132).
- 4) When the teacher decides that the student has a sufficient understanding of the paragraph, he or she summarizes the paragraph (lines 133-137) and moves on to the next one (lines 138-140).

Of these phases, the third is the most complex. Here I explore what happens when the student fails to answer, or answers incorrectly or with insufficient detail.

While Leonel rarely answers quickly, there are seven separate occasions<sup>318</sup> in which he pauses for at least five – and as many as 27 – seconds. On most of these occasions, Paula rephrases the question. For example, "What did Jehovah demonstrate when he provided us with the Bible?" becomes "Why did Jehovah give us the Bible?" after a five-second pause (lines 36-39). She also often simplifies the question into component questions that are more direct (lines 92-97, 120-124). On one occasion, she allows Leonel a pause of nearly twenty seconds because of his repeated false starts (lines 45-50).

To draw Leonel out, Paula relies heavily on series of leading questions that seek particular, brief answers. Consider the following:

Paula  
 53      si Jehová no nos hubiera dado la Biblia,  
             if Jehovah had not given us the Bible,

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<sup>318</sup> See lines 38, 45-49, 74, 86, 94-96, 121, and 128.

54 si usted no te hubieran enseñado la Biblia,  
if they had not taught you the Bible,  
55 ningún libro ni (.). . .  
no book nor (.)  
56 tú habrías conocido a Jehová?  
would you have gotten to know Jehovah?

Leonel

57 No.  
No.

Paula

58 No, verdad?  
No, right?

Whenever Paula asks this type of question, she repeats the answer immediately after Leonel provides it, often with the tag question "verdad?" ("right?").<sup>319</sup> With this extensive scaffolding, she helps him build appropriate answers piece by piece.

On a few different occasions, she also provides scaffolding regarding the use of the physical text. In lines 84-85, she tells him where in the text the answer can be found (the first line),<sup>320</sup> and he reads the relevant line aloud. In line 129, also, she reminds him to look at his book. Elsewhere, she grounds his answer in their previous discussion, reminding him, "dijimos" ("we said") and prompting him to repeat what they had said earlier (lines 70, 76).

These scaffolding and evaluation techniques are common in personal and family Bible study, at least in this community. These techniques allow more experienced Witnesses to share their expertise. A division between "mature" or experienced Christians and relative newcomers is common among many different types of Christians, particularly in study groups, where Christians of longer standing often serve as mentors (cf. Bielo 2009c: 38-39).

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<sup>319</sup> While a more literal translation would be "true?", its usage is parallel to English "right?" Magnus Pharao Hansen (p.c., 4/19/2011) observes that Witnesses use this tag question very frequently, and that Nahuatl-speaking Witnesses use a comparable tag question with similar frequency. He suggests that it may be related to the use of "la verdad" ("the truth") as the unmarked way for Witnesses to talk about their faith, as discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>320</sup> The bulk of the answer actually appears in the second line of the paragraph (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2005b: 18).

### 7.3.3 Back Stage with No Audience at All: Preparation for Public Activities

Witnesses are expected to flesh out their outlines or Ministry School assignments in private in order to give polished presentations on stage in the Kingdom Hall. Outlines are extensive: I was given a sample outline for a 45-minute talk<sup>321</sup> which ran to three and a quarter single-spaced pages, and nearly every line contained extensive citations from the Bible, Watch Tower literature, or both. Furthermore, this outline was broken down into three five-minute segments and two fifteen-minute segments, ensuring similarity across speakers and contexts. In fact, Brooklyn editor Michael S. told me that outlines were once shorter, perhaps five or six bullet points for a 45-minute talk, but that outlines have become more specific to maintain consistency as the organization has grown.<sup>322</sup> As more people become Witnesses, the spatial, social, and temporal distance among them has grown – and with it the possibility of ever-larger intertextual gaps, and the need for generic regimentation (Bauman 2004; Briggs and Bauman 1992; Kroskrity 2009). The outlines also contain explicit generic regimentation, in the form of metalinguistic instructions: "Adhere closely to the outlined material, and observe the indicated timing of each section. Not all cited texts need to be read." Furthermore, reading certain Bible citations is not optional, and these are indicated within the outline.

Because such preparation is back stage, with no ratified audience at all, I was not often privy to it. Everyone I asked told me they wrote out their presentations in full, and I saw pairs of women rehearsing their Ministry School skits much more often than I saw male elders and ministerial servants preparing talks. The collaborative nature of the skits also required a different type of rehearsal than individual talks. However, I was occasionally able to observe the type of preparation required for Chontal-language talks, which I describe at length in Chapter Nine.

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<sup>321</sup> March 1991. No. 1 How Well Do You Know God? (Provided by Michael S. on 12/27/2012)

<sup>322</sup> Fieldnotes 12/27/2012.

## 7.4 Prayer

Good Protestants pray with their eyes shut. Catholics, by contrast, do so with open eyes. Why? So they can read the words of their prayer books instead of speaking from within. [Keane 2007: 2]

Jehovah's Witnesses, like other Protestants, do not accept memorized prayers as genuine; in fact, prayer is the only element of religious services that is not performed with reference to some physical textual artifact. Spanish-speaking Witnesses always use the word *orar* rather than *rezar*; although both mean 'to pray,' *rezar* suggests the recitation of memorized or written prayer (see also Phraao Hansen 2010: 132).<sup>323</sup> In spite of their lack of material textuality, prayers represent a highly entextualized speech genre. They are internally cohesive, occurring in bounded ways at predictable moments and displaying a fixed form (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Keane 1997b).

Prayers typically occur at the boundaries of religious activities. They serve to open and close not only public activities like meetings, Assemblies, and weddings, but also private activities like home Bible study and family worship. Witnesses also offer prayers before meals. Men always lead these prayers in public settings; women lead them in private settings only when no baptized man is present. In fact, former Witnesses Heather and Gary Botting (1984: 86) note in passing that "if a woman ever prays or says grace aloud in the presence of other baptized Witnesses – male or female – she must first cover her head, be it with a hat or a Kleenex, to indicate that she understands her place within the divine scheme of things."

Prayers always consist of a monologue spoken directly to Jehovah, who is addressed in the second person. When Witnesses pray in Spanish, they always use the familiar pronoun *tú*. In spite of this familiarity, there are constraints on what can be said in public prayer, particularly on

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<sup>323</sup> In fact, *orar* is etymologically related to English 'orate' and 'oral' while *rezar* comes from the same Latin root as English 'recite.'

register. Slang and vulgarity are forbidden, most colloquialisms are discouraged, and longer and more formal words are common even when unnecessary.<sup>324</sup> There are also restrictions on the type of speech acts that a prayer can consist of. In prayer, one cannot gossip with God about the neighbors, ask God how he is feeling today, complain about one's husband or the harvest, make small talk with God, promise to behave differently in the future or otherwise bargain with God, inquire about his food preferences or family life, or talk to God about any of the other things one might discuss with people. One can only thank God, or petition God: all prayers consist of these two building blocks. Words meaning 'thank' or 'ask for' are common in prayer, as are various directive forms.

There are also conditions on petitioning. Holden (2002c: 62) notes that Witnesses' "failure to spend much time in meditation, prayer, healing, and other such rituals seems to convey their unwillingness to recognise that God will intervene in human affairs," which is reflected in the types of petitions that do and do not appear in Witness prayers. Asking for health and safety for those present, their families, or other Witnesses is common, as is asking for help understanding Biblical teachings and sharing them with others, whether in formal talks or door-to-door ministry. Many people also ask Jehovah to help non-Witness family members to come to the truth. I have heard prayers asking for help with the Chontal language as well; because the use of the language is an institutional initiative and not a personal whim, it seems to be an appropriate object of blessing. However, selfish petitions are not acceptable; I never heard anyone ask for help or blessing with any task that was not directly related either to the Watch Tower Society or to their physical well-being. (However, Witnesses are encouraged to express their anxieties and make personal requests in private prayers, which I was unable to observe.)

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<sup>324</sup> For example, Spanish-speaking Witnesses use *proporcionar* 'provide' and *brindar* 'give, dedicate' in prayer in contexts where they would almost certainly use *dar* 'give' in less formal speech.



While prayers are not based directly on written texts, they form a recognizable genre and exemplify the same hierarchy as written texts. In fact, their consistency – in spite of the lack of a written text – illustrates the extent to which Witness practices involve speaking with a unified voice. Witness prayers exemplify what Mahmood (2001) has called "rehearsed spontaneity," for they must be performed in accordance with these genre expectations, only some of which are ever explicitly spelled out.<sup>325</sup>

### **7.5 Mind the (Intertextual) Gap: Texts and the Incomplete Determination of Interpretation**

The concentric participation structure of Watch Tower Society texts allows Witnesses to identify with the hierarchy and feel empowered to participate, even as they are restricted from true authorship and agency of the texts they perform (cf. Bauman 2004). The larger Protestant textual economy – as compared to the Catholic one – empowers individuals by allowing them to read and interpret the Bible directly (Bielo 2009b; c). However, the Witnesses represent a return to more centralized practices of interpretation. In fact, Witnesses are forbidden from engaging in individual interpretation (Holden 2002a; Quick 1989),<sup>326</sup> and limited to roles that mediate written texts they are not the authors of.

In fact, no individuals are ever allowed to inhabit the authorship role. Authorship is anonymous, attributed to the Watch Tower Society rather than individuals. Raymond Franz

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<sup>325</sup> See, for instance: "Let Your Petitions Be Known to God" (*The Watchtower*, 9/1/2006, pp. 27-31), "Lord, Teach Us How to Pray" (*The Watchtower*, 2/1/2004, pp. 8-12), "You Must Pray This Way" (*The Watchtower*, 9/15/2004: pp. 3-4), and "How Should We Pray to God?" (*Awake!*, 2/2012, pp. 12-13). Private prayer is somewhat less constrained, but a discussion of private prayer is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>326</sup> It is interesting to note reflexes of Witness mediational performances in other contexts where written texts inform performance in regimented ways. I observed that many school age Witnesses have difficulty paraphrasing, and at one point, a few sixth-grade girls got upset at a classmate for copying a list out of order. While teachers in Zapotitlán suggest that these problems are widespread and not limited to Witness children, a few did suggest the Witnesses' rote learning might be related to students' inability to put concepts into their own words.

(1983: 295), a former member of the Governing Body, goes so far as to observe that "the concept of 'the organization' ... creates the belief that, to all intents and purposes, whatever the organization speaks, it is as if God himself were speaking." The reliance on written texts (themselves mediational performances of a writing process to which nobody has access) affords this anonymity: only a very small number of individuals know the identities of the authors of the written texts, and these identities are systematically erased. The institutional structures that circulate these written texts, and the ideologies that legitimate them, allow Jehovah to remain the ultimate agent and author of all Witness religious activity.

In spite of this centralization, the Watch Tower Society cannot control every detail of interpretation. Intertextual gaps are inevitable, as Bauman and Briggs (1992: 157) remind us. The use of written texts may naturalize strong constraints on the intertextual gap, but this gap never fully disappears. Indeed, congregations may still understand messages in ways other than they are intended. For instance, the example that follows illustrates a case in which congregation members were unaware of such a misunderstanding.

One congregational announcement included a letter received from Brooklyn about a new Basic English edition of *The Watchtower*.<sup>327</sup> An elder, José, read the letter, which explained that this new edition was designed for children and English language learners, and that it does not replace the normal edition of *The Watchtower*. The congregation, and José in particular, were overwhelmingly excited about this announcement; he thanked the Watch Tower Society many times for providing them with such a great resource to study English. However, this edition was designed for English-speaking congregations with a high percentage of immigrants, to help them absorb the Watch Tower message. Its goal was not to provide non-English-speakers with a path

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<sup>327</sup> Field notes, 1/15/2011.

to economic advancement,<sup>328</sup> but Congregación Sur interpreted it as a boon to them and to their children's study of English.

Given the Watch Tower Society's desire to minimize intertextual gaps in the name of standardization, translation carries particular dangers. The framing of translation as a mechanical process of commensurability rather than a creative process helps to curtail this danger, as does the restriction of authorship to an institution. Witnesses do not deliberately challenge the Watch Tower Society's authority in translating. However, the gap that translation introduces does create tensions, which I explore in the two chapters that follow.

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<sup>328</sup> The Watch Tower Society discourages members from holding any academic or economic ambitions that might take time away from the work of door-to-door proselytizing, so one can assume that this publication was not produced with these goals in mind.

## **Eight**

# **"When the Dead Are Resurrected, How Are We Going to Speak to Them?": The Once and Future Chontal Language Community**

The story of the use of Chontal in Zapotitlán's three Jehovah's Witness congregations is a tale of tensions between the institutional and the local. This chapter tells that story. Although only about one third of people in Zapotitlán consider themselves Chontal speakers, all three congregations are currently Chontal-language congregations. Congregations are expected to function monolingually, and members are expected to share a dominant language. This institutional ideology combines with the absence of Spanish-language congregations in Zapotitlán to essentialize ethnic Chontals as speakers of Chontal.

Zapotitlán Witnesses also differ from the Watch Tower Society in *who* they see as the primary audience for Chontal-language religious talk, and in *when* they locate the need for such talk. The Watch Tower Society as an institution believes that it is easier to reach people in their native language and thus that there is a need for Chontal-language congregations as long as there are still some living first-language Chontal speakers. Many individual Witnesses in Zapotitlán, on the other hand, express greater concern with the future resurrection of monolingual Chontal-speaking ancestors in need of salvation. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that after Armageddon, those people who died without the opportunity to receive the word of God will be resurrected and given a second chance to accept the Bible, and there is a range of opinions about what language these individuals will speak. The institution, then, is concerned with contemporaneous use of Chontal, while many individuals in Zapotitlán are oriented to an imagined future.

## 8.1 History

Jehovah's Witnesses first arrived in Zapotitlán in 1945 or 1946. Individuals began to convert, and the first Zapotitlán congregation was founded in 1949.<sup>329</sup> At any given time, there has never been more than one single Kingdom Hall in Zapotitlán; as more and more people converted, new congregations were founded with the understanding that they would share a single space. All three congregations are approximately the same size and meet at different times in the Kingdom Hall. This arrangement is a common one: both Kingdom Halls and congregations are intentionally restricted to a certain size to encourage close relationships and fellowship within congregations (cf. Alston and Aguirre 1970).<sup>330</sup> Individuals in Zapotitlán were originally assigned to particular congregations on the basis of household location and family relationships; the names of the congregations – *Sur* 'South', *Centro* 'Center', and *Norte* 'North' – reflect this division.

From the 1940s until very recently, Spanish was the official language of Witness meetings. Some individuals believe that the use of Spanish in the congregation contributed to the decline of Chontal. Lucas, a pioneer from Mexico City, suggested this point in an interview:

Since the work began here, since they arrived to preach, it has always been in Spanish, always, always, always. Like since the seventies, since 1960<sup>331</sup> when they arrived to preach, mmm, until, like until 2007. It's- all this time it was in Spanish, in Spanish, in Spanish. [58 seconds omitted.] But, well, for a long time it

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<sup>329</sup> Jacinto interview, 12/8/2010.

<sup>330</sup> Jacinto interview, 12/8/2010. I asked if congregations were all kept at comparable size so that people could get to know each other, and he said that it was also that people could participate. I then asked him if people would be embarrassed to participate in larger congregations, and he said that they simply would not have enough of an opportunity.

<sup>331</sup> Lucas's chronology disagrees sharply with that of most other Witnesses. However, he was in his early twenties at the time of our interview in 2011, and he was originally from Mexico City. The dates I use are based on multiple interviews with older Witnesses who directly remember these events, and these are generally consistent within a range of three to five years.

was in Spanish, so, um, maybe this also contributed to the fact that [Chontal] it's practically not spoken any more.<sup>332</sup>

However, the Witnesses have used Chontal *unofficially* in religious settings since their earliest days in Zapotitlán. In interviews, many older individuals told me that a few Witnesses would informally translate the meeting content into Chontal, or give bilingual presentations when they went door-to-door. Lorena, 59 at the time of our interview in 2011, told me that her mother became a Witness in 1940 when a neighbor came to the door and told her in Chontal that if she studied the Bible her children wouldn't drink or smoke or scandalize the community.<sup>333</sup> Jacinto, 77 in 2010 and one of the earliest Witnesses, recalled that some of the original elders would ask after the meeting, "Did you understand, brothers?"<sup>334</sup> The audience would then explain what they had or hadn't understood, and these men would translate: "That brother, oh how he would talk to them, yes, in Chontal! [3 seconds omitted] When he stops speaking Chontal, oh how the brothers are happy! 'Now, yes,' they say, 'we understood.'"<sup>335</sup> Other Witnesses who converted at this time or whose parents did so also suggested that Chontal was used in these contexts.

In 1989, the Watch Tower Society began a worldwide initiative to use more languages, including local and indigenous languages. They began using indigenous languages in Mexico ten

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<sup>332</sup> Lucas and Marisa interview, 2/2/2011, 00:30:59-00:32:40:

"Desde que empezó la, la obra aquí, desde que (.) llegaron a predicar, (1.0) siempre había sido en español, siempre, siempre, siempre. Como desde los setenta, (1.4) desde mil novecientos sesenta que (.) llegaron a predicar, mmm, hasta (3.8), como hasta el dos mil siete. (1.6) Es to- todo ese tiempo estuvo en español, en español, español. [00:31:32-00:32:30 omitted] Pero (0.6) pues durante (un) mucho tiempo, fue en español, entonces, eh (0.6) quizás eso también contribuye a que ya casi no se hable."

<sup>333</sup> Lorena interview, 5/23/2011.

<sup>334</sup> Jacinto interview, 5/9/2011, 00:24:40-00:24:42: "Entendieron, hermanos?"

<sup>335</sup> Jacinto interview, 5/9/2011, 00:25:20-00:25:34: "Ese hermano, co::mo les platicaba ahora sí en chontal! [00:25:24-00:25:27 omitted] Cuando termina de hablar en chontal co:::mo se alegran los hermanos! 'Ahora sí,' dicen, 'entendimos!'"

years later, in 1999.<sup>336</sup> As Michael S., an editor in the Writing Department at the Watch Tower Society's Brooklyn headquarters, explained, "There's also been ... a more conscious recognition that people need to know Bible truth in their native language."<sup>337</sup> When determining whether to take on a new translation project, he told me, "The reasons for translation would be, usually, what is the area of interest? Are there Jehovah's Witnesses that have been studying in another language that now feel they can better learn Bible teachings from the language of their heart?"<sup>338</sup> In fact, constant Watch Tower Society references to Chontal as the "native language" of all residents of Zapotitlán play a role in constructing these individuals as Chontal speakers, as we will see in this chapter.

However, Zapotitlán Witnesses did not begin to use Chontal until 2005, shortly before the death of Jacinto's brother Constantino, one of the earliest Witnesses.<sup>339</sup> Constantino's daughter Selena explained that the congregation had written a letter to the Watch Tower Society asking to use Chontal and that they had received a response in early 2005 authorizing them to make this change.<sup>340</sup> Selena didn't mention what inspired this letter, but one likely candidate is the August 15th, 2004 issue of *The Watchtower*, which contained an article about the growing use of indigenous languages in Mexico.<sup>341</sup> The article quoted translators and other indigenous

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<sup>336</sup> 1989: Michael S. interview, 3/28/2011; 1999: "Mexico's Indigenous Peoples Hear the Good News" (*The Watchtower* 8/15/2004, pp. 8-11).

<sup>337</sup> Michael S. interview, 3/28/2011, 00:21:58-00:22:11.

<sup>338</sup> Michael S. interview, 3/28/2011, 00:05:40-00:05:59.

<sup>339</sup> Different interviews place the Chontal language census and subsequent division of the congregations in 2005, 2007, or 2008. However, Constantino died in 2005 (Danny Zborover, p.c., 2/13/2012), so it seems safe to assume that the congregations were divided in that year. Indeed, Constantino's close family members (including his daughters Selena and Josefina and his brother Jacinto) all agree on the 2005 date.

<sup>340</sup> Selena interview, 4/29/2011.

<sup>341</sup> "Mexico's Indigenous Peoples Hear the Good News" in English; "Los pueblos indígenas de México oyen las buenas nuevas" in Spanish.

Witnesses, who wrote emotionally of their experiences: "I can see that having publications in their own language makes our brothers and sisters feel appreciated and dignified. That is very satisfying. I feel highly privileged to have this assignment."

At this time, the Watch Tower Society undertook a linguistic census in the region to determine where Chontal language congregations should be formed.<sup>342</sup> The Zapotitlán congregations were divided according to Chontal knowledge. A number of people moved to different congregations, for Congregación Sur was to use Chontal exclusively, while the two other congregations were to remain in Spanish. As Oseas remembered, "All of a sudden, they took us by surprise. They said that we're going to renew, or we're going to remember, the mother tongue. Then they chose (us/them),<sup>343</sup> the ones that were able to speak Chontal, and, they made them Sur."<sup>344</sup> Oseas's use of the words *renovar* (renew) and *recordar* (remember) in her recollection of the official announcement strongly suggests that the Watch Tower Society knew, at least at that time, that Chontal was no longer the mother tongue of the entire community. She went on to note that the members of the other congregations were going to work hard to try to use Chontal; others suggested in interviews that not even that much was initially required.

Indeed, the decision for only one congregation of three to use Chontal accurately reflects the sociolinguistic situation in Zapotitlán. In 2010, when I began my research, monolingual Spanish speakers were 62.7% of the population over the age of five (INEGI 2010), and in 2005, when the split occurred, even fewer individuals – only 11.5% – reported speaking Chontal

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<sup>342</sup> I am uncertain of the order in which the congregations outside of Zapotitlán began to use Chontal.

<sup>343</sup> Because of the quality of the recording it is difficult to hear whether she says *nos* 'us' or *los* 'them', although the following clause suggests *los* is the more likely possibility.

<sup>344</sup> Oseas interview, 5/10/2011, 00:02:40-00:03:06:

"De repente, de sorpresa, nos- nos agarraron. (2.0) Dijeron que (.) se va a renovar (1.0) o se va a recordar el lenguaje materno. (4.6) Entonces (nos/los) escogieron, (1.0) (a) los que hablaban en chontal, (1.2) y lo, (0.6) (los) hicieron la Sur."



(INEGI 2005). Nonetheless, the Watch Tower Society later encouraged the other two congregations to use Chontal as well, essentializing the connection between ethnic Chontal identity and Chontal language ability.<sup>345</sup> Since most of the older Witnesses who were better speakers remained in Congregación Sur, in practice this congregation used – and continues to use – Chontal more extensively than the other two.<sup>346</sup>

During that period, Rolando, who is active in the language committee, offered Chontal classes for Witnesses at the Kingdom Hall, but these ceased when he stopped attending Witness meetings.<sup>347</sup> In 2008, the Watch Tower Society was able to offer a two-week Chontal language course in Salina Cruz for pioneers who would be serving in Chontal-language areas. Beto, an older Witness who is a very fluent Chontal speaker, received several weeks of training in Mexico City to use the Watch Tower Society's language teaching methodology, which relies heavily on games and activities rather than on written exercises.. Lucas and Marisa, the pioneer couple, took Beto's two-week course, as did Cata, the wife of the Circuit Overseer, who served as a pioneer with Lucas and Marisa in 2008.<sup>348</sup> All described the course as intensive but basic, and all three noted that Beto's lack of formal education sometimes meant that he found teaching difficult.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> See Section 8.3.

<sup>346</sup> It is unclear from interviews whether two or three congregations were officially Chontal-speaking as of the beginning of my fieldwork. In practice, the majority of individuals from all three congregations attended Chontal-language Assemblies, but a few individuals from each chose to attend Spanish-language events instead.

<sup>347</sup> José interview, 12/11/2010; Oseas interview, 5/10/2011; Selena interview, 4/29/2011.

<sup>348</sup> Lucas and Marisa both began their assignment in March 2008; when they became boyfriend and girlfriend in October of that year, Lucas remained in Zapotitlán and Marisa returned to her home in Michoacán to avoid the appearance of impropriety until they could be married. After their marriage in June 2009, they returned to Zapotitlán in August 2009 and have remained there continuously since then, leaving only to work in Salina Cruz for short periods of time and earn money to pay for their expenses. Cata, too, met her spouse Pedro through her assignment as a pioneer in Zapotitlán. The fact that none of these individuals married Witnesses from Zapotitlán raises questions about the role of social class and ethnicity among Witnesses that are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>349</sup> However, as Michael S. mentioned in his discussion of translators (Section 6.4), presumably Beto's passion and commitment to the Watch Tower Society were more important than his formal education.

However, the courses were based on a dynamic methodology that used balloons and other props to teach the language by means of games and activities and did not require a strong pedagogical background.

Lucas is a particularly skilled orator in both Spanish and Chontal,<sup>350</sup> and Beto bragged that he was the one who taught Lucas to speak: "After a week of my teaching him Chontal, he gave his talk without looking at the, um, the outline. He talked like this, freely, as if he is a Chontal, but I taught him how it's said, how it's spoken, how it's pronounced, what word you use, the *diagonotal*,<sup>351</sup> and all that to be able to learn correctly."<sup>352</sup>

At the May 2011 Circuit Assembly, the new District Overseer explicitly encouraged all Chontal congregations to expand their use of the indigenous language. At this time, there were eight Chontal-language congregations attending the event: three from Zapotitlán, two from Salina Cruz, and one each from San Andrés, Xalapa del Marqués, and Oaxaca City. Dario, the Overseer, emphasized the need for Chontal both in public talks and prayers and in private meetings with congregation elders and ministerial servants.<sup>353</sup> The prayer with which he concluded the event,<sup>354</sup> for example, included the following:

Dario  
1 Danos, por favor, tu espíritu,  
Give us, please, your spirit,

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<sup>350</sup> See Chapter Nine for a discussion of the construction of Chontal expertise through collaborative preparation.

<sup>351</sup> This word refers to the orthographic representation of a glottal stop or *saltito* as well as that of glottalized and ejective consonants.

<sup>352</sup> Beto, interview, 2/17/2011, 00:20:59-00:21:23:  
"A los ocho días que yo le enseñé el chontal, dio su discurso, sin ver el, este (1.0), el bosquejo. Lo habló así abiertamente, como que si él es chontaleño, pero yo le enseñé cómo se dice, como se habla, cómo (.) se pronuncia, qué palabra se utiliza, diagonotal y todo eso para poder aprender correctamente."

<sup>353</sup> I was, of course, not present in these private meetings but I report as fact what was discussed as common knowledge in Zapotitlán during the following weeks.

<sup>354</sup> Dario, concluding prayer, 5/29/2011.

- 2 ayúdanos para que  
help us so that
- 3 podamos hacer siempre nuestro máximo esfuerzo  
we can always make our greatest effort
- 4 como  
like
- 5 el que ahora  
the fact that now
- 6 eh-h
- 7 los ancianos en las congregaciones estén  
the congregational elders are
- 8 interesados en que los hermanos prediquen en chontal  
interested in having the brothers and sisters preach in Chontal
- 9 y también las reuniones se conduzcan en chontal.  
and also (that) the meetings be conducted in Chontal.

While he recognized that meetings were not currently being conducted in Chontal, he did not publicly acknowledge that there were significant numbers of non-speakers among these congregations. At a later date, this same overseer recorded a brief interview with me, in which he asked me to give my professional opinion of the Watch Tower Society's use of indigenous languages. He would use this brief video, he said, to inspire indigenous language congregations to continue working hard, as well as to encourage indigenous language speakers in Spanish congregations to transfer to congregations where they could make use of their language skills.

In the weeks following the Circuit Assembly, all three congregations placed a concerted effort on expanding their use of Chontal. All talks given by elders and ministerial servants included at least some Chontal, and even non-speakers, particularly children, were encouraged to begin preparing their contributions in Chontal. Instead of individuals raising their hands spontaneously to answer questions based on the text, questions were assigned to particular individuals ahead of time, giving them time to prepare in Chontal and be sure of being recognized. Spontaneous contributions were also allowed, but pre-assigned contributions were given priority. As a result, many individuals who would have prepared their responses privately

instead wrote them jointly with older family members, or asked older family members to prepare *for* them and instruct them in pronunciation.<sup>355</sup>

## 8.2 Motivations for the Use of Chontal

### 8.2.1 The Mother Tongue: "to touch the fibers of their heart with the Biblical message"

The Watch Tower Society believes that people are more receptive to the Bible in their first language, and so there will be a need to preach in Chontal for as long as there are mother tongue speakers of Chontal. Like many other evangelical Christians, including the SIL/WBT (Handman 2007),<sup>356</sup> the Watch Tower Society distinguishes between "head" (logical facilities) and "heart" (emotions), and considers a person's first language the best way to access the heart. For the Watch Tower Society, then, the use of Chontal is primarily about reaching older individuals who are first-language or monolingual speakers of Chontal.<sup>357</sup>

This trope of the heart appears in Witness discourse at all levels of the organization. A sign in the Mexico Branch Office reads: "With the goal of reaching people's hearts, we provide them with the Bible's message in their mother tongue."<sup>358</sup> An article in the August 15th, 2004 edition of *The Watchtower*, "Mexico's Indigenous Peoples Hear the Good News," quoted Mixe-

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<sup>355</sup> Unfortunately, the congregations made this change a few weeks before I left Zapotitlán, and I was unable to document whether the congregations maintained this new set of practices, and how they affected the Chontal language ability of younger members of the congregation. Based on older Witnesses' self-reports that using Chontal had improved their comfort in the language, and given this technique's similarity to the rote techniques used for Bible instruction, I would expect a significant change in young Witnesses' Chontal ability over time. Unfortunately, this question is beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>356</sup> Catholics sometimes express this sentiment as well. Regarding the election of the first Latin American pope, a high-ranking Catholic priest in the US remarked, "Somebody with a Hispanic last name and whose mother tongue is Spanish – that touches people's hearts." (G. Jeffrey MacDonald. 2013. Pope Francis: For Hispanic Catholics in US, a Rush of Joy. *Christian Science Monitor*, March 13, 2013. Accessed online March 14, 2013.)

<sup>357</sup> The Watch Tower Society also uses many vernaculars in an attempt to align themselves with the practices of the early Church. I am indebted to George Chryssides (p.c., 4/20/2013) for this point. See also the discussion of both of these logics in *Bearing Thorough Witness* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2009a: 24-5).

<sup>358</sup> "Con el propósito de llegar al corazón de las personas se les suministra el mensaje de la Biblia en su lengua materna."

speaking Witnesses, who framed their delight in these terms. Michael S., an editor in the Brooklyn Watchtower complex, also used this language, as did Circuit Overseer Pedro and *mestiza* pioneer Marisa. Pedro, the *mestizo* overseer of a circuit that included not only Oaxaca Chontal but also Huave and the unrelated Mayan language Tabasco Chontal, used this image of the heart to connect translation in Biblical times with the use of indigenous languages today:

We understand that tending to people in their mother tongue, well it's something that has been seen within what, what Jehovah expects of these times, no? Something interesting that the Bible says, ah, Book of Acts chapter two, is that people, when they spoke to them at that time, at Pentecost, a holiday that was, thirty-three, the year thirty-three. It was that they spoke to those ones who were there, the proselytes, who were going to Jerusalem. They spoke to them in their language. Then the effect of that was that the word of God reached their hearts. The project, or what is being done here, on a worldwide level by Jehovah's Witnesses, is a matter that we understand to be God's instructions so that we can reach the hearts of more people and they can get to know Bible truth.<sup>359</sup>

It is something that Witnesses do, he added, "with the principal objective of helping people who ... might speak Spanish, but if they are spoken to in their own language, it's easier to touch the fibers of their heart with the Biblical message."<sup>360</sup>

For Pedro, the use of indigenous languages today is justified by a Biblical miracle that shows a fundamental connection between one's mother tongue and his or her heart. Yet he observed that it is also justified by trial and error: the Watch Tower Society used to preach to these individuals in Spanish, and this approach was less effective. Pedro provided two examples

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<sup>359</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:08:24-00:09:26:

"Entendemos que el atender a las personas en su lengua materna, pues es algo que se ha visto dentro de lo que es la, lo que Jehová espera de, de estos tiempos, no? Algo interesante que la biblia señala, ah, el libro de los hechos capítulo dos, es que las personas, cuando se les habló en aquel tiempo, en el pentecostés, una fiesta que hubo, el treinta y tres, en el año treinta y tres. Fue que les hablaron a los que estaban ahí, prosélitos, que iban a Jerusalem. Les hablaban en su idioma. Entonces el efecto de aquello fue que la palabra de Dios les llegó a su corazón. El proyecto, o lo que se está haciendo aquí, a nivel mundial por los testigos de Jehová es un asunto que entendemos que es la dirección de Dios, para que podamos llegar al corazón de más personas y conozcan la verdad bíblica."

<sup>360</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:09:38-00:09:52:

"...con el objetivo principal de ayudar a la gente, que a veces, aunque habla el español quizás, pero, que si se le habla en su propio idioma, es más fácil que se toquen las fibras de su corazón, con el mensaje bíblico."

of Witnesses who could only be reached fully by means of their first languages. Eighteen years after her baptism, one Witness woman was able to switch to an indigenous language congregation. After the very first meeting, she exclaimed: "Finally I understand and appreciate what I am hearing!"<sup>361</sup> As a result of such experiences, the organization's emphasis switched from teaching Spanish to non-Witnesses to preparing Witnesses to preach in other languages. "Those of us who speak Spanish, we put ourselves in people's place, we try to learn their language to teach them in their language so that Bible truth will have greater effect in people's hearts."<sup>362</sup> He also told me of greeting a man in Spanish and receiving no response, but as soon as he began to speak to the man in his own language, "the man even called his family, 'Come, look, he's speaking to us in our language,' His children, his wife, and we had a nice conversation, and the man finally told me, 'Thanks for speaking to me (in) my language.' Why? Because that's something that reaches the heart, right?"<sup>363</sup> Similar examples of this Herderian mother tongue ideology also appear in a *Watchtower* article about indigenous languages of Mexico.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:21:12-00:21:20:  
"Por fin entiendo y aprecio lo que estoy escuchando!"

<sup>362</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:22:02-00:22:19:  
"Nosotros, los que hablamos español, eh, ponernos en el lugar de las personas, tratar de aprender su idioma para enseñarles en su idioma a fin de que entonces tuviera un mejor efecto la verdad bíblica en el corazón de la gente."

<sup>363</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:24:23-00:24:45:  
"El señor hasta le llamó a su familia, 'Vengan, miren, nos están hablando en nuestro idioma.' A sus hijitos, a su esposa, y tuvimos una agradable conversación, y ya el señor finalmente hasta me dijo, 'Gracias por hablarme (en) mi lengua.' Eh, por qué? Porque eso es algo que llega al corazón, verdad?"

<sup>364</sup> "Mexico's Indigenous Peoples Hear the Good News" (*The Watchtower*, 8/15/2004, pp. 8-11). Compare Pedro's anecdotes with the following:  
"I got baptized after three months of Bible study,' she says. 'I knew that I should be baptized, but I must say that I really did not understand Bible truths as well as I should have. I think the reason is that my native language is Maya, and I did not understand Spanish very well. It took a while for me to get the real sense of the truth.'"  
"In one case, a Witness went to conduct a Bible study, but the student was not at home. When the husband came to the door, she offered to read from a brochure. "I don't want anything," he replied. The sister said to him in Totonac that the brochure was in their language. Hearing that, the man pulled up a bench and sat down. As she read to him, he kept saying, 'That is true. Yes, that is true.' He now attends Christian meetings."

Marisa, a *mestiza* pioneer from Michoacán serving in Zapotitlán with her husband Lucas, described the same phenomenon using this same imagery of reaching a person's heart:

We've seen that people, when someone preaches to them, if they preach in their language, it reaches their heart more, for example, even if they understand Spanish, no- if someone speaks an indigenous language, if you speak to them in their indigenous language, it opens their, their, like, they're more receptive to what you're saying because you're speaking in their indigenous language. Or even if they see that someone's not from, from here and tries to, to speak it, then they see that he, he's making an effort and so, (they'll say) 'well, it's important, then, what he's going to tell me because he's even trying to say it to me in my own language.' So, then, that's why. When someone speaks to them in their indigenous language, it reaches their heart more and, well, that's the goal when we preach to people about what the Bible says, about what God thinks, that it reaches their heart. So, if, well, in their mother tongue, it's more likely that that happens, than if someone speaks to them in, for example, Spanish, which isn't their mother tongue.<sup>365</sup>

All of these individuals, who were not ethnic Chontals, emphasized the need to preach specifically to living mother tongue speakers. When I asked in interviews if they foresaw a time when Chontal would no longer be used, they agreed that the use of Chontal was tied to the vitality of the language. That is, when the language was no longer anybody's mother tongue, it would no longer hold emotional significance for anyone. Pedro resisted my question to some extent, but he acknowledged that Chontal itself was not directly tied to the organization's goals: "It's not something that worries us in and of itself, right? Because our real goal, when the moment arrives in which there are no longer people who speak the language, eh, some indigenous tongue, we will go on preaching in, in Spanish. The goal is to try to reach as many

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<sup>365</sup> Lucas and Marisa interview, 2/2/2011, 00:33:10-00:34:30:

Marisa: "Se ha visto que las personas, cuando uno les predica, si les predica en su idioma, les llega más al corazón, por ejemplo, aunque entienda el español, no- si una persona habla una lengua indígena, si tú le hablas en su lengua indígena, se abre más su, su, como que es más receptiva a lo que le estás hablando porque le estás hablando en su lengua indígena. O hasta si ven que uno no es de, de aquí y trata de, de hablarlo, entonces ven que uno, uno se esfuerza y entonces (dirá) 'pues es importante entonces lo que me va a decir porque hasta está intentando decírmelo en mi lengua.' Entonces, pues, es por eso. Cuando uno le, le hablan en su lengua indígena, le llega más a, a su corazón y pues ese es el objetivo, que cuando nosotros les prediquemos a las personas, de lo que dice la Biblia, de lo que piensa Dios, pues que les llega a su corazón. Entonces si pues en su lengua materna, es más probable que eso pase, que a uno les hable en, por ejemplo, en español, que no es su lengua materna."

people as we possibly can."<sup>366</sup> When I asked Marisa if she thought there would still be a need in twenty years, she responded that it was unlikely, but the language would be necessary for as long as there are older people; she also said that the reason translating written materials has not been a priority is because the language is dying.

Josefina, a Witness in her 50s from Zapotitlán and the daughter of one of the earliest Witnesses, also spoke at length about the need to reach the hearts of older people in the region.

It is more necessary when we find an older woman, or when we go to far-away towns. We direct ourselves towards the older people, we speak to them with our Chontal, and we talk to them about something like this, about the promise, what God will have to do in the future. When, they listen when we speak Chontal to them, they already pay more attention, they like to learn more, yes, it's like the information reaches their hearts, when we speak to them in Chontal. [27 seconds omitted.] But if we arrive, we greet them, "**Are you well?**" or "**Are you all well?**" and then we are already speaking to them about God, and they even listen to you. [18 seconds omitted.] And yes, that's, that's what we are seeing, when we go to speak to them like so in Chontal, they listen to us, and they like it, and they even tell you, 'Come in, sit down' and they're going to give you a seat and listen to you, and yes, it reaches their hearts, but in Chontal.<sup>367</sup>

Indeed, during our 32-minute interview, she used the exact same wording three more times: "it reaches their hearts."<sup>368</sup> Josefina's emphasis on older people suggests that she, too, agreed with the Watch Tower Society as an institution that the primary motivation for Chontal was to reach

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<sup>366</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:31:02-00:31:21

"No es algo que nos preocupe en sí, verdad? Porque nuestro objetivo realmente, llegando el momento en que no haya una, personas que hablen el idioma, eh, la, alguna lengua indígena, se seguirá predicando en, en el español. El objetivo es tratar de llegar a cuantas más personas podamos."

<sup>367</sup> **Boldface** indicates Chontal as opposed to Spanish. Josefina interview, 4/28/2011, 00:07:20-00:09:27:

"Mas es necesario cuando encontramos una ancianita, o cuando vamos allá a pueblitos, (2.4) este, lejanos. Ya. Nos dirigimos con los (.) ancianitos, (1.4) les hablamos con nuestro chontal, (1.2) y cuando ya les, les platicamos de algo así, de (1.6) las promesas, lo que dios va a tener que hacer en el futuro. Cuando, escuchan cuando les hablamos el chontal, ya más nos prestan atención, y les gusta aprender más, sí, como que les llega en sus corazón la información, cuando les hablamos en el chontal. [00:08:10-00:08:37 omitted.] Pero si nosotros llegamos, les saludamos, '**ma wena topa'a?**' ...o '**awena tunjmana?**', y ya les estamos platicando de las cosas de Dios, y ya hasta te escuchan [00:08:50-00:09:08 omitted] Y, y sí eso, eso es lo que estamos viendo, cuando vamos a, a hablarles así en chontal, nos escuchan, y ya les gusta, y ya hasta te dicen, 'Pase, siéntase', ya te va a sentar y ya escucha, y sí, les llega en sus corazones, pero en chontal."

<sup>368</sup> Josefina interview, 4/28/2011, 00:14:51-00:14:53, 00:15:19-00:15:23, and 00:22:40-00:22:44.



out to older people in this region. However, Josefina, like many other ethnic Chontals, was largely concerned with a different group of Chontal speakers never mentioned by non-ethnic-Chontal Witnesses: the ancestors.

### **8.2.2 Resurrection: "We will see our grandparents and great-grandparents face to face"**

While individuals at higher levels of the Watch Tower Society were concerned with the salvation of older living individuals, many ethnically Chontal Witnesses were primarily concerned with the salvation of their ancestors. Their concern was not with the language as a vehicle of ancestral truth, but rather as an instrument for communicating with their ancestors. Ancestors, here, represent not a source of wisdom and moral resources but rather a destination for them.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that after Armageddon, those people who died without the opportunity to receive the word of God will be resurrected and given a second chance to accept the Bible. For many people in Zapotitlán, these deceased Chontal speakers were the primary audience for Chontal-language preaching.<sup>369</sup> While others made similar comments, seven of the Witnesses that I interviewed answered my question about why the Watch Tower Society decided to make a language change with lengthy narrative accounts of the resurrection. I provide one narrative in its entirety here, with the others available in Appendix E, and discuss them as a group in detail in the section that follows.

Oseas, 59, long-time member of Congregación Sur:<sup>370</sup>

- 1 Se decidieron cambiar (0.6)  
They decided to change
- 2 porque la misma (.) la Sociedad (.) de la Torre,  
because the very Society of the Tower

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<sup>369</sup> The emphasis on the logistics of the resurrection may be evidence of syncretism with the Mesoamerican ancestor cults, such as that evident in such traditions as Día de los Muertos, but this question is beyond the scope of the present dissertation. See, e.g., Nutini 1988.

<sup>370</sup> Oseas interview, 5/10/2011, 00:08:53-00:11:07.

- 3 (2.4) A R,  
A. R.<sup>371</sup>
- 4 hizo arreglos,  
made arrangements,
- 5 mediante el espíritu de Jehová.=  
by means of the spirit of Jehovah.
- 6 =Eso no es por sí solo.  
This [didn't happen] all by itself.
- 7 El espíritu de Jehová  
The spirit of Jehovah
- 8 (1.0) transmitió y dijo que (0.8)  
gave an order and said that
- 9 se van a renovar los lenguajes maternos.  
the mother tongues are going to be renewed.
- 10 Por qué?  
Why?
- 11 Porque los abuelitos los que se van a resucitar,  
Because the grandparents the ones that are going to be resurrected,
- 12 ellos no saben hablar español.  
they don't know how to speak Spanish.
- 13 (1.4)
- 14 Y cuando se resuciten a esas personas injustas,  
And when those unrighteous people are resurrected,
- 15 van a necesitar alguien que habla chontal para dar el testimonio a aquella persona  
they are going to need someone who speaks Chontal to give a testimony to that person
- 16 para enseñar acerca de Dios.  
to teach about God.
- 17 Porque mucha gente murieron,  
Because many people died
- 18 (1.0)
- 19 mucha gente murieron,=  
many people died
- 20 =los abuelitos, los tatarabuelos, ellos no saben.  
the grandparents, the great-grandparents, they don't know.
- 21 [00:09:49-00:10:36 omitted.]
- 22 Y por eso entonces ahora sí se hizo ese (arreglo)  
And that's why this (arrangement) was made now
- 23 que se va a renovar todos los lenguajes maternos,  
that all of the mother tongues are going to be renewed,
- 24 (1.2)
- 25 zapoteco, mixteco, huave,  
Zapotec, Mixtec, Huave,
- 26 (2.2)

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<sup>371</sup> A.R. is an abbreviation for *asociación religiosa* 'religious association,' a particular type of Mexican corporate structure.

- 27 bastante idioma, ahí,  
a lot of languages, there,  
28 todo se va a renovar,  
everything's going to be renewed  
29 para que cuando se levanten esas personas incluso los tatarabuelos,  
so that when those people rise including the great-grandparents,  
30 los vamos a hablar de la Biblia.  
we are going to talk to them about the Bible.  
31 Porque si no, cómo va(n) a oír?  
Because if not, how are they going to hear?

To understand these narratives, we first need to understand Witness ideologies about resurrection and the post-Armageddon future. All Witnesses believe that there are three types of people, characterized by their relationship to the Witness faith, or "the truth." The *righteous* are those who have accepted the Witness message and share it with others and are guaranteed eternal life in an earthly paradise;<sup>372</sup> the *unrighteous* are those who have not (yet) accepted the message; and the *wicked* are those who have rejected the message in spite of knowing better, that is, baptized Witnesses who have left the fold.<sup>373</sup> Upon their death, the wicked simply cease to exist, but both the righteous and the unrighteous will be resurrected after Armageddon.<sup>374</sup> During the Millennium – Jesus's thousand-year reign on earth – the unrighteous will have the opportunity to receive the message and become righteous; if they do not, they, too, will cease to exist. The stakes of the resurrection, then, are very high: if and only if Witnesses succeed in converting

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<sup>372</sup> Among "the righteous" are the 144,000 "anointed ones" who are destined for heaven rather than the earthly paradise (Holden 2002c: 25). As George Chryssides (p.c., 4/29/2013) reminded me, the vast majority of the anointed ones became Witnesses before 1935, and very few of them are still alive; it is for this reason that discussion of this aspect of Witness theology is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>373</sup> Fieldnotes, and Oseas and me, Bible study, 12/13/2010.

<sup>374</sup> This belief is connected to Acts 24:15, which reads: "and I have hope toward God, which hope these [men] themselves also entertain, that there is going to be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous" in the English New World Translation.

relatives and loved ones who did not become Witnesses, those people will live forever with them in paradise.<sup>375</sup>

These Zapotitlán Witnesses' narratives differ from the official account on one key detail: the language that will be spoken after Armageddon. The official Watch Tower Society stance is that "we do not know" (Michael S., p.c., 11/25/2012), but it seems likely that all humans will speak a language Witnesses call 'antediluvian Hebrew' (Botting and Botting 1984: 22-25; compare Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1973: 45-50). Watch Tower Society literature presents "the original language of the first Adam" as the most likely possibility, although it stops short from considering this a certainty:

What will become the common language of all the earthly children of the "Eternal Father"? Will it be the original language of the first Adam, the language with which Jehovah endowed him? Likely. In any event, all language barriers will be wiped out. You will be able to travel anywhere and communicate with people. You will be able to understand them, and they will be able to understand you. There will be one language for all mankind, and it would be appropriate for the entire Bible to be available in that language. (Compare Zephaniah 3:9.) In that language all the earth will be filled with the knowledge of Jehovah "as the waters are covering the very sea."—Isaiah 11:9. [Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1986: 176, quoted in Michael S., p.c., 11/25/2012]

While the Watch Tower Society is unwilling to claim any particular language as the future common language of humanity, they are quite clear that there will be some common language.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> The discussion in this paragraph comes from both conversations with Witnesses and from Chapter 9, "The Power of the Resurrection Hope," of *Worship the Only True God* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2002: 79-89).

<sup>376</sup> People may be resurrected without knowledge of this language, but they will acquire it shortly thereafter: "For those who lived prior to the Flood, including the eight human survivors of that Noachian deluge, this will present no great problem at their resurrection from the dead to life on earth under God's Millennial kingdom. But for the vast majority of the rest of mankind, it will mean learning a new language, the language God purposes for all humankind. In view of good language instructors used by the Kingdom, there should be no great problem on this account." (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1973, quoted in Michael S., p.c., 11/25/2012).

This section of this text bears the undeniably Herderian heading "One Race, One Language," yet this is somewhat misleading. In the post-Millennium era, when only believers survive, it seems undeniable that Jehovah's (one) people to share one single language: the pure language. Yet not only believers will be resurrected, and some of those who are resurrected may ultimately fail to achieve the eternal life of which Witnesses preach.

Zapotitlán Witnesses, on the other hand, appear to be just as certain that all individuals will be resurrected with the same linguistic repertoires they had in life.

The seven narratives are consistent in both content and structure. In all cases, the speaker explains that there will be a large-scale resurrection, and that many of those who once lived in this community did not speak Spanish but only Chontal. The ethnic Chontals see a future responsibility to their dead, then, to speak Chontal. These stories distinguish between an "us" of living Witnesses and a "they" who have died without receiving the message. The narrators also use a variety of verb forms to distinguish these groups temporally, and they attribute agency to themselves while denying it to those who they see as in need of salvation. In parallel with this attribution of agency, the narrators also attribute responsibility to themselves: by virtue of becoming Witnesses, they are accountable for the conversion of others.

All speakers use the first person plural extensively to refer to the living members of the Chontal congregations,<sup>377</sup> and the third person plural to refer both to the dead who are not yet Witnesses, and to the Watch Tower Society. The group of living Witnesses is characterized as "those who are trying to rescue Chontal" and "brothers," as opposed to "the ones who are in the tombs" or "the people who didn't receive the message" or "the people who died a long time ago." However, these two groups will coexist in the future, as demonstrated by speakers' phrasing of their statements about the future.

The choice of two particular constructions suggests that this future is not in doubt. The periphrastic future<sup>378</sup> is used in Spanish to describe assured future events, in contrast with the simple future, which is commonly used to indicate probability or supposition, and which often

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<sup>377</sup> The status of deceased baptized Witnesses is not discussed explicitly in these narratives.

<sup>378</sup> In Spanish this compound tense is formed with the verb *ir* 'to go' conjugated in the present; it is grammatically – although not semantically – comparable to English *be going to*, which is how I have translated this tense.

sounds archaic or overly formal when used with a factual future meaning. This simple future is used only twice: Josefina uses this tense in her final speculative comment, "we'll all be able to talk with the resurrected," and Beto uses it in his (nearly verbatim) voicing of the Bible as well as in the recontextualization of this Bible text in the following sentences. All of these speakers also use present subjunctive forms with *cuando* 'when', which indicates that an event that will happen at an unknown future time.

The linguistic and religious knowledge of these two groups is distinguished in part by verb tenses and aspect. When speaking of the dead, these narrators use the preterite and simple present tenses throughout: they "spoke Chontal" and "don't know [Spanish]" and "didn't get to learn the truth." The simple present is also often used to describe the living, and the living are the only people ever often spoken of in the present progressive: "we are trying to rescue Chontal" and "we are trying to teach [our children] to learn to speak with the Chontal language" and "we are speaking only Spanish." The religious and linguistic abilities of the living are a work in progress, while the dead receive either the finality of the preterite or, when their post-resurrection existence is considered, the habitual simple present, which suggests the impossibility of change.

Furthermore, all of these narrators rely heavily on rhetorical questions and conditionals. Rhetorical questions are common in Witness discourse elsewhere, and may function to create agreement:

Even brief encounters with this form of conversation are extremely irritating to anyone not considered to be a part of the elite 'we,' yet among the Witnesses the stock answers to the stock questions provide a verbal feedback system for consolidating social integration within the faith. It also obviates the necessity of thinking when presented with a question. When lured off the course of their carefully prepared house-to-house rhetorical interrogation presentations, many Witnesses become flustered and are unable to continue.  
[Botting and Botting 1984: 88]

The relevant question for Witnesses who discuss the resurrection in this fashion is how they will be able to get their message across, given language barriers and the high stakes of post-resurrection conversion. Josefina asks, "How are we going to talk to them?" and Lorena asks this same question four different times, in four slightly different ways, "But how are we going to talk to them? Now, in what way are we going to talk to them, if we're speaking only Spanish? ... How are they going to be able to talk to us? ... How are we going to talk to them?" For Beto and Oseas, the emphasis is not on the Witnesses but on the resurrected. Rather than asking how *we* will be able to talk to *them*, Beto and Oseas ask instead how *they* will be able to hear: "Because how can it be, if they, when they died, spoke Chontal?" Beto asks, and Oseas puts it: "Because if not [if we don't speak Chontal], how are they going to hear?"

Conditionals, on the other hand, referred to circumstances seen as prerequisites for this future preaching activity. They generally fell into two categories: the existential and the linguistic. Both Lorena and José placed particular emphasis on this first concern. Lorena says: "If we survive, if Jehovah allows us to survive this great tribulation," and José observes: "If Jehovah allows us to become (let's say) survivors in the tribulation that is coming soon, we are the ones who are going to teach these people who will be raised." This worry, however, was secondary to the fear of incomprehension: every single individual who spoke about the need to use Chontal after the resurrection described this possibility. The following table illustrates the pervasiveness of these concerns.

**Table 8.1:** Conditionals in discussion of the resurrection.

<b>Speaker</b>	<b>Conditional</b>
Josefina	"Vamos a tener que platicar con ellos, porque si nosotros no..." "We are going to have to speak with them, because if we don't..."
Josefina	"Y si nosotros vamos a platicar con ellos en español, ni nos van a escuchar, no nos van a entender." "And if we are going to speak with them in Spanish, they aren't even going to hear us, they aren't going to understand us."
Beto	"Porque cómo puede ser, si ellos, cuando murieron, hablaron en Chontal?" "Because how can it be if they, when they died, spoke in Chontal?"
Beto	"Si le hablamos en- en español, no lo van a entender." "If we speak to them in Spanish, they aren't going to understand it."
Oseas	"Porque si no, cómo va(n) a oír?" "Because if not, how are they going to hear?"
Lorena	"En qué manera los vamos a hablar, si nosotros estamos hablando puro español?" "In what way are we going to talk to them if we are speaking only Spanish?"
Lorena	"Ah, pero qué tal, si nosotros cuando, si Jehová permite, cuando ellos se van a resucitar, y nosotros estamos ahí esperándolos a ellos, mm?" "Ah, but what if, if we when, if Jehovah allows, when they are going to be resurrected, and we are there waiting for them?"
Lorena	"Porque si se levanta y nosotros hablamos, hablamos, este, español, 'Ay, ¡qué bueno!' le vamos a decir." "Because if they rise and we speak, we speak, um, Spanish, <sup>379</sup> 'How wonderful!' we are going to say to them."
Lorena	"Y si nosotros no hablamos espa, espa, el este, chontal, cómo los vamos a hablarlos?" "And if we don't speak Sp-, Sp-, um, Chontal, how are we going to talk to them?"
José	"Entonces en el futuro cuando se levanten éstas, si nosotros no tratamos de rescatar nuestro lenguaje, quién les va a enseñar?" "Then in the future when they rise, if we don't try to rescue our language, who is going to teach them?"
José	"Si Jehová permite (que) lleguemos a ser (para decir) sobrevivientes en la tribulación que está próxima nosotros somos los que vamos a enseñar a estas (personas) que van a ser levantados." "If Jehovah allows us to become (let's say) survivors in the tribulation that is coming soon, we are the ones who are going to teach these (people) who are going to be raised."
Jacinto	"Si no hablamos bien el chontal, cómo vamos a dar el mensaje a estas personas?" "If we don't speak Chontal well, how are we going to give the message to those people?"
Esmeralda	"Y qué tal si no saben en el español, pues se les va a predicar, este, de: chontal." "And what if they don't know Spanish? Well they're going to be preached to, um, from Chontal."

<sup>379</sup> Based on other disfluencies elsewhere in this interview I strongly suspect that she meant to say "Chontal."



Both agency (Ahearn 2001; Duranti 2001; 2004) and responsibility for this preaching are placed in the hands of not only the Watch Tower Society as an institution but also these particular individual Witnesses. I differentiate here between agency and responsibility. Taking Ahearn's (2001: 112) definition of *agency* as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" as a starting point, I define *responsibility* as the intersection of agency and moral knowledge. Hill and Irvine (1993: 2) observe that "'responsibility' points toward the agency aspect of meaning while 'evidence' points toward the knowledge aspect. But the two aspects are crucially linked..." Similarly, Zigon (2008: 137) suggests that this term might be better imagined as a portmanteau consisting of *response* and *ability* which "may have little to do with answering for oneself, and instead denote the ability to answer others and the interaction context." Given the role of agency in responsibility, denying agency to these ancestors functions to protect them from bearing any culpability for their moral status. Whether these resurrected ancestors become righteous – or not – is up to the living Witnesses, whose moral knowledge creates an obligation to (learn Chontal and) teach. The dead have no parallel obligation to (learn Spanish and) learn.

The Watch Tower Society, as the agent that shapes all Witnesses' lives by providing them with moral direction, is positioned as the agent of the change to Chontal. Beto, in particular, placed my question, *why?*, in the mouth of an instructor at Bethel House in Mexico City, the Witnesses' Mexican headquarters. Indeed, Beto directly invoked specific authoritative sources to which he attributed the concern with resurrection, voicing not only an instructor at Bethel House but also the Bible itself. Similarly, Jacinto cited the Bible, telling me that "the word of God mentions that, that all those who died ... are going to be resurrected." Beto and Oseas also both placed the shift to Chontal in the context of an institutional shift to indigenous languages more broadly. While Beto invoked these institutional voices, Oseas mentioned "arrangements," a term

that indexes Watch Tower authority indirectly.<sup>380</sup> Indeed, four of these seven speakers explicitly place the agency for the decision to use Chontal in the hands of the Watch Tower Society,<sup>381</sup> a fifth (Jacinto) alludes to the Bible, and a sixth (Esmeralda) cites an unspecified "they," referring to the Watch Tower Society.

However, individual Witnesses do bear both agency and responsibility with regard to preaching to resurrected Chontal-speakers. Word choice and grammatical features ("encoded agency" (Duranti 2001; 2004)) work together to portray members of the Chontal congregation as highly agentive, and the dead as lacking in agency. All of these narratives often used semi-passive<sup>382</sup> and passive constructions to talk about the dead, and exclusively active constructions to talk about the living. Indeed, in these narratives, almost all of the active constructions that referred to this group of ancestors are used with verbs that fall into two classes: cognitive verbs and verbs of life and death.<sup>383</sup> Cognitive verbs are more common – the dead hear, understand, speak (in the sense of 'have ability in [some language]', rather than 'communicate [with someone]'), know, listen, and receive messages. They are receptive to the message – indeed, "it's

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<sup>380</sup> Former Witness David Reed (2010) defines "arrangement, the" as follows: "In any specific situation or circumstances, the procedural instructions provided by the Watchtower Society through its publications, letters, and appointed representatives. For example, an elder may reject suggestions for an innovative approach to meetings or door-to-door work by replying, 'No. Let's just follow the arrangement.' This puts the weight of the Watchtower Society and God's invisible heavenly organization behind his words." The Spanish word *arreglo(s)* serves this precise purpose.

<sup>381</sup> Referred to variously as "the Society and Jehovah's organization", "the Society", "the Society, the people of Jehovah", "the Society of the Tower, A.R.", "the faithful and discreet slave", and "the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses."

<sup>382</sup> While Spanish does have a true passive construction using the copula *ser*, the semi-passive is more commonly used. The semi-passive consists of reflexive verbs (for inanimate subjects) or reflexive impersonal verbs with an dative subject (for animate subjects). *Se les va a avisar* 'they're going to be told' is an example of this construction.

<sup>383</sup> An earlier version of this chapter considered some of these verbs 'locational'. Pamela Munro (p.c., 1/12/2013) notes that verbs like *levantarse* 'get up, rise' and *volver* 'return' are not precisely locational, and Mike Galant (p.c., 1/25/2013) suggested that these might profitably be included in this latter category.

deserved that they come to know, come to learn, come to get to know Jehovah" – but they are not actively seeking it out.

**Table 8.2:** Types of verbs in discussion of the resurrection.

<b>cognitive verbs</b>	<b>verbs of life and death</b>
<i>escuchar</i> 'hear'	<i>estar</i> 'be at'
<i>entender</i> 'understand'	<i>levantarse</i> 'rise, get up'
<i>hablar</i> 'speak' (used with language as object, in the sense of 'know')	<i>volver</i> 'return'
<i>saber</i> 'know'	<i>resucitarse</i> 'be resurrected'
<i>oír</i> 'hear'	<i>morir</i> 'die'
<i>recibir</i> 'receive'	<i>fallecer</i> 'pass on'
<i>aprender</i> 'learn' (1x)	<i>vivir</i> 'live' (1x)

The semi-passive constructions provide further evidence for this claim. The unrighteous simply receive the message:

**Table 8.3:** Semi-passive constructions in discussion of the resurrection.

Lorena: "se les va a dar el testimonio"	they're going to be given a testimony
Lorena: "se les va a avisar"	they're going to be told
José: "no se les ha predicado"	they haven't been preached to
Jacinto: "se les va a dar el mensaje"	they're going to be given the message
Jacinto: "vivieron lo que se les enseñó"	they lived what they were taught
Esmeralda: "se les va a predicar"	they're going to be preached to

Living Witnesses, on the other hand, are active participants. They are never the subjects of these passive or semi-passive constructions, and they engage actively with the language and with these ancestors. The resurrected hear and understand – or are unable to hear and understand – the living, based on entirely on their choice of language. The living, in contrast, teach the dead, talk with the dead, help the dead, welcome the dead, and give the dead the message. They are, in short, the active, agentive participants in this communication.

**Table 8.4:** Active verbs in discussion of the resurrection.

<b>we ... the language</b>	<b>we ... the resurrected</b>
<i>aprender</i> 'learn'	<i>(tener el privilegio de) enseñar</i> '(have the privilege to) teach'
<i>(tratar de) rescatar</i> '(try to) rescue'	<i>platicar con</i> 'talk with'
<i>olvidar</i> 'forget'	<i>hablalar a</i> 'talk to'
<i>mostrar</i> 'demonstrate'	<i>ver</i> 'see'
<i>hablar</i> 'speak'	<i>esperar</i> 'wait for'
<i>usar</i> 'use'	<i>ayudar</i> 'help'
	<i>dar a entender</i> 'help ... understand'
	<i>darle la bienvenida a</i> 'welcome'
	<i>darle el mensaje a</i> 'give ... the message'
	<i>darle el testimonio a</i> 'give ... testimony'

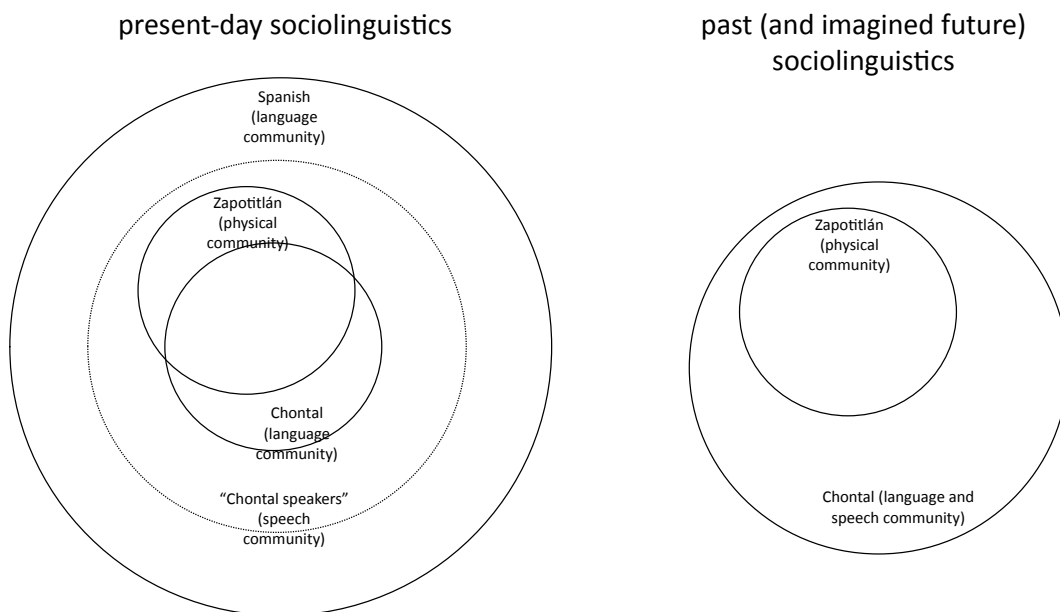
Robbins (2001) reminds us that listening can be agentive, particularly in Christian contexts, and Friedner (m.s.: 3) asks us to consider "the transformative power of understanding."<sup>384</sup> However, the co-occurrence of the conduit metaphor of communication (Reddy 1979) with the consistent use of passive and semi-passive constructions suggests that the Witnesses do not, in fact, conceive of listening as agentive. Furthermore, ideologies that only Witnesses are able to transcend their emotional ties to their first languages (see Section 5.4) suggest that one only gains agency to listen in particular ways somewhat later in the process of becoming a Witness.

Furthermore, if the resurrected are stripped of their agency, they cannot possibly have responsibility for their own moral standing. By transforming the resurrected Chontal speakers into passive receptacles for the message, these narrators make it impossible to blame their ancestors for what otherwise might be considered a moral failing. And indeed, the stakes are especially high because of the personal nature of the resurrection. Both Oseas and Lorena referred repeatedly to "the grandparents" and "the great-grandparents." *Los abuel(it)os*, "the grandparents," is commonly used idiomatically to refer to the older members of the community,

<sup>384</sup> Furthermore, Hirschkind (2006) depicts a morality that not only takes listening as central but even locates the agency of communicative acts in the listener rather than the speaker. Fung, Miller, and Lin (2004: 304) also illustrate "a version of listening...that links [it] to active sense making, reflectiveness, and moral agency."

those of grandparental age, although it can also be personal, while *los tatarabuelos* "the great-grandparents" is almost never used in idiomatic fashion. Lorena, however, used the personal pronoun and referred specifically to "our grandparents" and the joy that she would feel at welcoming them back to this world; José did the same, referring at one point to "our ancestors who died." When I asked Jacinto if, for his example, his grandfather was among those he would welcome back to the world he took this up enthusiastically, cutting me off to say, "Exactly! I would love to tell my grandfather that we came to know the truth, because he didn't learn the truth."

**Figure 8.5:** The sociolinguistic situation of the co-present audience (left) and of the imagined future audience of resurrected Chontal speakers (right). The Chontal speech community coincides for both, but the Chontal language community is coterminous with the speech community in the imagined future, and this community is not a subset of the Spanish language community as it is in the present day.



## 8.3 Monolingualism and the Genetic Fallacy

### 8.3.1 The Ideal of Synchronic Chontal Monolingualism

In spite of the multilingualism of all Chontal congregations, there exists an ideal that a Chontal congregation should do everything in Chontal. As Lucas, the pioneer from Mexico City, explained: "They changed it to a circuit in Chontal, and now they really began to tell them, 'well, if you are Chontals, then (in) your meetings you to have to speak Chontal, you have to comment in Chontal, you have to preach in Chontal, because you are Chontals.'"<sup>385</sup> Similarly, the District Overseer's prayer quoted earlier in this chapter (section 8.1) observed that "the congregational elders are interested in having the brothers preach in Chontal and also (that) the meetings be conducted in Chontal."<sup>386</sup> Michael S. at the Brooklyn Watchtower also told me that bilingual congregations are very rare and that they typically represent a transitional stage that ends once written materials have been produced.

The pressure to use Chontal to the exclusion of Spanish is much stronger during rare events like Assemblies. During Chontal-language Assemblies, nearly all Spanish-language talks are given with an interpreter. The two exceptions are presentations that are not live and thus are more difficult to translate. In the drama, actors lip-sync to a recording rather than speaking themselves; the audio-drama consists of a recorded dramatic reading of the Bible.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Lucas and Marisa interview, 2/2/2011, 00:31:53-00:32:31:

"No había chontal, no había circuito en chontal. [00:31:57-00:32:11 omitted] Entonces como vio que aquí era zona chontal, pues los cambiaron a un circuito en chontal, y ahora sí les empezaron a decir, 'pues si ustedes son chontales, entonces sus reuniones tienen que (.) hablar chontal, tienen que comentar en chontal, tienen que predicar en chontal, porque ustedes son chontales.'"

<sup>386</sup> Dario, concluding prayer, 5/29/2011:

"...los ancianos en las congregaciones estén interesados en que los hermanos prediquen en chontal y también las reuniones se conduzcan en chontal."

<sup>387</sup> Since there exists no Chontal-language Bible accepted by the Jehovah's Witnesses, it is hard to imagine how the audio-drama could be presented other than in Spanish.

### 8.3.2 "It takes a lot of effort. You have to think, how? How?": Chontal as Challenge

Of course, presenting in Chontal requires significantly more time and effort. To answer a question in Spanish, one need only find the answer in the text and underline it; a Chontal answer requires translation and often rehearsal. Elders and ministerial servants who regularly present longer segments find it particularly difficult to adhere to this ideal. They spend several hours a week preparing for meetings even if they present exclusively in Spanish; presenting in Chontal doubles or triples the time required.<sup>388</sup>

Many congregation members, including those who spoke Chontal very well, presented the language as difficult. "The ones who don't work hard will never achieve it," said Oseas, "It takes a lot of effort. You have to think, how? How (do you say it)?"<sup>389</sup> She, and many others, cited three major problems that made this translation effort particularly difficult: a lack of understanding of the precise meaning of Spanish words, trouble finding the correct word in Chontal, and uncertainty about how to write Chontal.

These first two concerns were intertwined, and many more people expressed worry about their Chontal ability than about their understanding of Spanish. Oseas worried: "Sometimes it's also hard for us because we don't understand the word, what does it mean?"<sup>390</sup> But she herself – although she said Chontal was easier for her than Spanish – spent much more time discussing the lack of Chontal ability in the community and the degree to which she had to learn Chontal from other Witnesses. Many others, particularly younger speakers, expressed the same insecurity.

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<sup>388</sup> According to both interviews and my observations. Living in a house with two elders meant that I saw informally how much time they spent preparing each week.

<sup>389</sup> Oseas interview, 5/10/2011, 00:05:38-00:05:53:  
"Quienes no se esfuerzan nunca lo logran. (3.6) Quiere mucho esfuerzo. (1.8) Tienes que pensar, ¿cómo? ¿Cómo (dices)?"

<sup>390</sup> Oseas interview, 5/10/2011, 00:05:59-00:06:06:  
"A veces también nos dificulta porque no- no entendemos bien (0.8) la palabra, ¿qué significa?"

Pablo, a 38-year-old ministerial servant in Congregación Sur, noted: "Since it's a lot of information, there are words that can't, we don't know how to express them in Chontal, yes. That's it, we don't know how to express it. [3 seconds omitted.] And there are simple words that, yes, more or less we can speak them. And there are words that aren't possible."<sup>391</sup> Several of these speakers also stressed that translation was a difficult task even if they felt fully competent in both languages.

Even those who did not find the language itself challenging emphasized the difficulty of writing. Both Josefina and Lorena, for example, said that they were used to commenting in Chontal, and both said they found it easier to memorize their contributions or translate on the fly rather than to try to write them down. Pablo's father Alfredo, age 61 and a ministerial servant in Congregación Sur, told me: "Me, for my part, what is hard for me is to write the letters. That's what's hard for me."<sup>392</sup> He then provided several examples of words that he found especially difficult to spell; all of these words contained sounds not found in Spanish.

### **8.3.3 "For those who are Chontals, [it's] easy and quick": The Essentialization of Ethnic Chontals as Chontal Speakers**

In spite of Chontal speakers' observations about the difficulty of translation, non-ethnic-Chontals and ethnic Chontals alike often essentialized the connection between Chontal ethnicity and Chontal language ability. Pioneer Marisa suggested that it was easier for ethnic Chontals to use the language:

For example, us, when we go to the meeting and we prepare a commentary in Chontal, but, well it does take a lot of work, no? It's hard, how will you put it, will

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<sup>391</sup> Alfredo and Pablo interview, 6/25/2011, 00:03:18-00:03:40:

"Como (0.6) la información es mucho, hay palabras que no se, (0.8) no sabemos pues expresarlo (.) en chontal, sí. Ese es, no sabemos expresarlo. [00:03:31-00:03:33 omitted.] Y hay palabras sencillos que sí, más o menos lo (.) podemos hablar. (1.8) Y hay palabras que no se puede..."

<sup>392</sup> Alfredo and Pablo interview, 6/25/2011, 00:15:44-00:15:49:

"Yo, de mi parte, lo que me dificulta es para escribir las letras. Ese es lo que me dificulta."



you translate? What word will you use? What if it doesn't sound good like that? Well, since for us it's not our mother tongue it's very difficult for us, right? For those who are Chontals, well yes, easy and quick they have their magazine, in Spanish and then they provide their commentary.<sup>393</sup>

For herself and her native-Spanish-speaking husband, it "takes a lot of work" to be able to participate in Chontal. However, "for those who **are** Chontals," it's "easy and quick." She does not say "for those who speak Chontal." Instead, she locates this language facility in being Chontal, in Chontal ethnic identity.

Her husband cited the same essential connection between Chontal identity and Chontal language, locating it in the institutional voice of the Watch Tower Society at the time of the change to Chontal. He said, "They really began to tell them, 'well, if you are Chontals, then (in) your meetings you to have to speak Chontal, you have to comment in Chontal, you have to preach in Chontal, because you are Chontals.'"<sup>394</sup> He framed the need to use Chontal monolingually in the meetings with a repetition of the phrase, "you are Chontals."

Members of the community also spoke about language in ways that constructed all ethnic Chontals as Chontal speakers. Josefina used the phrase *ser chontal* 'be Chontal' throughout our discussion, and she framed the official designation of Congregación Sur as a Chontal language congregation, as "the news, the letter, [that said] that now we are going to try to be Chontals."<sup>395</sup> She noted, too, that, "... this really is a requirement, it has to be Chontal, because we're already

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<sup>393</sup> Lucas and Marisa interview, 2/2/2011, 00:29:37-00:30:07:

"Por ejemplo, nosotros cuando vamos a la reunión, y (.) preparamos un comentario en chontal, pero, (.) pues sí cuesta mucho trabajo, no? =Es (.) difícil ahí, ¿cómo le vas a poner, vas a traducir? ¿Qué palabrita vas a usar? ¿Que así no se oye bien? (1.4) Pues como nosotros no es nuestra lengua materna (pues) se nos hace muy difícil, verdad? A los que son chontales pues sí, fácil y rápido tienen su revista, (y) en español y entonces sacan su, su comentario."

<sup>394</sup> Lucas and Marisa interview, 2/2/2011, 00:32:17-00:32:31:

"... y ahora sí les empezaron a decir, 'pues si ustedes son chontales, entonces sus reuniones tienen que (.) hablar chontal, tienen que comentar en chontal, tienen que predicar en chontal, porque ustedes son chontales.'"

<sup>395</sup> Josefina interview, 4/28/2011, 00:17:09-00:17:15

"...la noticia, la carta, que ahora vamos a tratar de (.) ser chontales"

registered as Chontals."<sup>396</sup> Lorena, meanwhile, essentialized the connection between Chontal ethnicity and Chontal language skills in the opposite way, by framing particular ethnic Chontal individuals' inability to speak the language as remarkable: "They really are Chontals. In name they're Chontals, yes, but they don't speak it, they don't speak it very well."<sup>397</sup> While there are quite obviously Chontals who do not speak Chontal, she suggests in this remark that anyone who is Chontal ought to be able to speak it.<sup>398</sup>

#### **8.4 The Once and Future Chontal Language Community**

In contemporary Zapotitlán, many people describe a direct connection between Chontal ethnic identity and Chontal language ability, yet this essentialized and idealized connection is not borne out by most individuals' competence or practice. However, in the past, the community of Chontal speakers was coterminous with both the ethnic Chontal community and the speech community that values Chontal as an emblem of identity (Barth 1969). Many Zapotitlán Jehovah's Witnesses imagine a future in which these communities will again overlap. When the ancestors are resurrected in the post-Armageddon future, the Chontal ethnic community will no longer simply imagine itself as a community of Chontal speakers, but will once again use the Chontal language as its chief medium of communication.

At present, the essentialized connection between Chontal ethnicity and the Chontal language is managed in multiple ways. An ideology of language as words (see Section 4.1.3)

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<sup>396</sup> Josefina interview, 4/28/2011, 00:36:46-00:36:56:  
"...pero sí esto sí es un requisito, (1.2) tiene que ser chontal, (0.8) porque ya estamos registrados como chontales."

<sup>397</sup> Lorena interview, 5/23/2011, 00:44:08-00:44:18:  
"Pero sí son chontales, mm? (1.2) De nombre son chontales, sí, pero no lo hablan, no lo hablan muy bien."

<sup>398</sup> Compare sections 4.2.2 and 4.5.3.1 of this dissertation for more discussion of this "genetic fallacy" (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998) and the essentialized link between Chontal language and Chontal ethnic identity.

means that speakers with relatively limited Chontal competence are able to perform speaking Chontal and hence construct themselves as Chontal speakers. Most extended genres which require Chontal are performances of textual materials and are prepared in advance. This affords collaborative preparation: the eventual performer may write his speech with the aid of a more competent speaker. Furthermore, speakers have a variety of Chontalization strategies available to them: they may memorize speeches whose content they do not understand, speak with simultaneous interpreters in certain circumstances, deploy Chontal elements in symbolic ways, or even speak *about* Chontal *in* Spanish.

## Nine

# Jehovah's Witnesses' Use of Chontal

This chapter illustrates how Zapotitlán's three Jehovah's Witness congregations use the Chontal language in ways that help negotiate tensions between Watch Tower institutional ideologies of language and the lived sociolinguistic reality of Chontal speakers. Zapotitlán Witnesses are full members of the Witness organization and the Witness community. They are, simultaneously, members of a speech community that is oriented to Chontal although any given individual may not speak it well – or at all.

Members of the Zapotitlán congregations must meet the following goals simultaneously. (1) *Nativization*: They must perform expertise in the Chontal language, which is not the dominant language of all congregation members, due largely to a mother tongue ideology that misrecognizes ethnic Chontals as Chontal speakers. (2) *Monolingualization*: They must adhere to an institutional monolingual communicative ideal that says that a congregation must use precisely one language, which for them is Chontal. (3) *Legibilization*: They must also communicate religious knowledge in a way that will be intelligible to a significant number of Spanish-dominant and Spanish-monolingual congregation members.

In this chapter, I explore how these tensions are managed both "back stage" and "front stage" (Goffman 1990[1959]). In back stage contexts, typically Witness homes, speakers prepare for front stage performances using collaborative techniques that produce performative Chontal expertise. Meanwhile, in front stage contexts, individuals use Chontalization strategies that allow individuals to perform "speaking Chontal" even though what they say is bilingual or heavily Spanish (cf. Ahlers 2006).

## 9.1 Preparation Techniques

### 9.1.1 Preparation by Less Competent Speakers

Before anyone gives a talk or presentation in Chontal, he or she writes it in Spanish – based on an outline provided by the Watch Tower Society – and then translates it. Those who are not fully competent in the language undertake this translation with a fluent speaker. Typically, the less competent speaker will read the talk one clause at a time, and the fluent speaker will repeat the clause in Chontal. The less fluent speaker will then repeat this and write it down; they will go back and forth until both are satisfied that it has been transcribed correctly. In the following excerpt, Lucas, a pioneer (full-time Witness volunteer) from Mexico City, is translating a public talk for the upcoming Assembly with Oseas, a woman in her late 50s. Lucas's wife, Marisa, and I are sitting in, and participating only occasionally, typically to provide alternate Spanish definitions for particularly challenging words. Lucas is trying to transcribe what Oseas says word-for-word, while I am taking extensive notes on Chontal as well.<sup>399</sup>

Lucas

- 1      Pues para decir, a la  
        So to say, um, the
- 2      GÉNESIS DICE (2.0)  
        GENESIS SAYS (2.0)
- 3      "Génesis" - o "nos avisa," no?  
        "Genesis" – or "tells us," no?

Oseas

- 4      Aha, "Génesis nos avisa cuanto."  
        Mhmm, "Genesis tells us how much"

Lucas

- 5      Génesis **uyaapá**, más bien?  
        Genesis **told us**, better?

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<sup>399</sup> Lucas, Marisa, and Oseas, translation session, 11/17/2010, 00:28:24-00:28:49. **Boldface** represents Chontal, while **SMALL CAPS** represent the Spanish text he's referring to.

Oseas

6     Ándale.

Right on.

7     Génesis **tuyá'e**

Genesis **tells us**

Lucas

8     Génesis **tuyá'e**

Genesis **tells us**

Oseas

9     Ese, **tuyaa**, avisa pues.

That, **tells**, tells then.

Marisa

10    Avisa.

Tells.

Oseas

11    Ándale.

Right on.

Lucas

12    **Tu. Ya.**

**Te. Ll.**

Oseas

13    **Tuyá'e.**

**Tells.**

Lucas

14    **E?**

**S?**

Oseas

15    Ándale.

Right on.

These translation sessions often involve deciding which words or phrases ought to be left in Spanish to avoid compromising meaning. At another point during the same session,<sup>400</sup> Lucas and Oseas look for Chontal equivalents for *cristianos fundamentalistas* 'fundamentalist

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<sup>400</sup> Lucas, Marisa, and Oseas, translation session, 11/17/2010, 00:00:17-00:01:23. **Boldface** represents Chontal, while **SMALL CAPS** represent the Spanish text he's referring to.

Christians' before deciding that it will be clearest to say this phrase in Spanish. Oseas offers the form "**ling** cristiano" with a Chontal article (l.4), a common nativization strategy for nouns. Aside from the article, they choose to leave the noun phrase in Spanish:

Lucas

- 1 Dice (5.0)  
It says (5.0)  
2 "MUCHOS CRISTIANOS FUNDAMENTALISTAS DICEN."  
"MANY FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANS SAY."  
3 Cómo sería?  
How would it be?

Oseas

- 4 **Ashpela ling** cristiano (3.0)  
**Many** Christians  
5 [Cristiano, pues, sí  
[Christian, well, yes

Lucas

- 6 [Ya pero  
[Yes but  
7 En español, no? [CRISTIÁNOS FUNDAMENTALISTAS.  
In Spanish, no? [FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANS.

Oseas

- 8 [En español, porque no sabemos qué clase de  
[In Spanish, because we don't know what type of  
9 de cristianos,  
of Christians,  
10 ((Oseas and Marisa laugh))  
11 Verdaderos o  
Real or

Marisa

- 12 Falsos.  
False.

Oseas

- 13 Falsos, sí, pues.  
False, yes, well.

Lucas

- 14 Por ejemplo, un cristiano es el que  
For example, a Christian is someone who  
15 cree en Jesús, no?  
believes in Jesus, no?

Oseas

- 16 Aha.

Lucas

- 17 Pero sí en español, no?  
But yes in Spanish, no?  
18 [Para que  
[So that

Oseas

- 19 [En español para que (xxx)  
[In Spanish so that (xxx)

Lucas

- 20 Para que no cambie.  
So that it doesn't change.

Oseas

- 21 Ándale, sí.  
Right on, yes.

Lucas

- 22 Ah, bueno.  
Ah, okay.  
23 A ver.  
Let's see.  
24 **Ashpela?**  
**Many?**

Oseas

- 25 Aha, **ashpelá.**  
Mmhmm, **many.**  
26 **Ashpela** cristiano, dice varios cristianos, no?  
**Many** Christians, it says various Christians, no?

Lucas

- 27 CRISTIANOS FUNDAMENTALISTAS.  
FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANS.



Oseas

28 Fundamentalistas, ah.  
Fundamentalists, ah.

Marisa

29 En español (xxx).  
In Spanish (xxx).

Oseas

30 **Ashpela** cristiano [fundamental, como se dice ahora ese?  
**Many** Christians [fundamentalist, how do you say that now?

Lucas

31 [fundamental  
[fundamentalist

Marisa

32 Pues lo va a poner en español.  
So he'll put it in Spanish.  
33 Fundamentalistas.  
Fundamentalists.

Oseas

34 Fundamentalista, sí.  
Fundamentalist, yes.

Lucas

35 Mmm.  
36 "Dicen."  
"Say."

Oseas

37 **Tikwaayi.**  
**Say.**  
38 Dicen.  
Say.

**Figure 9.1:** Lucas, Marisa, and Oseas during one such session.



As discussed earlier, Lucas is recognized as a particularly good speaker in both Spanish and Chontal. Other non-native and heritage speakers stumble and stutter, or their pronunciation is poor, but Lucas speaks slowly, clearly, and with confidence. Yet much of the work that goes into Lucas's performances occurs ahead of time, in Oseas's kitchen. As a woman, Oseas can never obtain the type of congregational position that would allow her to perform a public talk, yet her Chontal expertise is often mobilized in Lucas's public talks.

Lucas's success as an orator is also connected to the orthography that he has worked out for himself. While a regional language initiative has published pamphlets outlining pan-Highland-Chontal orthographic principles (Zárate Pérez 2004; 2009), these pamphlets

themselves do not use a consistent writing system, and nobody follows the rules precisely. The lack of a standardized Chontal orthography gives writers the freedom to transcribe their talks in the way that makes the most sense to them. However, it also means that busy Circuit and District Overseers, whose talks are often translated and transcribed by someone else, may not be certain of the correct pronunciation. Indeed, Chontal speakers often comment on the Overseers' lack of fluency, both at the time and after the fact, especially when watching recordings of their performances.

### **9.1.2 "We helped each other": Back Stage Production of Expertise**

Selena, who was 54 years old at the time of my fieldwork in 2010-2011, told me that she and her sister Josefina did not speak Chontal at home as children although they understood it (cf. Waterhouse 1949). Their father Constantino was an elder in Congregación Sur at the time of the language change, but he died soon after; in fact, Selena told me that Constantino was the one who had petitioned the Watch Tower Society to recognize them as a Chontal language congregation. In the few months between this official recognition and Constantino's death, she said, he would translate the daily Bible reading and the magazine readings for her as a model of how to translate: "Then my father, since we used to read the text of the day – you know the text of the day? – ah, well, when we were reading the text of the day, now, yes, my father would say, 'Look, in Chontal, this word, or this one, this phrase can be used like this, you can say it like this.' And that also helped me."<sup>401</sup>

She, like many others, told me about the Chontal classes that Rolando provided at the Kingdom Hall at that time. These classes, she said, focused on basics like numbers and spelling

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<sup>401</sup> Selena interview, 4/29/2011, 00:13:29-00:13:51:

"Entonces mi papá, como leíamos el texto del día==(usted) sí conoces al texto del día?==ah pos cuando leíamos el texto del día, ya ahora sí mi papá ya decía, 'Mira, en chontal, esta palabra, o esto, esta frase así se puede usar, así se puede decir.' Ya eso también me ayudó."

but they were very useful, especially since congregation members were still struggling at the time of our interview. Older people, like José, an elder in Congregación Sur, also noted that this course was useful in spelling, which he considered one of the greatest challenges for most congregation members. Oseas, five years older than Selena, said that she learned Chontal in Rolando's classes. In those classes, she said, "We helped each other. 'What does this word mean? How do you say it?' Like that, among many people, we were there."<sup>402</sup>

Oseas explicitly compared the lack of interest and curiosity of some of her co-congregationalists with the dedication of Lucas, whom she often helped to translate his talks. Yet when she said that congregation members helped each other, she described a situation quite similar to her talk-writing sessions with Lucas (section 9.1.1). Chontal knowledge, particularly written Chontal translations of written Spanish texts, is constructed collaboratively even though it is later performed individually.

Indeed, I was able to sit in on several preparation sessions for the May Chontal-language Assembly, in which multiple highly competent Chontal speakers co-wrote presentations and talks. Several weeks before this Assembly, Héctor, a fluent Chontal speaker and young elder in the Oaxaca City Chontal-language congregation (originally from San Andrés), came to visit Zapotitlán with his wife. One of his talks at the Assembly was to include a demonstration with two young Witnesses from Zapotitlán, and so he sat with them to write their parts, first in Spanish and then in Chontal. Jacinto, an elder in Congregación Centro in his late 70s, happened to be sitting nearby, and he offered suggestions that Héctor would then easily incorporate into his discussion.

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<sup>402</sup> Oseas interview, 5/10/2011, 00:08:20-0:08:28

"Nos ayudábamos unos con otros. '¿Qué significa esta palabra? ¿Cómo se dice?' Así entre varios estamos allá."

During that same visit, Jacinto and Héctor sat down together with the outline for the talk that the Circuit Overseer would give, to prepare this talk in Chontal. The patterns of their interaction look much like Lucas's preparation with Oseas, described above, in terms of repetition and discussion. However, Héctor displayed his own language skills by attempting a first translation or offering a countertranslation much more often than Lucas. Yet Héctor also often deferred to Jacinto's age and language skills. The following transcript illustrates how they collaborate in order to reach agreement on a translation for 'self-sufficiency' that both consider appropriate. Héctor offers two related words for 'fullness' or 'satisfaction' (ll. 4-7), which Jacinto accepts at first (l. 8), but when he hears these words in context, he offers the alternative 'that there is no lack' (ll. 26), which Héctor accepts immediately (ll. 27-29).<sup>403</sup>

Héctor

- 1 O la autosuficiencia,  
Or self sufficiency
- 2 este,  
um,

Jacinto

- 3 Ah ese  
Oh that.

Héctor

- 4 **Lanajkoya**, esa, no?  
**Fullness**, that, right?
- 5 O, estar  
Or, to be
- 6 satisfecho?  
satisfied?
- 7 **Lanajkokoya**?  
**Satisfaction**?

Jacinto

- 8 **Lanajkoya**.  
**Fullness**.

---

<sup>403</sup> Héctor and Jacinto, translation session, 5/14/2011. Dialectal differences may also have contributed to the amount of negotiation required throughout this interaction, but that question is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Héctor

9 La autosuficiencia.  
Self-sufficiency.

10 Autosuficiencia es este,  
Self-sufficiency is this,

11 lo que se siente satisfecho,  
that one feels satisfied,

Jacinto

12 [mmhmm  
[mmhmm

Héctor

13 [alguien que  
[someone who

Jacinto

14 Contento,  
Content,

Héctor

15 Ah, con, aha,  
Ah, with, aha,

16 con lo que ya tiene  
with what he already has

Jacinto

17 Este  
Um

Héctor

18 Aha  
Aha

Jacinto

19 Ah cómo  
Ah, how

20 cómo va (allí)?  
how does it go (there)?

Héctor

21 **I'omjligopa**  
**He compares**

Jacinto  
22 (mm)  
(mm)

Héctor  
23 **I'omjligopa,**  
**He compares,**  
24 este,  
um,  
25 autosuficiencia  
self-sufficiency

Jacinto  
26 **To tipa'a (y) ay mewe'e**  
**Like, there's no lack**

Héctor  
27 Aha,  
Aha  
28 **(ay) lopa'a**  
**There's (not)**  
29 **je ey mewe'e**  
**something missing**

Either Héctor or Jacinto could have prepared the Circuit Overseer's talk alone, yet they chose not to. I have seen other equally competent speakers confer with one another in the same way.

Preparing talks together – "helping each other" – allows speakers to take advantage of the back stage to guard against linguistic insecurity. Translations can be negotiated and confirmed in this lower-stakes private space before individuals must rehearse them and, ultimately, perform publicly as the highly competent speakers that the Watch Tower Society assumes they are.

### **9.1.3 Chontal through the Bible, the Bible through Chontal**

Several people used my interest in Chontal to coax me into Bible studies; others used Bible study as a pretext to teach their children some words and phrases in Chontal. I made no

secret that I came to the Witnesses not as a seeker but as a language student,<sup>404</sup> but many Witnesses were still pleased that my interest in the language had brought me to them and their meetings and viewed my eventual conversion as only a matter of time.

These interactions, where Chontal lessons and Bible lessons are intertwined, share much with the collaborative preparation techniques detailed in the previous two sections. These individuals knew that my primary interest was in Chontal rather than in the Bible, while their interest in Chontal was secondary to, and in fact grew out of, their commitment to Jehovah's Witnesses. What was at stake for them in these interactions was my learning the Bible and their hopes for my eventual transformation into a formal member of their community. As a result, they found ways to minimize their knowledge of Chontal and foreground the Bible.

My contact in Brooklyn, editor Michael S., had encouraged me to undertake a Bible study in Chontal and compare it with the Spanish and English texts because he thought it would be useful for my project and "interesting to see what doctrinal differences in understanding exist."<sup>405</sup> In short, he too used my interest in Chontal as a wedge. Soon thereafter, when 54-year-old Selena offered to teach me Chontal if I would undertake a Bible study with her, I took the opportunity to follow Michael's advice.

In the following excerpt, Selena and her mother Belén are beginning our study. Selena begins by reading me the title of the first chapter of the study book, *¿Qué Enseña Realmente la*

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<sup>404</sup> See section 1.2. At one point in an interview, Alfredo asked me if I attended more than one congregation. I mentioned that I was going to all three: "Since it's my, my job to learn Chontal and that's where it's spoken, well, I have to go." He responded, "Look. But if you, if you want to learn in Chontal, are you also interested in studying the Bible? Or is it only out of interest in Chontal?" To such a direct question, I told him: "Well, in fact, more than anything I'm here out of interest in Chontal."

Alfredo and Pablo, interview, 6/25/2011, 00:14:37-00:15:04:

Jena: Como es mi, mi trabajo aprender el chontal y ese es donde se habla, (0.8) pues, tengo que ir.

Alfredo: Mira. (1.0) Pero si usted, (1.0) si usted quieres aprender en chontal, (1.2) y te interesa::: estudiar la biblia? (1.4) O nada más por interés del chontal? (2.2)

Jena: Bueno, de hecho, más que nada vengo por interés en el chontal.

<sup>405</sup> Personal communication, 4/2/2011.



*Biblia?* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2005b: 8).<sup>406</sup> Belén then interrupts her to say she should also explain in Chontal because "this one wants Chontal" (l. 10). Selena then asks her how to say it in Chontal (ll. 11, 16) and corrects her when she translates *the truth* as *the good* (ll. 18, 20). Belén takes up this correction and repeats her translation (ll. 21-24). Selena takes up the first half of this translation (ll. 25-26) but neither of them succeeds in finding a good translation for *about God* (ll. 23-24, 28).<sup>407</sup> In fact, Selena dismisses her own translation by repeating "Something like that" twice (ll. 29-30) and then observing: "I'm not, um, I'm not a Chontal teacher" (ll. 32-34).

Selena

- 1 Bueno, aquí el español.  
Well, here the Spanish.
- 2 CUÁL ES LA VERDAD ACERCA DE DIOS?  
WHAT IS THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD?
- 3 Este, eso, CUÁL ES LA VERDAD ACERCA DE DIOS,  
Um, that, WHAT IS THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD,
- 4 Ese [(es la primera)  
That [(is the first)

Belén

- 5 [Primera, primera  
[First, first

Selena

- 6 CUÁL ES LA VERDAD ACERCA DE DIOS?  
WHAT IS THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD?
- 7 Es este como decir,  
This is like saying

Belén

- 8 Espli- explícala en español  
Expl- Explain it in Spanish

---

<sup>406</sup> Selena, Belén, and myself, Bible study, 4/22/2011, 00:01:05-00:02:12:

**Boldface** designates Chontal, and SMALL CAPS indicate text that has been read aloud. The English translation of the text comes from the English language version of this book, *What does the Bible Really Teach?* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania: 2005b).

<sup>407</sup> Selena's translation *let's get closer to God* probably derives from the similarity in Spanish between *acercarse a* 'get close to' and *acerca de* 'about.'

- 9 y chontal  
and Chontal  
10 porque este quiere chontal  
because this one wants Chontal.

Selena  
11 (mmhmm)  
12 Como se dice chontal este?  
How do you say this in Chontal?

Belén  
13 Cuál? (Si, si) CUÁL ES LA VERDAD?  
What? (Yes, yes) WHAT IS THE TRUTH?

Selena  
14 Mmhm.

Belén  
15 ACERCA DE DIOS?  
ABOUT GOD?  
16 dice  
it says.

Selena  
17 Cómo?  
How?

Belén  
18 **(Pe / Te) kopa'a**  
**(Where / How) is**  
19 **pe alweno**  
**the good**  
20 para que acerca a  
so that about?

Selena  
21 No bueno, **aljlinka**  
Not good, **the truth**

Belén  
22 Así (ate) ah sí  
Like this (xxx) oh yes  
23 **Pe kopa'a aljlinka**  
**Where is the truth**  
24 para que **jlanDios**  
so that **God**

25 (**ajltsina**)  
(**knows**)

Selena

26 **Pe kopa'a aljlinka**  
**Where is the truth**

27 **Pe kopa'a aljlinka**  
**Where is the truth**

Belén

28 **Pe lokopa petsi...**  
**Where it says where...**

Selena

29 **ajl- ajl- ajlok'ojlayme jlanDios**  
**let's- let's- let's get closer to God**

30 Algo así.  
Something like that.

31 Algo así.  
Something like that.

Belén

32 (xxx)  
(xxx)

Selena

33 No soy  
I'm not

34 este (0.8)  
um (0.8)

35 no soy maestra de chontal  
I'm not a Chontal teacher.

In other cases where speakers collaboratively construct a Chontal version of a Spanish text, they also co-construct their authority and their Chontal knowledge. Here, however, Selena actively dismisses her own expertise: she asks her mother to translate rather than attempting it herself (ll. 11, 16). She suggests that her own translation is less than ideal (ll. 29-30) and specifically negates any positioning as a Chontal teacher (ll. 32-34). At the same time, she also participates in the behaviors that others use to build Chontal expertise: she corrects her mother's use of *alweno* 'the good' for *aljlinka* 'the truth' (l. 20) and proposes an alternative to her mother's

translation of *about God* (l. 28). Her unwillingness to position herself as a Chontal teacher is particularly striking because she used her very Chontal expertise to convince me to undertake this Bible study.

Oseas, meanwhile, could not turn to this strategy, because I had sat in on several sessions in which she helped Lucas translate his talks. Yet on the occasion of our first one-on-one Chontal class, she taught me how to read the Bible – physically – at the same time as she taught me Chontal. She has just said, in Chontal, that we should look at Chapter 1, Verse 1 (of Genesis), and I ask her what the Chontal word for 'verse' means (l. 1). She then reorients me in Spanish (ll. 4-6) and I ask her if *je loshwepa* means 'verse' (l. 7), which we both confirm (ll. 8-12). I ask her how to say 'chapter' (l. 13), which she initially interprets as a question about the chapter number (l. 15) but realizes from my incorrect attempt (l. 14) that I am asking for the word and provides it (ll. 16-18). Once we confirm that we are both in the same place and that I know the words for *chapter one, verse one* (ll. 20-23), she begins to translate (l. 25):<sup>408</sup>

Jena

- 1 Qué es **je loshwepa**?
- What is **je loshwepa**?

Oseas

- 2 El que- lo que dice, así (0.8)
- Who- what it says, like that.

Jena

- 3 Ahh

Oseas

- 4 En el capítulo uno (1.2)
- In chapter one
- 5 y (0.8)
- and
- 6 versículo uno
- verse one

---

<sup>408</sup> Oseas and me, study session, 11/29/2010, 00:00:04-00:00:43.

Jena

- 7 **Je loshwepa** es versículo?  
**Je loshwepa** is verse?

Oseas

- 8 Mmm  
9 **je loshwepa alnuli**  
**verse one**  
10 (1.2)

Jena

- 11 **Je loshwepa anuli?**  
**Verse one?**

Oseas

- 12 Aha

Jena

- 13 Y capítulo es?  
And chapter is?  
14 **[Pe lananko?**  
**[Chatper? [sic]**

Oseas

- 15 [Uno  
[One  
16 **Lanako alnuli.**  
**Chapter one.**  
17 (1.2)  
18 **Pe lanako alnuli.**  
**Chapter one.**  
19 Capítulo uno.  
Chapter one.

Jena

- 20 **Pe lanako alnuli**  
**Chapter one**  
21 **[je loshwepa alnuli**  
**[and verse one**

Oseas

- 22 **[je loshwepa alnuli=**  
**[and verse one=**  
23 =Eso, así.  
=Yes, that's it.  
24 (3.4)

## 25 **Alte'a...**

### **In the beginning (lit. at first)...**

Unlike Selena, Oseas cannot deemphasize her Chontal expertise. Instead, she brings out a Bible and begins at the very beginning: chapter one, verse one, of Genesis. Before she can start to read the Bible, however, she has to teach me *how*. She teaches me, then, the metalanguage of chapters and verses. Once she has taught me to locate myself in the Bible, we begin from the beginning.<sup>409</sup>

#### **9.1.4 Writing**

For the Witnesses, as in secular contexts, most writing is derivative of authoritative genres. Witnesses take notes in meetings, chiefly to note the Bible verses that a speaker uses so they can refer back to them later. Any Witness who gives presentations in the Theocratic Ministry School writes to prepare these presentations, and men who have privileges to address the congregation write much more extensively when they prepare their public talks. However, all of these presentations and talks are based on outlines that come from the Watch Tower Society. A Witness may write out the content of his talk, but he is not the interpreter or the author of the words that he will speak.

## **9.2 Chontalization Strategies**

In spite of the ideal of Chontal monolingualism, meetings are never held fully in Chontal. Publications are available only in Spanish and thus readings take place in Spanish. Furthermore, if meetings were held solely in Chontal, the majority of congregation members would not understand their content. To balance these opposing pressures, then, speakers also use a variety

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<sup>409</sup> The beginning of the Bible is also 'the Beginning' in the orthographic convention of many Bibles – although not, incidentally, the New World Translation, which does not capitalize this word in either English or Spanish.

of strategies to Chontalize their contributions without either having to expend a massive amount of time in preparation or making meetings inaccessible to non-speakers and semi-speakers.

Jocelyn Ahlers (2006) describes how Native Americans perform Native identity in English to communicate with people from multiple Tribal affiliations; here, congregation members must "speak Chontal in Spanish." That is, they must negotiate how to perform "Chontal speaking" while simultaneously minimizing the effort involved and maximizing comprehension by those congregation members whose Chontal is very limited. (The case Ahlers describes, however, differs in its audience, as I will discuss later in this chapter.)

Even during Assemblies (intensive multi-day religious events), when there is most pressure to use Chontal, a significant number of the participants in any given Chontal Assembly – including those who participate the most – are second-language Chontal speakers, and often beginners at that. The Circuit and District Overseers, each of whom gives multiple talks during a single multi-day event, are not ethnic Chontals. The Circuit Overseer is also responsible for congregations using Huave and the unrelated Tabasco Chontal. He can, perhaps, make small talk in all three languages, but does not have extensive fluency in any, yet he must present talks in all three. The District Overseer has in his jurisdiction these three languages, as well as a number of varieties of Zapotec; he had started in this position less than a full week before his first Chontal-language Assembly and had not yet really begun to study even one of the languages spoken by the congregations in his district. Several of the pioneers in the region are not ethnic Chontals either. Their full-time volunteer service in a Chontal-speaking congregation, however, typically means that they put a lot of effort into learning the language and often speak it better than ethnic Chontals of the same age.

Some of the congregation elders who give talks are also fairly young men who are not accustomed to using Chontal on a regular basis, and many of the youths who assist in demonstrations, monologues, and interviews have passive competence but almost no speaking ability in Chontal. During the transcription process, my assistant repeated the refrain: "This guy doesn't really speak." He said this of non-ethnic-Chontal speakers frequently, as well as ethnic Chontal youths; it may also have been an excuse when dialect differences made comprehension difficult.

There are several strategies available to these individuals when the occasion requires them to speak in Chontal. One is to speak without comprehension, or with limited comprehension. Those young speakers who assist in larger demonstrations are limited to this tactic: they simply have to memorize the pronunciation of short segments in Chontal if they are to participate. They may read from notes or scripts during the actual event, but a general lack of familiarity with any standardized Chontal orthography and the grassroots nature of most Chontal writing means that correct pronunciation still requires a significant amount of preparation.<sup>410</sup> District and Circuit Overseers, who work with groups of congregations that may use three or more languages among them, often give talks in this fashion; it is simply not possible for them to learn to speak all of the languages well during their tenure. It is frequently clear to all in attendance that the Overseers do not really know what they are saying, but the audience appreciates the effort that they make.

A second strategy is to use Chontal in symbolic fashion at key points in an otherwise Spanish contribution. A speaker might give the first and last few minutes of his talk in Chontal, prefacing major points with a one-sentence Chontal summary (cf. Ahlers 2006). Others sprinkle numbers or other commonly known Chontal words in the middle of otherwise-Spanish

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<sup>410</sup> See Blommaert 1999, 2001[1998] on 'grassroots literacy.'



sentences. In interviews and informal conversation, some speakers claimed explicitly that they chose these words deliberately as part of a gradual increase in the number of Chontal elements; others admitted that these were the words they themselves were most familiar with.

A third strategy – and the one that requires the least preparation – is to speak with a simultaneous interpreter. Such speeches almost always involve some symbolic Chontal as well. At the Assemblies I attended, the last sentence or two of interpreted talks was nearly always given in Chontal, which also allowed the speaker to avoid an anticlimactic ending.

Finally, Spanish contributions might contain apologies, explicit claims about the speaker's lack of Chontal ability, and particular exhortations to use and learn Chontal. Spanish contributions are also sometimes explicitly marked as intended to appeal directly to a subset of participants who are known not to speak Chontal, as when one speaker addressed the youth in the audience directly in an aside. These contributions sometimes also bring the back stage preparation described in the previous section into the foreground, and typically occur during the Service Meeting (one of five weekly Witness religious meetings), itself something of a back stage that supports door-to-door preaching activity.

### **9.2.1 Chontalization Strategies: Speaking Without Understanding**

During most of my time in Zapotitlán, all three congregations performed their question-and-answer routines in a mix of languages. The men directing the study might ask the questions in Spanish, Chontal, or a mix of both, and congregation members would answer in either language. Yet after the District Overseer introduced a new policy of using Chontal more widely during the Circuit Assembly held in May 2011, all three congregations emphasized the use of Chontal much more heavily. Where before some public talks and presentations were given fully in Spanish, now all included at least some Chontal, even if minimal and symbolic. Since the goal

was to reach full Chontal participation, even children and other non-speakers were asked to prepare their contributions in Chontal.

This new goal changed the question and answer format significantly. When either language was acceptable, all congregation members prepared answers for all questions and volunteered answers. Under the new regime, individuals were assigned questions ahead of time, which allowed them to prepare a more limited number of answers in Chontal yet be certain their work would not go to waste. Spontaneous answers were still allowed, but pre-assigned commenters were called on first. Many younger Witnesses responded to this change by preparing contributions jointly with older family members, or by asking older family members to prepare for them.

Eleven-year-old Esmeralda spoke "a few words but not all all all of it, no, a few words that my grandparents are teaching me (now)."<sup>411</sup> When she had to prepare an answer in Chontal, her grandfather Jacinto would ensure that she knew the answer in Spanish, and then would translate it for her to copy down. This rote repetition approach to language learning displays many commonalities with the question and answer format in general, which Holden (2002c: 67) characterizes as highly mechanistic. Indeed, Holden quotes a former Witness: "You had to read it through, read it through again, answer the question, and then read it through *again*. So by the time Sunday came, you were an expert at it. You were a fully trained parrot!" (Holden 2002c: 68). A parrot, of course, repeats sounds without any comprehension of their meaning; this was the precise experience of non-speakers. They knew what their comments were supposed to mean, but they had no way to be certain that they were actually saying what they thought they were saying.

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<sup>411</sup> Esmeralda interview, 5/18/2011, 00:01:16-00:01:25:

"Algunas palabras que otras pero si no, todo todo todo no, algunas palabras que me enseñan (ahorita) mis abuelitos."

When I asked Esmeralda if she had ever performed a Ministry School assignment in Chontal, she told me she had one coming up very soon: "This next [assignment], once we come back from the Assembly, I'll have to do one in Chontal. Because now they're asking for a requirement sometimes, they tell you, 'Hey, this week it's going to be in Chontal,' and you're going to do it in Chontal."<sup>412</sup> Her partner for the demonstration was somewhat older; it would be much harder, she suggested, for two young girls to undertake a demonstration together in Chontal. In fact, Esmeralda was not in charge of the demonstration but was only helping, which meant that her older partner was to write her part, and all she had to do was learn to pronounce it.

### 9.2.2 Chontalization Strategies: Translating Key Elements

A second strategy has speakers present key segments in Chontal, especially boundary markers. Thus, opening and closing prayers are the elements of meetings that are most frequently presented in Chontal, even if everything else is given in Spanish. A man may present the first few sentences or paragraphs of a long talk in Chontal before switching to Spanish, and he may give topic sentences or summaries in Chontal while presenting the meat of his talk in Spanish. Within a sentence, a man might use one or two words of Chontal in an otherwise Spanish utterance: many pepper their speech with Chontal numbers and other basic words that most people know (for example, *its'iya* 'now, today'; *tikwa* 'says'; *liya kamats* 'this world'). This structure is recursive:<sup>413</sup> Chontal is used symbolically at the level of the event, the text, and the sentence. Furthermore, in weekly meetings, mediating elders may ask questions twice, once in Spanish and once in Chontal, or paraphrase someone's contribution in the other language. All of these contributions provide a Chontal flavor while protecting non-speakers' comprehension.

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<sup>412</sup> Esmeralda interview, 5/18/2011, 00:01:30-00:01:45:

"Ésta (.) que::: regresando de la Asamblea (me) va a tocar una en chontal==la vamos a pasar. Porque ya nos están pidiendo un requisito a veces, te dicen, 'ey, en esta semana va a ser en chontal'==y lo vas a pasar en chontal."

<sup>413</sup> Compare Irvine and Gal (2000) on ideological recursivity.

**Figure 9.2:** Structural recursivity. The column on the left represents segments of a typical Sunday meeting, while the center column represents subsections of the public talk, and the righthand column represents paragraphs within the main body of the public talk. Yellow cells illustrate where the Chontal language is used, while white cells represent activities that are primarily conducted in Spanish.

<b>opening prayer</b>		
public talk	<b>introduction</b>	
	body of talk	<b>topic</b>
		paragraph
		<b>topic</b>
		paragraph
	<b>topic</b>	
paragraph		
	<b>conclusion</b>	
Watchtower study		
<b>closing prayer</b>		

I consider the sentence level in particular since it provides the clearest examples of this phenomenon. One particularly common use of this framing (Ahlers 2006) strategy is to introduce quotations. I provide here several examples of the dozens I recorded:<sup>414</sup>

- 1 "La pregunta del párrafo diez **tikwa**, 'CUÁL ES EL CARÁCTER NATURAL DE JESÚS?'"<sup>415</sup>  
"The question from paragraph ten **says**, 'WHAT IS JESUS' NATURAL DISPOSITION?'"
- 2 "**AlBiblia tikwa**, 'EN CUANTO A MÍ, EL ACERCARME A DIOS ES BUENO PARA MÍ.'"<sup>416</sup>  
**The Bible says**, 'BUT AS FOR ME, THE DRAWING NEAR TO GOD IS GOOD FOR ME.'"
- 3 "Eclesiastés capítulo **amalpu y loshwepa imbama oke tikwa**, 'Y SI ALGUIEN PUDIERA SUBYUGAR A UNO SOLO, DOS JUNTOS PODRÍAN MANTENERSE FIRMES CONTRA ÉL. Y UNA CUERDA TRIPLE NO PUEDE SER ROTA EN DOS PRONTO.'"<sup>417</sup>  
"Ecclesiastes chapter **four and verse twelve says**, 'AND IF SOMEBODY COULD OVERPOWER ONE ALONE, TWO TOGETHER COULD MAKE A STAND AGAINST HIM. AND A

<sup>414</sup> **Boldface** represents Chontal, and SMALL CAPS represent anything that comes directly from the text under discussion. English translations of Bible material come directly from the English *New World Translation*.

<sup>415</sup> Fieldnotes, 3/6/2011. The textual material here is from "*Ven, Sé Mi Seguidor*" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2007b) and "*Come, Be My Follower*" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2007a).

<sup>416</sup> Eduardo, "Cómo se acerca Jehová a nosotros", 12/17/2010.

<sup>417</sup> Israel, "Cumplamos nuestra labor de ayudantes en la predicación" in series "Ayudemos a las personas a reconciliarse con Dios", 12/18/2010.

THREEFOLD CORD CANNOT QUICKLY BE TORN IN TWO."

- 4 "La respuesta de Job, **inespa** muy claro..."<sup>418</sup>  
"Job's answer, **he said** very clearly..."

In these examples, speakers use only commonly known words: quotatives (*tikwa* 'he/she/it says', *inespa* 'he/she/it said'), numbers (*amalpu* 'four', *loshwepa imbama oke* 'verse twelve'), and the article *al* (in *alBiblia*). Even non-speakers are likely to know these words, and in context, they provide few barriers to communication since the substantive content – and particularly the textual Biblical content – is all in Spanish.

Ahlers (2006) describes the use of similar strategies among Native Californians, in a style she terms Native Language as Identity Marker (NLIM). In the style she describes, "the English speech event, which is technically the bulk of the performance, is quite literally framed by a Native language use" (Ahlers 2006: 64). The same might be said of the Chontal speech event, as illustrated in Figure 9.2.

However, NLIM differs from Chontalization in its audience. The speakers that Ahlers describes "cannot assume fluency, or even knowledge, on the part of their audience members" (Ahlers 2006: 67). Similarly, Chontal-speaking Witnesses cannot make these assumptions about their co-present audience, although this audience is discursively constructed as containing exclusively Chontal speakers. Yet Chontal-speaking Witnesses are simultaneously oriented to a second audience: the imagined future audience of resurrected Chontal monolinguals, described in the previous chapter. All members of the co-present audience understand Spanish and all of them are assumed to understand Chontal. A significant number of them do, in fact, understand Chontal. However, members of the imagined future audience speak *only* Chontal, and their communicative needs must also be taken into account.

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<sup>418</sup> Fieldnotes, 4/15/2011.

### 9.2.3 Chontalization Strategies: Simultaneous Interpretation

A third strategy – used almost exclusively by District and Circuit Overseers, is to give talks with a simultaneous interpreter. In this type of talk, the speaker would typically provide a few sentences, then pause for the interpreter to catch up. Although the interpreter might have a copy of the outline provided by the Watch Tower Society, Pedro (the Circuit Overseer) stressed that only the one who gives the talk in Spanish should be seen as the presenter, as he is the one who prepares in advance.<sup>419</sup> Pedro also emphasized that the role of the interpreter is a special one, but that the interpreter's competent performance comes from Jehovah's blessing rather than from his own innate linguistic ability.

Pedro

- 1 El que da el discurso en español es el que prepara  
the one who gives the talk in Spanish is the one who prepares
- 2 la información que se va a transmitir.  
the information that will be transmitted.
- 3 El intérprete, su función es,  
The interpreter, his function is
- 4 es difícil, ahora sí que es una tarea difícil porque él tiene que estar escuchando,=  
it's difficult, now yes it's a difficult task because he has to be listening
- 5 =de alguna manera un poco antes  
in a way a bit before
- 6 se  
they
- 7 ponen de acuerdo  
come to an agreement
- 8 en algunos términos difíciles del español al chontal, podemos decir,  
on some difficult terms from Spanish to Chontal, we can say,
- 9 se busca la manera de tener  
one seeks a way to have
- 10 una comprensión mejor,  
a better understanding
- 11 y ya en el momento en que el intérprete está ahí, pues él tiene que estar  
and in the moment when the interpreter is there, well he has to be
- 12 atento, escuchando y  
attentive, listening and
- 13 captando lo que está diciendo, para él transmitirlo  
capturing what he's saying, so that he can transmit it

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<sup>419</sup> Pedro & Cata, interview, 5/9/2011.

14 en el momento en el idioma,  
 in the moment in the language  
 15 de,  
 of  
 16 de  
 of  
 17 que se está traduciendo,  
 that's being translated  
 18 entonces, es una tarea  
 then, it's a task  
 19 un tanto difícil,  
 (that's) rather difficult,  
 20 el intérprete ahí tiene que hacer una labor muy especial,  
 the interpreter has to undertake a very special labor,  
 21 pero bueno, igual,  
 but okay, anyway,  
 22 confiamos en la ayuda de Jehová, a veces, no  
 we trust in Jehovah's help, sometimes, not  
 23 no tanto en  
 not so much in  
 24 la habilidad de uno como, como persona,  
 in the ability of one as, as a person  
 25 sino siempre pues uno confía en que  
 but rather one always trusts in that  
 26 pues de alguna manera Jehová nos da,  
 well somehow Jehovah gives us,  
 27 y en ese momento a las personas que lo hacen les da esa  
 and in that moment, to the people who do it, he gives them that  
 28 capacidad,  
 capacity  
 29 claro, tiene que hacer su esfuerzo pero confiando en la guía de...  
 of course, he has to make an effort but trusting in the guidance of...

When I asked Pedro later what the qualities of a good translator are, he said only that a good translator must understand Spanish well and be a native speaker of Chontal. I suggested that simultaneous interpretation might require a distinct set of skills from giving one's own talk in Chontal. Pedro agreed that the experience was different, but not the skills involved. In fact, neither interpretation nor giving a talk requires skill, precisely; a man's ability to communicate clearly to the congregation comes from his relationship with Jehovah and not from anything he himself does or knows.

Michael S. at the Watch Tower Society in Brooklyn told me that there are very few languages worldwide that have no written materials but in which elders are able to give talks.<sup>420</sup> He described a parallel situation for Macedonian congregations in the US while they were in the process of finding translators, but emphasized that congregations where two languages are in use are an exception. In the following section, I analyze closely the use of a simultaneous interpreter and the differences between the two translations as I also consider a fourth strategy: speaking about Chontal, in Spanish.

#### **9.2.4 Chontalization Strategies: Speaking About Chontal, in Spanish**

In a fourth strategy, presenters who were unable to speak Chontal would compensate by speaking about Chontal in Spanish. The District Overseer relied particularly heavily on this strategy. In a talk given with a simultaneous interpreter, he mentioned the Chontal language three separate times, and emphasized it again in the Assembly's concluding prayer, which he delivered in Spanish immediately following this talk.<sup>421</sup> First, he suggested that preaching door-to-door was especially difficult for those who were not from the Chontal region and were not highly competent in Chontal.<sup>422</sup> This description served a second, covert function, effectively apologizing for delivering his talk with an interpreter:

- Dario
- 1 Predicar  
Preaching
  - 2 ha sido una prueba  
has been a test
  - 3 que muchos  
that many

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<sup>420</sup> Michael S. interview, 3/28/2011.

<sup>421</sup> Dario, public talk "¡Cobre ánimo! Usted puede vencer al mundo" ("Take Courage! You Can Conquer the World!"), 5/29/2011.

<sup>422</sup> The explicit connection between being from elsewhere and not speaking Chontal serves, again, to essentialize the Chontal ethnic community as a community of Chontal speakers.



- 4 no han vencido fácilmente.  
have not easily overcome.
- 5 Quizá porque la gente  
Perhaps because people
- 6 no quiere oír el mensaje  
don't want to hear the message
- 7 o en el caso de los que hemos venido  
or in the case of those of us who have come
- 8 asignados a trabajar en las congregaciones con ustedes  
assigned to work in the congregations with you
- 9 es porque no sabemos chontal.  
it's because we don't know Chontal.

Lack of Chontal knowledge is seen here as a failing that negatively impacts one's efficiency in the ministry. The use of the first-person plural in lines 7-9 allows him to include himself in the category of those who do not speak Chontal, forestalling questions about why he is presenting in Spanish while encouraging the expansion of Chontal in all aspects of religious life.

Oscar's Chontal translation of Dario's remarks, meanwhile, is briefer. Much of what it omits is the characterization of those who "don't know Chontal." Dario suggests that it is "those of us who have come assigned to work in the congregations with you" who have problems with the language, while Oscar says it is "some of us." This seemingly small change is highly consequential: it allows Oscar to avoid not only speaking for a group of which he is not part, but also the untrue presupposition that it is only those who have come assigned from elsewhere who don't know Chontal.

- Oscar
- 10 **Loya'aya litayki jlan**Dios  
**To declare the word of God,**
- 11 **tikwa tama ashpela**  
**he says, although many**
- 12 **tikwa ulijpa tama ijlt'a (a'i) kipime**  
**have overcome it although it was (not) difficult,**
- 13 **to lingshanuk' (a'i ki)pik'a tokyajla**  
**for example, the people (didn't) want to hear**
- 14 **(eh) litayki.**  
**his word.**

- 15 Por eso **iyank'** awalka  
That's why **some of us**
- 16 **a'i kajltsina lajltayki imajlnesi.**  
**don't know how to express it in Chontal.**

Oscar's translation also introduces a parallel not present in Dario's original: *predicar* 'to preach' becomes *loya'aya litayki jlanDios* 'to declare the word of God'; *el mensaje* 'the message' becomes *litayki* 'his word'; and the only Chontal name for the Chontal language is *lajltayki* 'our language' or 'our word.'

**Table 9.3:** Parallel names of the language and the Bible.

<b>Chontal</b>	<i>l-ajl-tayki</i> ART-1PL-word	<i>l-i-tayki</i> ART-3SG-word	<i>jlan-Dios</i> ART-God
<b>literal translation</b>	'our word'	'God's word'	
<b>conventional translation</b>	the Chontal language	the Bible	

Witnesses often refer to the Bible in Spanish as *la palabra de Dios* 'the word of God' but they would be unlikely to refer to a language as 'our word' or 'our words.' This parallel, however, occurs throughout Chontal-language talks and translations.

After Oscar's Chontal rendering, Dario continues by describing how Chontal has been instrumental in some conversions. Studying with Chontal speakers in Chontal, he suggests, has led directly to baptisms:

- Dario
- 17 Pero puede decirse que hemos vencido  
But it could be said that we have overcome it
- 18 porque estamos tratando de aprender  
because we are trying to learn
- 19 a decir algunas cosas  
to say a few things
- 20 y varios de ustedes han ayudado a  
and many of you have helped
- 21 a algunos  
some (people)
- 22 que hablan chontal en el territorio  
who speak Chontal in the territory

- 23 *dándoles estudios,*  
by studying with them,<sup>423</sup>  
24 *algunos ya se han bautizado*  
some have already been baptized  
25 *como los que ustedes han visto en otras asambleas.*  
like those that you have seen in other Assemblies.

Here, he continues to distinguish between a 'we' who have come from elsewhere and do not speak Chontal, and a 'you' who speak natively. The need for Chontal is a challenge; one overcomes this challenge by learning the language.

Oscar again shortens these remarks chiefly by erasing details about the 'we' for whom Dario is speaking. Dario's *porque estamos tratando de aprender a decir algunas cosas* 'because we are trying to learn to say a few things' is transformed into *porque tikwa pe laliwik'ipa* 'because, he says, of what we've learned.'

- Oscar
- 26 **Te kajl'kwayaku?**  
**What are we going to say?**  
27 **Ajlkojle iyank' lulijpa**  
**We are going to say that we have overcome it.**  
28 **y porque tikwa pe laliwik'ipa**  
**and because, he says, of what we have learned.**  
29 **y walka tama jouk'alema imank'**  
**And some of all of you**  
30 **tunjlmukiyaleyi (pe) lajltayki**  
**teach (in) Chontal**  
31 **awalka tijloyumma lafojliya**  
**some of them come to the meetings**  
32 **awalka joupa emulmimpola laha**  
**some of them have already been baptized.**

Oscar also adds an additional set of Chontal-language activities that Dario has not mentioned, and which makes his translation more inclusive than the original. Dario emphasizes home Bible study and baptism, and Oscar adds attending religious meetings in between these two. That is,

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<sup>423</sup> The English phrase "studying with them" refers to the weekly lesson that Witnesses conduct with non-Witnesses and unbaptized children, and communicates a similar Witness-specific meaning to Spanish *dándoles estudios* (l. 23) and Chontal *tunjlmukiyaleyi* (l. 30)

Oscar includes not only baptized Witnesses as proof of success but also the more ambiguous group of those who come to meetings without necessarily undertaking the public commitment symbolized by baptism. Like Dario's "some" who have already been baptized, the "some" to which Oscar refers in lines 31 and 32 must be those who are receiving Chontal language study; *tijloyumma* 'they come' and *emulmimpola* 'they have been baptized' are third-person forms in contrast with second-person plural *tunjlmukiyaleyi* 'you teach', whose subject is *walka ... jouk'alema imank'* 'some of all of you.' However, the inclusion of meeting attendance widens who is included here, since many Witnesses begin attending meetings but never progress to baptism and the formal identification it symbolizes.

Finally, towards the end of this talk, Dario suggests that making an effort to use Chontal is an integral part of religious practice:

Dario  
33 Entonces  
    So  
34 cómo podemos mantener  
    how can we keep  
35 toda esta armadura espiritual de la que hablamos  
    all of this spiritual armor that we've spoken about  
36 bien puesta?  
    in place?  
37 Al estudiar  
    While studying  
38 con regularidad la Biblia,  
    the Bible regularly,  
39 al prepararnos para las reuniones,  
    while preparing for meetings,  
40 escuchar con atención  
    listening with attention  
41 y esforzarnos  
    and making an effort  
42 por dar nuestros comentarios  
    to give our commentaries  
43 en chontal.  
    in Chontal.

Here, using Chontal is equated with preparing for meetings more generally. Oscar, however, equates Chontal directly with the Bible in his translation.

- Oscar  
44 Por eso **tikwa jani aswigojle**  
That's why **if we use**  
45 **litayki jlanDios**  
**the Word of God**  
46 **ajltok'imonga aswigojle**  
**it helps us to use**  
47 (xxx) **lajltayki pe lajlnesgopa.**  
**(xxx) Chontal, which we speak.**<sup>424</sup>

Compare *aswigojle litayki jlanDios* (ll. 44-45) and *aswigojle lajltayki* (ll. 46-47). The only linguistic difference between these two clauses is the possessor of *tayki* 'word, language, voice'.<sup>425</sup> I noted above the parallelism between the name of the Bible and the name of the Chontal language. Here, the use of the same form of the same verb transforms reading the Bible (*aswigojle litayki jlanDios* 'using God's word') into a perfect parallel of speaking Chontal (*aswigojle lajltayki* 'using our word').

In his final prayer,<sup>426</sup> this same Overseer not only asks for blessings and help holding meetings in Chontal but also covertly chides parents for not speaking Chontal with their children. While his prayer asks Jehovah to help Witnesses to teach their children Chontal and to make these children humble and willing to learn, the audience of such parents and children would hear this prayer as a call to action.

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<sup>424</sup> Oscar's Chontal rendition is ambiguous. Does using the Word of God help us to use Chontal? Or does using Chontal help us to use the Word of God? Only the latter reading is consistent with Dario's original point, and my assistant assured me that this was Oscar's intention.

<sup>425</sup> Turner and Turner (1971: 176) list this word as "the word, language, voice" and provide an example sentence meaning, "His language is different; you can't understand him." Their spelling *ladayguih* reflects consistent voicing distinctions between San Matías Petacaltepec and Santa María Zapotitlán.

<sup>426</sup> Dario, concluding prayer, 5/29/2011.

Dario

1 Gracias, pues,  
Thanks, then,  
2 te rogamos que  
we beg of you that  
3 ayudes a  
you help  
4 los hermanos que tienen hijos  
the brothers and sisters who have children  
5 para que les quieran enseñar chontal  
so that they will want to teach them Chontal  
6 poco a poco, en sus casas  
slowly, in their houses  
7 ehh esforzándose porque  
ehh making an effort because  
8 ellos van aprendiendo  
they go on learning  
9 y haz que los jovencitos  
and make it so the youth  
10 sean nobles, humildes, y se dejen guiar  
are noble, humble, and let themselves be guided  
11 a fines para su propia protección  
to ends that are for their own protection  
12 e incluso para hacerse más inteligentes.  
and even to become more intelligent.

During this same Assembly, Pedro<sup>427</sup> – also speaking with an interpreter – suggested that parents should take advantage of Family Worship to teach Chontal to their children. He made a public example of a family whose two-year-old spoke in Chontal during a demonstration, although her contribution was only two words, which represented a significant percentage of her Chontal vocabulary. (Others, too, would comment throughout this Assembly, and in the following weeks, about how much this little girl had impressed them.)

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<sup>427</sup> Pedro, "Prestemos atención a las necesidades del circuito" ("Giving Attention to the Needs of the Circuit"), 5/29/2011.

## 9.2.5 Putting it All Together: Chontalization Strategies and the Co-Construction of Chontal Expertise

After this Assembly, the Chontal-language religious meetings in Zapotitlán often included lengthy discussions in Spanish about how to say something in particular in Chontal. In a presentation on "Effective Research" in a service meeting, Lucas asked the congregation to help him define the word "research" in Chontal.<sup>428</sup> I analyzed the ideologies of learning and research displayed in this excerpt in my treatment of the circulation of texts in Chapter Six; here I am primarily concerned with his orientation to the Chontal language.

Immediately before the transcript begins, Lucas has asked the congregation in Chontal to take out their copies of *Beneficiese de la Escuela del Ministerio Teocrático* 'Benefit from Theocratic Ministry School Education' if they've brought them. He first frames his reading in Chontal (ll. 1-4), and then observes in Spanish that he's going to read in Spanish and then the congregation will participate in translating this Spanish content into Chontal (ll. 5-9). He follows this by reading in Spanish and repeating what he has read (ll. 10-17), asking the listeners again how to say *research* in Chontal (l. 18), and repeating what he has read a third time in Spanish (ll. 19-21). Next, Lucas calls on several members of the congregation (ll. 25, 34, 49, 70), who each attempt elements of the translation (ll. 26-27, 35-37, 50, 71-73). Lucas ratifies each answer with a positive assessment (ll. 28, 41, 74), often explicitly taking up and repeating what has been said (ll. 30, 32, 39, 46, 52, 54), and sometimes explicitly problematizing some aspect of what has been offered and looking for further responses (ll. 30, 61, 75-77). Finally, after one correction of his own (l. 78), he asks for a volunteer to repeat the entire translation (ll. 80-84), and when she

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<sup>428</sup> Lucas, presentation "Investigación Eficaz" ("Effective Research"), 6/3/2011. As elsewhere, **bold text** designates Chontal, and SMALL CAPS indicate text that has been read aloud. Spanish text comes directly from *Beneficiese de la Escuela del Ministerio Teocrático* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001a: 33); English text is from *Benefit from Theocratic Ministry School Education* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2001b: 33). Note that the English and Spanish versions of the text are not always very close equivalents, especially given differences in word order.

provides it (l. 85), he evaluates this positively in both Chontal (l. 86) and Spanish (ll. 87-91), emphasizing that this is now the definitive translation of 'research' into Chontal.

Lucas

- 1 **Ifa'a tikwa**  
**It says here**
- 2 LA INVESTIGACIÓN (1.6) EFICAZ  
HOW TO DO RESEARCH
- 3 **tojle tikwa**  
**that's what it says**
- 4 LA INVESTIGACIÓN EFICAZ  
HOW TO DO RESEARCH
- 5 pero yo lo voy a decir  
but I'm going to say
- 6 la definición en español  
the definition in Spanish
- 7 y alguien rápido va a pensar  
and someone is going to think quickly
- 8 cómo traducirlo en chontal  
how to translate it into Chontal.
- 9 Fíjense.  
Pay attention.
- 10 ¿QUÉ ES INVESTIGAR? ES BUSCAR  
WHAT IS RESEARCH? IT IS A CAREFUL
- 11 CON DETENIMIENTO  
SEARCH
- 12 INFORMACIÓN  
FOR INFORMACION
- 13 SOBRE UN ASUNTO  
ABOUT A PARTICULAR
- 14 CONCRETO.  
MATTER.
- 15 BUSCAR INFORMACIÓN  
A CAREFUL SEARCH
- 16 CON DETENIMIENTO  
FOR INFORMATION
- 17 SOBRE UN ASUNTO CONCRETO.  
ABOUT A PARTICULAR MATTER.
- 18 A ver, en chontal, cómo se dice 'investigar'?  
Let's see, in Chontal, how do you say 'research'?
- 19 BUSCAR  
A CAREFUL
- 20 CON DETENIMIENTO  
SEARCH



- 21 INFORMACIÓN.  
FOR INFORMATION.  
22 (5.6)  
23 (xxx xxx xxx)  
24 (3.2)  
25 Hermano Martinez?  
Brother Martinez?

Jacinto

- 26 **Laweje petsi**  
**Let's look for**  
27 **laykwi kom'ma**  
**what is needed**

Lucas

- 28 **Toj'liya.**  
**Like that.**  
29 **Tetsi shongka?**  
**What else?**  
30 **Laweje, pero ifa'a tikwa** 'CON DETENIMIENTO'  
**Let's look for, but here it says** 'CAREFULLY'  
31 (2.2)  
32 **Laweje**  
**Let's look for**  
33 (2.6)  
34 **Pima Cortés**  
**Brother Cortés**

Uriel

- 35 **Laweje**  
**Let's look for**  
36 **pero dice** 'CON DETENIMIENTO'  
**but it says** 'CAREFULLY'  
37 **acuidado**  
**carefully**  
38 (2.2)

Lucas

- 39 Cuidado  
Care  
40 (1.8)  
41 **[Toj'liya**  
**[Like that**

Uriel

42 [(Cómo es)  
[(How is)

Lucas

43 **Laweje**  
**Let's search**  
44 (1.2)

Uriel

45 **acuidado=**  
**carefully=**

Lucas

46 Cuidado.  
Care.  
47 (Vamos)  
(Let's)  
48 (2.8)  
49 Hermana Dolores?  
Sister Dolores

Dolores

50 **Apangka**  
**Slowly**  
51 (1.8)

Lucas

52 **Pangka pangka**  
**Little by little**  
53 (1.2)  
54 **Laweje apangka**  
**Let's search slowly**  
55 (1.2)  
56 LA INFORMACIÓN  
FOR INFORMATION  
57 (3.2)  
58 o:::::  
or:::::  
59 lo que dicen los libros  
what books say  
60 (1.4)  
61 Cómo se dice eso?  
How do you say that?  
62 (2.2)

- 63 **lawejle pangka**  
**let's search slowly**  
64 (3.2)  
65 lo que dicen los libros?  
[for] what books say?  
66 (12.2)  
67 Alguien?  
Anyone?  
68 (3.0)  
69 Lo que dicen los libros.  
What books say.  
70 **Pima** Martínez.  
**Brother** Martínez.

Jacinto

- 71 **Pe lokopa, pe lokopa**  
**what it says, what it says**  
72 **ga, gallibro**  
**the, the book**  
73 **(pe lokopa)**  
**(what it says)**

Lucas

- 74 (Está bien.)  
(Good.)  
75 O quitarle 'libro'  
Or take away 'book'  
76 que 'libro' es castellano, ah?  
because 'book' is Spanish, eh?  
77 entonces chontal  
well in Chontal  
78 **alje'e**  
**the readings**  
79 (2.4)  
80 A ver quien lo dice todo en chontal?  
Let's see, who can say it all in Chontal?  
81 (2.2)  
82 (Alguien que tiene?)  
(Someone who has it?)  
83 (2.2)  
84 Marisa?

Marisa

- 85 **(Lawejle pangka pe lokopa alje'e)**  
**(Let's search slowly for what the readings say)**

Lucas  
86     **Toj'liya**  
          **That's it**  
87     Eso es investigar.  
          That's research.

Lucas uses two of the strategies described above: he frames Spanish with Chontal, both at the level of the sentence and of the text, and he speaks about Chontal in Spanish. He frames his Spanish-language reading, *ifa'a tikwa* 'it says here', and this long segment introduces a presentation that is given almost exclusively in Spanish. In fact, the few things Lucas later says in Chontal either frame Bible quotations or repeat this early consensus: at one point he asks the audience to take out their Bibles and find a particular verse, and he observes near the very end that *lawejle pangka pe lokopa alje'e* 'research' makes Witnesses more able to teach people about the Bible.

The Spanish framing of a search for the correct Chontal term has much in common with the back stage preparation techniques described in section 9.1. Lucas is not a native speaker of Chontal, and he provides opportunities for the fluent speakers in the audience to jointly construct a definition that will become authoritative.<sup>429</sup> All of the speakers he calls on have selected themselves to speak by raising their hands, volunteering their expertise. Furthermore, all of them are recognized as good speakers, and all regularly participate in meetings in Chontal. It is not coincidental that this particular meeting so strongly resembles back stage translation: the service meeting is simultaneously a front stage and a back stage context. For Witnesses, the service meeting is a front stage activity that takes place in the Kingdom Hall, on the literal stage. Yet it provides explicit back stage support for the activity Witnesses consider most vital: communicating with non-Witnesses.

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<sup>429</sup> Jae-Eun Park (2007) discusses the construction of non-native-speaking identity in word searches, but a closer examination of this aspect of Lucas's presentation is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

### 9.3 Translation, Authorship, and Interpretation Revisited

This chapter has explored how individual Jehovah's Witnesses manage tensions between particular congregations and the Watch Tower Society institution. While these congregations have begun using the Chontal language since 2005, the institutional ideology that essentializes ethnic Chontals as Chontal speakers conflicts with on-the-ground sociolinguistic facts. These facts also call into question a policy of monolingual Chontal use. Individual Witnesses are able to produce Chontal expertise both through back stage preparation techniques that allow them to take advantage of the knowledge of more confident speakers, and through front stage framing techniques that allow them to package bilingual performances as fully Chontal.

Collaborative preparation and Spanish-language references to Spanish-language texts also perform a second function: they maintain the centralized authorship of the Watch Tower Society. As described in the discussion of the circulation of texts in Chapters Six and Seven, the central element in all religious activities is the performance of some sort of text, whether a *Watchtower* article or a public talk whose speaker receives an outline by email. Worldwide, nearly all congregations receive these materials in the languages in which they will perform them. The decentralization of translation in these particular congregations affords the potential of undermining this centralized authority. Diffusing translation among many unnamed individuals – which is precisely what occurs at Watch Tower Society headquarters – also gives members of these congregations a strategy to minimize this threat and preserve the central authority to which they are loyal.

## Ten Leaving

I left Zapotitlán with more questions than I had arrived with, ten months earlier. When I first arrived, I wanted to know: Why are some people more successful at maintaining or revitalizing their languages than others? For many people in Santa María Zapotitlán, the answer was connected to their faith as Jehovah's Witnesses. Witness religious meetings were the only high-status context – and the only public context – in which the Chontal language was regularly used. Yet the Witness religion is highly centralized and standardized: as I learned more, I became increasingly certain that the anthropological study of any given congregation must be situated within the institutional whole of the Watch Tower Society. This knowledge raised a second key question: what mechanisms help Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide to see themselves as a community?

Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Chontals are underrepresented in the social science literature, and my research helps address these descriptive gaps. More importantly, however, I have developed the concept of the *globalized textual community* (Chapter Two), which synthesizes many notions of community from throughout the social science literature. The *language community* concept ties community to a shared code and its referential norms, while the *speech community* is based in shared social action and shared evaluations of different language varieties. Meanwhile, the *community of practice* framework locates language within a larger system of shared social practices and only privileges language's ability to connect individuals when members themselves do so. However, this type of community is often temporally or spatially limited, and they rarely align with participants' larger sense of identity.

Other theoretical notions have grappled with the affordances of written language. The *imagined community* places textual circulation at the core of larger groups like nations whose members articulate a collective identity, and the *interpretive community* sees reading practices as constitutive of community. Yet these frameworks, which link community to written texts, are limited by their lack of engagement with questions of translation and circulation. Furthermore, they do not attempt to ground their theories in members' ideologies about community and the role that texts play.

My concept of the *globalized textual community* integrates some of the strengths of each of these frameworks. Like the language and speech community, this concept emphasizes shared linguistic practices, but I do not unquestioningly accept externally imposed boundaries between language varieties. Instead, I consider the ways in which community members define their language practices as shared across these boundaries. Jehovah's Witnesses explicitly invoke the standardization of reading contents and practices as constitutive of their community; I build on Anderson's (1983) fundamental insight about the affordances of written texts to consider how translations are framed as commensurate or even identical, with members' own logic as a guide. Ultimately, this way of looking at community helps us understand how Jehovah's Witnesses see their religious identity as primary, and how religion comes to supersede national, ethnic, and linguistic identities.

## **10.1 The Stories the Census Tells**

In 2005, the year that Jehovah's Witnesses began using Chontal in their meetings, the interim census reported a historic low in the number of Chontal speakers in Santa María Zapotitlán (INEGI 2005). Only 110 individuals older than five, or 11.5% of the population, claimed to speak Chontal. This number had been dropping quickly in the last few censuses, from

37.3% in 1995 to 26.1% in 2000, which suggested an aging Chontal-speaking population whose children were no longer learning the language (INEGI 1995; 2000). Yet just five years later, in 2010, 343 people – 37.5% of the town's population – told census-takers that they spoke the language (INEGI 2010).

**Table 10.1** Indigenous language speakers in Santa María Zapotitlán between 1990 and 2010, according to census data (INEGI 1990; 1995; 2000; 2005; 2010).

	total population	population age 5+	indigenous language speakers 5+	monolingual speakers 5+	bilingual speakers 5+	indigenous language speakers %
1990	903	735-764 <sup>430</sup>		18	246	34.6%-35.9% <sup>431</sup>
1995	994	829	309	6	303	37.3%
2000	1024	835	218	3	207	26.1%
2005	1128	955	110	0	110	11.5%
2010	1104	914	343	1	340	37.5%

Could it be that 233 people had learned to speak their heritage language in only five years?<sup>432</sup> And if they all hadn't, why were some of these 233 people newly willing to identify themselves as Chontal speakers? The Mexican census bases its linguistic data on self-reports, and the stigma attached to being a speaker of an indigenous language means that systematic underreporting is likely (King 1994: 85-87; see Cifuentes and Moctezuma 2006 for a fuller discussion of Mexican census data). However, the self-reported nature of census data also means that we can never be sure whether an increase primarily reflects growth in speakership or simply affiliation with the language.

<sup>430</sup> These numbers represent the lowest and highest percentages seen in the following four rows of the table and assumes fairly steady birth rates.

<sup>431</sup> These numbers are based on my extrapolation of the population older than age five, and on the assumption that the total number of indigenous language speakers was 264.

<sup>432</sup> The actual number of new speakers is presumably higher than this since some older speakers would have died during this period.



This trend in Zapotitlán is typical of the region as a whole. The *municipio* of Santa María Ecatepec, where most Chontal speakers are located, also shows a downward trend in the number of speakers in censuses until 2005, and a sharp jump between 2005 and 2010. However, Zapotitlán is the largest of the *municipio*'s eight towns, with a population nearly equal to that of the next two largest communities (Santa María Ecatepec and San Lorenzo Jilotepequillo) combined. Furthermore, Zapotitlán's share of the total number of speakers in the region also drops between 1995 and 2005 and rises again in 2010, suggesting that what is happening in Zapotitlán is, at least in part, driving this regional trend.

**Table 10.2** Indigenous language speakers in the *municipio* of Santa María Ecatepec, age 5+, 1995-2010.

	Chontal speakers in Zapotitlán	Chontal speakers in <i>municipio</i>	Zapotitlán share of total speakers in <i>municipio</i>
1995	37.3% (309/829)	30.4% (952/3136)	31.8% (309/952)
2000	26.1% (218/835)	24.2% (701/2892)	29.5% (218/701)
2005	11.5% (110/955)	16.1% (515/3207)	21.4% (110/515)
2010	37.5% (343/914)	32.2% (988/3064)	34.4% (343/988)

In contrast, we see no increase in indigenous language speakers either in Oaxaca State or nationwide over this same time period. In 2003, the *Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas* (General Law of Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples) established full legal status for indigenous languages and created new rights and institutions (Pellicer et al. 2006). Yet national and state census data reflect no effect of this national law, and it seems unlikely to have caused such stark changes at the local level. In fact, during the period 1995-2005, indigenous languages were more vibrant in Oaxaca State as a whole than in Zapotitlán; the large gain in Zapotitlán between 2005 and 2010 is even more surprising in light of the rapid drop in the years preceding it.

**Table 10.3:** Indigenous language speakers in Oaxaca State

	population age 5+	indigenous language speakers age 5+	indigenous language speakers as %
1995	2,812,067	1,027,847	36.6%
2000	3,019,103	1,120,312	37.1%
2005	3,103,694	1,091,502	35.2%
2010	3,405,990	1,165,186	34.2%

**Table 10.4:** Indigenous language speakers in Mexico<sup>433</sup>

	population age 5+	indigenous language speakers age 5+ (millions)	indigenous language speakers as %
1930	14,028,575	2.3	16.0%
1950	21,821,032	2.4	11.2%
1970	40,057,728	3.1	7.8%
1990	70,562,202	5.3	7.5%
2000	84,794,454	6.3	7.1%
2005	90,266,425	6.0	6.6%
2010	100,410,810	6.7	6.7%

The Watch Tower Society's embrace of the Chontal language – and the ensuing use of the language in high-status religious contexts – may be one of the factors that counteract the stigma against indigenous languages. As people use Chontal in these contexts, they come to indexically connect the language not just with membership in the local community but also with membership in Jehovah's Witnesses. Since Witnesses see their religious identity as more important than local, ethnical, or cultural identities, the Chontal language's ties to the globalizing textual community provide a powerful incentive to speak it. The moral imperative to use Chontal described in Chapter Eight – and the ability of speakers to perform above their true level of competence, as described in Chapter Nine – may also have motivated less competent speakers to begin identifying themselves with their heritage language. Pharoa Hansen (2010) observes both that

<sup>433</sup> Data are taken from a compilation available on INEGI's website at <http://cuentame.inegi.gob.mx/impression/poblacion/lindigena.asp> with the exception of the final row, which comes from INEGI (2010).

obedience to the Witness hierarchy was a powerful motivator to use Nahuatl in one central Mexican community, and that knowing that one's language has value to others may also increase prestige. Both explanations, then, are likely: more people may be speaking Chontal, and speakers and non-speakers alike may be more likely to claim knowledge of the language in official contexts like the census.

I did not see the same widespread use of the language among youth that Pharao Hansen (2010: 133-134) describes in the community of Hueyapan. Instead, individuals in their 50s told me that they were using the language regularly for the first time in their lives (compare Waterhouse 1949). However, unlike Pharao Hansen, I began my fieldwork in this community several years after the congregational switch to the indigenous language, and I am unable to tease apart what changes, precisely, the census increase reflects.

Who, demographically, are these new speakers? Are they older people whose passive knowledge is informing their new efforts to speak? Individuals who perceive themselves as speakers on the basis of their ability to perform speakership? Children whose few words represent greater Chontal knowledge than that of their older siblings? And what kind of speakers will they become in the next five years, and the five after that?

## **10.2 Looking for the Congregation**

What type of community, precisely, can we hope to find among seven and a half million individuals who speak at least 595 languages among them? The concept of the globalizing textual community engages simultaneously with theoretical definitions and with Witnesses' own phenomenological reality (Chapter Two). From a theoretical standpoint, shared reading – and shared literacy practices – unite this community, and members are oriented to the role that these

practices play. If written texts afford a standardization not only of content but also of literacy and mediational practices, translation represents the potential to challenge it.

Witnesses minimize these challenges and further authorize their texts and the institution that produces them through several mechanisms. One such mechanism is the *transidiomatic authoritative discourse* of the "pure language" (Chapter Five). Witnesses worldwide claim to speak a single shared pure language, defined as Biblical truth, and this discourse places constraints on what Witnesses can say. They also participate in a textual regime that dictates the value of particular texts from the top down, and evaluates Watch Tower Society materials more highly than all other texts (Chapter Six). In religious practice, Witnesses engage in mediational performances (Bauman 2004) that authorize Watch Tower Society texts even as they legitimate both particular individuals' participation and a totalizing participatory hierarchy (Chapter Seven).

In spite of this standardization, Witnesses see themselves as powerfully agentic. They are not simply swept along by the will of a vast institution. Instead, they choose to participate in that institution, which represents a beacon of righteousness, a force for good in the midst of great turmoil. When I left Zapotitlán, my host mother, Doña Florencia, encouraged me to "look for the congregation." For Witnesses, aligning oneself with the congregation is the only way to be certain of living a righteous life. In response, I told her that I would travel to Brooklyn and Mexico City, and she was delighted. She could hardly have imagined that I would, after much searching, find the congregation – behind her every word and action, and those of nearly everyone in Zapotitlán.

### **10.3 Language, Religion, and Morality: The Salvation of Chontal**

Why are some people more successful at maintaining or revitalizing their languages than others? Further anthropological study must consider how people connect particular languages to

moral personhood. Liddicoat (2012) suggests that religions typically relate to language in one of two ways: a *sacrality* orientation, in which the code is itself holy, or a *comprehensibility* orientation, in which a language's ability to be understood by particular individuals is what is valued. I will take this distinction a step further: where do these orientations locate moral value, and how do they consequently imagine translation? The sacrality orientation locates morality in particular *codes*, while the comprehensibility orientation locates morality in *relationships* between speakers and codes.

Witnesses, who privilege comprehensibility, see these relationships as irreducibly emotional. In turn, the affective connections between speakers and their languages provide a warrant for translation, because translation into any particular language is the only way to marshal its speakers' emotional ties to it. That is, translation is the only way to exploit the emotionality of first languages in the service of a message so important that it can change the moral status of those language's speakers. We return here to Witnesses' narratives about their ancestors (Chapter Eight), who died speaking only Chontal, who will be resurrected speaking only Chontal, and who can be saved only through Chontal. These narratives are so important because they assign agency and responsibility for conversion to small groups of individual Witnesses, who take on the task of translating the moral message into a form their ancestors can understand not only logically but also emotionally.

However, few people in Zapotitlán are fully competent speakers. The scripted nature of Witness religious participation (Chapter Seven) allows individuals to "speak Chontal in Spanish" – to perform Chontal speakership – in part to comply with this moral necessity to speak Chontal (Chapter Nine). *Chontalization strategies* allow Zapotitlán Witnesses to be – simultaneously – full members of the Witness community, and members of a speech community that is oriented to

Chontal despite individuals' varying competence. These strategies include framing devices (compare Ahlers 2006), metadiscourse about Chontal in Spanish, and reciting memorized passages without understanding them. Since all Witnesses perform from written scripts, individuals may also prepare these texts with the aid of more competent Chontal speakers. Collaborative translation and preparation not only allows less fluent speakers to take advantage of others' Chontal knowledge but also diffuses responsibility for translation and with it, the potential challenge to centralized authorship of Witness textual materials.

Witnesses believe that salvation requires both faith and works; only through sharing the message can a Witness be guaranteed salvation. Zapotitlán Witnesses' narratives about the resurrection make two important claims: individual Witnesses or groups of Witnesses will be responsible for the conversion of their resurrected ancestors, and that conversion must take place in Chontal, which is these ancestors' first language and thus the only language to which they feel an emotional connection. As a result of these two concerns, Witnesses use the language in the present with an eye to the future, when the language will carry additional moral weight. Witnesses' salvation depends ultimately on the salvation of their ancestors, and thus on the salvation of Chontal.

#### **10.4 The Projects that Choose Us and the Projects We Choose**

I arrived hoping to compare language revitalization programs – one spearheaded by the government, one by foreign academics, and one by a religious institution – to better understand why such programs fail or succeed. At the time of my research, only the religious project had legs,<sup>434</sup> and it was there that I concentrated my attention. Yet focusing my attention on one of the community's three Christian denominations changed who I was perceived to be, and it awakened

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<sup>434</sup> As of this writing, the academic project is slated to begin its first field season in Summer 2013.

an interest in religion not only as a force promoting language maintenance and revitalization but also as a translocal community.

When I first started asking about the circulation of Witness texts like *The Watchtower*, I was simply curious. Later, these conversations gave rise to more theoretical concerns about how written text affords standardization, how translation endangers it, and how these dangers can be overcome. In this dissertation, I have explored both the particular ethnographic case and the institution behind many of this community's ideologies and practices. The enactment of Witness religious texts and the moral weight this enactment carries are, ultimately, inseparable from the language in which it is carried out.

### **10.5 Anthropological and Post-Apocalyptic Futures**

It is tempting to dichotomize Christian and indigenous, to see missionization as an imposition. Yet this sharp distinction only holds true at certain historical moments, and it had ceased to be meaningful in Zapotitlán long before I arrived. In 2010, more Witnesses had been converted by neighbors than by strangers from elsewhere, or born into Witness families. Three and four generations attended meetings together, and only those in their seventies and older remembered the arrival of men with a phonograph and a stack of publications on the back of a burro, before the road was constructed.<sup>435</sup>

How do Christian practices become indigenous? Robbins (2007) notes that Christian and anthropological understandings of time are often incommensurable, which makes this question a particularly difficult one for anthropologists. For many Christians, he observes, a total rupture exists between past and present, and present and future. Similarly, Witnesses are concerned with the post-apocalyptic future to the exclusion of the more immediate one. Yet many of the

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<sup>435</sup> Jacinto interview, 12/8/2010.

questions that interest anthropologists take place in the imaginable, short-term future: Who will speak Chontal in five years, or in ten? Will Spanish monolinguals among the Witnesses take up the moral imperative to use Chontal? What can speakers of other endangered languages learn from their example?

This study also suggests the need to treat translation more broadly. For multilingual institutions – religious and otherwise – translation practices represent both a powerful site for ideologization and the potential to challenge dominant ideologies. One priority for future anthropological studies must be a comparative project: Is the role of translators recognized or erased? Who is authorized to translate, when, and how, and to whom? Is translation depicted as a creative act, or a mechanical one? Do people see translations as commensurable, or are different languages unable to escape their own logics?

Who do such institutions hold ultimately responsible: must seekers learn the language in order to access the message, or can the message be brought to them in any language they choose? And how does that choosing connect what is institutional and what is indigenous still more closely?



# Appendix A

## Notes on Transcription

All ethnographies are acts of anthropological curation, and so are all transcripts.

Transcripts tell stories (cf. Ochs 1979), and it is important for us to recognize how we manipulate these stories.

Throughout this dissertation, I've used a slightly modified version of CA transcription conventions (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; see also DuBois 2006), although my goal is not to transcribe at this same level of detail. In longer transcripts, line breaks represent intonation units, and I've included pauses, lengthening of particular sounds, and latching where these may be relevant to the analysis.

When Jehovah's Witnesses' voices appear in the body of this text rather than in lengthier examples, I've removed hesitation markers and other disfluencies, and left out detail that distracts from the story I am trying to tell.

Chontal morphemes are represented in **boldface** throughout. The choice SMALL CAPS through to designate where individuals are quoting directly from a written text was a deliberate one. I see it as a visual index of the authorization this type of quotation represents.

<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Representation</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Brief pause	(.)	
Timed pause	(2.0)	
Latching	=	
Lengthening	ba:::d	the number of colons indicates the degree
Commentary	((Oseas laughs.))	
Uncertain segments	(think)	
Multiple possibilities	(think / thing)	
Unintelligible segments	(xxx)	
Overlap	[	

## **Appendix B**

# **Glossary of Spanish-Language and Jehovah's Witness Terms**

<i>Abuelitos</i>	Grandparents, ancestors; a respectful term used to refer to older people generally.
<i>Active</i>	A congregation member who performs field service each month.
<i>Agencia Municipal</i>	Municipal agency; the local branch of the municipal government.
<i>Agente Municipal</i>	Municipal agent; the man in charge of the <i>agencia municipal</i> .
<i>Arte</i>	A colonial grammar of an indigenous language written by Dominican or Franciscan friars.
<i>Asamblea</i>	The Spanish language term for 'assembly.'
<i>Assembly</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Town-wide meetings where local government business is dealt with.</li><li>2. Events held several times a year in which larger groups of congregations (districts or circuits) come together for one to three days of public talks and other Witness activities.</li></ol>
<i>Bethel</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Refers collectively to the buildings of the worldwide headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses in Brooklyn, New York.</li><li>2. Refers collectively to the buildings of any Branch Office.</li></ol>
<i>Bethelite</i>	A resident and full-time worker at any Bethel.
<i>Bible Study</i>	The close study of Watch Tower publications with a Bible used only as a supplement.
<i>Branch Office</i>	Jehovah's Witness headquarters overseeing some particular geographic region.
<i>Cafetal</i>	A coffee plot.
<i>Cargo</i>	In Oaxaca, a local political or religious position.
<i>Cargo System</i>	The political (often political-religious) hierarchy in Oaxacan towns.
<i>Circuit</i>	A collection of Jehovah's Witness congregations within a small geographic area.
<i>Circuit Overseer</i>	The man in charge of a circuit.

- Circuito* The Spanish language term for 'circuit.'
- Ciudadano* Citizen.
- Comedor* A small and fairly informal restaurant.
- Comisaría de Bienes Comunales* Commissary of communal goods; the branch of local government that deals with land and is an organ of the federal government in Mexico.
- CONASUPO* A subsidized store in a small town, named for the now-defunct agency that used to run these stores.
- Congregation Bible Study* A weekly meeting in which Witnesses read and answer questions from a Watch Tower Society Bible textbook.
- Discurso* The Spanish language term for 'public talk.'
- District* 1. In Oaxaca, an administrative unit containing multiple *municipios*.  
2. For Witnesses, a geographic area composed of multiple circuits.
- District Overseer* The man in charge of a district.
- Distrito* The Spanish language term for 'district.'
- Doctrina* Colonial texts containing indigenous language versions of catechisms, prayers, and scripts for sacraments.
- Esclavo Fiel y Discreto* The Spanish language term for 'faithful and discrete slave.'
- Faithful and Discreet Slave* The Governing Body; comes from Matthew 24: 45-7.
- Field Service* The door-to-door proselytizing that Witnesses undertake.
- Governing Body* A small group of senior male Witnesses in Brooklyn who are directly responsible for preparing and distributing theological materials. See *The Watchtower*, July 15, 2013, pp. 20-25.
- Inicial* The first year of pre-school.
- Jehovah's Witness* A member of the globalized textual community, an individual who participates in the Watch Tower textual regime. Witnesses themselves only use this term for those who have been baptized and remain active, but I apply it more broadly. Compare Holden (2002c: 186), who defines *Jehovah's Witnesses* as "Devotees of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society."

<i>Kingdom Hall</i>	The place where Witness congregations meet.
<i>Milpa</i>	A small plot where individuals farm a variety of food crops, especially corn, beans, and squash.
<i>Municipio</i>	An administrative unit in Mexico that corresponds roughly to a county. (For political and historical reasons, Oaxaca has more <i>municipios</i> than any other state.)
<i>Oportunidades</i>	'Opportunities'; a conditional cash transfer program for students and their families.
<i>Pioneer</i>	A full-time volunteer role in which Witnesses are expected to perform a high number of hours of field service, including both proselytization and congregational support.
<i>Precursor</i>	The Spanish language term for 'pioneer.'
<i>Preescolar</i>	Pre-school, which in Mexico includes kindergarden.
<i>Preparatoria</i>	High school.
<i>Primaria</i>	Elementary school.
<i>Public Talk</i>	A Witness meeting in which a man, usually an elder, gives a lecture that is based closely on a Watch Tower Society outline.
<i>Publicador</i>	The Spanish language term for 'publisher.'
<i>Publisher</i>	A Jehovah's Witness who evangelizes door-to-door. A publisher has not necessarily been baptized yet, but one must pass an exam dealing with questions of doctrine and organizational policy in order to be approved as a publisher.
<i>Pure Language</i>	See Chapter Five.
<i>Righteous</i>	Refers to a person who has accepted the Witness message.
<i>Salir Adelante</i>	'Forging ahead'; refers to a discourse of progress that characterizes the past as 'backwards' (see Messing 2007).
<i>Salon del Reino</i>	The Spanish language term for 'Kingdom Hall.'
<i>Service</i>	See 'field service.'
<i>Service Meeting</i>	A weekly Witness meeting that focuses on practical issues in their door-to-door ministry.

- Setenta y Más* 'Seventy and Older'; a social welfare program for older adults,
- Special Pioneer* A pioneer who meets an even higher standard for the number of hours of field service than regular pioneers.
- Spiritual Food* Religious content, including the publications and programs of the Watch Tower Society.
- Studying* Legitimate peripheral participation in Witness activities.
- Sucursal* The Spanish language term for 'branch office.'
- Superintendente* The Spanish language term for 'overseer,'
- Talk* See 'public talk.'
- Telesecundaria* A type of middle school in rural Mexican communities which shows televised lessons as a supplement to the teachers' knowledge.
- Tequio* Public works projects or communal labor.
- Theocratic Ministry School* A meeting in which Witnesses prepare skits that illustrate techniques of door-to-door evangelism.
- Unrighteous* Refers to a person who has not (yet) accepted the Witness message.
- Usos y Costumbres* Uses and customs; a system that protects indigenous forms of political organization and is not subject to the involvement of national Mexican political parties.
- Watch Tower Society* The "global institutional arm of [Jehovah's Witnesses]" (Michael S., p.c., 12/13/2011)
- Watchtower* 1. *The Watchtower*, a monthly Witness publication that comes in two versions, one intended for the public and the other intended for Witnesses. This second version contains study articles.  
2. The Brooklyn Bethel complex.
- Watchtower Study* A weekly meeting in which Witnesses read and answer questions from the current issue of *The Watchtower*.
- Wicked* Refers to a person who "does not want to change their moral standards to God's standards" (Michael S., p.c., 5/12/2013). Often a person who has rejected the Witness message, or someone who has been baptized and later left the fold.

*Zona de Reserva* Reserve zone; in Mexico, this designates a region close to a town where hunting and collecting firewood is strictly forbidden.

## Appendix C

### Highland Chontal Communities

This is a list of Highland Chontal towns according to Turner (1972:ii; see also Figure 3.2) and Bartolomé and Barabas (1996: 170). I include information about both population and the number of indigenous language speakers; these numbers are based on the 2010 Mexican census (INEGI 2010).

\* indicates a town listed by Bartolomé and Barabas, but not Turner, as a Highland Chontal community; I do not know what the town labeled 'La Hacienda' on Turner's map corresponds to.

<b>Community</b>	<b><i>Municipio</i></b>	<b>Population age 5+</b>	<b>Indigenous language speakers age 5+</b>
San Juan Alotepec	Asunción Tlacolulita	279	13 (4.7%)
La Pájima*	Magdalena Tequisistlán (Tehuantepec District)	225	4 (1.8%)
Magdalena Tequisistlán*	Magdalena Tequisistlán (Tehuantepec District)	3514	144 (4.1%)
San Miguel Ecatepec (San Miguelito)*	Magdalena Tequisistlán (Tehuantepec District)	699	5 (0.7%)
Guadalupe Victoria*	San Carlos Yautepec	828	103 (12.4%)
San José Chiltepec	San Carlos Yautepec	350	171 (48.9%)
San Lucas Ixcotepec	San Carlos Yautepec	145	40 (27.6%)
San Matías Petacaltepec	San Carlos Yautepec	619	253 (40.9%)
San Miguel Chongos*	San Carlos Yautepec	408	6 (1.5%)
San Miguel Suchiltepec	San Carlos Yautepec	171	57 (33.3%)
San Pablo Topiltepec	San Carlos Yautepec	445	198 (44.5%)
San Pedro Tepalcatepec	San Carlos Yautepec	371	114 (30.7%)
Santa Lucía Mecaltepec	San Carlos Yautepec	245	108 (44.1%)
Santa María Candelaria	San Carlos Yautepec	298	125 (41.9%)

Santa Catarina Jamixtepec	San Miguel del Puerto (Pochutla District)	207	0
Loma Atravesada*	San Miguel Tenango (Tehuantepec District)	39	0
San Miguel Tenango*	San Miguel Tenango (Tehuantepec District)	586	16 (2.7%)
La Reforma*	Santa María Ecatepec	360	55 (15.3%)
San Juan Acaltepec	Santa María Ecatepec	184	52 (28.3%)
San Lorenzo Jilotepequillo	Santa María Ecatepec	472	160 (33.9%)
San Pedro Sosoltepec	Santa María Ecatepec	106	48 (45.3%)
Santa María Ecatepec	Santa María Ecatepec	473	47 (9.9%)
Santa María Zapotitlán	Santa María Ecatepec	914	343 (37.5%)
Santo Domingo Chontecomatlán	Santa María Ecatepec	358	157 (43.9%)
Santo Tomás Teipán	Santa María Ecatepec	192	126 (65.6%)
San Andrés Tlahuilotepec	Santa María Quiegolani	171	84 (49.1%)



## Appendix D

### Excerpt from Pedro and Cata Interview<sup>436</sup>

Pedro: Pues ya todo viene bosquejado,==es como La Atalaya. (Cata: Ahh.) Es igual. Cua-cuando nos llega una revista, el Atalaya, pues ya, ya vienen los artículos. Ya sólo uno tiene que prepararlos (.) para poder alimentarnos bien, asimilarlo, lo que ya está ahí, y eso es, es como un alimento que se nos sirve y nosotros tenemos que hacer el esfuerzo de comerlo nada más. Se nos pone en la mesa el alimento y ya nosotros con la cuchara, hay que (.) sopearlo, por decirlo así. Ésa es la labor, así de que el alimento se nos da ya, preparado, solo nos toca a nosotros aprender a disfrutarlo. Y nutrirnos lo mejor que podamos

[[00:50:32-00:00:50:52 omitted]]

Pedro: Pero lo nutritivo no deja de ser el pan, a nivel mundial. Y eso es lo que hace que los testigos de Jehová sean una comunidad (.) mundialmente unida, sin (.) importar barreras lingüísticas, nacionales, raciales, ningún otro tipo. Eso es algo tan hermoso dentro del poder de Jehová, que no se ve (.) en ningún otro lado, jaja, verdad?, Mientras que en otras naciones hay guerras por cuestiones de etnias, de (.) nacional, nacionales y cosas, cuestiones por el estilo, en el pueblo de Jehová, no. Estamos trabajando más en la unidad, y no importa. Aquí no hay barreras para nosotros. (2.0)

Cata: Y quería comentar que eso es lo que nos une (en) una hermandad mundial precisamente, que todos tenemos el mismo elemento espiritual, la misma instrucción. Es que lo que un testigo de Jehová que cree, lo va creer el otro, que esté en el otro lado del mundo. No va a haber diferencia. Eso nos une. Yo, en mi predicación, por ejemplo, me he topado con personas de una misma religión, que en cierto lugar creen una cosa, y en otro lugar creen otra, y e::so es la diferencia de los testigos de Jehová. Como recibimos la misma enseñanza, (1.2) nos une, (0.8) tanto en adoración, y eso, nos hace, nos hace una hermandad mundial. Donde quiera que estemos, aunque no hablemos el idioma, pero (1.4) ya somos hermanos. (En) las asambleas internacionales, donde se reúnen hermanos de otros países, aunque no se hable en el idioma de:, pero ya.

Pedro: jaja (1.0) De hecho, una profecía de la Biblia, en Sofonías, la profecía de Sofonías dice (1.0) que:: llegaría el momento en que todos los pueblos, las naciones, habla- hablarían un mismo lenguaje. Se trata del lenguaje puro de la verdad==No es un idioma, no? Es una, un lenguaje simbólico, digámoslo así, pero ese lenguaje es la verdad bíblica. Que::: lo que decía mi esposa, aquí (1.2) tenemos un entendimiento de un asunto y en China, Japón, Holanda, Francia, los países bajos tienen el mismo entendimiento==O sea, hablamos el mismo idioma, en ese aspecto. No hay variación. Ahí sí no hay ninguna diferencia, como en los mismos idiomas surge no? Que unos hablan una variante y otros otra, aquí no hay variantes. Aquí tenemos una enseñanza unida, y pues claro, es una enseñanza saludable al grado de que, pues (0.6) no importa dónde esté uno, puede servirle a Jehová de la misma manera.

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<sup>436</sup> Pedro and Cata interview, 5/9/2011, 00:49:51-00:53:28

## Appendix E

### Narratives About the Resurrection

Acts 24:15 is the Biblical basis of Jehovah's Witness beliefs about the resurrection. In the English language New World Translation, this verse is rendered: "and I have hope toward God, which hope these [men] themselves also entertain, that there is going to be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous." In the Spanish New World Translation (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1987), it is rendered as follows: "y tengo esperanza en cuanto a Dios, esperanza que estos mismos también abrigan, de que va a haber resurrección así de justos como de injustos,"

The following six narratives and one Bible lesson address the resurrection. SMALL CAPS denote direct or near-direct Bible quotation, while **boldface** designates Chontal language words or phrases.

1. Josefina, 52, daughter of one of the founding members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Zapotitlán and long-time member of Congregación Sur:<sup>437</sup>

- 1 Por ejemplo, se está haciendo  
Like, it's being done
- 2 (1.8)
- 3 para que todos aprendamos (1.2) chontal de nuevo=  
so that we all learn Chontal again
- 4 =que rescatemos al chontal con el fin de  
that we rescue Chontal in order to
- 5 (1.0)
- 6 enseñar (0.8) a los resucitados,  
teach the resurrected,
- 7 los que (.) van a estar.  
the ones who are going to be [here].
- 8 (2.6)
- 9 Cuando Dios cumpla su promesa,  
When God keeps his promise
- 10 de los (.) que están en las tumbas,  
that the ones who are in the tombs
- 11 van a ser levantados, (0.8)  
are going to be raised
- 12 y los que ahora estamos tratando de rescatar el chontal,  
and those of us who are now trying to rescue Chontal,
- 13 vamos a tener el privilegio de  
we are going to have the privilege of
- 14 enseñar todas aquellas personas,  
teaching all those people

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<sup>437</sup> Josefina interview, 4/28/2011, 00:00:21-00:02:25.

- 15 (en) chontal.  
(in) Chontal.
- 16 Porque  
Because
- 17 (2.6)
- 18 o vamos, sí, vamos a tener que platicar con ellos,  
or we are going, yes, we are going to have to speak with them,
- 19 porque si nosotros no...  
because if we don't...
- 20 (1.0)
- 21 Hoy (.) nos olvidamos del chontal.  
Today we forgot<sup>438</sup> Chontal.
- 22 Cuando estas promesas se realicen, estos, los (.) muertos se resuciten,  
When these promises are fulfilled, um, [when] the dead are resurrected,
- 23 cómo vamos a hablarles?  
how are we going to speak to them?
- 24 (1.0)
- 25 Y si nosotros vamos a platicar con ellos en español,  
And if we are going to speak with them in Spanish,
- 26 ni nos van a escuchar,  
they aren't even going to hear us,
- 27 no nos van a entender.  
they aren't going to understand us.
- 28 (2.0)
- 29 Y por eso (0.8)  
And that's why
- 30 hoy todos los que van creciendo,  
today all of those who are growing up,
- 31 ya los estamos  
we are already
- 32 tratando de enseñar para que aprendan a hablar con el idioma chontal,  
trying to teach them to learn to speak with the Chontal language
- 33 y  
and
- 34 (2.4)
- 35 en ese día todos podremos platicar con los (.) resucitados.  
in that day we will all be able to speak with the resurrected.
- 36 ¡Qué bonito!  
How beautiful!
- 37 Vamos a platicar,  
We are going to talk,
- 38 nos van a entender,  
they're going to understand us
- 39 y nosotros también  
and we also

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<sup>438</sup> 'Nos olvidamos' is bivalent and may be translated as either 'we forget' or 'we forgot.'

40 vamos a tener el gusto de platicar con ellos,  
are going to have the pleasure of talking with them,  
41 con el chontal.  
with Chontal.

2. Beto, 67, ministerial servant in Chontal-language congregation in Salina Cruz, taught the Chontal language class for pioneers in Salina Cruz:<sup>439</sup>

1 Pero ahora,  
But now  
2 por la ayuda de la Sociedad y (.) la organización de Jehová,  
with the help of the Society and Jehovah's organization,  
3 pues el chontal  
well, Chontal  
4 ahorita lo estamos, ah, mostrándolo otra vez,  
now we're, uh, demonstrating it once more,  
5 y aplicando de que todo el mundo (.) hable chontal porque,  
and trying for everyone to speak Chontal because  
6 eh, allá en la Casa Betel nos hicieron una pregunta,  
ah, there in Bethel House they asked us a question,  
7 de acuerdo con las Escrituras.  
according to the Scriptures.  
8 El instructor nos dijo,  
The instructor said to us,  
9 'Hermanos, (1.4)  
'Brothers,  
10 por qué creen que la Sociedad quiere de que nosotros hablemos  
why do you believe that the Society wants us to speak  
11 cada quien con su lengua,  
each one with his language  
12 en chontal, tzotzil, mayo, maya, zapoteco, zapoteco de la sierra, chontal parte baja?  
in Chontal, Tzotzil, Mayo, Maya, Zapotec, Sierra Zapotec, Lowland Chontal?  
13 Por qué la Sociedad tanto se esmera en esto?  
Why does the Society go to such pains?  
14 Entonces la respuesta es (1.4)  
Well the answer is  
15 lo que dice las Escrituras, la Biblia:  
what the Scriptures say, the Bible:  
16 'LOS PRIMEROS SERÁN ÚLTIMOS,  
'THE FIRST WILL BE LAST,  
17 Y LOS ÚLTIMOS SERÁN PRIMEROS.'  
AND THE LAST WILL BE FIRST.'  
18 Ahora cuál sería la respuesta en ello?  
Now what would be the response in that?  
19 Cuál sería nuestra misión en que nosotros podemos hacerlo primeros o últimos?  
What would be our mission that we could do first or last?

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<sup>439</sup> Beto interview, 2/17/2011, 00:15:13-00:17:28.

20 Entonces el hermano de la Casa Betel, el instructor, nos dijo de que, (1.0)  
 Then the brother from Bethel House, the instructor, told us about how  
 21 los que murieron primero,  
 those who died first  
 22 serán resucitados (.) al último (1.2)  
 will be resurrected at the very last  
 23 y los que están muriéndose (.) ahora,  
 and those who are dying now  
 24 lo- los últimos,  
 the last ones  
 25 serán los primeros que van a resucitar.  
 will be the first who are going to be resurrected.  
 26 Entonces,  
 Well  
 27 eh, van a ellos, ahora sí, hablar a los que van resucitando,  
 um, they're going to, now yes, speak to those who go resurrecting  
 28 van a hablar a su lengua natal,  
 they are going to speak their birth language,  
 29 en que los finados,  
 and the deceased,  
 30 los que murieron primero,  
 the ones who died first,  
 31 les van a dar la aclaración.  
 are going to give them the explanation.  
 32 Porque cómo puede ser,  
 Because how can it be  
 33 si ellos,  
 if they  
 34 cuando murieron,  
 when they died  
 35 hablaron en chontal?  
 spoke in Chontal?  
 36 Ahora al resucitar, si le hablamos en- en español,  
 Now when they are resurrected, if we speak to them in- in Spanish,  
 37 no lo van a entender.  
 they aren't going to understand it.  
 38 Por eso la Sociedad,  
 That's why the Society,  
 39 y el pueblo de Jehová,  
 and the people of Jehovah,  
 40 está muy interesado en que nosotros usemos (.)  
 is very interested in us using  
 41 nuestra lengua materna para poder hablar a los resucitados  
 our mother tongue to be able to speak to the resurrected  
 42 de arriba para abajo,=  
 from top to bottom

43 =hasta llegar (.) el primero que murió,  
until we get to the first one who died,  
44 pero con su dialecto original.  
but with his original dialect.

3. Lorena, 59, long-time member of Congregación Sur:<sup>440</sup>

1 Va a haber una resurrección,  
There's going to be a resurrection,  
2 COMO PERSONAS DE JUSTOS  
OF RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE  
3 Y DE INJUSTOS, mm?  
AND UNRIGHTEOUS, mm?  
4 Entonces,  
And then  
5 esas personas (.) justas,  
those righteous people,  
6 que ya conocieron la verdad,  
who already learned the truth,  
7 y las personas injustas  
and the unrighteous people  
8 son personas que no conocieron la verdad,  
are people who didn't get to know the truth,  
9 como por ejemplo,  
like, for example,  
10 (0.8) los abuelos, los tatarabuelos.  
the grandparents, the great-grandparents.  
11 Ellos fallecieron,  
They passed on,  
12 ellos no conocieron,  
they didn't get to know it,  
13 y no saben ni hablar el español.  
and they don't even know how to speak Spanish.  
14 Puro chontal ellos hablaron,  
It's only Chontal they spoke,  
15 ahora, fijese:  
now, pay attention:  
16 (2.6) cuando ellos van a ser resucitados,  
when they are going to be resurrected,  
17 se les va a dar el testimonio, mm?  
they're going to be given a testimony, mm?  
18 Se les va a avisar  
They're going to be told  
19 acerca de la palabra de Dios,  
about the word of God

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<sup>440</sup> Lorena interview, 5/23/2011, 00:32:21-00:35:56.

20 pero,  
 but,  
 21 cómo los vamos a hablarlos ahora?  
 how are we going to talk to them now?  
 22 En qué manera los vamos a hablar,=  
 In what way are we going to talk to them  
 23 =si nosotros estamos hablando puro español?  
 if we are speaking only Spanish?  
 24 Y esos,  
 And they,  
 25 los que fallecieron,  
 the ones who died,  
 26 hablaron puro chontal?  
 spoke only Chontal?  
 27 Y ahora cuando los,  
 And now when they,  
 28 cuando, si sobrevivimos,  
 when, if we survive,  
 29 (1.0)  
 30 si Jehová nos permite sobrevivir  
 if Jehovah allows us to survive  
 31 esta grande tribulación,  
 this great tribulation,  
 32 y los vemos cara a cara a los abuelos,  
 and we see face to face with the grandparents,  
 33 los tatarabuelos.  
 the great-grandparents.  
 34 Aquellas personas que no recibieron el mensaje no saben  
 Those people who didn't receive the message don't know  
 35 (1.2) lo que Jehová dice su palabra,  
 what Jehovah says [in] his word,  
 36 cómo (nos) vamos a hablar a nosotros, ellos?  
 how are they going to speak to us, them?  
 37 No se va a poder,  
 It's not going to be possible,  
 38 porque puro español estamos hablando.  
 because it's just Spanish that we're speaking.  
 39 Ah, pero qué tal,  
 Ah, but what if,  
 40 si nosotros cuando,  
 if we when,  
 41 si Jehová permite,  
 if Jehovah allows,  
 42 cuando ellos se van a resucitar,  
 when they are going to be resurrected,

43 y nosotros estamos ahí esperándolos a ellos, mm?  
 and we are there waiting for them, mm?  
 44 Para darle la bienvenida?  
 To welcome them?  
 45 Entonces  
 Then  
 46 vamos a hablarlos en chontal, mm?  
 we are going to speak to them in Chontal, mm?  
 47 Vamos a hablarlos,  
 We are going to speak to them,  
 48 vamos a dar-  
 we are going to he-  
 49 -les a entender acerca de la palabra de Dios en chontal.  
 -lp them understand about the word of God in Chontal.  
 50 ¡Cómo el esclavo fiel y discreto, Juanita,  
 How the faithful and discreet slave, Juanita,  
 51 ha trabajado, está trabajando arduamente  
 has worked, is working very hard  
 52 para ayudar a esas personas que, que no saben! Mm?  
 to help those people who, who don't know! Mm?  
 53 Por esa razón,  
 For that reason,  
 54 (1.4) para darles la bienvenida,  
 to welcome them,  
 55 y para darles el mensaje.  
 and to give them the message.  
 56 Porque si se levanta y nosotros hablamos,  
 Because if they rise and we speak,  
 57 hablamos, este,  
 we speak, um,  
 58 español,  
 Spanish,  
 59 'Ay, ¡qué bueno!,' le vamos a decir.  
 'How wonderful!' we are going to say to them.  
 60 Mira, vamos a, entonces vamos a llorar  
 Look, we're going to, well, we're going to cry  
 61 pero de alegría,  
 but from joy,  
 62 ya no de tristeza.  
 no langer from sadness.  
 63 Corriendo vamos a dar la bienvenida a nuestros abuelos,  
 We're going to go running to welcome our grandparents,  
 64 y si nosotros no hablamos espa, espa, el este, chontal,  
 and if we don't speak Sp-, Sp-, um, Chontal,  
 65 cómo los vamos a hablarlos?  
 how are we going to talk to them?



66 No vamos a poder.  
We aren't going to be able.

67 Por eso,  
That's why,

68 por eso está,=  
that's why it is,

69 =es por esa razón,  
it's for that reason,

70 dice que el esclavo fiel y discreto está trabajando sobre eso.  
they say that the faithful and discreet slave is working on this.

71 Para dar a, la bienvenida a esas personas  
To welcome those people

72 que van a ser resucitados,  
who are going to be resurrected

73 y para que fácilmente  
and so that we can easily

74 vamos a dar el mensaje sobre esto.  
give them the message about this.

4. José, 63 and an elder in Congregación Sur:<sup>441</sup>

1 El circuito  
The circuit

2 pues ahorita como ésta,  
well, now, since this

3 este trabajo=  
this work

4 =esta obra de predicación  
this preaching work

5 [[Jena: sí]]  
[[Jena: yes]]

6 se está (abarcando) a nivel mundial  
is being seen on a worldwide level

7 y se está buscando a  
and they are looking for

8 a (0.8)

9 a todos los lenguajes  
for all the languages

10 incluso la organización de los testigos de Jehová  
in fact the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses

11 está muy interesado  
is very interested

12 que todos los idiomas  
(in) that all the languages

13 se de, desa, de esa predicación que se,  
they, of, of that preaching that

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<sup>441</sup> José interview, 12/11/2010, 17:42-20:50.

- 14 se abarca todo  
includes everything
- 15 incluso a los lenguajes también  
even the languages too
- 16 y ahorita mucha gente  
and now many people
- 17 el propósito es esto.  
the goal is this.
- 18 Rescatar el lenguaje materno.  
To rescue the mother tongue.
- 19 Porque el (propósito divino) en el futuro  
Because the (divine goal) in the future
- 20 cuando se levante la resurrección de las personas que murieron mucho tiempo antes  
when the resurrection occurs of the people who died a long time ago
- 21 también van a merecer que sean enseñados.  
they are also going to deserve to be taught,
- 22 Ese es el propósito divino.  
This is the divine goal.
- 23 Entonces en el futuro cuando se levanten éstas,  
Then in the future when they rise,
- 24 si nosotros no tratamos de rescatar nuestro lenguaje,  
if we don't try to rescue our language
- 25 quién les va a enseñar?  
who is going to teach them?
- 26 Por eso la organización está interesado que nosotros rescatemos el lenguaje y lo  
hablemos  
That's why the organization is interested that we rescue the language and we speak it
- 27 y en el futuro  
and in the future
- 28 si Jehová permite (que) lleguemos a ser  
if Jehovah allows us to become
- 29 (para decir) sobrevivientes  
(let's say) survivors
- 30 en la tribulación que está próxima  
in the tribulation that is coming soon
- 31 nosotros somos los que vamos a enseñar a estas (personas)  
we are the ones who are going to teach these (people)
- 32 que van a ser levantados.  
who are going to be raised.
- 33 Porque mucha gente  
because many people
- 34 nuestros antecesores, que murieron,  
our ancestors, who died,
- 35 no supieron hablar el español,  
didn't know how to speak Spanish,

36 sí?  
yes?

37 [19:10-19:52 omitted.]

38 Y muchas de esas personas no oyeron el mensaje=  
And many of those people didn't hear the message

39 =lo que se está difundiendo ahorita.  
that is being spread right now.

40 El mensaje del reino no, no han llegado a saber,  
The message of the kingdom, they haven't managed to know it,

41 no ha- no se les ha predicado,  
nobody has preached to them,

42 y ahorita se está dando esta publicación  
and now this preaching is happening

43 a nivel mundial.  
worldwide.

44 Hay más de doscientos treinta países  
There are more than two hundred thirty countries

45 que se está extendiendo la obra de predicación  
where the work of preaching is extending

46 y entonces  
and then

47 pues merece que toda esta gente lleguen a saber  
well it's deserved that all these people come to know

48 lleguen a aprender  
come to learn

49 lleguen a conocer a Jehová.  
and come to know Jehovah.

50 Entonces aquellas personas que murieron  
Then those people who died

51 inocentemente con su dialecto  
innocently with their dialect

52 pues  
well

53 Jehová también  
Jehovah also

54 ahora sí  
now yes

55 tiene esa misericordia que todos aprendieran.  
has that compassion so that all learn.

56 Entonces,  
Well,

57 por eso (es la) propuesta de la organización de los testigos está  
that's why the goal of the organization of the Witnesses is

58 está muy interesado  
is very interested

59 que se rescaten los lenguajes  
in rescuing the languages  
60 para que  
so that  
61 pues demos este testimonio cabal  
well we give this thorough testimony  
62 a aquellas personas en la (obra)  
to those people in the (work)  
63 en la resurrección del futuro.  
in the future resurrection.

5. Jacinto, 77 and a long-time elder in Congregación Centro, and brother of one of the founding members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Zapotitlán (and himself a founding member).<sup>442</sup>

1 Bueno.  
Well.  
2 Este es urgente (1.2)  
This is urgent  
3 porque:: (2.0)  
because  
4 según (0.8)  
according to  
5 este::  
um  
6 la palabra de Dios  
the word of God  
7 menciona (2.2)  
mentions  
8 que::  
that  
9 que todos los que murieron (2.2)  
that all those who died  
10 en, (1.2) este::  
in, um,  
11 van a ser resucitados.  
are going to be resurrected.  
12 (Eso es / esos) que ya transcurrió, este,  
(That is / those) that it's already been, um,  
13 muchos años (1.2)  
many years  
14 que ya están al (1.2)  
that they are already in  
15 al sepulcro (mm)  
in the tomb  
16 mucho tiempo  
a long time

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<sup>442</sup> Jacinto interview, 5/9/2011, 00:17:05-00:19:29.

- 17 pero  
but
- 18 fijese que esos van a volver a la vida. (1.6)  
keep in mind that they are going to return to life.
- 19 La, la palabra de Dios  
The, the word of God
- 20 dice que  
says that
- 21 van a volver (1.4)  
they're going to return
- 22 A LOS JUSTOS  
THE RIGHTEOUS
- 23 Y A LOS INJUSTOS.  
AND THE UNRIGHTEOUS.
- 24 Los injustos  
The unrighteous
- 25 son esas personas (1.0)  
are those people
- 26 que no escucharon  
who didn't hear
- 27 nada del mensaje del reino. (2.2)  
any of the message of the kingdom.
- 28 Ahora (a) esas personas se les va a dar el mensaje.  
Now those people are going to be given the message.
- 29 Cuando  
When
- 30 van a volver a la vida.  
they're going to return to life.
- 31 Por eso nos esforz- esforzamos  
That's why we wor- work hard
- 32 por que  
because
- 33 si:::  
if
- 34 si no (0.6) hablamos bien el chontal,  
if we don't speak Chontal well
- 35 cómo vamos a dar el mensaje a estas personas? (¿Sí?)  
how are we going to give the message to these people? (Yes?)
- 36 Entonces (1.8)  
Then
- 37 de eso  
from there
- 38 nos esforzamos, si.  
we work hard, yes.

Jena

- 39 Para que, por ejemplo  
So that, like,  
40 su-  
your  
41 su abuelo de usted, no?=  
your grandfather, no?

Jacinto

- 42 =Es:::::o  
Exactly!  
43 Yo me gustaría  
I would love  
44 platicarle a mi abuelo que nosotros conocimos la verdad  
to tell my grandfather that we came to know the truth  
45 porque este no supo la verdad.  
because he didn't learn the truth.  
46 Vivieron (1.2)  
They lived  
47 lo que se les enseñó  
what they were taught  
48 este::  
um  
49 puras tradiciones,  
pure tradition,  
50 este,  
um  
51 de inclinarse ante un imagen,  
to kneel before an image,  
52 que este es (1.8)  
that this is  
53 el Dios de Don Fulanito y-  
Joe Schmoe's God and  
54 hasta ahí nada más.  
up to that nothing more.  
55 Ellos no supieron  
They didn't know  
56 quien es el Dios todopoderoso  
who the almighty God is  
57 ya cuando-  
already when  
58 hasta yo también  
even me too  
59 cuando todavía (1.8)  
when still

- 60 (era) niño,  
 (I was) a boy  
 61 u: este, estaba yo contento.  
 oof, um, I was happy.  
 62 Y apoyaba yo a la, a la religión católica.  
 And I used to support the, the Catholic religion.

6. Esmeralda, 11, Jacinto's granddaughter. Lives with two elders from Congregación Centro; her father is the only adult in the household who has not been baptized. (In response to the question: "Do you remember when they started using Chontal in the congregation?")<sup>443</sup>

- 1 Fue en una Asamblea  
 It was in an Assembly  
 2 en donde, este, dijeron que  
 where, um, they said that  
 3 pues:::  
 well  
 4 ya no se veía la: lengua chontal  
 the Chontal language wasn't been seen any more  
 5 y que se tenía que este, de volver a  
 and it had to be, um, returned to  
 6 a retomar para=  
 to be picked up again so that  
 7 =porque este:::, que no ves que dicen como:  
 because um don't you see that they say, like  
 8 la resurrección?  
 the resurrection?  
 9 Van a volver a resucitar los muertos  
 They're going to return to resurrect the dead  
 10 y qué tal si no saben en el español,  
 and what if they don't know Spanish,  
 11 pues se les va a predicar  
 well they're going to be preached to  
 12 este, de: chontal=  
 um, from Chontal  
 13 =en la lengua de ellos.  
 in their language.

7. Over the course of 13 minutes on another occasion,<sup>444</sup> Oseas, whose narrative is quoted in full in Chapter 8, read to me from Acts 24:15 and then proceeded to translate the entire text for me. This segment, which is too long to provide in its entirety, also contains several comments about not only ancestors in general but Oseas's great-grandmother in particular. I give here the first two minutes, which suggest the flavor of the event, as well as the full Chontal translation.

<sup>443</sup> Esmeralda interview, 5/18/2011, 00:00:45-00:01:12.

<sup>444</sup> Oseas and me, Bible study, 12/13/2010, 00:02:08-00:04:15 shown here, although this topic lasts until 00:14:45.

Oseas

- 1 venticuatro quince  
twenty-four fifteen
- 2 (10.0)
- 3 (ya)
- 4 dice aquí  
it says here
- 5 dijo el apostol Pablo,  
the Apostle Pablo said,
- 6 TENGO ESPERANZA EN CUANTO A DIOS  
AND I HAVE HOPE TOWARD GOD
- 7 ESPERANZA QUE ESTOS MISMOS TAMBIÉN ABRIGAN,  
WHICH HOPE THESE MEN THEMSELVES ALSO ENTERTAIN,
- 8 DE QUE VA A HABER RESURRECCIÓN  
THAT THERE IS GOING TO BE A RESURRECTION
- 9 ASÍ DE JUSTOS  
OF BOTH THE RIGHTEOUS
- 10 y COMO DE INJUSTOS.  
AND THE UNRIGHTEOUS.
- 11 TENGO LA ESPERANZA, dice,  
I HAVE HOPE, it says,
- 12 EN CUANTO A DIOS  
TOWARD GOD
- 13 ESPERANZA QUE ESTOS MISMOS TAMBIÉN ABRIGAN  
WHICH HOPE THESE [MEN] THEMSELVES ALSO ENTERTAIN
- 14 DE QUE VA A HABER RESURRECTION  
THAT THERE IS GOING TO BE A RESURRECTION
- 15 de ASÍ DE JUSTOS  
OF BOTH THE RIGHTEOUS
- 16 y COMO DE INJUSTOS.  
AND THE UNRIGHTEOUS.
- 17 Va a haber una esperanza, dice,  
There's going to be hope, it says,
- 18 que se van a:::::  
that they're going to be
- 19 resucitar  
resurrected
- 20 justos  
righteous
- 21 los justos, **ijlniya ts'ak'a kijlpikyajma lingshanuk**  
the righteous, **those people of good judgment**

Jena

- 22 **ijlniya?**  
**those?**



Oseas

23 aha.

24 **Ijlniya**, los justos,  
**Those**, the righteous,

25 **ijlniya ts'ak'a**  
**those good**

Jena

26 (3.0)

27 **Ijlniya? Ts'ak'a=**  
**Those? Good=**

Oseas

28 **Ts'ak'a.**

**Good.**

29 **Kijlpikyajma.**  
**Judgment**

Jena

30 **Kijlpikya=**  
**Judgm=**

Oseas

31 **Kijlpikyajma.**  
**Judgment.**

Jena

32 **Kijlpikyajma.**  
**Judgment.**

Oseas

33 Mmhmm.

34 **Je pi- ti'eyi (1.6)**  
**And th- who did**

35 **alwena.**  
**good.**

36 (3.0)

37 **Je ti'eyi (.) alwena.**  
**And who did good.**

38 (1.6)

39 **Ijlna'a los justos.**  
**These righteous.**

Jena

40 (4.0)



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