ScienceDirect®

The Bible in two keys: Traditionalism and Evangelical Christianity on the Fort Apache reservation

M. Eleanor Nevins ✉

Show more ⌄

⊶ Share   ❞ Cite

Get rights and content ↗

Abstract

This article examines contrasting entextualizations of the Bible across conflicting Traditionalist and Evangelical Christian identities on the Fort Apache reservation in Arizona. On the one hand, each makes use of Apache language idioms and genre precedents to underwrite their respective claims to authentic Apache identities. On the other hand, each selects different components of that loosely shared repertoire of discursive precedents in their entextualizations of the Bible in order to articulate contrasting transformative projects for their community as well as to assert the contemporary relevance of their voices within differently imagined global orders. This analysis constitutes the local speech community as a locus of ethnolinguistic inquiry in which relations to encompassing social orders are mediated in part by the circulation of texts. In this process conventions and precedents serve as a reservoir of resources mobilized for use in competing strategies advanced by differently affiliated actors in dialogue with one another. In this way multiplicity and dynamism as a characteristic of local communities is defined as a crucial dimension of local–global discursive processes.

Introduction

This article is addressed to conflict and dynamism in religious discourse on the Fort Apache reservation in Arizona. I describe contrasting uses of the Bible across two competing religious identities: Apache Independent Christians (AIC hereafter) and self-identified Traditionalists. Often opposed in reservation political struggles, these two groups can be understood as competing post-colonial indigenous religious movements in tight and antagonistic dialogue with one another. Each lays claim to an authentic Apache identity by drawing its leadership from the reservation community and by using Apache language religious idioms in its ceremonial activities. Each also identifies as Christian and appropriates the Bible to local interpretive practices, but in contrasting ways. I argue that this is no confused syncretic jumble, but a sharply delineated and competitive discursive field in which reservation residents use the Bible in conjunction with Apache language religious idioms to make competing claims on Apache identity, global Christianity, and the authority to speak to contemporary problems.

I take the Bible to be an example of a mass mediated text, and both a symbol and instrument in the process by which reservation residents claim global Christian affiliations. I argue that any text (the Bible, but also textual symbols of indigeneity) through which a historically colonized community defines its participation in wider social and political orders is likely to be the object of competing claims and discursive elaboration within that community. Locally established conventions, including discourse genres, language ideologies, registers and idioms, are not irrelevant to this process, but form a diverse, loosely shared repertoire to be mined by differently positioned local actors as they recontextualize global texts to their own meanings and concerns.

At the same time local community conflicts and polarizations are often strategically oriented towards, while not identical with, contending entextualizations of the Bible, or other global texts, in more widely encompassing discourses, flows, and institutions. This article describes this dynamic at play in conflicting entextualizations of the Bible among Traditionalists and Apache Independent Christians as they utilize Apache language and other aspects of their local repertoire to articulate opposed post-colonial religious affiliations.

Section snippets

The Fort Apache reservation

The analysis presented here draws upon 3 years of ethnographic research from 1996 to 1999 on the Fort Apache reservation in Eastern Arizona, home of the White Mountain Apache Tribe. This is a complex community with a diversity of churches and religious affiliations. According to the 2000 census there were approximately 12,400 people on the Fort Apache reservation, and 9400 on the adjacent San Carlos Apache reservation. Ties of family, marriage, tribal governments, church and ceremonial…

Textuality, misunderstanding and the Bible (a disclaimer)

By focusing analytic attention on recontextualizations of the Bible in contending indigenous religious movements, and by placing this study within a special issue devoted to the theme of "intertextuality and misunderstanding," I in no way mean to imply that Apache Christians misunderstand the ostensibly true meaning of the Bible by virtue of mediating it too heavily through local conventions. Instead, following Bailey (2004), I take misunderstanding to be intrinsic to the organization of human…

Media discourse and mediation of communities

This study contributes to an emerging body of work in linguistic anthropology addressed to the ways in which minority, indigenous, or other smaller scale local communities (in the sense articulated by Silverstein, 1998, Spitulnik, 1993, Spitulnik, 1997) discursively articulate with larger scale social orders. One way is through the circulation of mass media texts, whether the print material of schools, magazines and churches; or the print, audio and film texts of television, movies, radio, and…

The Bible, local recontextualizations and the anthropology of Christianity

This article also contributes to the growing body of literature addressed to the anthropology of Christianity, particularly the study of charismatic movements in communities identified

as indigenous. Robbins (2003) criticizes anthropological studies of communities undergoing conversion to Christianity for focusing overmuch on continuities between post-conversion and past religious practices. He argues that while continuities no doubt are in play, ethnographers should give due attention to the…

White Mountain Apache religious identities

Ethnographic research on religious and moral discourse on the reservation is extensive and is also predated by the arrival of the first significant missionary presence (the Wisconsin Lutheran synod) on the reservation in 1886. That an ongoing argument between missionaries and practitioners of established ceremonial forms informs innovation in religious discourse and identities is reflected upon in some works (Basso and Anderson, 1973, Goodwin and Kaut, 1954, Kessel, 1976, Kessel, 1988, Nevins,…

Traditionalists and AIC: two post-colonial indigenous religious movements

Both Traditionalism and AIC came to prominence in the 1930s as responses to the challenge posed to Apache religious leadership by the Lutheran mission. The mission was established in 1896 and enjoyed the support of the government agent assigned to the reservation (Ferg, 1988). The primary Lutheran mission church and school were located in the community of Eastfork with satellite churches in Whiteriver, Canyon Day and McNary. The early Lutheran missionaries made a point of employing Apache…

Silas John Edward's Holy Ground Movement

Contemporary Traditionalism is not so much an apologist discourse as a counter-translation strategy (Keane, 2007) elaborated by a man named Silas John Edwards, and in his "Holy Ground Movement." As a young man Mr. Edwards acquired a number of traditional ceremonies from his father, a prominent *diyiń*. He also became familiar with Lutheran doctrine and practice by serving for several years as a translator for the pastor at the Eastfork mission (Basso and Anderson, 1973, Ferg, 1988, Kessel, 1976, …

AIC–As an indigenous religious revival movement

While it might seem counter-intuitive to call an anti-Traditionalist Protestant religious movement an "indigenous religious movement," Apache Independent Christian churches

are formulated taking indigeneity as a point of departure. Most AIC churches are Apache language dominant and its participants make extensive use of established Apache language religious idioms and speech genres to translate the Bible to local concerns. Edward Spicer describes their origin like this:

... in the 1930s a group…

…

The Traditionalists' Bible

Many Traditionalists model the Bible on Apache Traditionalist ceremony and vice versa. They extend the counter-translation strategy institutionalized by Silas John Edwards to the stories and songs of the most publicly prominent Traditionalist ceremony on the reservation: the *Na'íees*. The *Na'íees* is a girl's coming of age ceremony, called "The Sunrise Dance" in English. These occur between the families of the *Nabíeesń*, the girl undergoing the ceremony and that of the *Na'íłeesń*, a woman from a…

The Bible of AIC's

As AIC read, interpret, recite and talk about the Bible, they do so in a way that is both engaged with and stands in opposition to the strategy employed by Traditionalists. Like Traditionalists, they create equivalences between the Bible and the texts of traditional religious practice; but they relate them to one another within a different temporal framework. Equivalences are made in order to claim the healing power and authority attributed to *diyiń*, while also serving the transformative…

Anthropology of Christianity, continuity, disruption and discourse

To summarize, Traditionalists and AIC both utilize locally established discourse genres to appropriate the Bible, and both utilize the Bible to make claims of global, contemporary relevance. But they do so on different terms, and by drawing upon different parts of a largely shared communicative repertoire. The present analysis, by focusing upon intertextuality in discourse, overcomes some of the problems identified by Robbins (2003) in that the continuity asserted by Traditionalists and the…

Bible translation, language ideology and the relevance of Apache language

Because of the close ties between members of the White Mountain and San Carlos Apache Tribes, much of what I have developed here is applicable to, and open to refutation from, ethnographic research on religious identities and discourses at San Carlos as well. The present study is relevant to an argument about the relation between Bible Translation, changing language ideologies and prospects for language maintenance developed by Samuels (2006).

Samuels usefully highlights the importance of…

Local mediation, global orientation

The case of dueling Apache Christianities discussed here is usefully viewed through the framing concern of this issue: intertextuality and misunderstanding, for several reasons. First, in what we can loosely term "lateral" patterns of textual circulation, we have a community utilizing many of the same intertextual referents (including the Bible and the songs of traditional ceremonies), but doing so in conflicting, contrasting ways and producing different religious identities. Traditionalists…

Acknowledgements

M. Eleanor Nevins (Ph.D. Anthropology, University of Virginia) is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Nevada Reno. Her research addresses the interplay of language varieties, discourse genres and language ideologies among residents of the Fort Apache Reservation in Arizona. In her published work she has addressed language ideology in relation to language maintenance programs, and the relevance of established discourse genres in local appropriations of mass media. With Tom…

Special issue articles   Recommended articles

References (58)

J. Robbins

On the paradoxes of global Pentecostalism and the perils of continuity thinking

Religion (2003)

L. Abu Lughod

The objects of soap opera: Egyptian television and the cultural politics of modernity

B. Bailey

Communication of respect in interethnic service encounters

Language in Society (1997)

B. Bailey

Misunderstanding

K.H. Basso

The Gift of Changing Woman(1966)

K.H. Basso

Western Apache Witchcraft(1969)

K.H. Basso

Portraits of "The Whiteman": Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache

(1979)

K.H. Basso

Western Apache Language and Culture: Essays in Linguistic Anthropology

(1990)

K.H. Basso

Wisdom Sits in Places: Language and Landscape among the Western Apache

(1996)

K.H. Basso *et al.*

A Western Apache writing system: the symbols of Silas John

Science (1973)

K.H. Basso *et al.*

Joseph Hoffman's "the birth of he triumphs over evils:" a Western Apache origin story

R. Bauman

A World of Others' Words: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality

(2004)

R. Bauman *et al.*

Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life

Annual Review of Anthropology (1990)

S. Gal

Multiplicity and contention among language ideologies: a commentary

P.E. Goddard

San Carlos Apache Texts

(1919)

P.E. Goddard

White Mountain Apache Texts

(1920)

G. Goodwin

White Mountain Apache religion

American Anthropologist (1938)

G. Goodwin

Myths and tales of the White Mountain Apache(1939)

G. Goodwin *et al.*

A native religious movement among the White Mountain and Cibecue Apache

Southwestern Journal of Anthropology (1954)

E. Hahn

The Tongan tradition of going to the movies

Visual Anthropology Review (1994)

W.F. Hanks

Discourse genres in a theory of practice

American Ethnologist (1986)

W.F. Hanks
Intertexts: Writings on Language, Utterance, and Context
(2000)

E. Hobsbawm
Introduction: inventing traditions

K.E. Hoffman
We share walls: language, land and gender in Berber Morocco
(2008)

Hoijer, H., n.d. San Carlos Texts. Unpublished, ca 325 pp. [Original in the Hoijer Papers at the Library of the...

D.H. Hymes
On communicative competence

D.H. Hymes
Toward Communicative Competence(1973)

W. Keane
Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter
(2007)

There are more references available in the full text version of this article.

Cited by (11)

Speaking in the mirror of the other: Dialectics of intersubjectivity and temporality in Western Apache discourse

2013, Language and Communication

Show abstract ∨

Annual review of anthropology: The language of evangelism: Christian cultures of circulation beyond the missionary prologue ↗

2018, Annual Review of Anthropology

White sage, bears, and territory: contemporary indigenous religion among the Chumash ↗

2018, Journal of Contemporary Religion

Concepts of Conversion: The Politics of Missionary Scriptural Translations ↗

2017, Concepts of Conversion: The Politics of Missionary Scriptural Translations

Upward, not sunwise: Resonant rupture in navajo neo-pentecostalism ↗

2016, Upward, Not Sunwise: Resonant Rupture in Navajo Neo-Pentecostalism

Joseph Smith's uses of pseudo-, Intralingual and intersemiotic translation in the creation of the Mormon canon: The Book of Mormon, the Bible and the Book of Abraham ↗

2014, Across Languages and Cultures

> ❯ View all citing articles on Scopus ↗

M. Eleanor Nevins (Ph.D. Anthropology, University of Virginia) is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Nevada Reno. Her research addresses the interplay of language varieties, discourse genres and language ideologies among residents of the Fort Apache Reservation in Arizona. In her published work she has addressed language ideology in relation to language maintenance programs, and the relevance of established discourse genres in local appropriations of mass media. With Tom Nevins she has published on the constitution of Apache heritage, and on figurations of storytelling across family and educational institutions.

View full text

ELSEVIER

RELX™