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The Mormon Church and the Language of My Faith Author(s): Michael Austin

Source: *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Fall 2019), pp. 19-24

Published by: University of Illinois Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/dialjmormthou.52.3.0019>

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THE MORMON CHURCH AND THE LANGUAGE OF MY FAITH

Michael Austin

It is no easy thing to command a language to change. Language just sort of happens, and those who make the rules eventually have to get on board or become irrelevant. Only pedants and fools think that they can stand in the path of linguistic evolution and order language itself to stop doing what it wants to do.

Well, pedants, fools, and the *Académie française*—one of the world's oldest and most prestigious institutes for the regulation of a language. The forty members of the *Académie*, known fondly as *les Immortels*, choose their own replacements, govern their own affairs, and answer to nobody's will but their own. Since the days of Cardinal Richelieu, who established it 1634 the *Académie française* has been responsible for preserving the integrity of the French language.

In recent years, the *Académie* has lead the charge against English loan words like *le weekend* and *le best of*—words that have, in their view, polluted the French language. In their official dictionaries and style sheets, they recommend alternatives for new English words that appear to be gaining currency. Don't say *networking*, they insist. Say *travail en réseau*—it is more French.

Does it work? Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. French editors generally accept the recommendations of the *Académie*, and French Universities teach their standards. But French is a global language with 440 million speakers, only about 15% of whom live in France. Official as the *Académie française* may be in the country where the French language emerged, most of the people in the

world who speak French as a first language have probably never heard of it. And, as it commands neither an army nor a police force, its regulations bind only those who agree to be bound.

English does not have an official academy—the British were more concerned about acquiring the world’s wealth than with taming its wild tongues. But we do have the *Chicago Manual of Style*, which works in somewhat the same way. Some people declare rules, some people follow them, some teachers teach them, most editors enforce them, and just about everybody else talks however they want. It has been going on for a long, long time.

But even when backed by the authority of the French Crown or the University of Chicago, only certain kinds of rules can be declared, followed, and ignored like this. We can call these “regulative rules” because they regulate the way that language is used in official and semi-official venues. A good English example of a regulative rule is “use *fewer* with things that can be counted (count nouns) and *less* with things that can only be measured (mass nouns).” I know this rule well, and I observe it meticulously in my own writing. I have probably marked wrong a thousand times on student papers. But when I see a sign in a store that says *TEN ITEMS OR LESS*, I still know what it means. I may clutch my metaphorical pearls and feel superior for a few minutes, but I don’t scratch my head in confusion. The sign, I know, is still in English. But if I saw a sign that said *LESS TEN OR ITEMS*, I would have no idea how to interpret it. Such a sign would violate another kind of rule—a “constitutive rule,” or a rule that constitutes part of the definition of the thing itself. Word order can vary in English, but it cannot vary indefinitely without ceasing to be English. *LESS TEN OR ITEMS* is not an incorrect sentence, but neither is it an English sentence, as it does not fulfil the semantic requirements that constitute what English means. This is how constitutive rules work.

I am spending so much time on language here because I believe that religion, at its best, is a type of language. It provides a vocabulary

and a grammar and a set of symbols that a group of people can use as the basis for shared spiritual conversations and experiences. Whether we acquire it as a child or learn it as an adult, a religion gives us the conceptual tools that we need to think and talk about spiritual things. The variety of religions and denominations in the world are the different languages of faith.

Mormonism is the language of my faith. I have spoken fluent Mormon for nearly all of my life, and I have grown comfortable with the cadences of Mormon speech, the nuances of Mormon thought, and the peculiar ways that Mormon understands things like God (Father and Mother), agency, the afterlife, atonement, and revelation. I can get by in other spiritual languages too. Because of my life's experience, I am reasonably fluent in both Catholic and Methodist, and I have recently acquired at least a solid reading level of Muslim. I love and respect these spiritual traditions deeply, but they are not my language. When I speak them with other people, I have to translate them in my head back into Mormon.

I am, and will always be, a proud and enthusiastic participant in the Mormon Church. As it happens, I am also a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is not the same thing at all. That Church's recent emphasis on its correct name has been a welcome development in my spiritual life, as it frees up the name "Mormon Church" to use to describe something else—something much less predictable and controllable than the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has ever been, but something nonetheless vital and important to my spiritual identity.

The two churches that I refer to—the Mormon and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—are churches in different senses of the word. The former is a regulative organization with duly appointed leaders, loyal followers, buildings, codes of conduct, members, non-members, and a process for kicking people out. It has an address, an

official web page, a newsroom, and a tax status, and it can be sued and held liable for damages. It is, in every material sense, a thing.

The Mormon Church, on the other hand, is not a thing. Or, more accurately, it is many things. The Mormon Church is a church in a much older sense of the word: a constitutive body of people who use a common religious vocabulary and who share part of their spiritual journeys with each other. It includes everybody for whom “Mormon” is the correct noun. The adjective can vary: liberal-, orthodox-, fundamentalist-, practicing-, non-practicing-, disaffected-, excommunicated-, ex-, dry-, and post-. There is tremendous variety among, and within, these different kinds of Mormons, but we all share a culture, a history, a grammar, and a set of beliefs that we either accept or do not accept—but that partially define us whether or not we accept them.

Much like the *Académie française*, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can issue proclamations binding those who agree to be bound. It has a perfect right to decide what it wants to be called and to insist, however politely, that it be called by its proper name. It can also determine who qualifies to be a member. It can let people in and kick people out. It can decide whose children can be baptized and whose children can't. And it can set rules for various levels of participation within its organization, including taking the sacrament, holding the priesthood, and attending the Temple.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can control almost every aspect of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But it has no control at all over the Mormon Church. The only requirement to be part of the Mormon Church is the desire to be part of the Mormon Church. You can't get kicked out of it, any more than you can get kicked out of “French.” Affiliation is purely a matter of choosing to use the language. Some Mormons are agnostics who need to use their spiritual language to talk about what they do, and do not believe. Some Mormons are atheists who don't believe in any god, but who adopt a spiritual language to talk about how best to behave in this life. And

some Mormons are completely comfortable declaring that the Church is true and that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. All are part of the Mormon Church. We may not agree with each other, but we can talk to each other about where we disagree.

And we can even work together to build the Kingdom. We don't need anybody's permission to love each other or to struggle with each other towards an understanding of the divine. We can, with no organizational authority whatsoever, mourn with each other, comfort each other, bake the occasional casserole for each other, and load up each other's moving vans—even when the van is moving somebody we love away from the formal institution that some of us belong to. One's status in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not determine one's place in the Mormon Church, nor do the rules of the regulative organization constrain our responsibility to the constitutive body of the Saints.

The Mormon people have not been called to go to Zion; we have been called to build Zion wherever we are—and this is true spiritually as well as geographically. Like all large communities, Mormonism has a center and a periphery. Once upon a time, these were geographical markers. The center was in the Utah urban corridor, and the periphery extended to the deserts of Nevada and California and the inhospitable borderlands between Southern Arizona and Northern Mexico. Today, the markers of the community are cultural and spiritual rather than geographical. Mormons exist all along different spectrums of activity, belief, and behavior.

Many of us find ourselves, at least some of the time, in the inhospitable borderlands of our religion and our culture—between activity and inactivity, belief and doubt, orthodoxy and dissent and all manner of social and spiritual wilderness. But that's OK because there are a lot of us wandering around looking for a place to start blossoming. As a people, we have always been able to build thriving communities in the spaces that nobody else wants to inhabit. Making deserts blossom is kind of our thing. We are Mormons; it's what we do.

In closing, I would like to bear my testimony of the Mormon Church. I don't know that the Church is true, nor do I have any idea what it would mean for something like the Mormon Church to be "true." I cannot even say that I know that the Mormon Church is good, though I know that it can be when the Mormon people use their spiritual vocabulary to think and do good things. I cannot say with authority that anybody else should be part of the Mormon Church, but I know that it is right for me.

I know that the Mormon Church is mine. It provides the vocabulary that I need to frame my deepest questions, and it gives me the metaphors that I need to make infinite and ineffable things hold still long enough for me to examine. I do not claim that the language of my faith is the best language in the world, or that it provides a perfect translation of God's mind and intentions. I only claim that it is my language—the one that I acquired in my childhood and have used ever since to make my way through the world.

This does not mean that my spiritual journey is over. It just means that my spiritual journey is Mormon. When I doubt that God exists, it is the Mormon God about whose existence I am unsure. When I feel God's love in my life, it is the Mormon Holy Ghost who is speaking comforting my soul. And when I feel compelled to work towards the Kingdom of God on Earth, it is the Mormon Zion that I feel called to bring about. We expect too much of a religion, I think, when we look to it for answers. Finding answers is what we seem to be on earth to do. The purpose of religion is to give us the vocabulary we need to frame the questions. And, as for me and my house, we will ask them through the spiritual grammar of the Mormon Church.