

**You say *Chanani*, I say *Chananaei*:
Language and Ethnography in Augustine**
Jessica Wright

Excerpt

“For when our country folk, asked what they are, respond in Punic, Chanani—what else do they state, obviously with one letter lost, just as is usual in such cases, than Chananaei?”

— Ep. in Rom. inchoat. 13

Augustine’s identification of North African congregants as *Chananaei* (Canaanites) employs second-hand knowledge of Punic to speculate on a bilingual pun, for the purpose of theological argument. His pun opens a window onto perceptions of Punic speech in late Roman Africa, where Latin was the chief language of government and education, and Punic was associated with rural, less sophisticated contexts.

Although the body of material has grown in recent years, our epigraphic evidence for fourth-century Punic remains slight, and Augustine—who mentions the language 21 times—constitutes our primary literary source. It is therefore necessary to scrutinize the context for his testimony, in order to understand more fully ideas about who spoke Punic, and their status within Roman African society.

Historians of Roman Africa have now largely accepted Augustine’s identification of *Chanani* with *Chananaei* as evidence for the internal ethnic identification of Punic-speakers as consciously “Canaanite.”¹ Yet this interpretation slides over the Latin-speaking perspective and theological motivation of Augustine’s argument. In my paper, I examine this and other references—including on-the-spot interpretation, Punic translations of an acrostic psalm, and the disastrous appointment of a renegade bishop for his fluency in Punic—to elucidate Augustine’s motivations in referring to Punic, and thereby to explore more critically the bilingual situation in North Africa during the late fourth century CE. As we shall see, Augustine’s

¹ See, for example, Brent Shaw’s *Sacred Violence* (2011), p. 431.

remarks reflect a literary (i.e., a Latin) construct of the *Chanani* as biblical Canaanites that diverges sharply from the low status of ordinary Punic speakers, yet at the same time closely mirrors their insider-outsider status within Roman African society.

Author Commentary

Jessica Wright

Learning to write engaging abstracts is both crucial for graduate work and extremely difficult. A good abstract is key to getting one’s paper selected for conference panels and journals; it is also a professional tool designed to give readers immediate access to your work: the material, the background, the questions, the stakes. Yet, in the humanities at least, rarely is the abstract formally taught.

But what are the components of a successful abstract? While scientific disciplines benefit from a relatively fixed structure, the humanities abstract is more vague, and far more varied. Should it include the full argument, or is a tantalizing hint sufficient? Should it reference secondary literature? Are quotations a waste of words?

Although good abstracts, like essays, can come in many different forms, the writing centre lexicon provides useful points of orientation: motive, orienting information, and thesis statement. In the example chosen here, the motive can be found in two parts: paragraph two sets up an initial motive for examining Augustine’s texts more closely, insofar as they constitute the primary literary testimony for Punic; paragraph three supplements this with a more immediate motive, which is recognition of question which other scholars had not paid much attention to—the perspective and motivations behind Augustine’s argument.

The orienting information is extremely compressed. Abstracts are typically 250 words, so there is little room for non-essential information. In this case, I chose to spend some of these words on a quotation from Augustine and its explication. My intention was to simultaneously set the scene, provide the reader with a sample of my primary material, and summarise the situation. In abstracts without opening quotations, one might begin with a specific problem or question, and expand from there into the orienting information.

The thesis statement comes in the final paragraph of the abstract. Important here is not simply the argument (“as we shall see ...”) but its method (examination of key references with an eye to motivation) and its implications (the bilingual situation in C4th North Africa). These two aspects of the thesis statement are critical: the method demonstrates that if your abstract is selected then you will know how to pull it off; the implications indicate to the reader why anybody else should care.