

The common behavior of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language. [Wittgenstein 1953, sec. 206]

I am trying to suggest that the notion of "action in accord with a rule" itself depends on the social institutions in which action is located. One learns how to "follow rules" (when to say a rule has been followed), and consequently how to talk about behavior and associated rules (as in gossip), as part of learning how to act, how to "live as a social being."²²

It should now be clear that gossip is a powerful instrument for manipulating cultural rules. Gossip is a primary metacultural tool, an activity through which people examine and discuss the rules they espouse. Through gossip people not only interpret the behavior of others, but also discover other people's interpretations; they can thus learn cultural rules at a distance. Through dialogue, gossip allows rules to change: it redefines the conditions of application for rules, thus keeping them up to date. Finally, gossip exploits the interpretive potential of rules to advance particular (personal, factional) ends. One talks, in gossip, as if the rule of culture were absolute, whereas cultural rules actually legitimize disparate and often contradictory modes of action. By catching someone's ear in a gossip session, one can introduce a particular assessment of the facts and cloak it with the garb of absolute morality and unflinching truth.

**Cultural Competence:
Gossip and a Theory of
Ethnography**

Ilaj no^oox lo^oilajkotik che^oe.
"Our gossiping together has,
then, come to an end."

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Studying gossip, in Zinacantan and elsewhere, reflects what I take to be the obvious fact that one can gossip only in a culture one is competent in. What precise parameters of competence operate here can be seen, in part, from my earlier discussion of the knowledge, general and particular, of rules and of facts, that gossips draw upon. The converse proposition—that competence in a culture presupposes at least the ability to *understand* gossip, if not to gossip—is more contentious but certainly arguable. But if these propositions hold, they have important consequences for the theory of ethnography, at least in the special but widely accepted sense of "ethnography" understood as the characterization of "cultural competence." In these concluding arguments I focus on some ramifications of the notion that an adequate account of cultural competence must encompass the native's ability to gossip.

First let me make plain what I do *not* mean to argue. It may be the case, as a matter of practical method, that attention to gossip in a community will elucidate or bring to early attention phenomena otherwise relatively obscure or inaccessible. (I have in mind matters of belief, native theories of personality and motivation, etc.) But it will doubtless be equally true that much will elude the ethnographer who has eyes and ears only for gossip. Other sorts of research which totally ignore gossip as a natural forum for native speculation may well be equally probing. Nor do I claim that we can know nothing useful about a society until we have learned to gossip in it—a

fatuous and self-congratulatory position that would deny most social science. Certainly the fact that most any Zinacanteco can participate, admittedly with varying skill and involvement, in gossip is something that an ethnography of Zinacantan must be able to account for; the skills required of a gossip are part of a wider range of skills that ethnography seeks to describe, whether or not ethnographers master them. But again there are familiar levels of analysis that go well beyond the ordinary understandings a native has of his world—levels of analysis that attention to gossip will inform but not exhaust.

It may be thought that the gossip's skills are relatively arcane, subtle, and possibly irrelevant—certainly not central concerns of an anthropology fascinated by social structures and kinship, power and politics, symbols and subsistence. On the contrary, I hope to have demonstrated that gossips dwell on precisely the issues that concern them and their fellows most: the familiar world of neighbors and kin, dissected into relevant bits and marked more often as petty successes or mishaps than as, say, triumphs, tragedies, or revelations. Roger Keesing has suggested recently that “it may be precisely in exploring the phenomenological world of the familiar and immediate, the everyday and mundane, that we stand to gain the most crucial knowledge of how humans perceive, understand, and act” (1974a, p. 93). Moreover, looking at gossip demonstrates that this phenomenological world—familiar and immediate though it may be—generates a formidable and complex set of routines, by which the gossip disassembles, evaluates, and reconstitutes its parts. Indeed, the routines are of a nature that raises doubts about the “cultural competence” said to be (at least in part) the object of ethnographic description. The skills of the gossip, I suggest, provide us with a somewhat different set of ethnographic goals.

Early notions of what an ethnographic description might look like were based loosely on an analogy with linguistic grammars.¹ When Chomsky wrote of “discovering a mental reality underlying actual behavior” (1965, p. 4), he might have been describing the task of uncovering either Language (Saussure's *langue*) or Culture (as represented in Goodenough's writings [1957, p. 167; 1961, p. 522] or in Kay [1966, p. 106]). Two sorts of definitional idealizations are involved here: first a decision must be made about what classes of “actual behavior” are to be considered—a grammar is concerned, presumably, with “linguistic behavior” somehow delimited and ethnography with “cultural behavior” (which might, for example, exclude the ravings of a brain-damaged person but include, perhaps, the actions of a schizophrenic). And second, only certain features of the selected class of behavior must be singled out for analysis; the relationship between the behavior and the “reality” that “underlies” it must be made precise.² Just as an early

generative grammar could be thought of as a finite device for characterizing the (infinite) class of all and only grammatical sentences of a language, ethnographic descriptions were envisaged that would characterize the class of appropriate behavior in a culture—or, somewhat more ambitiously, would “succinctly state what one must know in order to generate culturally acceptable acts and utterances appropriate to a given socioecological context” (Frake 1962, p. 39). Bits of such ethnographies include descriptions of routines for greeting, for taking a drink, for choosing a place to live or dividing an inheritance, and so forth.

We can speak about the rules of a language and the abilities that derive from mastery of those rules (for example, the ability to detect ungrammatical utterances, to produce an endless string of grammatical ones, to disambiguate, paraphrase, and otherwise transform sentences) regardless of the fact that many people who have mastered the rules make slips of the tongue, speak elliptically, or differ from one another in some aspect of their speech. The distinction between competence and performance in linguistics has survived the battering of suggestions that irregularity and variation (even in the speech of monolinguals) must be accounted for in an adequate grammar: Lakoff 1965; Labov 1972. By analogy, we can talk about the bounds of appropriate behavior in wider behavioral domains without, it seems, worrying that many people at many times *mis*behave, falter, act improperly or outrageously, or simply baffle one another. Keesing argues that the notion of cultural competence can be usefully salvaged:

Culture, conceived as a system of competence shared in its broad design and deeper principles, and varying between individuals in its specifications, is then not all of what an individual knows and thinks and feels about his world. It is his *theory of what his fellows know, believe, and mean*, and his theory of the code being followed, the game being played, in the society into which he was born. It is this theory to which a native actor *refers* in interpreting the unfamiliar or the ambiguous, in interacting with strangers (or supernaturals), and in other settings peripheral to the familiarity of mundane everyday life space; and with which he creates the stage on which the games of life are played. We can account for the individual actor's perception of his culture as external (and as potentially constraining and frustrating); and we can account for the way individuals then can consciously use, manipulate, violate, and try to change what they conceive to be the rules of the game. But note that the actor's “theory” of his culture, like his theory of his language, may be in large measure unconscious. Actors follow rules of which they are not consciously aware, and assume a world to be “out there” that they have in fact created with culturally shaped and shaded patterns of mind. [1974a, p. 89]

Keesing urges that such a view of cultural competence must be coupled with a concern with wider “sociocultural performance.”

Difficulties remain even in this enlightened account. In the previous chapter I discussed some uncertainties in the notion of cultural “rule,” which plague any account which holds Culture to consist of codes, rules, and routines, with actual behavior considered only an approximation. It is furthermore unclear how much variation a system of shared competence can tolerate and what depth of behavioral complexity it must encode. The gossip’s knowledge of his cultural world stands in revealing counterpoint to this hypothetical cultural theory, in ways I shall examine in the remainder of this chapter.

How much of what a native knows belongs to his theory of the world? In what unfamiliar circumstances will he refer to the theory? How will he actually behave? Such questions arise directly when anthropologists try to catalog favorite facts. What, for example, is an appropriate residence choice? The answer is muddled by a seemingly endless string of contingencies. I live with my father after marriage; except that, if he is dead, I may live with my father’s brother; except that, if he is too young, I may live with my mother; except that, if she has moved back to her father’s house, I may move in with my wife’s family; and so on.

Ethnographers may truncate this list of “except” clauses at some arbitrary point—when, say, the informant runs out of breath, or when his imagination fails him—hoping that the resulting characterization (in the above case, say, a rule of patrilocal residence) will not run afoul of too many everyday contingencies. Practitioners of an expanded “ethnoscience” have tried to untangle from consciously formulable rules and lexically labeled analytic units—shorthand formulas that people may use more for describing than for justifying the ordinary, unproblematic flow of everyday events—“deeper” underlying units (e.g., bundles of separable rights and obligations, unitary “roles” which ordinarily but not always rest with single individuals; Keesing 1970) which surface, typically, in unusual or exceptional circumstances. Young men in a village may generally live with their fathers after marriage; but what will happen to Xun, who is an orphan? or to Mikel who has quarreled with his father and been disinherited? Presumably the “system of shared competence” will include mechanisms necessary to account for such unusual events, to accommodate extenuating circumstances.

Here I can distinguish two sorts of *accounting for*. It may happen that people are baffled about what to do; they may need to *figure out*, say, how to divide up bride-wealth when the normal recipients are not around. But it may also happen, I should think much more commonly, that exceptional circumstances have already generated a solution (re-

sulted in an outcome) by the time people have noticed that something is amiss; and in this sort of case people figure out not what to do, but how to interpret what has happened, how to understand or justify it, and usually how to feel about it. Since people rarely behave in ways that strike their neighbors as outlandish, there are presumably ways to figure out what to do, how to respond, what to think, when ordinary precepts fail. And, inversely, when people act surprisingly in what seem ordinary circumstances, there must be ways to figure out (or try to figure out) what is going wrong. I emphasize that all these are matters to *figure out*; it is a mistake to suppose that culture provides ready-made answers to all problems. There can be no infinite list of contingency rules.

Note that the ethnographer’s task can now be seen to resemble closely the gossip’s *métier*, with the crucial difference that the naive ethnographer, unlike the old-hand gossip, has trouble distinguishing the exceptional from the ordinary. Still, neither ethnographer nor gossip confronts “raw behavior”; instead, both interpret what they see and often label it in a way that presumes antecedents and suggests consequences and sequels. (“I can tell from the way he slammed the door that he fought with his wife and is now probably going out to get drunk.”) Geertz has suggested that the characteristic and proper job of the ethnographer is to *inscribe* and *interpret* microscopic bits of action:

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct of reading of”) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior. [1973, p. 10]

Gossips spend their time reading, in this sense, their neighbors’ behavior; they may do it well or badly, but ethnographers presumably have much to learn from them in either case.

Is the notion that culture is a shared, systematic theory of the world well defined? How much of the world does the theory of the world allow us to model? Keesing argues that the ideational system is not to be confused with the behavior “on the ground.”

A competence model of Trobriand culture would tell us what classes of things, people, and events there are and what kind of a world they are situated in, and it would give rules for how to garden, trace descent, exchange, and reside. But it would tell us nothing about residence patterns, descent groups, agricultural production, or the flow of exchange—or even how many Trobrianders there are and where they live. [1974a, p. 90]

Still, recent ethnoscientists (see Kay 1970) allege the possibility of reconciling the native's cultural competence with observed statistical facts. Consider the suggestion that a particular model of decision routines by which natives decide where to live on a particular island will, given the appropriate input (i.e., a census and other relevant demographic information), generate a pattern of residence that very nearly corresponds to the facts—a pattern that is, say, 90 percent correct in its “predictions” of the number of patrilocal, matrilocal, . . . residence choices. If the model is simple (i.e., not unreasonably elaborate or ad hoc), it may reasonably be supposed to isolate the important considerations that bear on any individual's choice of where to live.

But is this “prediction”?³ Since we already have the facts (the statistical facts) when we start, what is to prevent us—if we are ingenious enough—from building a model that is 100 percent correct: that generates every single residence case? What is to prevent a linguist from writing a “grammar” of twenty-five sentences of a language? It may be a good one or a bad one—how do we know? It would be a neater (and far more difficult) task to say something about residence patterns in, say, the same village in ten years, or in several villages on the basis of fieldwork in just one village. But in the latter case we should not be inclined to suppose that we could “model” every single residence choice.

The question remains, How much of what goes on in the world is part of people's theory of the world (knowledge of the world)? What limits, other than practical limits of size (we may compile a census of eight hundred people more easily than a census of three billion), are generated by the formal properties of our models?

I can clarify matters with a different example. Imagine that we set out to account for (write a “cultural grammar” of?) the behavior of motorists at traffic intersections—a favorite example for beginning anthropology students aimed at demonstrating the complexity of their own cultural knowledge. This can be made to look like a good ethnographic problem by listing some of the elements of the situation. We should presumably need to describe and analyze the “semantic structure” of sets of salient objects: traffic signs, distinguished by shape and function; equivalence classes (traffic signs, stoplights, traffic cops, etc.). What forms might a solution take?

1. We might state the traffic laws, which are presumably precise and finite (though possibly complex). We could then declare behavior in conflict with the laws not only “illegal” but “culturally inappropriate.” Few would find this solution adequate.

2. We might interview a few drivers and enumerate principles according to which people claim they act at intersections. (We might serve as our own informants.) Such principles might form a list, ordered in terms of importance or precedence. For example, consider the following list:

- a. Stop for a red light, stop sign, or yield sign;
- b. except, in the last case, when the intersection is empty.
- c. Go with a green light or an unmarked intersection;
- d. except, in the latter case, when the intersection has other traffic;
- e. except when there is a traffic policeman; in which case stop if he says stop, and go if he says go;
- f. except, in the latter case, when there is traffic in the intersection;
- g. and, except when the traffic light seems to be broken, after an appropriate wait, go when an opening appears;
- h. and except, when it is late at night with no one around, ignore all signs and go;
- i. and except, when it is an emergency (see rules for emergency—“on the way to a fire,” “having a baby,” etc.), in which case . . .

There is no clear criterion that tells us when to stop; we can embellish the situation indefinitely. It is no help to the ignorant ethnographer to say: “Well, the rules are quite simple, other things being equal . . .” or “. . . in the absence of special circumstances.”⁴

3. We might film traffic at a representative sample of intersections, hoping for a wide variety of contingencies. We could undoubtedly produce from the resulting “corpus” of traffic crossings a model to encompass whatever percentage of the cases we liked. H. L. A. Hart proposes a similar example to show that such a procedure, from an “austere” external point of view that encompasses only the raw observable facts, “cannot be in terms of rules at all” but only “in terms of observable regularities of conduct, predictions, probabilities, and signs” (1961, p. 87). And to describe how people operate at intersections in such terms is to “miss out a whole dimension of the social life of those” people—in particular, the fact that people judge behavior as right or wrong. Thus, we might want to exclude certain navigations of the intersection recorded on film as defective or inappropriate: we might discard confrontations that resulted in crashes, cases in which pedestrians were mowed down, close shaves, hit-and-runs, and so forth. Indeed, the entire enterprise might benefit from assembling a panel of experts to rule on individual cases—which would be to change the nature of the solution.

4. Following the insight of similar studies of pedestrians who manage to walk the sidewalks (usually) without jostling, treading on, or decking others,⁵ we might imagine that each motorist abides by a set of rules and conventions, and that motorists *interact* with one another, exchanging signals, adjusting to each other's communicated or intuited inten-

tions. Why else, indeed, do motorists employ conventionalized hand and directional light signals?

Voluntary coordination of action is achieved in which each of two parties has a conception of how matters ought to be handled between them, the two conceptions agree, each party believes this agreement exists, and each appreciates that this knowledge about agreement is possessed by the other. [Goffman 1971, p. 39]

Thus the "rules" which delimit how one navigates the sidewalk or the intersection are not merely elaborated for contingencies; more than that, they provide for interaction and intercommunication between this rule follower and other individuals, also conceived as rule followers. And, as each of us knows, the presumption that others whom we meet at intersections are following the same rules occasionally fails, and we screech to a halt, swerve and swear, or crack up—all fates that await us in other social situations as well.

Notice, here, that the notion of interacting sets of actors, each bearing some (overlapping, one hopes) segments of the system of rules and understandings that are supposed to "underlie" behavior—rules some of which themselves relate to the interaction between actors—severely tests the formal devices which ethnographers have developed to codify "cultural grammars." A linear ordering of routines which make binary (or, perhaps, *n*-ary) choices will hardly do justice to this admittedly trivial traffic situation. And as we add to the wrinkles and complications, we may justly start to wonder (along with the hapless motorist) when patterned decision-making comes to an end and (not necessarily random) temporizing begins.

Something seems to crumble in the notion of the native actor's competence.

A reasonably good driver decides in a flash what to do as he approaches an intersection; and he may change his mind several times equally quickly. Even a swift computer with an elegant program devised to simulate the situation (or more ambitiously, designed to pilot a remote automobile equipped with sensors that simulate the driver's perceptions)⁶ would seem dull-witted by comparison. And, as life goes, this is a trivial problem. The object of the rules is to get a driver through the intersection; his best strategy is to do it as quickly as possible, avoiding a confrontation with the law or with someone else's car. There is room for alternative modes of action; some drivers stick to the letter of the law. (Of course we know from the frenzied anger such drivers inspire in us that they are deviant.) But we are disinclined to call what happens "compromise between alternatives." There is no compromise between a red light and a policeman waving you on; or between a green

light, a car honking behind you, and a ten-ton truck running the light in the other direction.

The problem is not that we cannot explain every contingency, but rather that we do not know what limits to set. How much of a native actor's ability to make decisions belongs in ethnography, is part of cultural competence?

B. J. Diggs suggests that certain rules, like these traffic laws, have a *point*—they are designed to lead to a certain instrumental goal—and thus there need be no endless list of contingency rules.

No statement of a rule includes reference to all conditions pertinent to its application; one would not wish to so encumber it, even if every contingency could be foreseen. This implies that every rule follower is expected to know "what he is doing" in a sense larger than "following the rules"; and if the rules are instrumental he is often expected to know the goal to which his rule-directed action supposedly contributes—to know "what he is doing" in this sense. Not always, to be sure, but often he could not make a sound judgment of when and how to apply the rule without this knowledge. [1964, p. 36]

How much, then, of this calculus of *points* and *goals*, of knowing what one is doing (and, in a larger sense, *what there is to do*) is part of the shared theory of the world that is the object of ethnographic description? And how do we as ethnographers characterize these goals?

Here again the gossip is in an advantageous position. It is precisely by formulating an account of what the protagonists of a gossip story "are doing" that the gossip puts himself in a position to pronounce on the rules involved, the degree to which they have been satisfied or disregarded, and the sense or senselessness of the outcome. This is, once more, a matter of (motivated and justifiable) interpretation, of Geertz's "thick description"; and again the ethnographer can learn from the gossip.

Let me start again from the beginning, to reconsider what an individual, a Zinacanteco, for example, "knows about his world"—what skills he or she must possess. What belongs in an ethnography? A Zinacanteco first must be able to accomplish certain tasks. A man must know how to hoe corn, how to accept a drink, how to enter a house politely. A woman must master tortilla-making techniques; she must know how to tie up her hair and her skirt. Within the Zinacanteco universe it makes little sense to talk about rules governing these skills. Departures from standard behavior no longer constitute behavior at all. Nonnormal action conveys no messages (except the ultimate message: "I am no longer a Zinacanteco [or a human being]"). Only when there

are alternatives can behaving a certain way have meaning. These basic skills are unremarkable⁷ and are certainly unlikely to be remarked upon in gossip. (Compulsive ethnographers will, of course, record skirt-tying and hoe-holding techniques to demonstrate the thoroughness of their observations.)

Such invariant skills range into more complex abilities as one enters realms of activity where there are principled alternatives. Zinacantecos choose between goals; they know what modes of action are appropriate to what ends (or are likely or unlikely to achieve them). They have mastered decision schemes and strategies which enable them to pursue their purposes. They have learned to produce coherent and largely unsurprising behavior in the face of infinitely varied circumstances. But no one's plans succeed without a hitch. Zinacantecos also know how to gossip; and gossip arises precisely when people do apparently surprising things; when order gives way to confusion and incoherence. Gossips reconcile aberrant action with the current standard.

So far my argument can be taken to suggest an extension of the notion of "cultural grammar" which has a clear parallel in linguistics. George Lakoff (1965) argues that an adequate grammar must generate certain ungrammatical (or nearly grammatical) sentences and mark them as violations (show how they are violations). Native speakers have definite intuitions about sentences which are not fully grammatical; they can often interpret them, find them ambiguous, relate them to other sentences, transform them, and so on. Utterances whose grammar is questionable may still provide evidence useful to a syntactician. An adequate cultural grammar must account for (allow interpretations of?) certain sorts of deviant behavior. Not everything everyone does is appropriate, unsurprising, predictable, normal, or acceptable. But deviance does not (always) mark the breakdown of the cultural mechanism or variations in cultural competence (ideocults?). Natives have ways of coming to understand or simply countering mistakes, accidents, and perversity. Just as fluent speakers interpret many ungrammatical sentences in standard ways, I claim that gossips typically apply rules of culture to action outside the rules.

Still, cultural grammars patterned after grammars of language are mechanisms with impoverished capabilities even with respect to their own limited goals. We need to build into such grammars what seems a constantly increasing complexity: inventories of objects, roles, situations, and "scenes" (units and contexts); rankings of priorities, hierarchies, conflicting paths to various ends (ordering of rules); an appreciation for the communicative power of acts (including speech acts), the ability to anticipate action from prior cues (the semantics of behavior), and so on. Moreover, we require a cultural grammar with the capacity for

change. The units of the code change: clothing styles change; positions in ritual hierarchies are born and die; occupations, objects, animals, bodies of knowledge come and go. So, too, do the rules change: laws have periods of ascendancy, then fall into disuse; etiquette reforms itself; times change, as every old native can tell you. There is no mechanical problem here: cyberneticians build machines that modify themselves. But our usual cultural grammars are static—or, more exactly, the fragments we extract of such grammars are deeply rooted in the data of one moment.

The prospects for developing even a descriptive mechanism powerful enough to capture this widened cultural competence seem bleak. I suggest, instead, that we can appreciate the nature of this mechanism by looking at gossip. Even without routines for predicting (or anticipating) all behavior, we can satisfy ourselves with the ability to appreciate the import of behavior we see (or are likely to see). The capacity to assess others' actions is essentially the capacity to participate in gossip: I suggest that we aim at untangling a culture's rules at least until we have learned to manipulate them well enough to gossip.⁸ (This is at least a necessary condition to having mastered a culture.) What constitutes the ability to gossip?

The most striking fact about this ability (as part of overall cultural competence) is this: it is difficult to distinguish an "ideational" component, which involves knowledge of the general rules of the culture, from knowledge of a wide set of contingencies which are in no sense common to a cultural tradition. We ordinarily have thought of one's cultural competence as composed of codes: conceptual schemata for, say, plants and animals, kinship systems, political structures, and so on. The conceptual schemata have, we assume, an independent existence prior to any particular configuration of animals, any set of actual kin, any actual political operation. (The fact that a man is an only child does not, that is, affect his understanding of words for siblings, or of sibling relationships. Or does it?) But in gossip the nonparticular is irrelevant before the actual; the contingencies determine the general principles—for they are all there is. In gossip, the world becomes more than ideal schemata and codes; it rests on the Who's Who, much expanded, on history, on reputations, on idiosyncrasies, on exceptions and accidents. Gossip exalts the particular. Much of an actor's cultural competence rests on a vast knowledge of contingent fact, raw unconnected trivia—in addition to the understanding of taxonomies and lexical subsystems which we have always suspected to be there.⁹ Being able to gossip is part of being a Zinacanteco; thus knowing those particular random facts about other people that render gossip meaningful and interesting is necessary to being a successful Zinacanteco.

Watching people operate on their cultural rules through gossip also shows us the folly of our belief that culture *provides* sets of ideal rules which apply to particular configurations of people, places, things, and events. The contingencies of life themselves restructure the rules, even change them over time. Thus, in gossip people may mouth the same words, may invoke the same rule, and derive different conclusions. They may talk about the same facts, espouse the same standards, and still contradict one another. Here is the source for doubt about modeling the cultural rules so as to predict those occasional troublesome marriages that don't fit the marriage rule, residence choices that violate the accepted norm. A skilled native rationalizer could doubtless reconcile almost any aberration with some rules; and gossip about such aberrations might cut both ways—some will say “freakish and immoral,” others “just what one would expect.” It is in gossip sessions that people most often confront rules directly; at such times the rules have no independence—one's whole understanding of the cultural code depends on the particular setting, on the configuration of past experiences and knowledge, which is suddenly relevant to the application of rules and standards to the facts in question.

We must not be misled by the fact that people typically state cultural rules baldly and absolutely. Informants could certainly state the traffic rules governing intersections. We know—as competent drivers—that the rules are subject to contingencies, and that we apply them (as I suggested before) other things being equal. Gossip, in looking at past sequences of actual behavior, leads participants precisely to the point where unnecessary details have been shorn. Other things *are* equal: one can apply the rules with an appearance of objectivity and absoluteness. The insignificant variations of fact have been masked by gossip's rhetoric. Gossip continually works toward a verbal representation of the facts amenable to the application of rules, to evaluation, and to mental filing for future reference.

I propose that the native's ability to act appropriately is—though epistemologically on a different level—essentially equivalent to the gossip's ability to understand his action.¹⁰ At least, for purposes of our ethnographic descriptions, we may treat rules as operating after the fact to explain behavior. We have not really learned the rules of a culture until we know how to manipulate them in gossip. Moreover, we are still novices at a culture until we can listen to its gossip with an understanding ear. Finally, I claim that when we crack the gossip that pervades social life we see the cultural tradition in its most dynamic form as it applies itself to the kinds of behavior most interesting to natives. We see people actively speculating about the nature of their neighbors, their lives, and, in short, their world.

Following a suggestion of Abrahams (1970), it appears useful to locate gossip within a native classification of verbal behavior, as a particular type of performance, as a speech genre, at least as a lexically labeled behavioral domain. Such a procedure would allow the analyst to state the criterial attributes of what he is going to call “gossip,” and to relate these attributes to the criterial attributes of “gossip” in his analytical language (in this case, social science English). Rather than employing ordinary “ethnoscience” procedures to produce a taxonomy of “verbal behavior,” in chapter 3 I elected to present evidence for a Zinacanteco theory of the properties of certain sorts of conversation which I claim resemble gossip. This choice reflects my opinion that artificially elicited taxonomies (particularly taxonomies of *nouns*) tell us little about the attributes of actually occurring behavior, and not much more about how people manipulate words (of various syntactic shapes) to “order their experience.”

Fortunately, various anthropologists have provided taxonomies of Tzotzil words for speech, and it will be illuminating to try to discover a domain of “gossip” within these taxonomies.

Victoria Bricker (1974) reports that standard eliciting techniques with various informants in Zinacantan produced apparently divergent taxonomies of *lo'bil* (“speech”). These Bricker was able to reconcile by inviting informants to elaborate on what seemed incomplete responses and to clarify responses which seemed to confound relations of contrast and inclusion.¹ The resulting “suggested composite speech taxonomy” (1974, p. 80) is presented in figure 10. The position of a domain resembling that of English “gossip”