

that someone /sta cukel/ ('went to jail'); frequent jailing is a sure sign of evil propensities.

(42) /7ayem ta cukel hayib bwelga xci7uk tah xryoxe/ (W 17)
'He's been to jail who knows how many times with his (talking) saint.'

(43) /ko7olko7ol sk'upinink pus/
'They have equal desire for the sweatbath (the jail).'

So far I have examined some Tzotzil words which cluster around a domain of verbal behavior in Zinacantan not unlike gossip. No single word is equivalent to 'gossip.' Instead, in different contexts, the words in question sometimes contrast and sometimes complement one another. For example, /-lo7ilta/ ('tell stories on...') and /-laban/ ('mock...') both contain elements of the English 'gossip about ...'; yet the words are neither synonyms nor antonyms. When the two words occur together in a couplet, the meaning of /-lo7ilta/ stretches to include an element of mocking. Yet, to describe the shrewish public ridiculing of a man by his wife, the choice of /-laban/ ('She wanted the world to know how awful he was; that she wanted nothing more to do with him. So she mocked and ridiculed his behavior.')

over /-lo7ilta/ (She let everyone in on his transgressions.) is significant.

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I do not pretend in this thesis to offer any semblance of semantic analysis of the various stems I present. I doubt that available descriptive mechanisms can account for the ordinary usage of, say, words relating to verbal behavior --- (see next page for continuation of footnote)

Gossip cannot be distinguished from other speech on stylistic grounds. Formal speech differs from ordinary speech in taking the form of pairs of lines with parallel structure and different end couplets. The formal genre occurs in songs, in prayer, in scolding, in formal denunciation and praise (which may transfer information of interest to gossips); but a domain of gossip is not delimitable by such formal criteria.

Here again is my original problem: on what grounds can I claim that the clustering of Tzotzil words around certain kinds of verbal behavior represents the existence of a coherent domain of gossiping behavior? The words refer sometimes to gossip-like phenomena, and at other times to quite different sorts of talk and behavior. In the remainder of this chapter I shall present evidence for the existence of a native Zinacanteco theory about reputation and the transfer of information through gossip-like conversation. 19

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least of all mechanisms depending on referential meaning and hierarchical structure. The nature of a mechanism which can capture the complexity of sense systems remains a compelling mystery to me.

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It has been suggested to me that if I want to claim that there are 'rules' which govern so-called 'gossip-like behavior' then there must be rules which enable Zinacantecos, in turn, to decide whether particular talk is gossip. How, asks this critic, can there be rules for gossiping if we don't know what gossiping is? The criticism conceals a mistaken notion (see next page for continuation of footnote)

Gluckman (1963) remarks that belonging to a group entails knowing the gossip of a group, knowing about other people (and their ancestors). He writes that in Zululand

"...I found myself excluded from groups because I did not know enough gossip. Gradually I learnt the gossip; but I never acquired enough certainty in knowing when and, more importantly, when not to use it, ever to become a member of Zulu society." (p. 309)

My work in the field aimed explicitly at overcoming at least in part the lack of knowledge which excluded me from Zinacanteco society. When I first arrived in Zinacantan gossip was meaningless to me not because I did not know enough about the people involved, but because I didn't know them at all. Through such devices as the Who's Who (cf. Chapter 4) I began to recognize names and associate them with reputations; until eventually I could respond appropriately to new revelations, or ask informed questions, or even offer tidbits of gossip

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of how rules govern behavior at all --- there is a certain sense in which a rule applies to a given situation only by virtue of the fact that we decide to apply it (see Chapter 7). But, surely, the claim that only a well-defined activity can have its own rules is mistaken. There are rules of conversation ('We don't tell lies to our friends. We tell the whole truth.') which don't govern all conversations; there are rules of gossip ('We don't tell stories about people to their faces') which conflict with other precepts ('You shouldn't talk about someone behind his back'), and none of which depend on deciding first whether a given situation is or is not gossip or 'conversation with a friend', etc. Similarly, rules of etiquette as much define a situation as they are brought into play by one. In any case, the fact that I can claim certain rules for telling stories about one's neighbors in Zinacantan does not presume that there is a labelled domain of gossip in Tzotzil, which there isn't.

myself. Zinacantecos found my acquired expertise amusing, but my friends began to talk to me in a new way. They came to expect me to know the background of their gossip; and they showed a new eagerness to share news and comment with me.

The difference between the inside and the outside was demonstrated one afternoon when a notorious slattern approached my wife at the waterhole and asked a favor. In all innocence, my wife agreed; she was bewildered by the giggles of our comadre who observed the exchange. When the women returned to the house, my comadre --- knowing that I knew the girl's reputation--- could not restrain herself from rushing up to tell me what had happened giggling behind her hand; she knew that I knew who the girl was and that my wife didn't.

Much of what a Zinacanteco knows about his fellows has practical value; it is what Hotchkiss (1962:1) calls "instrumental knowledge".

"This neutral, instrumental knowledge about others is obtained most often in contexts which are not neutral, but rather in those affectively charged conversations with others commonly known as gossip. Instrumental knowledge about a person is conveyed along with evaluations of him, and new bits of information are accumulations upon a body of knowledge, a dossier, if you will, that an individual possesses for each of his fellows." (Pp. 1-2)

In Zinacantan such instrumental knowledge typically includes information about what men are good for loans and how much interest they charge, if any; we have already seen this

explicit subject in gossip. Similarly, it is important to know which men are curers and which are powerful. Because of the constant danger of witchcraft, a Zinacanteco must know which men can reverse witchcraft and which are capable of sending sickness in the first place.

Not all information carried by gossip (or, as Gluckman might urge, presupposed by gossip) is of this instrumental sort. Not all such information is fact. Zinacantecos are aware of the questions surrounding the nature of the information conveyed in gossip. What I have called their 'native theory of gossip' concerns: (a) the separation of public from private (privileged) information; (b) the question of truth versus hearsay; and (c) the general ethics of telling tales on people.

Zinacantecos are aware that the facts of court cases brought to the town hall become public knowledge, and that others are likely to talk about one's misfortunes if they result in public hearings. People draw an explicit parallel between the town hall and other modern mechanisms for disseminating information (with which Zinacantecos are essentially unfamiliar: there are no newspapers, no radio broadcasts of relevance.)²⁰

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Few people are literate. Radios are little more than articles for prestige: Zinacantecos fluent in Spanish listen mostly to the radio announcements of the correct time, by which they can set their fancy wristwatches.

Cep remembered hearing that a man under discussion had been up to some mischief. No one could remember the details.

"Maybe it never became public knowledge; perhaps it was a secret affair." (E 202)

"Well, if the agente settled the matter in his house no one would have heard about it."

"Yes, when a story comes out at the town hall, then a newspaper report goes out to every part of the country."

"It comes to every streetcorner; we hear about it on the radio....(ha ha ha)."

"But when it doesn't come out (at the townhall), then nothing shows up on the radio; no newspaper is published. (Ha ha ha)."

"Is it true that the old lady divorced old Marvel?" (W 74)

"Yes; she says she woke up each morning with a wet skirt. The old man would piss on himself at night. Just like a child..."

"At night? Wasn't that just when he was drunk?"

"No, no, according to her he didn't have to be drunk. Even when he was sober. 'What a rank odor his urine has! Not like a child's,' she would say."

"That's right. The old woman even said such things right out at the town hall!"

Zinacantecos realize that children are often the carriers of gossip; there is an attempt to exploit children's apparent harmlessness to find out about one's neighbors. Hotchkiss (1962) reports that in the ladino town of Teopisca children have access to otherwise unavailable information by virtue of being "non-persons."

"A less obvious function of the child as errand runner ... is that found in his role of 'informer', or more politely, 'intelligence operative'..." (p. 5)

A similar situation obtains in Zinacantan; children are frequently cited as the first ones to report some juicy bit of gossip. A newcomer to Zinacantan finds the inquisitive, touchy children the most visible and ubiquitous people in the municipio, even as he tries hard to ignore them. In the story of Chapter 1, little children first reported that the lewd old man was fiddling with his own daughter. The story is not unique.

A man was divorced for embracing the daughter of a neighbor during a curing ceremony. (W 29)

"Well, listen, while they were in the midst of preparing the candles, old Maryan went outside. The old fucker was drunk, you see. It was children who saw it all, according to what was said at the cabildo. They were out embracing each other behind the house --- old Maryan and Mat's daughter. That's what came out later at the town hall."

Similarly, one of my friends in Zinacantan was estranged from his brother-in-law because the latter's son had made slanderous remarks at a public hearing. My friend was angered, even though the boy was only five years old.

In conversation Zinacantecos reveal that other factors limit the availability of public information suitable for gossip. Geographical boundaries limit certain transfers of information; and some people, despite their evil desires and many transgressions, may be able to cover their tracks.

"But that man has always been a big woman-grabber."

(W 101)

"I know. He had such an experience when his brother was /martomorey/..."

"His older brother."

"He was simply beaten up terribly; it was all due to his woman grabbing. But I don't know the whole story..."

"That's true, we don't know who the woman was...."

"Now that you mention it, I think it was one of his brother's helpers, there together with him..."

"Ah, but if it happened over in /Hitekllum/ that is why it never became public knowledge here."

"Right, the affair never came out. It happened in /Hitekllum/, and that's why we didn't hear anything about it."

"The man is a ritual advisor today." (W 111)

"He's a holy elder now, but he gave injections. (Ha ha ha)."

"He made a holy child under the pine trees. (Ha ha ha)."

"But that's about all I know about him."

"That man has had lots of foolishness; there are probably other things like this that he's done, or maybe there were other times (when he got girls pregnant) that never came to light.

"It's not as if he goes around talking about such things."

"No. It's just that in this case we all heard about it."

"If there were other times, it was all secret..."

I have shown that the contrast between /lo7il/ ('hearsay') and /yec/ ('true') or /melel/ ('true'), as well as the contrast between a plain declarative sentence and a sentence containing the particle /la/ ('quotative evidence'), can draw attention to the unverified quality of a story or statement. Zinacantecos believe, on the one hand, that gossip must contain a grain of truth; whereas they know from direct experience that some gossip is unreliable. The opinion that all officeholders are subject to malicious gossip ex officio appears above. The tension between the 'hearsay' and 'whole truth' positions is illustrated in the following excerpts.

"The man is a curer, but he also knows how to send sickness. He talks to the Earth Lord; he transforms himself into a (supernatural) goat." (W 94)

"Well, but has anyone actually seen him doing that, or is it just gossip?"

"He must certainly have been seen, otherwise why would he be reputed to do it?"

"Whoever says he does it must have seen him."

"When our faces aren't seen when we do what we do, then we aren't gossiped about."

"Listen, old lady Xunka⁷ is the most quarrelsome old lady there is." (A 32)

"She's always taken to the town hall; and it's all the fault of her mouth, of her gossip. If she hears any story she immediately goes to tell other people about it."

"But she doesn't just tell the story the way she heard it. She always thinks up new things to add. She has gossiped about lots of her companions, but never the truth. That's why she got into such trouble --- all because of the stories she told."

Zinacantecos present their versions of gossip as true; but they rarely hesitate to discredit conflicting accounts.

Gossip is often especially useful to the ethnographer as it sheds light on the exotic beliefs of the natives. Stories about people who transform themselves into supernatural creatures or who witch their relatives make plain the different constraints in Zinacantan which allow people

to believe 'apparently unlikely' stories. In a tradition which accepts witchcraft as a prime source of disease, gossip about an alleged witch is at least plausible; moreover, scepticism about such gossip can take two forms: (i) there is no witchcraft; (ii) the person in question is an unlikely witch. An elaborate instance of witchcraft gossip involves a man who was estranged from his elder brother and father.

Several stories relate to their quarrel:

(a) The younger brother, Yermo, was unwilling to obey his father's wishes about how to farm and work. Thus he moved out, violating the ordinary rule that the youngest son stay with his father, while the older sons move out to set up their own households.

(a') The father, old Manvel, was a domestic tyrant who gave his sons very little land to work independently, and who commandeered most of the household resources. Smarting under the yoke of his father's will, Yermo moved out.

(b) Yermo treats his father badly, no longer accords him the respect that he deserves. He also avoids and speaks angrily to his older brother Antun, even though Antun lent him money and support during a recent religious office. He is just waiting for his father to die so that he can dispute the land division his father made between his children.

(b') Old Manvel, being displeased with his youngest son, has systematically cheated his son out of his inheritance, giving him only inferior tracts. He has effectively disowned Yermo.

(c) Yermo got involved with some disreputable men in the ownership of a corn mill. He placed the mill on

a corner of his land where it polluted one of his father's water holes and caused people to trod and throw trash on his brother's cornfield.

(c') Antun has tried to cause official trouble for his brother Yermo by claiming before civil authorities that the land on which Yermo put his mill was not his to use. The claim is false, and was only made to get Yermo jailed.

(d') Yermo's eldest daughter --- almost of marriageable age --- contracted a disease and, after a long illness, died. The curer discovered that the disease was due to witchcraft activity by old Manvel himself, a well-known curer. Yermo feels that his father caused his daughter's death as part of a general campaign of evildoing against his youngest son.

(d) Yermo's daughter died of measles, during an epidemic which also brought two of Antun's children close to death. Antun even contributed money towards the burial expenses of Yermo's daughter. The fault for this ill-feeling rests with the curer who slandered old Manvel; but Yermo should never have believed the curer's diagnosis --- or should, at least, have confronted his father directly with the charges.

I have heard all these stories in different conversations. Note that story (d) may take two forms: some say that old Manvel was an unlikely person to witch his own granddaughter, while others claim that witchcraft itself is suspect. Two compadres of mine have, over time, changed their alliances with the two sides of this family, and their willingness to repeat different versions of these stories has accordingly changed. The first was nephew of Yermo's wife who was for a time planning to move onto land Yermo was to provide. At first he willingly told all of the stories above marked with a prime; he was eager to talk about old Manvel's illtemperedness and Antun's propensity for scolding. Later,

after fighting with his mother and consequently with her sister (Yermo's wife), this man switched to story (d) to account for the fact that the two sides of the family don't get along. My other compadre is, at least in conversations with anthropologists, a sceptic with respect to witchcraft. He first was closely allied with Antun; when I asked him about the dispute between Antun and Yermo he told me story (d), emphasizing his conviction that suspected witchcraft was never sufficient grounds for such a dispute. More recently, this compadre has cooperated strongly with Yermo on a land deal, and his version of the family conflict in question has changed predictably. He now suggests that stories (b') and (c') are most likely to explain the schism, and the witchcraft story has totally dropped from view. (We return to these questions in Chapter 6.)

Zinacantecos' awareness that gossip is rarely "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" leads to the last element of 'native theory' about gossip that I shall consider. There is a general ambivalence about gossip: it is a powerful and hence dangerous tool. In a Goffmanesque sense, an individual can use gossip to control others: by managing the impressions his listeners have of himself and of the person about whom he gossips. At the same time, he fears control by others who gossip about him. But there is no Sicilian 'law of silence' in Zinacantan; Zinacanteco men seem to have

a genuine passion for gossip --- so long as there is no possibility of retaliation. In recorded gossip sessions at my house, informants were often reticent and obviously nervous until someone jokingly said: "You know, of course, that Xun here is not going to play these tapes at the town hall, that he just uses them here for his work." Such an assurance amazingly allowed most men to shed their reservations and join in with gusto.

The deep seated ambivalence over the ethics of gossip is a recurrent theme in gossip itself. Zinacantecos emphasize the potential for danger in telling stories, true or not; they know that bad feelings may follow well-intentioned disclosures.

A boy saw his older brother's fiancée in a compromising position under a bridge with another man. (N 4)

"He saw them embracing each other near the waterhole. He couldn't see who the boy was, but he recognized his brother's sweetheart. But evidently he went to tell his brother.

"'/Kere/, who knows if you're telling the truth. I don't believe it,' said the older brother to his younger brother.

"'Well, see. You don't want to be told. I guess you'll be satisfied if you get a bit of his cast off leavings,'

Cep told his older brother.

"But the older brother just wouldn't believe; neither would the parents. '/Kere/, don't break your brother's heart with your babbling,' said the old man and his wife.

"'See, you just won't listen,' said Cep."

Gossip travels its own paths with sometimes disconcerting swiftness. The bad feelings that arise must often be settled by formal procedures: giving liquor, formally asking pardon, accepting the mediation of an elder.

"Didn't she quarrel with Cep the Musician during her husband's cargo?" (E 340, E 356)

"Yes, she would gossip about him. 'What a disgusting way that musician has! He has cut off lots of my apples and peaches. He has taken ears of corn to eat without asking.' That's what she would say. And she complained that he would say lowd things even when women could hear. She said, 'that old twisted-leg man; he can't restrain his tongue!'

"But the musician's wife heard what had been said. The musician had been called a thief, but he denied it. 'I just cut some peaches to eat; I just had the desire to eat a few.' He offered to pay for them, but the woman would take no payment. Finally they settled the affair over a bottle."

"But Cep must have been embarrassed; for he was maligned as a thief."

Zinacantecos also understand that people spread damaging gossip for different kinds of reasons. Factional disputes engender long exchanges of gossip and slander as each side tries to revenge itself on the other through ever more serious accusations. (Cf. Rush (1971)) Realignments within factional disputes may cause one-time allies to turn informer. Tzotzil uses the root /pak/ ('fold') to mean 'reciprocate': as when a person slandered in turn slanders his opponent; or when a jailed man devises a pretext to jail his jailer.

A famous attempt to get wealth in exchange for selling souls to the Earth Lord was revealed through treacherous gossip.

"The way it was revealed was through the gossip of Cep; he was the one who told all." (W 154)

"I didn't know which one of them told..."

"But didn't Cep tell that Antun from /Caynatik/?"

"...That's right. First Cep had friendly conversations with Antun. They were good friends..."

"...Cep probably told him that this was what they had done, this was where they had been..."

"...Maybe Antun was thinking of going along with them."

"Anyway, at first they were friendly. But later they quarrelled. After that, old Antun came to /Nabencauk/ and told what he had heard. That's how the story came out."

"They fought over a plan they had together; that's what Antun said. 'We had borrowed money from a bank, but when it came time, Cep gave up. He couldn't pay back his debt. I had to pay it off for him.' After Cep backed out of the bank plan, Antun said to himself, '/Putu/, I guess I'll just tell all about their (witchcraft) plans. Let the rest of the people decide what to do. You can't tell me that they will get away with it.' That's how the whole affair was revealed."

"There is a story about the old man's son Cep, too, when he divorced his wife." (0 25)

"Ah, so he divorced her."

"Yes, she didn't stay married to him long, because she claimed Cep was too ill-tempered. She couldn't bear being scolded all the time and having no corn to eat. Also, she didn't want her husband to slander her; when she heard what he said about her she started to gossip about him, too."

"So the husband first slandered his wife?"

"Yes, he would say why he divorced her. He told his friends that she was no good; she didn't want to sleep with him. She wouldn't let him embrace her. 'I don't want to have you in my bed; I'm too little and you can't yet enter me,' she would say even though the man wanted her. The man

got angry; he beat her and wanted his bride payments returned.

"But when the girl heard that she had been gossiped about, she started talking herself. Whereas the man said that she wouldn't sleep with him, the woman claimed that the man would just pester her for nothing. He was useless; he would just wake her up and then do nothing. He wouldn't let his wife sleep, but would just fidget in the bed. That's what the woman said at the town hall. That is how everyone knows that Cep can't get it up, that he is impotent."

I suggest that the examples of native speculation I have presented show that Zinacantecos are aware of a domain of behavior similar to that we call 'gossip.' Despite the unhappy lexical fact that no Tzotzil word glosses cleanly as 'gossip', and despite the unfortunate situation that prevents us from uniformly eliciting gossip with a single question or frame, Zinacantecos in fact seem to treat certain sorts of talk and conversation as a coherent body of phenomena. Gossip in Zinacantan includes more, perhaps, than gossip elsewhere: it is conversation which bears on reputation; it is scandal and slander as well as ridicule; it can be friendly and amused, but also hostile and serious. The sort of domain it is can, I claim, be judged from the sort of thing Zinacantecos have to say about gossiping in the examples above.

I began this chapter by suggesting that all conversation about people and their alleged actions is fair game for a study of gossip. (Zinacantecos do, in fact, follow our convention of not gossiping about another to his face; though they may mock him in his presence.) I presumed the possible subjects of such conversation to be limited in range (and see Chapter 5). Moreover, native theory on the matter further constrained the sort of conversation I was able to elicit --- Zinacantecos have, as we have seen, their own ideas about what it means to tell interesting stories about people.