

Chapter 8

Cultural Competence; Gossip and a Theory of Ethnography

Hna7be smelol skotol. (I know the truth about all of it.)

In the course of my research I became convinced that studying gossip had given me more insight into Zinacantan than another sort of study could have. This conviction reflects what I take to be the obvious fact that one can only gossip in a culture one is competent in, and the more contentious proposition that competence in a culture presupposes at least the ability to understand gossip, if not the ability to gossip. These propositions suggest certain consequences for the theory of ethnography. As a matter of practical method, one might suppose that attention to the gossip in a community can elucidate certain ethnographic phenomena otherwise inaccessible (or barely accessible). In Zinacantan, I believe that gossip does lead directly to native theories of personality and motivation, and to large bodies of belief which are not available to ordinary ethnographic field techniques. In this final chapter, though, I concentrate on the notion that an adequate ethnography (an adequate account of cultural competence) must encompass the native's ability to gossip or to understand gossip.¹

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I do not claim that some areas of culture are accessible only through gossip --- other kinds of research may be equally probing, even if they fail to utilize gossip as a naturally occurring source for native speculation. Nor do I claim that we can know nothing useful about a culture until we have learned to gossip in it. But the fact that any native can (see next page for continuation of footnote)

Early notions of what an ethnographic description must look like were based loosely on an analogy with linguistic grammars. When Chomsky (1965:4) speaks of "discovering a mental reality underlying actual behavior" he could be describing the task of uncovering either Language (Saussure's langue) or Culture (as represented in Goodenough (1957:167; 1961:522), or Kay (1966:106).) Just as grammar is concerned with characterizing (by means of a finite generative device, i.e., syntax) the class of all and only grammatical utterances in a language --- thereby giving an operational definition of 'grammatical in language L' --- ethnographic descriptions were designed to characterize the class of appropriate behavior in a culture. Bits of such an ethnography might include routines for greeting, for taking a drink, for choosing a place to live or dividing an inheritance, or taxonomies of kin (categories of kin) or objects, and so on.

The notion of 'cultural grammar' relies heavily on the distinction between competence and performance --- a distinction well-argued in linguistics. We can talk about the rules of a language, and the abilities of a speaker which derive from mastery of these rules (e.g., the ability to detect ungrammatical sentences, to produce an endless list of grammatical ones, to disambiguate, to transform, and otherwise to manipulate sentences), as distinct from the vagaries of

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participate in gossip is something that an ethnography must be able to account for; the skills required of a gossip are part of the wider range of skills that ethnography seeks to describe, whether or not ethnographers master them.

actual speech. The argument for cultural competence is similar. We can talk about the bounds on appropriate behavior --- what people say (think) they are supposed to do; how they determine the appropriateness of other people's action --- without worrying if many people at many times misbehave, falter, act improperly or outrageously. The Culture consists of the codes, rules and routines; what people actually do is only an approximation.

What 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.

Ethnographic description seemingly must move beyond the facile cultural rules mouthed by informants --- which may, indeed, run afoul of everyday contingencies, as would a rule of patrilocal residence in the above example. Practitioners of an expanded 'ethnoscience' try to penetrate beyond conscious rules and labelled analytic units. Keesing (1970) (after Goodenough (1965)) probes the underlying structure of role and status concepts (represented at the surface by simple labels); he finds that he can explain Kwaio behavior only by reference to complexes of rights and obligations which ordinarily but not always rest with single individuals.

Analytically, the individual labelled 'father' occupies a number of distinct roles which in unusual circumstances may be spread among several people. Appropriate behavior in these circumstances is determined only after the smallest elements have been untangled: who is acting as 'head-of-household', who is 'acting guardian', and who is 'father-of-the-bride?' An ethnography includes analytic units not distinguished in ordinary language to account for contingencies, for extenuating circumstances, for unusual happenings. Since native actors act in such situations in ways which do not strike their neighbors as outlandish, there are presumably ways to figure out what to do when ordinary precepts fail. (And, conversely, since people sometimes act surprisingly in what seem ordinary circumstances, there must be ways to figure out (or try to figure out) what is going wrong. Gossip arises often when people are baffled and need reassurance.) I emphasize that these are matters to figure out; culture does not provide ready-made answers to all problems. There can be no infinite list of contingency rules; instead the cultural mechanism must be able, through finite means, to deal with capricious and infinite reality.

The most recent ethnoscientists (see Kay (1970)) allege the possibility of reconciling the native's cultural competence with statistical reality. 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% 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'? 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% correct: that generates every single residence case?² (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.

I can clarify matters with a different example. Suppose we set out to account for the behavior of motorists at intersections --- a favorite example for undergraduates

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The insight underlying this argument, though not the conclusions, arose in conversation with George A. Collier.

first confronted with the complexity of their own cultural knowledge. What forms might the solution take?

(i) 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 agree that this solution is adequate.

(ii) We might interview a few drivers and enumerate principles by which people claim they behave 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 latter 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 which 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."

(iii) We might film traffic at a representative sample of intersections and interview drivers to see why they drove as they did in various cases. We could undoubtedly produce, from this corpus of data, a model to account for whatever percentage of cases we liked. (Question: Would we consider everything we saw to be equally 'valid' or 'appropriate'? Would we discard confrontations that resulted in crashes? Need we assemble a panel of experts to rule on the appropriateness of each choice?) At each point it would presumably be possible to expand the corpus to include new contingencies --- what is the statistical reality in such a case? No subset of possible circumstances --- even in so simple a situation --- will contain all of the wrinkles and complications. At what point does patterned decision-making come to an end and (not necessarily random) temporizing begin?

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; even the swiftest computer with the most elegant program we could devise for this situation 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 by 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 cop waving you on; or between a green light, a car honking behind, 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?

Consider what a Zinacanteco must know to be successful. He must know, first, how to perform certain tasks; he must possess certain skills. Men 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. Non-normal action conveys no messages (except the ultimate message: 'I am no longer a

Zinacanteco (a human).') Only when there are alternatives can behaving a certain way have meaning. These basic skills are unremarkable; they are the least likely topics for gossip.

Such skills range into more complex abilities. Zinacantecos know alternative ends and what modes of action are appropriate (and likely or unlikely to achieve) what ends. They have mastered decision schemes which enable them to choose between options. They have learned to produce coherent and largely unsurprising behavior when confronted with an infinite range of circumstance, to produce order from the "blooming, buzzing confusion." Gossip arises precisely when people do apparently surprising things, when order gives way to confusion. Gossips reconcile aberrant action with the current standard.

I am partly suggesting an extension of the notion of 'cultural grammar' which has a parallel in linguistics. Recent grammarians (notably George Lakoff in his classic study of syntactic irregularity (Lakoff (1965))) require that an adequate grammar be capable of generating certain ungrammatical (or nearly grammatical) sentences and marking them as violations (showing 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 of questionable grammaticality may still provide evidence useful to a syntactician. An adequate 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 languages are mechanisms with impoverished capabilities. 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, 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 which modify themselves. But our usual cultural grammars are static --- or, more exactly, the fragments which we extract of such grammars are deeply rooted in the data of one moment.

The prospects for developing 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 have penetrated a culture far enough when we have untangled its rules and learned to manipulate them sufficiently well to gossip. (This is at least a necessary condition on 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 non-particular 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 schemes 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. 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 modelling 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 at which 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. 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.