

"Stories about him will not be
eased; he no longer listens
to reason."

7

At the level of figure 1 in chapter 4, gossip consists of words and phrases: it is text. Gossips depend on their skill with words to draw morals from (apply rules to) the events they describe and to elicit the desired responses from their audiences. Words with evaluative power, or words that invite speculation and evaluation, occur frequently in gossip. If there were moral philosophers in Zinacantan (and there may be), they might look at gossip to understand the primary verbal tools of moral argument.

Anthropologists have long recognized that a basic and unique resource in learning (whatever it is that one learns) about an alien society is language. The earliest empirical ethnography began with lists of kin *words* and the systematic study of the semantic structure of lexical sets. Whether or not formally elicited taxonomies take the ethnographer very far, they certainly take him somewhere. Taxonomies belong among the resources natives have for construing their lives and the world.

In gossip, though, we see not simply the resources, but the *process* of construal. To look at the vocabulary that occurs in Zinacanteco gossip is to discover what words facilitate evaluation and transform mere narrative into gossip. Words are the gossip's primary *tools*. When people argue on moral questions (or when they gossip), does the argument hinge on word meanings, on the facts of a situation, on a (moral) rule, or on the conditions for the application of a rule? Often, perhaps, all these will be at stake. In a vacuum it may be possible to assign a word

its referent (as we can state a rule baldly, out of context). But gossip bends the already tenuous relationship between words (and, for example, the verbal propositions that embody rules) and reality—that is, the facts. The gossip uses words for particular purposes; thus in gossip one has an unimpeachable example of how verbal tools *can* be used.

A study of gossip vocabulary reveals first the semantic resources available to the gossip; further, these same resources are at once objects of study and sources of insight for the ethnographer as well. In this chapter I make some tentative efforts at describing the use of certain words in Zinacanteco gossip, samples of the verbal tools native Zinacantecos manipulate and apply in negotiating their lives.

Many crucial active words in gossip will typically be polysemic; but their use involves a complexity and evident indeterminacy that goes beyond multiple meanings. Words describing personality traits, dispositions, and so forth, refer only to elusive entities, if they refer at all.¹ Words with evaluative implications draw communicative power from their positions in sense systems (Lyons 1963; Haviland 1970*b*)—that is, in relation to other words—as well as from metaphor. A narrator *may* base his claim that "Xun has a bad head" (i.e., an evil temper) on certain objective characteristics Xun possesses; but we understand what he means insofar as we appreciate the existence of other words the narrator could have chosen to describe Xun's temperament differently. We stand most in need of a semantic theory when we try to describe the behavior of such words and expressions.

From transcribed gossip conversations I selected what seemed interesting occurrences of words and phrases.² By a mechanical procedure I kept track of certain stems which occur typically in explicit or implied evaluations, as they appeared throughout the corpus. The gossip context provides natural examples of usage. I was thus relieved of the necessity to work from translations or definitions.³ I extract semantic facts from such natural examples—material essentially like that available to native language-learners.

I was most interested in words of the following sorts:

a. Words frequently used to mark approval, disapproval, agreement, disagreement, pleasure, displeasure, and so forth. For example, a common expression meaning "that won't do" is *mu stak'* ("it isn't possible"; lit., "it doesn't answer"). Such words are part of a metalanguage for cultural evaluation.

b. Key words in the implied rules underlying questions of fact in gossip discussions. I showed in chapter 4 how the dialogue between narrator and interlocutor often concerns key aspects of the protagonists' behavior: in a courtship, did the parents of the bride *tak'av* ("answer

favorably")? Did one man *p'is ta vinik* ("respect") another properly? Gossip focuses on the key clauses of underlying rules (propositions expressing rules) through the medium of words.

c. Words about what I have called unobservables: personal propensities and traits of character, motives, emotions, desires, and so on. Buried in this segment of vocabulary is a native theory of personality, a native psychology which figures freely in gossip sessions.

d. Words which evoke hypothetical outcomes, alternative courses of action, or contrary-to-fact possibilities. Much of the evaluative portion of a gossip session may be devoted to speculation about how things should have been done, how they could have turned out otherwise.

Underlying these verbal investigations is the Wittgensteinian premise that words and the phenomena with which they are associated are inseparable. We learn about the world (or about a particular world) as we learn a language. I may again invoke Austin: "When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not *merely* at words (or 'meanings,' whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena" (1961, p. 130). As ethnographers we must at least in part be interested in seeing how the elements of the cultural universe, the conventions and rules of a culture, are mirrored in its vocabulary; and how words themselves are objects for speculation and manipulation. That the resources of a language may lead us to speak of moral dilemmas in a certain way must certainly affect the nature of the dilemmas themselves, as they are perceived by the protagonists. What we cannot talk about is irrelevant, or at least unavailable for scrutiny. For the outsider, it is talk that leads directly to what is relevant, on the native theory.

In this chapter I present several groups of words and expressions from Zinacanteco gossip, arranged somewhat haphazardly by notional and superficial grammatical criteria. Thus, I have distinguished surface "adjectives" from surface "nouns," and so on.⁴ Within a particular superficial "part of speech" I have separated subclasses by distributional and intuitive criteria: adjectives which modify human nouns are distinguished from those which modify verbs; within the former class one can distinguish roots which describe physical characteristics from those dealing with personality, propensity, and "mental" states.

Once I had arrived at a set of terms I asked a Zinacanteco to perform a special sorting task, to produce the groupings shown in what follows. I asked him to arrange the expressions (written on cards) in piles, not on the basis of "semantic similarity" (whatever that means; see Berlin 1968, p. 28), but by virtue of their "going together well"⁵ in the sense

that the expressions could occur together as descriptions of a certain situation, or in a coherent story. These groupings of words do not represent some ultimately small semantic domains; rather they exemplify the ordinary use to which words are put in practical situations (like gossiping): words evoke culturally salient images—types of people, frequent social situations, and so forth. We learn the code (the language) not only by understanding its units (the meanings of words) but by being familiar with frequent messages (typical ways the language is employed).

Adjectives

Tzotzil contains a large number of adjectives which are used frequently to refer to human beings. Of these, the adjectives which most clearly reveal the evaluative power of gossip are those with a normative component, which imply some trait of character, usually negatively evaluated. Here are some examples, listed alphabetically, of roots of this class which figure prominently in Zinacanteco gossip. For each entry I give a gloss, examples from the gossip, and occasionally distributional or derivational information. Glosses preceded by a dollar sign (\$) may be found in Laughlin (1975).⁶

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| ?abol -ba | \$"be suffering"; "be abject, poor" |
| 1. | Batz'i ?abol abaik, yiluk yil, laj xa ko'on.
"You are suffering so; never mind, I am no longer angry." [A parent addressing his previously estranged daughter] |
| bol | "stupid" |
| | Has noun form <i>-bolil</i> "stupidity"; and intransitive verb <i>-bolib</i> , "become stupid." |
| 2. | Mi ta jna? k'u x'elan sbolil?
"How should I know about his stupidity?" |
| 3. | Ya'yoy sbolil.
"People have heard of his foolishness." |
| 4. | Mi'n chavak'be ta ?ora ta jtz'ikbe sbolil?
"If you give her immediately then I will put up with her transgressions." [A suitor trying to bargain for a wife whose reputation has been compromised] |
| 5. | Ibolibtasat.
"He was made foolish." [A man given a potion who became feeble-minded] |
| chich | \$"extremely loquacious, saying everything that occurs to one"; "foolish, befuddled" |

6. Ibolib *ichichub* xa.
“He has now become stupid, become *foolish*.”
- chopol** “bad”
7. Leklek ?antzon xitun, mu?nuk *choplikon*, jna? xi?abtej.
“I am a *good* woman, not bad; I know how to work.”
8. Toj *chopol* sjol tajmek chyakub.
“He gets a very *bad* head when drunk.” [I.e., he is an ugly drunk]
- chuvaj** “crazy, mad”; \$“silly”
9. Ivovi ?o, ipas ?o ta *chuvaj*.
“He went crazy and became *mad* because of it.”
10. ?ech' ta *chuvajil*.
“He had a period of *madness*.”
- ch'aj** “lazy”
11. Xulem xutik yu?un toj *ch'aj*.
“They call him ‘Buzzard’ because he’s so *lazy*.”
- ch'inin** \$“itchy”; “promiscuous, licentious”
- lek** “good”
12. Ma?uk *lekil* vinik ta melel.
“You’re right, he’s not a *good* man.”
13. Mu jna? mi *lekil* krixchano le?e, mu jna? mi chvovi nan.
“I don’t know if he’s a *sane* person or if perhaps he is going mad.”
14. *Lek* yo?on.
“He has a *good* heart.” [I.e., he is good-natured]
15. Mi k'un to lapukujib ti *lekot* to?oxe?
“Did you only gradually become evil? For you used to be *all right*.”
- loko** \$“provocative, oversexed, boy-crazy”
16. Yu?nox ?unen *lokotik* tajmek ch'iem taj tzebe.
“That girl just grew up to be somewhat *wild*.”
- manya** “mischievous, wicked, underhanded”
17. Kavron, toj *manya* molot!
“Damn! You are such a *dirty* old man.”
18. ?An ch'anuk, mu jna? k'usitik *manyaon* ana?oj, vo?one molon.
“Shut up! I don’t know what *wickedness* you are attributing to me; I am an elder.” [Man rebuking those who made lewd insinuations]

- me'on** “poor”
This is most probably a noun root meaning “orphan.”
19. *Me'on*, naka chon-si? tzpas
“He is so *poor* he lives by selling firewood.”
- mol** “old, elder, large.”
20. K'usi amulil, pero *molot* xa, mi xana? xasa? k'op to?
“What crime have you committed? But you are an *old man*. Do you still get into trouble?”
- mu** \$“delicious, fragrant, disgusting”
21. Yan x?elan li *mu* jvabajome.
“That *awful* musician is disgusting.”
22. Li *mu* paj-ni? vinik ?une, listzakik noxtok.
“That *disgusting* droop-nosed man raped me.”
- pentejo** \$“stupid or awful”
23. Mu xa *pentejoikon* xkik' akechel.
“I’m not so *stupid* as to take your leftovers [i.e., a cast-off lover].”
24. Kavron, pero ma?uk vinik li *pentejo*.
“Damn! That *stupid fellow* isn’t a man.”
- pim** “stubborn, thick”
- porkirya** “disgusting”
Use of this word is usually restricted to women.
25. Mu xa much'u xchi?inon, *porkirya* mol sbon sba ta pukuj.
“No one will now accompany the old *disgusting* man, since he has painted himself up with evil.” [Woman complaining of her husband, who has contracted venereal disease]
- povre** “poor, unfortunate”
26. Svov xa la iyuch' i *povre*.
“The *poor* fellow drank it right down, they say.”
27. Ikom ?o ta *povre*.
“He became *poverty-stricken*.”
28. *Povre* me?el jun yo?on batem, pero yochel ta skobbel smuk.
“The *poor* old lady went off without a care; but they had already begun to fuck her sister.”
- pukuj** \$“dangerous, devilish, evil”; “ill-tempered”
29. Xa?i sba batz'i *pukuj*.
“He thinks himself to be quite *tough*.”

30. *Pukuj* ilok', mu sk'an mantal, mu sk'an xchi'in stot.
"He has turned out to be *unpleasant*; he won't obey; he won't live with his father."
31. Ta sk'opohel no'ox xvinaj ti toj *pukuj*.
"From his speech alone it is evident that he is terribly *ill-tempered*."
32. Toj *pukuj* tajmek k'al xyakube, ?i skotol sa' smul.
"He is very *ugly* when drunk, and he gets into all kinds of trouble."
- p'ij** \$"clever, smart, intelligent"; "deceitful"
The verb *p'ijubtas* means "to instruct," especially to instruct in deceitfulness.
33. Sonso pukuj, *p'ij* yilel pero batz'i sonso.
"He is foolishly ill-tempered; he seems *smart* but he's really dumb."
34. Taj x'elan *p'ijubtas* ti ?o spoxil.
"That is how he *informed* him about the existence of a potion [an aphrodisiac]."
35. Ja' nan *xp'ijubtasvan* li vinik ?une.
"Probably the man *told* [her] *how to act* [to deceive a supernatural being]."
- sonso** "stupid, ordinary, ingenuous"
See example (33) above.
36. ?Unen *sonsotik* nan chk vo'one.
"He's just a *stupid ordinary* person like me."
37. Mu k'u bal ?o, batz'i *sonso*, mu xul tzjol k'u tzpas.
"He is good for nothing, just *stupid*; he can't think what to do."
38. Yu'nox *sonso*, mu sna' kastiya.
"He's just *stupid*: he doesn't know Spanish."
39. Mu sna' mi cho'el komo *sonso* xch'ulel.
"He didn't know he was being tricked, because he has a *simple* soul." [I.e., he has no curing powers]
- sovra** "leftover, worthless"
40. Muk' bu tun ta jmoj, komuk ta *sovra*.
"He hasn't served at all [i.e., in cargo positions]; he's just *worthless*."
- tuk'** \$"honest, upright, conscientious"
The intransitive verb *-tuk'ib* means "become *tuk'*," "straighten out." The transitive verb *-tuk'ulan* means "notice, pay attention, take care of."

41. *Tuk'il* j'ilol.
"He's a *straight* curer." [I.e., he's not a witch]
42. *Tuk'* inupun.
"He got married *in the correct way*."
43. *Tuk'an* no'ox me, k'an me chtal li Maryane.
Straighten out! Maryan might come! (Woman trying to discourage the advances of her lover in the face of husband's arrival.)
44. Batz'i mu *xtuk'ulanat* yu'un stot sme?
He just wasn't *cared for* by his parents.
45. *Istuk'ulan* nan ta batz'i yech mu yechuk.
Perhaps he *took care of* it, but carelessly.
- tutz** "homosexual, coward"
Laughlin (1975, p. 347) lists the root as deriving from a positional meaning \$"stubby, stunted."
46. Ta la ssok ?o li ?antze, mu xa la x'alaj, timi xchi'in li *tutze*.
"A woman will be ruined, they say—she will no longer bear children—if she sleeps with a *homosexual*."
47. *Tutz* chalbeik ?o li ch'abal xch'amal.
"They call him '*sissy*' because he has no children."
- xilim** "blabbermouth, wild talker"; \$"imprudent"
48. Batz'i toj *xilim* chk'opoj.
"He talks *tactlessly, without thinking*."
49. *Xilimtik* xa'i sba.
"He acts *imprudently*, with a devil-may-care attitude."
- vaxal** \$"quiet, calm, gentle, tame"; "faultless, upright, good"
This is evidently a positional root having to do with quiet and calm; when applied to people it denotes lack of evil tendencies.
50. Mu no'ox yu'un sna' ti *vaxal* jset'.
"He doesn't know how to *behave properly*."
51. *Vaxlan* kavron!
"*Behave yourself*, you bastard!"
- vov** "mad"
This root has only a few adjectival properties.
52. Solel *voviem* yilel ta jmoj.
"He seems to have gone completely *mad*."
53. *Avovil* xa.
"What you are doing is *madness*!"
Cf. example (13) above.

- yan** “different, unpleasant, disgusting”
 54. *Yan* tzpas, kapem.
 “He acts *unpleasantly*: he is angry.”
55. *Yan* sba avo'on.
 “Your heart is *unhappy*.”
56. *Yan* x'elan xchak svex.
 “The seat of his pants is *revolting*.”
57. *Yan* tzpas ti jjole.
 “My head is *misbehaving* [I am having wild thoughts, mad inclinations, etc.]”
- yij** \$“thick, ripe, old”; “disgusting”
 Within a single noun phrase the adjective *yijil* often means “disgusting” rather than “old,” etc.
58. Mas *yijot*.
 “You are *older*.”
59. K'u 'onox sjol li *yijil* ch'aj krem ya'el?
 “What’s the matter with that *disgusting* lazy boy, anyway?”
60. ?Animal *yij* s(*yih*-)il 'at.
 “His *disgusting* penis was terribly *thick!*”
- yo** \$“miserable, wretched, humble, lowly”; “less severe”
61. Pukuj 'onox pero mas *yo* jset'.
 “He is evil-tempered, too, but somewhat *less so*.”
62. Mas *yo* jtz'uj, ja' mas xa'i k'op.
 “He is a bit *less* [unapproachable]; he is more amenable to talk.”
63. *Yo* chopol vinik.
 “He is a *miserable* bad man.”

The sorting procedure when applied to this set of words produced the following clusters, each justified as indicated.⁷

- a. sovra “leftover, worthless”
 sonso “stupid”
 chopol “bad, defective”
 bol “stupid”
 chich “stupid, foolish”
- Exegesis “Such a person has served for nothing. He just is totally useless.”
- b. xilim “imprudent, wild-talking”
 vov “mad”
 loko “crazy, oversexed”
 chuvaj “mad, insane”

- Exegesis “Such a person will just say or do anything. He also is totally useless.”
- c. bal “satisfactory, adequate”
 ch'ul “holy”
 vaxal “good, quiet”
 tuk' “straight, honest, upright”
 lek “good”
- Exegesis “Such a person is good; he acts the way a good man does, and he serves cargos. He knows the proper way to do things. He is harmless when drunk.”
- d. p'ij “smart”
 bivo “quick, lively, clever”
- Exegesis “‘This person is good; he talks wisely. He knows where he is going, what he is talking about, how he should conduct himself.”
- e. yan (yan x'elan) “disgusting, different”
 mu “disgusting, stinky”
- Exegesis “Such a person is bad, good for nothing. He is just disgusting and unpleasant.”
- f. tutz “homosexual”
 yo “wretched, lowly”
 povre “poor, unfortunate”
 me'on “poverty-stricken, orphaned”
 ch'aj “lazy”
 ?abol -ba “unfortunate, suffering”
- Exegesis “‘This sort of person is probably just worthless. He doesn't pass cargos; he is just there, doing nothing. He might be homosexual, or lazy, or just a wretched poor man.”
- g. pukuj “evil-tempered”
 yijil “disgusting”
- Exegesis S(yih)il pukujil no'ox: “It's just a matter of this person's disgusting evilness.”
- h. pim “stubborn”
 porkirya “disgusting”
 manya “wicked, mischievous”
 pentejo “stupid, awful”
- Exegesis “‘This person is awful. He won't do what he is told, but what he does is wicked; perhaps he lies all the time, or steals.”

- i. ch'inin "itchy, promiscuous"
puta "whorish, licentious"
Exegesis "This is for sex-crazed women."

These clusters suggest a highly tentative diagram which opposes negative to positive characteristics (see table 6). Predictably, more common words in gossip deal with negatively evaluated character traits than with positively evaluated ones.⁸

Table 6 Personal Propensity Marked by Tzotzil Adjectives Often Used in Gossip

	Negative	Positive	
b	Imprudent	Wise	d
a	Stupid	Clever	
	Useless	Serves <i>cargos</i>	c
g	Evil-tempered	Good-tempered	
f	Poor	(Wealthy)	
e	Perverted		
	Disgusting		
h	Wicked	(Obedient)	
		(Law-abiding)	
i	Perverse		
	Sexually improper	(Modest, proper)	

NOTE Marginal letters correspond to lettered lexical clusters explained in the text.

Another important class of adjectives contains "adverbial" words which modify the main verbs of Tzotzil sentences. Several of the words in the previous section function this way; for example, we may say

64. Pukuj xlo'ilaj.
"He talks in an *unfriendly, unpleasant* way."

Similarly, sentences (42) and (48) show *tuk'* and *xilim* used adverbially. Aside from such uses of otherwise semantically loaded words, there are

adverbials which seem primarily to be intensifiers, or semantically neutral pointers. The following list contains the most frequent of such words in Tzotzil conversation.

- ?animal** \$"lots of, very much"
Used to modify nouns, verbs, and adjectives.
65. ?*Animal* sa? smul.
"He gets into trouble *all the time*."
66. Toj ?*animal* la pukuj x'ilin tajmek li me'ele.
"They say the old lady is *terribly* shrewish, always getting angry."
67. ?*Animal* smanya ?uk.
"He, too, has *lots of* evil tendencies."
- batz'i** "very, real"
With adjectives and verbs this word is ordinarily an intensifier.⁹
68. *Batz'i* ixi?
"He was *really* afraid."
69. Yech *sbatz'i*-nop.
"He was *completely* lying."
- ben** "good, very"
69. *Batz'i ben* ch'ajot.
"You are just *awfully* lazy."
71. *Ben* xa vinik yilel pero stak'in la ?antz.
"He now seems to be a *good* man, but it is, they say, all because of a woman's money."
- ?entero** "very, real, exactly, completely"
72. Mu ?onox *batz'i ?entero* tajmek sk'opon sbaik.
"They still don't *really* get along."
73. Lek ?*entero* vinik.
"He is a *real* man."
- labal** "completely, continuously, simply, constantly"
This word most frequently modifies de-verbal nouns.
74. Ta?lo li *labal* k'abtael.
"I've had enough of being pissed on *all the time*." [Wife complaining about aging husband]
75. *Labal* ?elek' tzpas.
"He just steals *constantly*."
76. Mu jk'antikotik k'u *slabal*-?al tajmek.
"We don't like the things he *keeps* saying."
- lek** "well, successfully, excessively"
As I show above, when used with nouns, *lek* means

- simply "good"; with verbs it means "be good at. . ."; with verbs referring to bad activities, it means "do to excess." With adjectives, the word is an intensifier.
77. *Lek xa spasoj k'op.*
"They are *deeply* involved in the dispute."
78. *Lek iyich' ?arsyal.*
"She was *well* whipped."
79. *Lek jyakubel vinik.*
"He is *quite* a drunkard."
80. *Lek me bosol yu?un tajmek.*
"It [pubic area] really bulges *nicely* on her."
- naka** \$"just, only, completely, nothing but, simply, hardly"
81. *Naka ?onox pistola sna? ?onox li j?a?yele.*
"That guy *always* has the custom of carrying a pistol."
82. *Naka xa tzvokol xchi?iltak isk'anbe sjol li tak'ine.*
"When he lends at interest, he *just* lives on the labor of his comrades."
83. *Naka me yak'bel, naka me taluk krixchano.*
"*Just hurry up* and give it to her [fuck her]; people *might* come along."
- solel** \$"just, simply"
84. *Solel yiluk yil li kajnile, solel batuk ta jmoj.*
"I'll *simply* forget about my wife; let her *just* go for good."
85. *Mu k'u chismanbe, solel yech no?ox tajmek.*
"He doesn't buy me anything; he's *just* a good-for-nothing."
- toj** "so much, too much, very, just"
This word occurs frequently in conversation; in gossip it signals a quality that a person displays to excess.
86. *Mu sna? ta yo?on yech, toj pukuj, mu stak' k'oponel.*
"He isn't well disposed to that; instead he is *terribly* nasty. One can't talk to him."
87. *Toj palta sjol.*
"His head is *too* faulty." [I.e., he misbehaves]
88. *Toj mas chilbajin parajel.*
"He has mismanaged the hamlet affairs *too much*."
- toyol** "very, highly, often"
Toyol literally means "high" or "tall"; its shortened form *tol* occurs as an intensifier.
89. *Batz'i tol chk'elvan, tol sokaibe sjol viniketik.*
"She *always* looks at people; she *often* seduces men."

90. *Tol stij yak' chamel.*
"He is *always* threatening witchcraft."
- yalal** "on purpose"
Laughlin (1975, p. 382) lists this word as a particle; it, like other words in this list, modifies main verbs. It implies intent, and thus it parcels out the blame.
91. *Mu yalaluk isk'opone.*
"He didn't speak to her *on purpose*."
92. *Yalal sa?bil yu?un.*
"He *asked for it* [some sort of trouble]."
- yech** \$"like that, in that way, just nothing"
Yech appears in many idiomatic constructions. With verbs it often means "do for nothing, for no reason." In the subjunctive, *ti yechuke*, "if it were thus," often implies "this is how it should have been, or would have been had something not occurred." *Yech* also means "true."
93. *Solel yech xkapet.*
"He's just irritable *for no reason*."
94. *Muk' bu xkil ti yech chispasbe.*
"I have never seen him treat me *that way*."
95. *Yech tal avak' avokol.*
"You took the trouble to come *all for nothing*."
96. *Pujbeik smoton ti yechuke.*
"They *should have* hit him with a little gift [i.e., a punch]."
97. *?Ati tuk'uk batuke yu?van ?u k'usi smul ti yechuke.*
"If he had gone directly, you can't mean to suggest that he *would have* been at fault?"

In sorting these words my informant made only two groups. The first contained the words *lek*, *?entero*, and *ben*. He explained:

"This is a good man. He is *lek vinik* ['a good man'], *ben vinik* ['a fine man'], *?entero vinik* ['a real man']."

The second group contained all the other intensifiers and particles. My informant urged:

"Think of a drunkard. One could say all these things about a man who drinks:"

Yech jyakubel skotol k'ak'al.
"He's *just* drunk all the time."

Tol xyakub.

"He gets drunk *a lot*."

Toj 'uch'el yu'un.

"He drinks *too much*."

Solel jyakubel.

"He's *simply* a drunk."

Naka yakubel tzpas.

"*All* he does is get drunk."

Mero jyakubel.

"He's a *real* drunk."

Labal yakubel tzpas.

"He is *continually* drunk."

This sorting tends to confirm my suspicion that in gossip, intensifiers occur mostly as markers which point to negatively evaluated behavior or propensities. Such words in Tzotzil punctuate and emphasize the spoken word.

Nouns

The largest class of roots in Tzotzil, and perhaps the only open class, is that of nouns. The most interesting uses of nouns in gossip involve: (a) characterizations of individuals by nouns naming identities, roles, social positions, and so forth; (b) talk about emotions, motives, and personal capabilities through "metaphorical" use of body-part nouns; and (c) descriptions of disputes and evaluations of particular settlements.

From the most commonly occurring nouns from transcribed gossip, my informant produced the following clusters, which suggest types of people, roles, or identities.

- | | | |
|------|-------------------------------------|--|
| a. | muchacho
'ulo' | "boy, helper"
"friend, visitor" [reciprocal
term of address between
Zinacantecos and
Chamulas] |
| | 'intyo | "Indian" [impolite] |
| | Exegesis | "These people are Indians; they work as helpers, as hired hands—especially Chamulas." |
| 98. | Spas ta smuchacho yajval balamil. | "He became a <i>servant</i> of the Earth Lord." |
| 99. | Srason 'intyoetik. | "That is the way <i>Indians</i> do it." |
| 100. | Toj mas j'o'lol 'intyoetik li' toe. | "Some of the <i>Indians</i> around here are too much." |

- | | | |
|------|--|--|
| b. | chujil
Mat | "runt; fool, feeble-minded"
"Mateo" [name of the
town fool in Naben-
chauk] |
| | palta | "fault, defect, failure" |
| | Exegesis | "Such a man has a defective head; he is feeble-minded [like Mat in Nabenchauk]." |
| 101. | Toj palta sjol. | "He has a <i>faulty</i> head." [I.e., he is a fool] |
| 102. | Ta byernexetik mu stak' mas jpastik palta. | "During Lent we must not <i>fail</i> in our duty." |
| 103. | Xchujil no'ox. | "He's just a <i>moron</i> ." |
| c. | j'elek'
'elav
patil | "thief"
"diversion"
"back, backside" |
| | Exegesis | "This man offers a diversion, because he is a thief. He comes from behind and steals; he sneaks around behind people's backs." |
| 104. | Chispak'ta ta 'elek' jchi'uk kajnil. | "She falsely accuses my wife and me of being thieves." |
| 105. | Ta patil chut sbaik. | "They scolded each other in <i>secret</i> , where we couldn't see them." |
| d. | totil
'ajvalil
rason
balamil | "father; senior"
"lord, master, capable
person, owner"
"reason, wisdom, reason-
ableness"
"land, property" |
| | Exegesis | "This is a senior man who is wise; he is owner of much land." |
| 106. | Totil jk'u lej. | "He is one of the <i>richest</i> men." |
| 107. | Batz'i totil j'ak'-chamel ta 'alele. | "He is supposed to be one of the <i>most dangerous</i> witches." |
| 108. | Yu'nox yajvalil ta jmoj, 'oy smarchante. | "She's a complete <i>professional</i> [whore]; she has her steady customers." |
| 109. | Tol la 'ep 'ochem yajval. | "They say she has had many <i>lovers</i> ." |

110. *Yajval yajval* much'u sna' sk'o'ponel.
"Only a few know how to talk."
111. Chapal xa'ox *yajval*.
"His *murderer* was already ready."
112. Mu sna' rason jset' li mole.
"That old man is not at all *reasonable*."
113. Mu xa k'u sta ta *balamil*.
"He know longer manages to get anything on *earth*."
[He is a total failure]
- e. kavron "cuckold, bastard"
tyavlo "devil, bastard"
xulem "buzzard, lazy person"
- Exegesis "These are bad words that would be said of a lazy man, a man who is not respected."
114. K'u akwenta xatik' aba *kavron* mol?
"Why are you butting in, you old *bastard*?"
115. Sme'el *tyavlo*, mi chapoj 'uke?
"You old lady *devil*, will you try to defend her, too?"
- f. j'ilol "curer, shaman"
ch'ulel "soul"
- Exegesis "He has a clever soul; he knows how to cure."
116. *J'ilol* 'ox ti vo'ne.
"He was going to become a *curer*."
117. Mu'nuk ta ryoxetik ta jk'an 'o *kilolal*.
"I didn't gain my *curing ability* from asking talking saints for it."
118. Te nan *xch'ulel* jset' li jkobel tzeb.
"That fucking girl has something of a *soul*." [I.e., she has some sense]
119. Vo'one, ijvaychin xa, li'ay me ta *jch'ulel*.
"As for me, I have dreamed about it; my *soul* was there."

There are certainly identities and types of people not characterized by word clusters on this list. The limited class of nouns from the gossip corpus suggested to my informant various types of undesirable person—peons, fools, thieves, lazy buzzardlike louts—and only two neutral or positively evaluated types: the rich landowner associated with the wise man, and the spiritually potent curer. The sample sentences show that such associations correspond closely to the senses of the words as they occur in gossip. Note that even in the positively evaluated clusters (d) and (f) individual words occur in negative contexts in actual speech. *Totil* applies not only to wise and respected elders, but also to master

witches and incurable troublemakers. And in cluster (f) talk about a person's *ch'ulel* may point as much to soul weakness and lack of discipline as to soul strength and potency. The verbal associations into which each word enters make it possible for the native speaker to create conceptual clusters and to illustrate each with hypothetical representatives of some common type of person. (Presumably some similar conceptual lumping allows gossips to attribute unobserved and unreported qualities to real people on the basis of limited or rumored bits of information.)

Certain body part nouns in Tzotzil carry heavy metaphorical weight. They often describe emotions, motives, character traits, and other mental phenomena. The two roots with the heaviest burdens of this sort are *-jol* ("head") and *-o'on* ("heart"). In the following lists I consider various concatenations of verbs and adjectives with these roots. For each construction I show the word with which the body-part noun occurs, give a gloss for it, and then show the meaning of the compound expression, often with examples. Thus, under the adjective + *jol* construction, one adjective that can occur is *bik'it* ("small"); the resultant expression, as in, e.g., *bik'it ajol* (lit., "your head is small"), means "have weak head for liquor"; hence, here, "you can't hold your liquor."

- a. Adjective + *jol* ("head")
- | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|---|
| <i>bik'it</i> | "small" | Compound meaning |
| <i>chopol</i> | "bad" | "low tolerance for liquor" |
| <i>palta</i> | "faulty" | "unpleasant, uncooperative, unfriendly" |
| <i>ko'ol</i> | "equal" | "imprudent, unwise, foolish" |
| <i>parejo</i> | "similar" | "in agreement" |
| <i>jp'ej -jol</i> | "one head with. . ." | "in agreement, friendly with" |
| <i>xch'uk</i> | | "together with, friendly with" |
| <i>jchop 'o -jol</i> | "different head" | "strange, queer, evil, odd" |
| <i>-jololal yech</i> | "—'s head thus" | "the way one is by nature" |
120. *Ko'ol sjolik* ti batz'i naka vinik ta sa'ike.
"They have *similar proclivities* in that they are always chasing after men."

- b. Adjective + *-o'on* ("heart")
- | | | |
|---------------|--------|---|
| <i>jun</i> | "one" | "content, happy" |
| <i>lek</i> | "good" | "happy" |
| <i>chopol</i> | "bad" | "unhappy, anxious, worried, ill-tempered, grief-stricken, mean" |

<i>yan sba</i>	"disgusting, odd"	"worried, anxious, sick"
<i>pukuj</i>	"evil"	"ill-tempered"
<i>tzotz</i>	"strong"	"brave, courageous, strong, uncomplaining"
<i>bik'it</i>	"small"	"weak, fearful, sensitive, quick to anger"
121.	Batz'i mas xa <i>pukuj yo'on</i> li yajval balamil. "The Earth Lord is now terribly <i>ill-tempered</i> ."	
122.	<i>Slekil nan yo'on</i> . "It was, perhaps, from the <i>goodness</i> of his <i>heart</i> ."	
123.	<i>Sjunul xa'ox ko'on ta xkik'</i> . "With <i>all my heart</i> I was going to marry her."	
124.	Mi 'o jset'uk abankilale, yu'un <i>tzotz 'o avo'on</i> bu xaxanav. "If you have a bit of your older brother, then you will be <i>brave</i> wherever you go." [Proverb about <i>moy</i> , native tobacco]	

c. Verb + -jol (subject)

We assume sentences of the form

	Verb	Subject	[Possessor + jol]
<i>lik</i>	"arise"		"decide to do something, be provoked, have an idea, have mischievous or wicked thought"
<i>kap</i>	"become angry"		"lose temper"
<i>xi?</i>	"be afraid"		"become afraid"
<i>ch'ay</i>	"lose, be lost"		"forget, be befuddled"
<i>vovi</i>	"go mad"		"go mad"
<i>yan -pas</i>	"do bad or disgusting thing"		"have crazy or wicked thoughts"
<i>sok</i>	"break, be broken"		"be provoked, become wicked"

d. Verb + -o'on (subject)

<i>'ech'</i>	"pass"	"be satisfied with, try as hard as one can, do until one is tired of something"
<i>laj</i>	"finish, be finished"	"stop being angry, be reconciled, be placated"
<i>ch'ay</i>	"lose, be lost"	"be distracted, unaware"
<i>sok</i>	"break, be broken"	"be unhappy, distraught, worried"

<i>lok'</i>	"exit, leave"	"do one's best, be sated"
<i>llk</i>	"arise"	"have pain in chest, be excited"
<i>vaxi</i>	"become calm"	"lose anxiety, lose evil proclivities"
<i>k'upij</i>	"long for, desire"	"have longing"
<i>k'an</i>	"want"	"desire, want"
125.	<i>Ch'ay sjolik</i> , mu sna' bu chbatik. "They were <i>dazed</i> ; they didn't know where to go [after committing murder]."	
126.	Te ista <i>ch'aybel yo'on</i> . "He was <i>distracted</i> there."	
127.	Sk'an <i>sokanbeik sjol</i> kremotik. "She wants to <i>provoke</i> [and <i>seduce</i>] boys."	
128.	Mu <i>xasokbe yo'on</i> abankile ta 'i'onel. "Don't make your brother <i>unhappy</i> with your babbling."	
129.	<i>Yo'on</i> la <i>xlik</i> tajmek. "They say his <i>heart</i> would <i>pound</i> ." [Man with heart condition]	
130.	<i>Ilik 'o sjolik</i> iyuch'ik mas trago. "As a result [of drinking] they <i>decided</i> to drink more rum."	
131.	<i>Yan tzpas</i> ti <i>jjole</i> , mu jna' mi 'ipon. "My <i>head</i> is <i>crazy</i> ; I don't know if I'm sick." [Man with a secret desire to frighten people at night]	
132.	Batz'i mu <i>xvaxi</i> li <i>ko'ontike</i> , mu <i>xvaxi</i> li <i>jjoltike</i> . "Our <i>hearts</i> won't <i>behave</i> , our <i>heads</i> won't be <i>obedient</i> ." [Man who admits being a witch]	
133.	Muk' 'onox <i>ilaj yo'on</i> yech komo te sbik'oj sk'ak'al li mole. "He wasn't <i>placated</i> in that way, for the old man swallowed his anger."	

e. Verb + -jol (object)

-ll	"see"	"know a person's bad tendencies"
-lo'lo	"deceive, trick"	"maliciously mislead or trick someone"
134.	Kilojbe <i>sjol</i> taj 'une. "I've <i>seen the way</i> that one <i>thinks</i> ."	
135.	Yalal ilo'lobat <i>sjol</i> . "She was purposefully <i>deceived</i> ."	

f. Verb + -o'on (object)

-kux	"rest"	"enjoy oneself"
-at	"count"	"worry, be anxious"
-pat	"mold, form"	"gratify, mollify, decide"
-il	"see"	"be acquainted with person's character"
-nop	"think, think about"	"want, decide to"
pich'	"make into lump, set"	"long for, be tantalized by"

136. ?Ep ?ojtikinbil, ?ilbil k'u x'elán yo'on.
"He is known by many; people have *seen* what *his heart is like*."
137. Ja? to ba spatbe yo'on taj yajnile.
"Only then did he go to *mollify* his wife."
138. Ja? no'ox spatoj ?o yo'on li yilolale.
"He must *content himself* with his curing powers alone."
[I.e., he is not a witch, too]
139. Ja? yech x'elán yatel ko'on chk li'e.
"This is what is *troubling* me."
140. Kere, ipich' la yo'on sbaik noxtok.
"Boy, they must have *longed for* each other again."

g. Verb + ta ("at, on, to, in") + jol ("head")

For example:

141. Xa?uk nan lekuk ti k'u cha'al yulem ta sjol.
"He perhaps thought what had *occurred to him* was good."
- | | | |
|------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| -yul | "arrive" | "remember, occur to one" |
| -joy | "encircle, surround, be surrounded" | "think up, have thoughts" |
| -nop | "think, think about" | "decide, think up" |
142. Batz'i xjoy ta sjol k'usi xal.
"He just *dreams up* out of nowhere what he says."

h. Verb + ta + -o'on

- | | | |
|-------|-------------------------|--|
| -ak' | "give, offer, put" | "harbor grudge, take to heart, be offended" |
| -na? | "know, long for, miss" | "be concerned about, take pity on, be sympathetic" |
| -k'ux | "be painful, have pain" | "be unhappy, be desolate" |
143. Mu sna? ta yo'on yech, toj pukuj, mu stak' k'oponel.
"He *has no pity*; he is ill-tempered and can't be reasoned with."

144. Yiluk yil mi'n avak' ta avo'on.
"Forget it, if you are *offended* by it."
145. K'ux ta ko'on vo'on yech.
"That sort of thing would make me *unhappy*."
- i. Idioms with freely occurring -jol or -o'on
146. Batz'i yu'un sjololal yu'un yech.
"That's just *the way he is*."
147. K'u ?onox sjol li yijil ch'aj krem.
"What's *the matter with* that lazy awful boy?"
148. Yo'onuk skob li sni? me'ele ta ?alele.
"He supposedly *wanted* to fuck his mother-in-law."
149. Yil xa no'ox yil, mu xtal avak'bon sk'ak'al ko'on.
"Let's forget it; don't come here and make me *angry*."

Idioms occurring with these two roots in natural conversation seem to show a fairly clear dichotomy between thinking, personality, and intellectual capacities which are associated with *jol* ("head"), and emotions, attention, desire, and well-being, which are expressed in terms of *-o'on* ("heart"). Much of the power of Tzotzil to deal with internal mental processes and states stems from metaphorical use of these two words. And, on the basis of gossip, we may posit some implicit contrast between things of the heart and things of the head (not unlike a similar contrast in English).¹⁰ The wider domain covered by these idioms is itself explicitly represented in a ritual couplet:

150. Ti sjole ti yo'one.
"His head, his heart." [I.e., his thoughts and his feelings]

Related formal couplets occur elsewhere, as for example in sentence (132) above.

Listening to gossip brings to one's awareness such semantic and expressive facts of a language—facts which seem to imply native theories about the world (or, at least, about the human body), stable in no simpler way than by giving examples.

Nouns dealing with disputes and settlement of arguments are also prominent in gossip; and this set of nouns is similarly revealing. Jane Collier (1973, chap. 4) writes about "Zinacanteco legal concepts" through the medium of certain Tzotzil expressions having to do with bringing up, searching for a settlement to, and reaching an end of disputes. Of the clusters of nouns produced by sorting prominent gossip nouns, several evoke conflict situations.

- a. *perton* "pardon, forgiveness"
pasensya "patience"
- Exegesis Ch'ak'van ta pertonal, 'oy spasensya.
 He pardons people; he has patience."
151. Muk' *sperton*, mu xa'i k'op.
 "He has no *mercy*; he won't listen to reason."
- b. moton "gift"
 limete "bottle" [fifth-size, for
 liquor]
- Exegesis 'Oy smoton, i'ak'bat slimete.
 "He has a gift; he is given a bottle."
 [Refers to the fact that a man who settles a dispute is
 always given a bottle of liquor by the disputants.]
152. Ta *limete* ilaj 'o k'op.
 "The dispute was settled *with a bottle* [i.e., with one
 party asking pardon of the other, and presenting a bottle
 which was accepted]."
153. Islok'esbe li *slimeteal* ja' xa islajes 'o smul.
 "He pulled out his *bottle* [to give to the other] and
 thereby apologized."
- c. 'akwerto "in agreement, agreement"
 'amiko "friend"
- Exegesis Ko'ol sk'opik, ta 'akwerto, komo 'amiko ya'el.
 "They have the same words; they agree, because they
 are friends."
154. Spas tal sba ta 'akwerto.
 They came to an *agreement*.
155. Lek *yamiko* sbaik ta xlo'ilajik.
 They are good *friends* to judge from how they talk
 together.
 Cf. sentence (31) in chapter 3.
- d. tajimol "games, foolishness,
 frivolity"
 melol "proper or traditional way"
- Exegesis Mu sna'be smelol, tajimol chk'opoj.
 "He doesn't know the correct way to handle the matter;
 he talks as if it were a game."
156. Ti yechuke tuk' no'ox tal avalbe *smelol*.
 "You should have come straight here to explain *the facts*
 of the situation."

157. Muk' bu *tajimol* li k'op lavie.
 "This affair now is no *game*."
- e. 'il *pletu* "quarreling"
kavilto "town hall, *cabildo*"
koj "fault of _____"
mulil "guilt, sin, fault, misdeed"
multa "fine, bribe, assessment"
kronta "enemy"
k'op "dispute, argument,
 affair"
'ixtol "toy, plaything"
k'ob "hand"
pus "sweatbath" [euphemism
 for "jail"]
- Exegesis My informant offered the following hypothetical story:
'il pletu xchi'uk yajnil.
 "He *quarrels* with his wife."
 Tol chk'ot ta *kavilto*.
 "He's always going to the *town hall*."
Skoj smul chak' *multa*.
 "As a *result* of his *misdeeds* he pays a *fine*."
Skronta sbaik xchi'uk yajnil.
 "He is an *enemy* of his wife."
 Tol sa' *k'op*.
 "He's always making *trouble*."
 Tol x'*ixtol*-k'opoj.
 "He always talks *irresponsibly*."
 Tztzak *k'obol* 'un, ch'och ta *pus*.
 "They seize his *hands*, and he enters *jail*."

Some sample sentences from conversation:

158. Batz'i me' *pletu*.
 "She's a *troublesome* old lady."
159. 'O *skaviltoal*, 'o *xchukelal*.
 "For such behavior there is a *town hall* and a *jail*."
160. *Skoj* chujaj.
 "It's the *fault* of his madness."
161. *Skoj* stzak-'antzile.
 "It's the *fault* of his propensity for raping women."
162. Isyakubtas xa sba mas yo' mu k'usi *smul* 'o.
 "He made himself drunker so that he would appear
blameless." [Zinacantecos believe that drunkenness is an

- extenuating circumstance in committing crimes (see J. Collier 1973, p. 159).]
163. Stzinanbe sbaik *multa*.
“They strapped each other with *fines*.”
164. Chba sjelik ta tak'in li skrontaik.
“They went to exchange their *enemies* for money [by selling their souls to the Earth Lord as his laborers].”
165. Solel iyixtalan tak'in sa²-*k'op* spas tajmek.
“He just *frittered* away his money by making *trouble* all the time.”
166. Ko²olko²ol sk'upinik *pus*.
“They equally enjoyed the sweatbath [i.e., the jail].”

Jane Collier (1973, pp. 91ff.) concentrates on what she calls “legal concepts” that underlie the use of particular Tzotzil expressions based on the roots *mul* (“sin, crime”) and *k'op* (“dispute”). She suggests that “Zinacantecos have cultural explanations for the reasons people do wrong, for the consequences of a wrong, and for the nature of an appropriate settlement. These ideas are part of a native theory that relates man to god and god to man. But in explaining Zinacanteco cosmology my aim is not to suggest that ideology determines behavior, but rather to point out that ideology provides a language for justifying behavior, for explaining behavior, and for directing future behavior” (1973, p. 91). Collier argues that the legal concepts involved underlie (and can be inferred from) Tzotzil terminological usage. “In exploring the meanings of Tzotzil terms used in legal proceedings, I have concentrated on the consequences implied by their use. I have defined words not in terms of the attributes of the objects they refer to, but in terms of the assumptions that must underlie their use. For example, I have defined the word *mulil* as ‘an act that displeases the gods’ instead of making a list of all the actions that could be called a *mulil* and proceeding to extract the semantic features shared by these actions. I have looked at terms in relation to their implicit assumptions, to explore their implications for future action. People rarely call an act a *mulil* for purposes of neutral observation, but rather to imply that something must be done about it. The gods must be placated. *Mulil* is a loaded term and its use spurs people into action” (1973, p. 92). Gossip offers glimpses of contexts of the use of such “loaded” terms, contexts in which the prods to action are somewhat less formal (and obligatory) than those which arise in litigation.

Informal speech often alludes to aspects of a formal legal theory of the sort Collier details. For example, sentence (162) suggests a relation-

ship between drunkenness and one's liability to *mul* (“guilt”). In a less obvious way, the vocabulary of gossip leads to an implicit understanding of the origins of disputes and the mechanisms of their settlement. One need not resort to formal interviews to understand from clusters (a) and (b) that settling a dispute is sometimes a matter of begging pardon or offering a bottle. Furthermore, the metaphor of “words” (*k'op*) pervades Zinacanteco talk about conflict, as if fighting were a matter of not listening (see sentence [151]), as if a rash, irresponsible talker gets himself into more trouble (see the examples based on *tajimol* [“game”] and *?ixtol* [“toy”]), and as if the end of a dispute is the end of talk (sentence [152]) or a matter of bringing stories into agreement (see cluster [c]).

The town hall is the most fertile source for gossip, and gossip sessions are accordingly rife with accounts of disputes and the accompanying verbal duels. Thus it is not surprising that nouns culled from gossip should suggest to an informant situations or personalities related to conflict, the *cabildo*, drinking in settlement of disputes. In cluster (e) my informant was able to create a whole imaginary court case from the semantic prods contained in a list of nouns. Words are suggestive objects in a speaker's universe.

I could continue with other root classes: intransitive verb roots include a large class of words having to do with emotional states; positional roots govern idioms of emotion, and of human quality based on metaphors of shape and size; transitive verb roots occurring in gossip are easily sorted into classes of evil and negatively evaluated acts. I leave to another place further exposition of the semantic facts involved. Here I have tried to show, first, how one can present interesting and culturally salient semantic facts of a language through examples from actual speech—lacking, as we do, a theory of semantics which might provide a more formal (and less voluminous) descriptive mechanism. Second, I hope to have thrown some light on Zinacanteco culture as one perceives it through a gradually acquired understanding of the language. I believe that as one begins to be able to talk and to understand what people say about their doings one's appreciation of those doings changes in quality; the challenge to the fieldworker is to convey some of the insight one gains from learning a native language without having to teach the whole language. The appeal of gossip lies in its full use of the resources of the language to talk about a wide range of cultural phenomena.