

# From “gesturecraft” to grammar: action, gesture, & sign in Zinacantec Family Homesign

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Monday, Nov. 28<sup>th</sup>, 12-1:30, Linguistic Anthropology Lab, SSRB 340



This paper describes lexical aspects of a first generation "family" sign language from a Tzotzil-speaking village in highland Chiapas, Mexico. The family includes three deaf siblings who have never met other deaf people, never been exposed to another sign language, hardly been to school, and had virtually no contact with speakers of any spoken language other than Tzotzil. The deaf individuals, who range from their early twenties to their early thirties, along with a fourth intermediate hearing sibling and a slightly younger hearing niece, have grown up using and contributing to a shared manual communicative system. Additionally, a now four-year-old child is simultaneously acquiring his mother and uncles' homesign and spoken Tzotzil. Intensive fieldwork on this tiny emerging language community began in 2008.

This presentation concentrates on a central question about linguistic signs: where do they come from? Previous research on manual gesture in Zinacantec Tzotzil allows direct attention to evident semiotic sources (especially in what Jürgen Streeck calls “gesturecraft”) for this homesign. Using both natural observation and semi-experimental results, the talk posits an apparent progression from visible action, sometimes through “iconic” co-speech gesture, to grammaticalized "portable" signs which can be emancipated from the immediate context of speaking, or which contribute to emergent linguistic structure. Recent data from the 4-year-old second generation signer demonstrate related processes of meta-iconic regimentation and formal simplification. Finally, the language of these Zinacantecs as compared to Tzotzil, the surrounding spoken Mayan language, suggests reevaluation of familiar assumptions about “language and culture” at the level of lexical and conceptual linkages.