

"Con Buenos Chiles": Talk, Targets and Teasing in Zinacantán¹

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1.0 activity in language

Ethnographers, like everyone else, meet language through the activities of everyday life. Even those of us particularly interested in words do not ordinarily find ourselves picking them apart, or hoisting them out of their familiar houses and yards: we use them right where we find them, at home. Usually, we do not find them asleep, but rather at work.

"That's a great deal to make one word mean," Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

"When I make a word do a lot like that," said Humpty Dumpty, "I always pay it extra."²

By the time we get back from the field, though, we often find ourselves tempted by one analytical urge or another; we end up stomping, whacking, twisting, and otherwise molesting the hardworking words we met in our ethnographic travels, until they are left, if not totally lifeless, at least limp and exhausted. We seem to be obsessed with bringing words back, as J. L. Austin puts it, into their own small corner of the world. The violent urges are normally of a type I call *subtractive*.

1.1 subtractive approaches to conversation and language

The classical philosophical subtractive urge comes from the idea that there is an essential *informational* (or *propositional* or *referential*) *function* to words. Taking heart from seemingly unproblematic cases like 'table' or 'ice cream' or 'bachelor,' and bolstered by enthusiasm for sentences about cats and mats, this sort of subtractive thinking strips from hardworking words everything that doesn't seem to relate to propositional content, and leaves it to less fastidious specialists to deal with the rest of the mess. And of course, the mess includes most of what the words were doing in the first place: teasing, joking, passing the time, gossiping, deciding, fighting, (as well as telling about, informing, finding out, speculating, and so on). I call this a *subtractive* urge because it amounts to deciding in advance how language works, or what is important about it, and *subtracting* the rest.

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't--till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

¹I am grateful to Alessandro Duranti for his invitation to contribute this paper, and for his supportive criticism. I have also benefitted from comments by Donald Brenneis, Robert M. Laughlin, Chuck Goodwin, and Candy Goodwin on an earlier draft.

²Extracts from *Through the Looking Glass* are from Carroll, 1960.

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"But 'glory' doesn't mean a 'nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master--that's all."

Another more sophisticated (or at least more modern) subtractive urge starts not with meaning, referential or otherwise, but with *sequence*.

"[...] it's my turn to choose a subject---" [said Humpty Dumpty.] ("He talks about it just as if it was a game!" thought Alice.) "So here's a question for you. How old did you say you were?"

Alice made a short calculation, and said "Seven years and six months."

"Wrong!" Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. "You never said a word like it!"

Language takes its life, on this view, from its realization as structured sequences of turns. Speakers choose their words and shape their utterances in such a way that the *work* that they are performing is displayed in discernable ways within the sequential organization itself. Put another way, the work that words do, on this view, must be demonstrable within a paradigm in which sequential organization (that is, the ways that subsequent talk can be seen to reflect and react to that work--*orient to* it, in the standard parlance--or that prior talk can be seen to *anticipate* it) is accorded special privilege. Or, at least, a special purity of demonstration is expected when people's words are said to be *doing* something. Subtract sequence, and one is on treacherous ground best left to non-scientists who can afford to wallow in the speculative and the fuzzy.

To some of us ethnographers, though, it seems clear, that words, in the places we meet them, typically resist subtractive molesting. We are hard pressed to find referents or propositions, or at least referents or propositions of a *single kind*; and we fail, hard as we try, to find evidence *only in talk* or the sequential organization of talk for what words seem to be achieving. Better evidence often comes from something that happens much later (or something that came long before); or perhaps from something that never happens at all, but simply turns out to be the case. Moreover, words do their work between people: speakers and hearers are actors whose medium is verbal, who trade places, and come and go, but who typically do more than talk.

1.2 words as actions

Much goes on in conversation that is routinely part of the material which the ethnographer in the field must use. The existing literature pays special attention, for example, to those aspects of speech that index social relationships--from the formally simple but socially highly ramified choice between familiar and polite pronouns, to the complex terminological subtleties of reference and address in kinship and other domains, and again to the elaborate and codified special linguistic registers that are called into play between castes, classes, or even in-laws. One starts with the premise that, in talking with one another, human beings are engaged in a particularly clear and accessible form of social life.

Haviland, "Con buenos chiles...", p. 3

Malinowski, of course, argued the same case very strongly long ago. His somewhat Austinian dictum--"Words are part of action and they are equivalents to actions" (1935: 9)--combines with his view that language is central to social life. As he puts it,

"Language is intertwined with the education of the young, with social intercourse, with the administration of law, the carrying out of ritual, and with all other forms of practical cooperation" (1935:52).

The very notion of 'speech act,' derived from Austin's observation that we are very often *doing* things as well as (or in the course of, or by means of) *saying* things, bring words squarely back into the domain of social action in general. But the subsequent formalization of speech act theory puts a special, and sometimes bizarre, emphasis on an elaborate coding process from speaker's intentions, to his meanings, to his words, back to understood meanings, and finally his illocutionary (as well as his more anarchic perlocutionary) effects on his addressee(s).

Starting with words (or perhaps with meanings) often leaves mysterious the actions that seem to be accomplished through talk. There are the classic headaches for speech act theory, the so-called 'indirect' speech acts, which seem to do their jobs while masquerading in an inappropriate verbal guise. A command posing as a question, or a question dressed like an apology, gives analysts--and occasionally interlocutors--difficulties.

"They gave it me," Humpty Dumpty continued thoughtfully... "--- for an un-birthday present."

"I beg your pardon?" Alice said with a puzzled air.

"I'm not offended," said Humpty Dumpty.

"I mean, what *is* an un-birthday present?"

1.3 actions, with words attached

Even philosophers, of course, have known for a long time that we do different sorts of things when we use words. In a well-known passage, Wittgenstein writes:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?--There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once and for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)

Here the term "language-*game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (1953, sect. 23.)

It may be unsurprising that linguistic philosophers, like Wittgenstein and Austin, might start with words, and only slowly move outwards to the things we do with them. One might suppose ethnographers, though, to proceed in the opposite direction: starting with *activities*, and working inwards to the *actions* (whether verbal or otherwise) which organize them (see Levinson, 1979). There may be some things one can *only* do by talking (promising, perhaps, or apologizing), but there are many more that one can do

perfectly well without words (asking, for example, commanding, or requesting), or that typically involve a Malinowskian 'intertwining' of words and other action (pointing, naming, perhaps even *denying*).

"I'm sure I didn't mean---" Alice was beginning, but the Red Queen interrupted her impatiently.

"That's just what I complain of! You *should* have meant! What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning? Even a joke should have some meaning--and a child's more important than a joke, I hope. You couldn't deny that, even if you tried with both hands."

"I don't deny things with my *hands*," Alice objected.

"Nobody said you did," said the Red Queen. "I said you couldn't if you tried."

The natural starting place, then, is what we find people up to, the business at hand, the activities of everyday life. Wittgenstein suggests that some activities, realized in speech, are simply features of human life everywhere. We will recognize them wherever we see them. When, in the case to which I will shortly turn, Zinacanteco men tease a young boy with suggestions about marriage, we recognize their fun, and also his chagrin and embarrassment. Wittgenstein, indeed, suggested that the very basis of our understanding other human beings was a common ground of language activities.

Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing. (1953: sect. 25.)

Wittgenstein's 'countless' kinds of sentence or multiplicity of 'language games' hints at the argued infinity of perlocutions. And the notion of a 'form of life,' embedded in an evolving 'natural history,' leads us back to the domain of action: back to the house, yard, field or marketplace where we collected our words in the first place.

2.0 Participant roles in conversation

The words I present in this essay come from the front yard of my friend Romin, a Zinacanteco cornfarmer who lives in the hamlet of *Nabenchauk* 'The Lake of Thunder,' a Tzotzil-speaking hamlet on the Pan-American highway in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. One morning in April, 1981, he and some of his kinsmen met there to make arrangements for a cornfield ritual designed to protect still fragile fields from windstorms. My text is drawn from a fragment of this event. Before displaying the phenomena, though, I must rid myself of another subtractive legacy, the concentration on *dialogue* (that is, talk between *two parties*) as the prototype of conversation.

2.1 'N party' conversation

Many students of conversation have, both because of their theoretical predispositions and for empirical or methodological convenience, concentrated on interactions between *two* participants. A fairly simple information theoretic model of channel, sender and receiver, message and transmission has often been applied to natural conversational exchanges whether or not these are obviously embedded in wider activities that transcend the immediate talk. Speech act theory starts from an idealized

speech situation which embraces a Speaker and a Hearer, with the former performing illocutionary acts by addressing utterances to the latter.

On the other hand, despite the fact that the vast corpus of empirical studies, produced by students of conversation, has concentrated on *two-party* talk, or on the interactions between speaker-hearer *dyads* in talk, the founding model of a conversational turn-taking system (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974³) makes clear provision for *multiple* participants in natural conversation, and specifies with considerable subtlety the varied and important differences between ways of participating, as speaker or hearer, in an activity within which talk occurs (see also Goffman, 1979). Although much of the classic work in the field concentrates on the peculiarly reduced communicative channel provided by *telephone* conversations⁴--systematically avoiding, by methodological fiat, certain distracting non-verbal or gestural phenomena⁵--there is a growing and significant body of research on multi-party interaction⁶.

Analytical concentration on the specially *marked* case of two-party conversation has led to twists and contortions, especially in the speculative realm of speech act theory. For example, it is hard to incorporate into a standard Speaker and Hearer account of speech acts such indirect demands as the one I take myself to have been making when I said, to no one in particular, but within the earshot of other members of the household:

"Who left this rubbish all over the floor?"

but where my supposed indirect request (that that person please remove it) seems to have no analytically appropriate addressee. Clark and Carlson, 1982a, 1982b, present a host of similar and more pointed examples--[Mother to infant] "Don't you think your father should change your diapers?"--and a proposed revision of speech act theory to include

³Chuck Goodwin has pointed out to me that Harvey Sacks's distinctive perspective on conversational turn-taking focussed precisely on its canonical multi-party form. See for example Sacks 1978.

⁴In these telephonic conversations, some *specialized* features of openings and closings (for example, that the person who answers the phone has to speak first, even though s/he doesn't know who's on the other end) are brought strikingly to the forefront of analytical attention. Looking at telephone conversations also allows us to forget (at least until the introduction of such technological innovations as 'call-waiting' devices or answering machines, see Robert Hopper 1986) the familiar and natural fact that even conversational *dyads* are interrupted by or shaped to suit third (or fourth..) parties.

⁵But see the work of C. Goodwin, 1981, on the crucial role of gaze.

⁶See for example, the corpus of Chuck and Candy Goodwin (C. Goodwin 1981, Ch. 5; C. Goodwin 1984; M. Goodwin 1980, 1982; Goodwin and Goodwin n.d.), or Holmes 1984. I am indebted to the Goodwins for bringing these materials to my attention and sharing them with me. It seems not accidental that their, and my, interest in *argument* should bring the dynamics of multi-party interaction strikingly to the fore, although the connection, strongly drawn in their work, between narrative or storytelling and role switching and negotiation is perhaps more surprising.

informatives, addressed to hearers who are not addressees of the immediate or overt speech act.

No doubt analysts deliberately chose to concentrate on two-party exchanges because they seemed to involve the limiting, *simplest* conversational case, from whose perspective the complexities of talk between more than two people could eventually be elaborated. Such logic seems suspect, however, if we consider the *design* requirements of human face-to-face conversation. The presence of more than two interlocutors (and, of course, we must abandon the static speech act model of *a* speaker and *a* hearer, since people exchange turns) means that the orderly transition from one speaker to the next, the crucial phenomenon that the notion of a sequential organization was meant to capture in the first place, cannot be mechanically managed. When there are just the two of us, if I stop talking, either you start or silence reigns. But when we are three or more, when I stop, the rest of you have to fight it out. That is, there are basic floor-selection mechanisms in 'n-party' talk ($n > 2$) that are *reduced* or altered just in the *special* case of two-party talk.

A volleyball analogy suggests itself. In this game, each team has a total of three hits to knock the ball across the net. A team can use one, two, or three hits, provided that no single player hits the ball twice in a row. When a team has exactly two members, if player A hits the ball and doesn't get it over the net, there is no question about player B's responsibility: s/he either hits it, or the point is lost. Two-person volleyball is thus both unambiguous and exhausting. Consider, now, three person teams, in which, after player A's first hit, *either* player B or C can make the next hit. Not surprisingly, in this game, balls sometimes fall inexplicably unhit to the ground. (B and C can simultaneously shout 'yours!'; in the two-person game, nobody has to shout anything, unless one's partner has fallen asleep.) The problem of who is to hit the ball next, that is, is *inherent in the design* of the game, although, in just the special case of two-person teams, it is solved by *default*.

The analogy is only partly frivolous. I have recently begun studying the conversation that accompanies volleyball games at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences⁷. One way of selecting *next hitter* is to call out a name:

Volley 1

(a ball is set up by J, and his two teammates, B and BB, must decide who will hit it. At line 68, B tells BB that the ball is for *him*.)

| | | | |
|----|-----|-------------------|------|
| 66 | j; | you got help | |
| 67 | bb; | oh thanks | |
| 68 | b; | that's yours, Bob | <--- |
| 69 | j; | beautiful | |
| 70 | | there you go! | |
| 71 | p; | ohhhh | |
| 72 | b; | nice play, John | |

⁷My stay at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in 1985-86 was supported by a Fellowship from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and National Science Foundation Grant #BNS-8011494.

The method is not foolproof, of course, not only because teammates can share names (in this game both B and BB are called 'Bob'), but also because physical coordination does not always match verbally announced intention.

Volley 1

| | | | |
|-----|-------|--|------|
| 121 | b; | they're looking a little cold over there | |
| 122 | j; | there it is Bob!<--- | |
| 123 | all; | ((laughing)) | |
| 124 | bb; | Thank you! | |
| 125 | b; | I thought you were talkin' to me | <--- |
| 126 | j; | I was | |
| 127 | b+bb; | ((laughter)) | |

Here B and BB (both named 'Bob') believe that the previous set (a ball passed by one player to a teammate), and the vocative invitation of line 122, were addressed to him. Only BB actually hits the awry set (line 124), acknowledging the pass with a 'Thank you'; but subsequent talk (at 125-126) shows that J intended the pass for B all along (and that he, B, had thought so too).

2.2 Person and participant

There are clearly mechanisms in conversation (as in other varieties of cooperative activity) that are designed around the familiar linguistic paradigm of **three person** categories⁸. First person grammaticalizes Speaker, second person Addressee (often conflating Addressee with mere Hearer), and third-person can refer to a variety of individuals, both participants and non-participants in the speech event. Hiding behind these familiar categories, of course, are considerable complexities. Michael Silverstein has noted, for example, that each person category can stand in for a *shill*: Speaker can be a mere mouthpiece for some Author behind the scenes. Addressee can be an errand boy, or an intermediary for some ultimate, unaddressed Target. Third person (Over)Hearer can be intended Recipient (as in Herb Clark's diaper example above), or, indeed, can catalyze other aspects of the form and content of utterances, whether ratified participant or not: she may, for example, be a Dyrbal mother-in-law (Dixon, 1971). And so on. Stephen Levinson (1983: 68-73, and especially n.d.) demonstrates that these participant roles, and others related to message form, message content, message transmission, and access to channels of transmission, can be distinguished not only on notional grounds, but on the basis of grammatical reflexes of the relevant discriminations⁹.

⁸One supposes that all languages grammaticalize at least three person categories, although Laycock (1977) suggests that some New Guinea languages have smaller two-term systems (contrasting, in the words of his title, 'me and you' with 'the rest'). Why these are *abbreviated* systems, as he calls them, rather than simply exceptions to the proposed generalization is unclear, and one would need extensive material, ideally including conversational evidence, to draw firm conclusions.

⁹ Levinson (1983:69) cites an example from Gazdar (1979):
'Billie is to come in now.'

We may have pulled apart the under discriminated notions of Speaker and Hearer, only to find ourselves obliged to bundle them back together again to accommodate people's habits of speech. That is, though analytically and sometimes actually distinguishable, these different participant roles often collapse onto a single body: the author (of message content) is usually *also* both the one who shapes message form (Levinson [n.d.] suggests the label 'scriptor') and also the Speaker who delivers the lines. And usually, the Recipient is *both* immediate Addressee and final Target. These may be the unmarked assignments, so that special circumstances may themselves require special marking¹⁰.

Particular ethnographic circumstances, established conversational traditions or special genres, may also complicate the repertoire of conversational participants. Codified speech situations (debates, courtrooms, public forums, plays) provide us with labeled categories that illustrate some of the issues: chairpersons, spokespersons, referees, interviewers, prompters, kibitzers--all suggest speech situations in which the cast of characters is elaborated in slightly different ways, and even informal conversation has its counterpart players¹¹.

2.3 Talking back

Of particular importance in what follows is the Responder or Interlocutor role in Zinacanteco Tzotzil talk, a familiar enough personage in our own conversational

which, to me at least, can suggest the presence of either a speaker's skill, or an addressee's skill. That is, it can indicate either that the person uttering the words is speaking for some other behind-the-scenes authority who issues the command, or that the words are addressed to someone, not Billie, who is in a position to relay the order to Billie; or both.

¹⁰Sometimes the special marking device may overlap in interesting ways with other grammatical categories. For example, the Tzotzil evidential particle *la* is normally attached to a declarative sentence to mark the event described in the sentence as hearsay: something that the speaker cannot vouch for on his or her own evidence. Such a device is peculiarly appropriate, too, to a situation in which the speaker is merely *relaying* an utterance which comes from another; it can thus even be attached to a question as in:

Mi la chabat ta k'in?
Q QUOT go+2A prep fiesta
Are you going to the fiesta (s/he wants to know).

Here the evidential particle *la* suggests that the questioner is repeating the question on the behalf of someone else.

¹¹Goffman (1974) distinguishes, at the sender's end, or *source*, such categories as *originator*, *emitter*, and, most interestingly, *animator*. Again I am indebted to Chuck Goodwin for this reminder. I began to think about the elaboration of such notions as part of a collaborative Working Group at the Australian National University in 1980 and 1981; this elaboration was, indeed, *animated* by such friends as Steve Levinson, Penny Brown, Elinor Ochs, Sandro Duranti, Bambi Schieffelin, Judith Irvine, and Michael Silverstein.

tradition, but nearly indispensable in the equivalent Tzotzil activity, *lo`il*. In English conversation, the presence of `back-channel'(Yngve 1970) -- in which listeners "signal... understanding and sympathy" with what has been said so far-- "*Gee, gosh, wow, hmm, tsk, no!*" are examples of such keep-going signals" (Goffman 1976, reprinted in 1981: 27-29)-- is a necessary ingredient in a speaker's being able to carry on with what he is saying. At the same time, listeners' encouraging back channel must not count as an attempt to get the full floor, thus disrupting the turn in progress.

In 1968 I spent a summer in a Maroon community in Suriname, where the people spoke a Portuguese based Creole called Saramaka (see Price, 1974). My host and primary teacher, Capitan Mayóo, had high hopes that I would learn something of both the language and the history of his village, Kadjoe. One afternoon he summoned me and my tape recorder in order to speak to me in a formal manner. My halting Saramaka, unfortunately, was not up to the task of responding to him appropriately, and shortly after he began my clumsy responses forced him to grind to a halt. Unperturbed, he signaled me to put the tape recorder on pause for a moment. Walking out to the street, he grabbed the first man he saw, and dragged him in to sit beside me. He was going to tell *me* a few things, he told the dragooned passer-by, but he needed a competent *listener* to be able to talk at all. Once he had the necessary verbal lubricant, he went on to declaim to me (and to my machine) for nearly an hour.

In Tzotzil conversation, the respondent's role is similarly indispensable¹². It must, indeed, usually be formalized, in the sense that when a speaker is addressing remarks to a group of more than one listener, a single person emerges as the `official' respondent, the one who gives acknowledging, often repetitive, back-channel or encouraging prompts. The others remain silent, though appropriately attentive. However, the division of labor between speaker and his official interlocutor need not always leave the speaker clearly on the floor: speaker and respondent may, in fact, often be more like co-speakers, with the rest of the audience serving as passive recipients of their collaborative talk.

3.0 Planning cornfield ritual

Let me now return to my friend Romin's front yard on that April morning in 1981. I will present a fragment of a prosaic, quotidian interaction. Several adult farmers work out shared farming costs, taking a brief moment in the midst of otherwise serious, if somewhat trivial, conversation, to joke with an adolescent boy about his marriage prospects. When the kid runs away in embarrassment, they continue with their business. I hope to dig a bit deeper into the moment, using the details of the interaction between speakers and hearers (or between co-speakers and audience) as my pick and shovel.

My *compadre* Petul had been out in the forest, with his sons and me, hauling and stacking timber for next year's building. The air was thick with smoky haze, swirling up from hundreds of cornfields, both highland and lowland, being burned off in preparation for planting. Soon it would be time to plant *our* fields, too, and as we were walking home we stopped in at Romin's yard, so that Petul could consult with his son-in-law about arrangements for the joint farming operation. This year, Petul and Romin had joined

¹²See Haviland, 1977.

several other Nabenchauk people, including a man of non-Indian extraction called Mario, in a major cornfarming operation far away in temperate fields in central Chiapas. Until new roads opened the area, the land had been inaccessible and almost unknown to Zinacanteco farmers. Moreover, the this year's fields lay in a remote area inhabited by Spanish-speaking peasants, well beyond the nearby lands bordering the Grijalva River, where Zinacantecos had, for several generations, rented cornfields from *ladino* (non-Indian) ranchers.

In securing rented lands so far away, Mario was instrumental: his own ladino identity, and his personal and family contacts with rural Spanish-speakers, had brought him into contact with the new landlords. Here, where long-established social and economic ties linking Zinacanteco sharecroppers to their ladino patrons did not exist, Mario was the crucial intermediary. He negotiated rents, arranged transport with the local owner, and managed the minutiae of daily accommodations with the rancher and his sons and daughters.

For Petul, and perhaps more for his son-in-law Romin, this situation was acceptable, but somewhat less than ideal. Zinacantecos are an independent lot, and their cooperative ventures are brittle and loosely knit. Petul has had, throughout his life, extraordinary success as a farmer and as a community ritual leader. Romin, his daughter's husband, is a politically powerful man in Zinacantán, a recent municipal President, a local authority, a former informant for the Harvard anthropological Chiapas Project, a model Indian for the local government Indianist bureaucracy. They needed and sought out Mario's aid in the honorable pursuit of growing corn, but the nuances of power, authority and responsibility for the operation as a whole were riddled with signs of tension and ambivalence. Who was boss? Who had the authority to make decisions? Who had the responsibility for the work and its organization? Who was the most important?

Here, then, was gathered together a somewhat disparate group of interested parties: Petul, consummate cornfarmer, with his hardworking sons; Romin, his politically influential and reasonably wealthy son-in-law, along with his adolescent sons who have just begun to be able to do a proper day's work in the cornfields (although they also go to school); and the ambiguous figure of Mario, to the rest of the world a cut above all Indians by virtue of being a *ladino*, albeit a poor one who lives uncomfortably near Indians--while to Zinacantecos themselves a cut below full fledged social actors, a category that includes only other Zinacantecos.

The business at hand was planning a ritual of dedication and protection for the cornfields, involving ceremonial gifts (of food and liquor), candles and shamanistic prayer at the corners of the cornfield, all designed to protect delicate new corn shoots from the ravages of wind and rain, near the beginning of the growing season.

Here again, Mario was, curiously, the key. Although a member of a ladino family that had long lived on the fringes of Zinacanteco society, who foregoes distinctive Indian clothing, speaks Spanish in the home, and resists participation in the civil-religious hierarchy that in many ways defines the boundaries of Zinacanteco life, Mario is a paradox. His mother *was* a Zinacanteco, until she made herself into a *ladina* after she married a non-Indian man and moved away; he is thus Petul's cousin. His first language is Spanish, but his Tzotzil is, if accented, fluent. He is comfortable with the government health clinics, but he is also an accomplished curer, in the Zinacanteco style: he dreams,

he reads pulses, and, most significantly, he prays, in the rapid formal couplets of Tzotzil ritual speech.

As we join the group, sitting on diminutive chairs in Romin's patio, Petul and Romin have hit upon the expedient of presenting Mario with a bottle of liquor to facilitate a formal request. Rather than searching out another shaman to perform the corn dedication ceremony, they suggest that he, Mario, himself an interested party, agree to perform the ritual. He has agreed, and they have begun to drink the proffered rum, further advancing Mario along a road to befuddlement upon which, it seems, he had already embarked before he arrived at Romin's yard.

3.1 How many candles?

In the snatch of talk which will be my central text, the first and most obvious stratum of business is a straightforward financial accounting.

As the shaman, Mario must work out how many candles, skyrockets, and other offerings will be required for the ceremony, so that the group can calculate what each contributor's share of the costs will be. One of Petul's sons, Antun, is serving as scribe, writing down the costs and numbers as Mario works them out. But there is more than a Speaker (spouting figures) and a Hearer (writing them down) involved here: there are bystanders (Mario's hired workmen, who speak no Tzotzil and are thus left out of the conversation); there is Romin, a kibitzer, who ventures an occasional dissenting opinion about the costs or the arithmetic; there is Petul's other son, Manvel (shown as `V' on the transcript), who serves the drinks and sometimes chides his younger brother, the scribe, but in an off-stage, unofficial voice; and there is Petul, the *real* expert in these matters, but here playing the role of facilitator, trying to keep the whole business moving along smoothly and efficiently.

Let's see how the talk progresses. We join the conversation after the men have already worked out the costs of candles, local rum, and skyrockets. They now consider what it will cost them to buy the chickens for the ritual meal. Mario says that chickens will cost two hundred fifty pesos each, and that they will need two, which works out to five hundred for the pair¹³.

¹³Transcripts from Zinacanteco Tzotzil are presented in a somewhat simplified version of the standard transcript notation. Tzotzil is written in a Spanish-based practical orthography in which the symbol ` stands for a glottal stop, and the symbol C' (where C is a consonant) represents a glottalized consonant. Here the first line of each pair shows the original Tzotzil utterance, while the second line gives a free English gloss. Overlaps and latches are marked with square brackets and equal signs connecting latched turns. The spacing of overlaps corresponds to the Tzotzil lines (not to the glosses). For more details about Zinacanteco Tzotzil see Haviland (1981). The participants' names are abbreviated as follows: M = Mario, the ladino curer; A = Antun, Petul's son who is writing down the accounts; P = Petul, the senior man in the group; R = Romin, his politically powerful son-in-law; V = Manvel, Petul's oldest son, who is mostly employed in pouring beer and occasionally directing remarks at his brother or his nephew, the little

Chanovun [lines 1-12]

- 1 a; k'u yepal
How much?
- 2 p; kinyentos pesos cha` kot xal
Five hundred pesos for two (chickens), he says.
- 3 m; [y de ahi quinientos pesos
And after that, starting with five hundred...
- 4 a; [quinientos veinticinco
525... [
- 5 r; mmjmm
unh unh
- 6 doscientos cincuenta xi
No, he said two fifty...
- 7 m; doscientos cincuenta jun . kot
Two fifty for one (chicken). [
- 8 a; pero quiniento ta xcha`-kotal un bi
But it would be five hundred for
two.
- 9 m; [cha` kot cinco
Five (hundred), for two
(chickens).
- 10 p; kinyento ta xcha`-kotal a`a
Yes, five hundred for the two.
- 11 m; [cha` kot che`e
Two chickens, yes...

Here the mix of roles and activities is clear and finely articulated: Mario gives the costs (before the transcript starts, and again at lines 7 and 9); Antun clarifies them before writing them down (lines 1, 4, 8); Petul, official interlocutor as the senior spokesman for the rest of the farming group (and owner of the bottle being offered to Mario), gives encouraging and assenting repetitive back channel (lines 2, 10).

Romin, somewhat aloof, just offers corrections: no, he said two fifty, not five hundred (lines 5 and 6). He has misunderstood, of course, thinking only of the cost of a single chicken rather than the combined total cost of two. Realizing that he has made a mistake, Romin takes a different critical tack.

Chanovun [lines 12-14]

- 12 r; kinyento pero mi s-
500, but will it..

boy who is teased later in the discussion. The little boy, by the way, is named Xun or 'John.'

- 13 mi sta
 will it be that much?
14 m; ja ja mu sta ja
 Hehh hehh, no it won't be that much.

Romin expresses his doubt about whether the figure Mario quoted for chicken costs is correct, as it seems much too high. Mario agrees, with a laugh, that his estimate is excessive, whereupon a little discussion follows about whether they should just go ahead and collect that much anyway (since there is no harm in having a bit extra cash for the ceremony [Antun at lines 15-16]), and also whether it will still be possible, in this era of steep inflation, to find cheap one hundred peso chickens as one could in the good old days (Petul at lines 20-22).

Chanovun [lines 15-22]

- 15 a; jk'eltik jtzobtik xa kere
 Let's see, let's just collect it, man!
16 jk'eltik jay kotuk chman o
 We'll see how many (animals) it will buy.
17 m; hehh
18 a; hehh
19 ta jk'eltik mi=
 We'll see if...
20 p; =mi o to jta ta syene ijk'ele
 We'll see if they can still be found for 100,
as I used to see.
21 mi muk' bu jtatik to
 If perhaps we can still find them (for that price).
22 bik'itik no`ox=
 Just little ones.

The protagonists display several concerns here: they want the ceremony to come off smoothly. The procedure will involve working out a total budget for the ritual, and then dividing the costs between each of the adult heads of household involved in the farming operation. So they want neither to collect too little money, nor to spend any more than they have to. Against this background Mario and Romin are jockeying with one another as experts on costs and prices; Antun, carefree and without particular responsibility, simply totes up the figures, turning his mind, perhaps, to the mini-fiesta of the ceremony itself. Petul, poorest and most habitually thrifty of the lot, a man who often will make a long and arduous journey to a distant village because he's heard that meat can be had there for a few pesos less per kilo, muses about whether a bit of savvy shopping will reduce the costs still farther. It is by mining the conversational lode, here, that one brings these words, and this activity, to life: finds not only messages but sentiments, not only participant roles but personalities, and complementary *social* roles in the business at hand.

3.2 Learn to read

A secondary conversational theme appears in a subsequent interaction between Mario and the young Antun, who is trying to do the sums as Mario mumbles out the costs. Mario begins to be impatient, in a joking sort of way, with Antun's slow

calculations. He challenges the boy to work out the sums more quickly, switching to Spanish (at lines 24, 28, 33 and 35¹⁴) and a brow-beating tone.

Chanovun [lines 23-41]

23 m; =aa mu xlok' avu`un
 Aw, you can't work it out!

24 solo de vela, cuanto es? <--
 Just the candles, how much is it?

25 v; nito tzkotol che`e
 Calculate the total, now.

26 skotol k'u yepal
 How much is it all together?

 [

27 r; doscientos cincuenta y cinco=
 255

 [

28 m; y solo de trago <--
 and just for liquor...

29 a; =doscientos cincuenta y cinco
 255

30 y trago - doscientos cincuenta=
 and liquor, 250.

31 m; =mjm¹⁵

32 a; y cohete - dos docena doscientos veinte
 and skyrockets, two dozen for 220.

33 m; a de ahi <--
 And then...

34 p; tzobo skotol
 add it all together.

 [

35 m; cuanto es <--
 How much is it?

 [

36 a; malaon ta jtzob skotol
 Wait for me, I'll just add it all up.

¹⁴And notice that he drags Antun with him into Spanish, another unsurprising feature of conversational organization--that co-participants' linguistic registers are subject to collaborative negotiation as much as their topics and messages.

¹⁵This *mjm* is not equivalent to a neutral English assenting noise of similar shape, but suggests both denial and impatience, like an exasperated waving of the hand: Mario seems to want the *total* sum and not another recitation of its ingredient subtotals.

When Antun is hesitant in working out the total, at line 36, Mario mocks him, at line 40 below: "*chano vun, xichi*," he says, "You should learn to read and write (literally, an imperative, "learn paper!"), as I always say!"¹⁶

37 p; tzobo skotol un
Add it all up!
[
38 m; aa ... kere:
Aw, damn!
39 p; tzobo skotol un
Just add it all up.
40 m; yu`un chano vun xichi= <---
You should learn to read and write, I say!
41 r; = jmmm jmmm
42 ((truck passes))

3.3 Am I a baby?

Up to this point, the men have stuck to the main business of the moment--calculating ritual costs--although the question of Antun's competence, as a scribe and accountant if not as a *man*, has at least been broached and hangs, as it were, in the air. Now the issues of topic and activity, interlocutors and audience, spring to center stage. Mario turns to young Xun, Romin's eleven-year-old son, who has been sitting silently listening to the conversation, and addresses his next remarks to him.

43 m; (mi xak'an jtzeb) (mi chapas abtel)
(Do you want my daughter?) (Can you work?)
44 ta la sk'an ali ta jnopbe s- yalib li-ala tote
Because I hear your father wants me to pick a daughter-in-law
for him.
45 pe:ro
but
46 jna`tik mi ta jnopbe yalib latote=
But who knows if I'll think of a daughter-in-law for your
father
[
47 p; (mi lok' kwenta?) <--
Did it work out?
[
48 a; =ta skotole mi:l-
All together, one thousand and...
49 m; pero chapas preva mi xtune=
But you must first test her to see if she is any good.

¹⁶ The Tzotzil expression for 'school' is *chanob vun* 'place where one learns paper,' and the same idiom stands for all three R's that ideally come with a Mexican primary school education. One is literate if one *sna`vun* 'knows paper.' And see Marios's summons to me, the literate anthropologist, in line 120 at the end of the transcript.

50 v; [hehh
 51 a; =mil ciento veinticinco <--
 one thousand one hundred twenty-
 five.
 52 m; chapas -
 You'll have to...
 53 preva mi bye:n
 test to see if she properly...
 [
 54 p; va`i la <---
 Listen there!

Mario jokingly (and indirectly) offers little Xun his daughter in marriage, saying that he has heard that Romin is preoccupied with acquiring a daughter-in-law. At least some of the audience here acknowledges the joke (Manvel, at line 50, for example, turns to look at little Xun and laughs), although Petul and Antun (at lines 47, 48 and 51) try to bring Mario back to the ritual accounting that Antun has finally worked out. In fact, at line 54, Petul explicitly tries to regain Mario's attention, and in the following line, he aims a direct vocative Mario's way. The nascent struggle between two conversational topics, the ritual accounting and this little piece of sideplay about Xun and his marriage possibilities, seems at first to be resolved in favor of the official order of business, as talk continues.

55 Maryo!
 [
 56 v; eso <---
 right!
 57 m; mmm?
 58 eh?
 59 a; tzkotole mil ciento veinticinco
 all together one thousand one hundred twenty-five.
 [
 60 v; (yu`un chapas proval k'u cha`al xi) <---
 You'll get to try out how she is, he says.
 61 m; skotole=
 all together
 62 a; =mmm xchi`uk xa
 yes, already including...
 [
 63 m; bueno
 good
 64 a; kaxlane xch-
 ..the chicklen, and the...
 65 skotol chk taje
 all together (that's the total).
 66 p; trago, kwete
 including liquor, and rockets
 67 a; jiii
 yes

68 p; kantela:
and candles...

They seem to have resumed discussion of the costs (and in fact, Petul seems to be anxious to terminate the whole business, now that a provisional total has been reached). But note the background prompting, at lines 56 and 60, by Manvel (V), a minor participant in the rest of the exchange. These remarks are aimed at little Xun, and delivered with a grin: they are jabs aimed at getting the little boy to take up the implicit challenge that Mario has offered; they are thus a sign that, despite Petul and Antun's efforts, the struggle between calculating costs and joking with Xun has not yet been resolved¹⁷. Manvel, at least, seems to be trying to prompt Xun to retort.

Xun, however, remains silent here and throughout. In fact, as the joking resumes he ultimately is unable to contain his embarrassment. He jumps up and runs inside the house. His father, Romin, however, explicitly takes up the joking theme himself, in the next line. He offers his son an appropriately insulting retort, bracketed by the verb *uto* 'say that,' and followed by the admonition, at line 71, that the boy shouldn't let such joking remarks pass.

69 r; mi unenon jch'unoj mantal atzeb uto: kere
"Am I just a baby that Ill take orders from your daughter?"
you should say that
[
70 v; va`i chk
Listen to that...
71 r; (k'u yu`un muk' bu chatak'av)
Why don't you answer?

Romin, here, almost puts the words into his son's mouth: "'Am I a baby?' 'Do you take me for a baby?'--say *that!*"¹⁸

Petul, stepping in now as Xun's grandfather, carries the joking on. As senior male in the family, it would fall to him, in a real marriage negotiation, to make a financial arrangement with the father of a prospective bride. From that perspective, the free offer of a woman in marriage is a real bargain, and he chides Xun not to let the opportunity pass.

72 p; mu me xavak' jvokoltikotik un
Don't cause us extra trouble, now.

¹⁷Indeed, I think that Petul's insistence on drawing out the details of the proposed total of 1,125 pesos--repeating the items that went into its calculation, at lines 66 and 68--show that he is aware of the possible diversionary topic and is trying to stave it off.

¹⁸Alessandro Duranti has pointed out to me that the 'I' of this 'Am I a baby?' is, curiously, not the 'I' of the speaker, since the retort is offered as a model for little Xun to say. Still, given the analysis of social relationships that I suggest below, it is far from clear that Romin *himself* is not also implicitly remarking to Mario: "Don't take *me* for a fool, either!"

73 (na`bil) (pial) ta ora mi ik'ot ti poxe
We'll understand right away when the gifts of liquor arrive.
[
74 r; (....)
75 kak'betik-
we'll give them...

Romin now takes up the theme, turning it back towards Mario, the hypothetical father-in-law. If such a lightning marriage could be arranged, why it would even be to Mario's advantage, because they would give him generous gifts of liquor to drink as part of the festivities.

76 p; pero mi-
But will it be...
[
77 r; kak'betik yuch'an li`e=
We'll give this one plenty to drink

Petul agrees, and even proposes that they go ahead and order the necessary liquor to seal the bargain on the spot (line 78). Mario begins to reformulate his position, at this point, by going on to tell Xun what will happen if the daughter turns out to be an unsatisfactory wife, breaking in on Petul at line 79.

78 p; =sta:k' xi xa chbat man-
Sure! We'll just send out orders...
[
79 m; mi mu sna` spak'an vaj i jtzebe
If my daughter doesn't know how
to make tortillas.
80 mi mu sna` skuch si`
or if she doesn't know how to carry firewood.
81 mi mu sna`=
or if she doesn't know...
82 a; = ja ja kere
Ha ha, oh boy!
83 m; chapbel li (matz') k'al xabat ta avabtele
..how to prepare your corn gruel when you go out to work.
[
84 p; mano junuk- junuk i- <---
Buy him one...
85 mano junuk
buy one..
[
86 m; xabat xasutesbone un
You will go and return her to me.
[
87 p; Xun <---
John!
88 m; chajsutesbe latak'ine
And I'll return your money to you.
[]

Looking more closely, one sees more to the joke: little Xun is a natural target for teasing, and marriage is a suitably inappropriate topic for any eleven-year-old boy. The subject of learning, growing up, and competence already is floating in the discursive air. ("Learn to read!" says Mario, quickly turning to Xun: "Can you work? Do you want to marry my daughter?") This sort of verbal horseplay between the grown-up and the growing-up is familiar social comedy. It reminds us that Zinacantecos think about the same sorts of things that we do, even if not all wives in the world pat tortillas or haul wood, and even if not all adolescent boys pay cash for their brides.

Moreover, I am struck by the fact that the sequence does not simply die a natural death: Xun is in no position to respond, even though Mario has provided him with perfect openings for the stylized joking and wordplay characteristic of Tzotzil interaction. (See Gossen, 1976.) Instead, the other *adults* take up the challenge, and *they* engage Mario in verbal sparring. But as mere audience, neither directly addressed nor directly concerned, their words are *aimed but mediated*. They travel through little Xun²¹. Often, as I mentioned, they take the form of words *put in his mouth*.

We saw, in line 69, that Romin gives the boy a verbal nudge ("Why don't you answer him?"), having already provided (at line 69) a pre-shaped verbal barb in the form of the ironic and slightly impolite:

"Am I a baby, that I should be taking orders from your daughter (by agreeing to marry her just on *your* say-so)?"

Notice that Zinacantecos often instruct messengers in the precise Tzotzil phraseology of a message: "go next door to the neighbor's house and say this ---", with an

where they both imitated the ridiculous Tzotzil accents of rural bumpkins from lowland hamlets. Clearly both enjoyed the opportunity to entertain everyone, including me.

²¹The parallel with the indirection of speech in interaction with tabooed affines, in classical 'avoidance relations,' is obvious. The best known cases are the 'Mother-in-law' or 'Brother-in-law' "languages" or vocabularies of Australia, used as part of a wider syndrome of avoidance and respectful relations between certain affines. In the classic description, Thompson mentions that, among the Ompela, a man will avoid speaking directly to a son-in-law, preferring instead to use *indirection* and speaking "to his child, or even to his dog, to which he speaks as to a son, and not directly to the person for whom the remark is intended" (Thompson, 1935: 480-1). See also Haviland, 1979a, 1979b, Dixon, 1971, 1972.

An important aspect of oral humor, gossip, passing and receiving information, in a socially acceptable but also potent way, is *mis-* or *re-direction*. The classic descriptions of Caribbean linguistic play and disputation show how 'dropping hints,' using child messengers, strategically placed 'out-louds' (in Guyana called 'broadcasting'), aggressive silence, and even public and overt '[a]busing' all exploit aspects of a communicative *space* which is partitioned according to specific ends and intentions. See Fisher 1976, Reisman 1974. I am indebted to Brackette Williams for discussion of these materials. (See Williams 1986.)

exact prefabricated utterance offered²². And as the conversation goes on, with Mario laying further conditions on the hypothetical marriage, so too do the suggested retorts continue to appear. For example, Romín starts to formulate such a rejoinder at line 98, while Mario blusters on about how young Xun will have to prove his worth as a hard worker in order to marry the daughter.

94 m; chapas
You will do...
95 chabat ba`yi
you will go first
96 junuk jabil
for one year.
97 ta jk'el k'u x`elan xa`abtej
And I'll see how well you work.
98 r; pues, mi pentejooñ xa <---
Well, am I so stupid as to...
[
99 m; treinta
Thirty...
100 cuarenta fila
or forty rows (of corn)
101 la` to un
Come back here!
102 ((laughter))

It is here at line 101 that Xun is overcome with *k'exlal`* shame and embarrassment.¹ He jumps up to try to run away. Mario grabs him with one hand, saying "Come back here," but the boy manages to twist away. As he runs into the house to hide, the rest of the participants bounce their final sallies off him. Mario continues with his description of the laborious tests of diligence the boy will have to pass.

103 cuarenta filas pe:ro
forty rows (of corn to hoe) but...
104 ta arroyo arroyo=
on very steep slopes!

And Petul now suggests an appropriate new retort:

105 p; =Xun
John
106 muk' bu xinupunotikótik
We won't get married.
107 mu jna` mi ijta ta pial ta jjak'be xi

²²Often it seems that this phraseological caution derives from a desire to control, insofar as possible, all information that leaves the house compound. See Haviland and Haviland, 1983, for a description of the Zinacanteco preoccupation with privacy and confidentiality.

Haviland, "Con buenos chiles...", p. 22

I don't know, if I can get the money on credit, I'll ask for her, say that!

108 ((laughter))

Inappropriate forms of paying for a bride have now become the theme to be elaborated. The form of words continues to be indirect: "Xun! This is what you should say! Reply *this* way!"²³

109 r; mi ta jtoj ta abtel ya`el taje uto kere
Just say, "Can I pay for her with work?"

110 m; pero con buenos chiles noxtox un
And (he'll also pay) with good chilies²⁴.

111 p; vo`on chba jtz'un-
Me, I'll go plant...

[

112 a; hehhh

113 p; vo`on chba jtz'un li iche uto
Tell him, "I'll be the one to plant the chilies."

114 x; hehh

As suddenly as it began, the joking sequence comes to an end. Xun, its vehicle, its catalyst, and its reflective surface, has run off to hide in the house, peering out of the door from time to time to keep at least one ear on the ensuing talk. Antun and Mario abruptly return to the arithmetic: the task of figuring out each of the seven corn partner's shares.

115 a; ora
and now...

116 m; ora multiplicado²⁵ por siete
and now, multiplied by seven.

117 a; siete
seven?

118 m; entre siete personas

²³Studies of child language show a similar pattern: adults or other caregivers sometimes offer pre-formed utterances to pre-verbal infants, thus somehow using them as the purveyors of messages whose real sources (or real targets) are thereby conveniently disguised. See Schieffelin 1979, Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1985, Ochs 1982, and Ervin-Tripp and Strage 1985. I am indebted to Elinor Ochs for pointing out this similarity, on seeing the film from which this conversational fragment is transcribed.

²⁴The title of my essay draws upon this Spanish remark. The reference to *chile*, as Lourdes de León has pointed out to me, is a common sexual image in Mexican Spanish *albures*, or ribald competitive male joking. It is here particularly appropriate because earlier the group of farmers had been discussing a plan to devote part of their new cornfields to commercial chili growing, a crop which at the time promised lucrative returns.

²⁵Mario has made a mistake here: he means "divided by" but gets the word wrong, as one can clearly see from his subsequent reformulation.

Haviland, "Con buenos chiles...", p. 23

(divided) among seven persons.
119 a ver
let's see...
120 paso . avokol vun, Xun
John, please work out the numbers...

Since higher order calculations are anticipated, the conversational fragment comes to an end when Mario summons me (I am also called Xun) to put down my camera and to pick up a pencil to do the division (line 120).

4.0 The textured audience

I began with the suggestion that multiple-party conversation is not the specialized case but the *canonical* case, for which language was designed, and that the traditional grammaticalized categories of person do not exhaust, and perhaps in some ways even obscure, the intricacies of the social organization of participants and bystanders in talk. It is a commonplace of speech act theory that *indirect* illocutions exploit the virtues of different kinds of targets and addressees: members of an indirectly addressed audience can conveniently 'hear' or 'not hear,' sometimes just as they choose. (Little Xun didn't choose to hear, but his kinsmen heard *for him*.) And a speaker can dodge responsibility for a verbal missile launched at someone else but intercepted by a formally unaddressed bystander. It is similarly a commonplace of the ethnography of speaking and conversation analysis that people mutually collaborate as speakers and hearers, interlocutors as I have called them, and that the audience is not passive in the struggle over both turns and topics.

I have also argued, in probing the nature of the conversational social system, that the identities, social relationships, and immediate activities of the conversationalists--all foci of wider ethnographic attention--form a necessary background to situated talk. I have led the reader on a brief excursion into the front yard of a group of Indian farmers in a Zinacanteco village. We meet several peasants planning their farming operation. When we peer more closely we see other relevant discriminations: between farmers and their hired hands, between adults and persons something less than adults, between Indians and *ladinos* or between Zinacantecos and other Indians. Moreover, the *activities* in question begin to pull apart. Planning the corn work divides into the needs of growing itself and its ritual concomitants; and attached to these activities are different sorts of obligation and responsibility: financial, ritual, practical. And in the midst of the joking and the planning, we see people concurrently adjusting their social relationships with one another: as cornfarmers and partners in a business venture; as kinsmen; as neighbors; and as members of a corporate group that commands loyalty and segments the social universe into *kinds*.

It is clear that we can move from the talk we hear (or overhear) to the knowledge about talkers' social lives we are seeking in part because we can divine something about *who* the talkers are and to *whom* they are addressing themselves. An otherwise prosaic interaction like this one shows that we need a richer, more textured model than that provided by, say, the traditional person categories of grammar or speech act analysis. Notice that talk itself can *invoke* rather different categories of social identity *simultaneously*: the conversational shifts transform the interlocutors, as a man is now cornfarmer, now petitioner, now ritual expert, now grandfather, and back again.

Moreover, social identity, and social relationships, lead to 'natural' topics. Inversely, topics in conversation can pick out *inherent* (appropriate) *targets*. Indeed, close scrutiny of a conversational passage like this one from Romin's yard shows an intricate interaction between topics, the construction and maintenance of a situated 'universe of discourse,' and the precise constituency of the pool of interlocutors. Issues, like competence and growing up and acting like an adult, once raised and if sustained by the appropriate cast of characters, can hang in the air, waiting to drop on an unsuspecting participant. Topics can have histories (both social and discursive), and can carry their own allusions. There can even be struggles *between* topics (little boy's marriages versus grown men's cooperative farming) as well as between talkers. Once we link these observations with the fact that talk directed, seemingly, at a single individual can aim more deviously, and yet quite precisely, at a highly *differentiated* wider audience, even the apparent diversion we have been looking at--a somewhat drunk and foolish ladino teasing a little Zinacanteco boy--takes us to the heart of our ethnographic concerns.

Mario's suggestion that he become little Xun's father-in-law amounts, under the circumstances, to a challenge to Romin and Petul. A father-in-law commands service and obedience from a son-in-law; the family that buys a new bride lives under the constant threat that she will bolt. Romin and Petul try to turn this logic on its head: anyone so foolish as to *give* his daughter away must be giving away something of *no value*, that only a fool would accept. Perhaps, if she is to be bought after all, she can be bought *on credit*.

Mario, in turn, launches a barbed, culturally laden, counterattack: all that really matters, since she will be an Indian wife, is whether she cooks, hauls firewood, and remains obedient. And all that really matters about a prospective son-in-law (*your* son or grandson) is how well he hoes corn. Concerns about hypothetical work and hypothetical authority (between sons-in-law and fathers-in-law) thus allow indirectly engaged verbal interlocutors to dance around very real concerns about the delegation of responsibility and authority, between cornfarming partners, in mutual work. The dance is choreographed in conversational turns, in a verbal medium, and with a cast that skillfully juggles soloists, partners, and the ensemble as a whole.

We see here that words belong to people: the fact that prompts are offered and wording is important, that information is managed and that messages have authors show that talk is characteristic social stuff. Thus, in a parallel way, social personae and identities also belong: to kin, to friends, to colleagues, to ethnic groups. A joke aimed at my son can be a potential insult aimed at me. Words *are* sticks and stones: they can be heaved over fences, rolled under doors; and they can ricochet off one target and thwack another.

Carrying these diverse messages and content are different vehicles. The texture of audience and interlocutors is apparent in the timbres of their different *voices*. A social occasion provides many possibilities: for official speakers and addressees, for ratified and sufficiently qualified interlocutors (whose power or status may make them appropriate conversational as well as community pillars), but also for off-stage, undercover, under-the-breath subversives, for prompters and hecklers, for studied non-hearers, for spies, even for those, like little Xun's uncle Manvel, who, according to the Tzotzil scheme of things, engage in such unsavory activities as *sokbe sjol*, 'ruining the head of' or 'provoking' his nephew, or worse, *sa`k'op*, 'causing trouble' which literally translates as 'looking for words.'

The details of conversations, situated in their natural surroundings, display a constant movement between discovering (or creating) *new* knowledge (about Zinacantán or classes of people; about these individuals or their relationship of the moment; about addressees and targets, or speech in general; or about little boys, fathers and sons, and ethnic loyalties), and *finding* or rediscovering, or recognizing as an old friend, familiar old knowledge. Language again shows its Janus face: both *creative* and *presupposing* (Silverstein, 1976). The ethnographer interested in the minutiae of interaction must take the methodological challenge seriously: to relate a single instance, or the details of just one moment (even a very *rich* moment) to a more general understanding (of a society, or of a human life, or of these few Zinacanteco friends) that, in some way to be formulated, is the goal of all ethnography.

Here is the inextricably *social nature of talk*. Words feed on social structure, and yet social structure is built largely out of occasions for talk. Broadening our view of how words signify has shown us that all words index the moment of their utterance. Similarly, broadening the notion of the activity of talk, its protagonists and their relationships, shows us that all such moments of utterance instantiate the social structure that gives them both their character and their occasion. The categories of analysis for social action writ large, then, apply, on this richer view, to conversation as social system: not just Speakers and Hearers, passing Messages, but alliance, exchange, collaboration, opposition, competition, collusion, expressivity and deviousness, cloaked in a verbal garb and arranged on a conversational stage.

Ethnographers, in our real lives as well as in our extended visits to other people's lives, learn about the world and the people in it by doing, but also in large part by talking and listening. Usually we do both. We, like the people with whom we live, are *concurrently* speakers and hearers, actors and audience. The virtue of scrutinizing a tiny stretch of situated talk, as I have done here, is that by exploring levels of interpretive gloss in this highly textured context of speech in action, we begin to be able to situate the activities, situations, beliefs, values and roles of codified ethnographic description in the settings and participants of momentary and ephemeral interactions where (hopefully) we discover them in the first place.

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