

**Gossip, Reputation,
and Knowledge in Zinacantan**

John Beard Haviland

**The University
of Chicago Press**

Chicago and London

Contents

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

© 1977 by The University of Chicago
All rights reserved. Published 1977
Printed in the United States of America
81 80 79 78 77 987654321

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Haviland, John Beard.

Gossip, reputation, and knowledge in Zinacantan.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Tzotzil Indians—Social life and customs.
 2. Gossip—Case studies.
 3. Zinacantan, Mexico—Social life and customs. I. Title.
- F1221.T9H38 301.2'1 76-8095
ISBN 0-226-31955-5

John Beard Haviland is a research fellow in the Department of Anthropology of the Institute of Advanced Studies, Australian National University.

Preface vii
Acknowledgments xi

1. A Plea for Gossip 1
2. The Ethnographic Context 16
3. The Domain of Gossip 28
4. The Structure of Zinacanteco Gossip 48
5. The Content of Zinacanteco Gossip 68
6. Gossip and the Cargo System 91
7. Gossip Words 122
8. Rules in Gossip 148
9. Cultural Competence: Gossip and a Theory of Ethnography 171

Appendix 1

Gossip in Taxonomies of Verbal Behavior
in Tzotzil 183

Appendix 2

The Who's Who Categories 192

Appendix 3

Gossip Subject Frequency List 204

Appendix 4

Orthographic Note 214

Appendix 5

A Gossip Session Transcribed 215

Notes 223

Bibliography 249

Index 255

4

When I first began to pay serious attention to gossip in Zinacantan, although I could understand people's words (having acquired some competence in Tzotzil during previous stays), I could not understand the gossip itself. It took me some time to discover what knowledge and skills I was lacking. I heard a good deal of interesting conversation—at meals, at fiestas, near the *cabildo*, or in the San Cristóbal market—but I was unsure how to record it (the words themselves were only part of the conversation); and I was often completely at a loss to appreciate its significance, not knowing the protagonists, their histories, or the background of convention that rendered their exploits noteworthy.

The relative importance of the three sorts of questions I could ask about a given story (Who? What? So what?) became clear as I unraveled the elements of gossip sessions. I found that the immediate conversational conventions were invariant in all gossip situations, and that most gossip "texts" shared a common structure.

There are essentially two participants in a gossip exchange in Zinacantan: the storyteller and his interlocutor.¹ Even when there are more than two persons involved in a gossip session—more than one person who knows the story, and more than one who wants to hear it—a single primary storyteller emerges, and a single listener takes over the responsibility of answering for the whole audience. Others may make comments, but at any given moment it may appear that one man is talking to one other and that the rest are merely eavesdropping.

But the interlocutor is more than a listener. He actively participates in the story, interjecting appropriate comments, exclamations, questions, and so forth. He has a fairly standard repertoire of phrases, words, and grunts to be used more or less for rhythm at neutral points. The storyteller talks in short phrases, pausing between them for the interlocutor's response. He too has a set of fillers from which to draw while he collects his thoughts.² Here, by way of illustration, is an excerpt from a two-man gossip session in which all the interlocutor's remarks are included. (The interlocutor is person B, the storyteller, person A.)

- B Mi ?o spasik yech krixchano?
"Have people done anything like that near you?"
- A ?Oy spas yech ?ach' toe.
"There was a recent case of that kind."
- B Aaaa.
"Oh."
- A ?Ali ja? x . . .
"Uh, it was . . ."
- B Much'u?
"Who?"
- A Stzeb li ?anima mol Manvel ?Iyene.
"The daughter of the late old Manvel Guillen."
- B Aaaa.
"Oh."
- A Ja? stzeb li ?anima mol Manvel ?iyen li? ta . . .
"Yes, old Manvel's daughter from . . ."
- B Aaaa . . .
"Yes . . ."
- A . . . ta ?Atz'ame . . .
". . . from Salinas . . ."
- B Aaaa.
"Oh."
- A . . . ta ?on te?tik xalike.
". . . from the Madron Grove, as they call it."
- B Manvel ?iyen ?ati i?ech' ta bolomale?
"Was this the Manvel Guillen who was a Jaguar [at the fiesta of San Sebastian]?"
- A Ja? ?un bi.
"That's the one . . ."
- B Aaaa.
"Oh."
- A Pwes, ja? primero isk'uban skrem li mol Maryan Kontzarese.

- "Well, first she was engaged to old Maryan Gonzales's son . . ."
- B ?ali . . . rejirole?
"You mean . . . the third-level cargo holder?"
- A Ja?e.
"That's right."
- B Aaaa.
"Oh."
- A Isk'uban ba?yi.
"His son first asked for her hand."
- B Bweno.
"Okay."
- A Bweno, pwes iyak' matanal ya?el.
"Well, he gave her gifts . . ."
- B Aaaa.
"Yes."
- A Ba yak' jset' juteb ya?el ta na ?une.
"He went to give a bit [of liquor] at her house . . ."
- B Li mol Maryan ?une?
"Who? Old Maryan [and his son]?"
- A Mol Maryan ?une.
"Yes, old Maryan."
- B Bweno, mi itak'av ya?el ti sme? li tzebe?
"Okay, but did the girl's mother answer [favorably]?"
- A Sme? li tzebe, itak'av.
"The girl's mother agreed."
- B Bweno.
"Fine."
-
- A Bweno, solel tey ispak'alín sba to?ox li vinike, che?e,
porke slok'el yo'on . . .
"Well, anyway the man just offered himself [to the girl] because he really desired her."
- B Ispas kasto ya?el?
"He went to some expense then?"
- A Ispas kasto ya?el, ibat ta vula?al.
"He had expenses; he went to visit her . . ."
- B K'usi jafil ismak ya?el?
"How long did he court her?"
- A ?Iii, te nan chibuk jabil ?un.
"Mmm, it was about two years."
- B Chib jabil?
"Two years?"

- A Chib jabil.
"Two years, yes."
- B ?Ijola!
"Son of a bitch!"
- A Chibuk.
"About two . . ."
- B Bweno, li chib jabil ?unc, chak' matanal.
"Okay, so those two years he gave gifts . . ."

The storyteller talks in short phrases with considerable repetition. The interlocutor responds with: (a) neutral grunts, (b) exclamations (e.g., *?ijola*, from Spanish *hijo de la chingada*), (c) questions on the identity of the indefinite subject or object of a sentence,³ and (d) questions of clarification (about the identity of one of the actors in the story or about matters of fact). Drawing out the storyteller without intruding on his style involves considerable skill; and the man who has to face a dumb audience is thrown into confusion and finds it hard to speak at all.⁴

The exchanges from this story illustrate one of the recurrent structural segments found in all gossip stories. If two men begin to gossip in a natural context the resulting conversation will have three parts: (a) identification, (b) story, (c) evaluation. The excerpt above begins to show how the storyteller identifies the people about whom he is gossiping so that the interlocutor can understand from some personal vantage point who they are. He offers a sequence of "identifying formulas," each time responding to a probe from the interlocutor. He identifies the girl in the story by means of the following sequence of formulas:

1. daughter of Manvel ?Iyen (now deceased);
2. who lived in the hamlet of ?Atz'am;
3. in the particular section of ?Atz'am called ?on te'tik;
4. and who had passed a particular religious office which entailed performing as a "jaguar" at the fiesta of San Sebastian.

This sequence is sufficient to identify the girl's father and hence the girl. (It turns out later that the interlocutor was well acquainted with the father—had held a different religious cargo simultaneously—though he did not know the daughter in question.)

The first boy mentioned, the girl's first fiancé, was identified as

1. the son of old Maryan Kontzares;
2. who [the father] had been *rejiról*, a third-level religious official.

Again, primary identification of the father is achieved by reference to the religious hierarchy. In this case the interlocutor turned out to know the boy himself; he was able to name him after a further disclosure:

3. Yu'un chopol jp'ej ssat.
"One of his eyes is bad."

The interlocutor was then able to say

4. Ja' li Telexe.
"Then it was Telex [a particular son of the old man]."

Occasionally the interlocutor is left in the dark and can ask no pertinent questions to identify a character. The storyteller ordinarily makes a concerted effort to establish some pathway which will lead the interlocutor to the person in question. He may use kinship ties. Another suitor who appears later in this same gossip session is identified through the following sequence:

- Interlocutor: "Whose son was that?"
1. "He was the son of a man they refer to now as the late 'Antun."
Interlocutor: "I don't know him."
2. "Well, he was also the son of old Maryan Kontzares's younger sister [if that helps]."

These long sequences of identifying formulas are extremely important parts of all Zinacanteco gossip; in fact, gossip sessions often break down into lengthy genealogical discussions. Some people seem to pride themselves on their knowledge of kinship and family history, not only for their own families but for those of their neighbors. Similarly, people have fantastically accurate memories of the cargo careers of other Zinacantecos, even from distant *parajes*. It became clear that to begin to understand gossip, I would need to tap the shared knowledge that people had of others throughout the *municipio*, which made identification possible. I compiled the Who's Who precisely for this reason.

A limited number of schemata recur in identifying formulas; the nature of these schemata hinted at the information I needed to gather. To establish a pathway the storyteller need only show kinship relations between the person he has in mind and a well-identified person. Identifying formulas commonly move down generations or stay at the same generation. That is, the beginning of a path may be an older person, well known; the individual being identified may be his sibling, child, or son- or daughter-in-law:

Yik'oj stzeb li mol Petule.
"He's the one who married old Pedro's daughter."

Hence, the set of kin relations which occur frequently in such identifying formulas includes child, sibling, spouse, and sibling-in-law (particularly brother-in-law). (The Tzotzil categories are somewhat more specific.)

The following features often appear to identify an individual from whom a kin-based path can proceed:

1. Focal individual (a well-known name); e.g., *mol Maryan Sarate* (the political boss); *mol preserente* ("the municipal president").
2. Religious cargo position; e.g., *mol pasaro* ("elder who has completed the heirarchy"); *'ech'em ta santa krusal* ("was a mayordomo in charge of the saint called Santa Cruz").
3. Civil office; e.g., *lik'em komite* ("used to serve on *ejido* committee"); *mol jwes* (town hall official).
4. Talent or skill; e.g., *j'ilol* ("curer"); *jvabajom* ("musician").
5. Place of residence; e.g., *ta 'on te'tik* ("from Madron Grove"); *yolon mukenal* ("who lives below the cemetery").
6. (By far the least frequent) reference to past gossip and reputation; e.g., *jmilvanej* ("the murderer"); *xch'akoj yajnil* ("the one who divorced his wife").

An identifying formula can involve just these features in combination, or it may utilize kinship pathways, as I show above. In order to make sense out of such identifying sequences a Zinacanteco must have at his disposal a vast array of information about others in the community—their relatives, their cargo careers, and their past transgressions.

After all the characters have been identified, a gossip session proceeds to the story itself. But the story is not simply a narrative. The interlocutor can ask about particular points of interest, providing the analyst with explicit evidence about what counts—what actions and words are crucial to the situation and its outcome. The basic plot of the story I have been examining in this chapter is this:

Old Manvel's daughter is courted by Telex, son of old Maryan. She rejects him and is hauled into court after running away to avoid him. Despite the presidente's arguments she continues to reject him; she agrees to pay back the money he has spent in courting her. Telex

persists and finally rapes the girl, with the encouragement of her mother, who has favored the boy's suit all along. The girl still rejects him and ultimately marries someone else.

The interlocutor is particularly concerned to establish the form of the courtship; did the suitor act properly so as to insure that the girl was obligated? Did the girl reject him wrongly? Was anyone's behavior extraordinary? The nature of the interaction makes it possible for both interlocutor and storyteller to emphasize the relevant aspects of the affair; the gossip session serves as a practical moral lesson by allowing participants to reflect on particular behavior and observe its outcome before making explicit evaluations.

Here are some examples of questions that the interlocutor asked regarding this story:

During the original courtship petitioning, did the girl's mother *tak'av* ["answer favorably"]?

When the girl rejected her suitor, was she already *k'oponbil ta yan* ["spoken to—i.e., propositioned—by another"]?

How long did the courtship proceed? How much expense did the unsuccessful suitor incur?

When the girl fled, where did she spend the night? [The implication of the question is, Did the boy have grounds for suspecting that she had eloped with another?]

Another feature of Zinacanteco narrative is the liberal use of dialogue.⁵ Gossip audiences seem particularly to enjoy what amounts to a dramatization of conversations which the characters in the story are alleged to have had—especially if such conversations are heated.

"Will you marry this boy?" said the presidente.

"I don't want to," she said.

"Well, if there is some other person who has already proposed to you, say so, admit it openly," she was told.

"No one," she said.

"Well then you should marry him for a while. See if he is able to feed you; gradually you will become accustomed to one another," said the presidente.

"No," said the girl.

"Perhaps it would be better for you to have a civil marriage [which makes divorce more costly]," said the presidente. He started to go into his office [to issue the papers].

"No, I don't want him," said the girl. "Why don't you just give him your own daughter if you have one?"

"Son of a bitch!"

"The fucking girl!"

"Listen," said the presidente. "What gives you the right to talk to me this way? Are you superior to me? You are nobody, but I am a settler of disputes. I didn't just take my seat here at the town hall yesterday; I've had years in this office. Now are you going to tell me to give my own daughter? Are you going to give me orders? You are just acting pretty snotty," said the presidente."

After the story is told, the gossips begin to evaluate what occurred. When all have heard of a man's transgressions or misfortunes, storyteller and interlocutor are moved to comment on the moral implications of the story. Sometimes such comments are tossed off sarcastically. After hearing about a case of adultery or even a murder, a Zinacanteco is likely to say

Batz'i lek spasik krixchanoetik yo'e.
People over there do the nicest things.

Often there is more to be said. In the story I have been discussing, participants in the gossip session laid much of the blame for the girl's misconduct on the fact that her father was dead and could not discipline her.

- a. Ja' xa ti k'u spas ta stukike, komo ch'abal xa stot cha'ie.
"That is how she acts when she is alone, for she realizes she has no father [to control her]."
- b. Li sme'e, mu xa sp'is ta vinik.
"As for her mother, she does not respect her."
- c. Sme'e, mu xa baluk.
"Her mother is not enough."
- d. ?Ati kuxluk ti stote, xch'un mantal nan bi a'a.
"If her father were alive, then she would obey."
- e. K'alal sme' xa no'oxe, mu xa xak' ta kwenta.
"When only the mother is there, then she will pay no attention."
- f. K'alal kuxul li totil ya'el che'e, syempre ja' mas chak' xi'elal, komo vinik chava'i.
"When the father is alive he always gives more cause for fear because, you see, he is a man."

There is a clear sense in which this part of the gossip session is the most active part: people build ethical theories on evaluations of such situations. Zinacantecos, through gossip, continually test ordinary rules and evaluative words against actual behavior.

Let me recapitulate, from a somewhat different perspective,⁶ how a single gossip session relates to a widespread set of ethnographic facts and phenomena not bounded by one particular story or a single instance of its telling. I mean to point out the ramifications for an ethnographer of the gossip's ability to gossip or of the interlocutor's ability to understand what gossip is about (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1



At the heart of a gossip session is a story—a verbal narrative which we may in principle write down. (A gossip story is no more an abstraction than, say, a myth for a nonliterate people.) To the uninitiated ethnographer, in fact, gossip is barely more than text: unadorned and uninterpretable accounts of events. This is not to say that such texts are useless; in chapter 5 I shall take an inventory of the frequent themes of gossip stories I heard in Zinacantan and put forward this inventory as a catalog of those departures from ordinary behavior sufficiently notable to result in gossip.

A gossip text necessarily offers an “emic” description of behavior, which goes beyond ordinary observables. I have in mind here Popper's (1972, p. 72) notion that observation is “theory-impregnated,” and this is true of both native's and ethnographer's observation. An ethnographer may observe behavior and not know even *what he has seen*⁷ until he hears it described. The ethnographer may not, that is, be able to cut the behavior stream into words—a feat which a gossip text has already accomplished. To give a deeper example, gossip frequently alludes to motivation, state of mind, emotion, intent, and so on—“inner states” whose outward manifestations ethnographers necessarily find difficult to recognize. Thus, gossip stories lead directly to the normatively salient aspects of behavior. We learn what constitutes sufficient excuse to break off a courtship; we learn how Zinacantecos express anger; we learn how it is possible to justify running away from one's husband, one's wife, a religious cargo, and so forth. Gossip always draws our attention immediately to the important facts, and it never fails to draw appropriate conclusions: deciding who is to blame, who acted badly, when things began to turn sour, etc.

Gossip, furthermore, continually alludes to generally inaccessible bodies of native theory and belief.⁸ On Quine's (1960) familiar account of “interanimation,” the logic of all argument or the import of even a single word in discourse may be tied to a large body of sentences (a theory) which relate to it. Gossip leads the ethnographer to (and draws

on the native's knowledge of) pieces of such native theory. Two examples will illustrate my point.

A woman from a particular hamlet was said to be living now with her third husband, her first two husbands having died. One participant in the gossip session suggested jokingly,

“Perhaps she has a red scorpion on her hand. Who knows when this husband of hers now will also die? (Ha ha ha.)”

The comment rides on a folkloric item: that people with a particular pattern on their palms said to represent a *tzajal tzeek* (“red scorpion”)⁹ will find a mate who survives only after three have died.

Correspondingly, only an understanding of Zinacanteco belief about the earth and the Earth Lord, about the formation of the world and the characteristics of treasure, will render comprehensible the gossip that surrounded a project to exhume a supernatural bell in Nabenchauk. The project failed, seemingly thwarted by a variety of natural obstacles. The gossips agreed, finally, that the project was doomed from the beginning, since

Kuxul li balamile.
The earth is alive.

Gossip alludes to otherwise inaccessible beliefs about “hot” and “cold” foods and diseases, about fertility and luck, about buried treasure and supernatural means to gain wealth, about the medicinal efficacy of various herbs and preparations, and so on. I call these beliefs inaccessible because they are infrequently expounded in other contexts; gossip, as the most common form of narrative, is almost uniquely responsible for keeping alive speculation about such matters.

Gossip stories raise a large class of problems surrounding the notion of “cultural rule” (or “norm” or “value”), which I shall consider in some detail in chapter 8. Here it is worth pointing out that from gossip we can extract certain rulelike propositions which underlie evaluative statements. When someone remarks in gossip that a particular awful boy “does not respect and obey his father,” and that if his own sons treated him like that he would throw them out, it seems possible to formulate some kind of a “rule” about filial obedience. Similarly, from accounts of cargo failures we learn “rules” surrounding proper cargo performance; from stories of jailing, poverty, or divorce we learn about upright behavior, farming techniques, guidelines for successful marriage, and so on. Such a procedure, at least, seems justified if we accept the view that gossip is itself a (perhaps feeble) social sanction: native actors learn how to behave by observing what sorts of misbehavior are sanctioned (by being gossiped about).

I argue in chapter 8, against this facile view, that the fact that we can often draw morals from the transgressions of others tells us little about the "rules" that purportedly "govern" behavior. Talk about rules raises but does not settle questions about their status: are "cultural rules" explicit or tacit? may there not be conflicting orderings of rules (so that one function of gossip is to achieve agreement between participants about which rules dominate in a particular case)? Here we confront again the plaguing distinction between behavior and accounts of behavior; it is far from clear that principles which underlie the accounts also constrain the behavior.¹⁰ In any case, there is a clear sense in which these underlying rulelike propositions amount to a statement of the *semantics* of behavior: they allow native actors to discuss and interpret the behavior of others; they legitimize and inform speculation about motives, intentions, second thoughts, regrets, and so forth, insofar as these are available to cultural scrutiny and insofar as they are relevant to evaluations of behavior. (Consider the highly psychologized gossip which characterizes American student circles: the rules of gossip permit [and in fact demand] discussion of the personalities and psychological states of gossip victims. In this respect, gossip reflects a native theory of behavior: that the prime determinants of action are individual psychological factors.)

I have shown that by various identifying formulas gossip leads participants to understand exactly who is involved (see fig. 2). In Zinacantan it was necessary to collect the information in the Who's Who to understand the gossip itself, not only to identify the protagonists. What is there to understand about the identities of the characters in a gossip story?

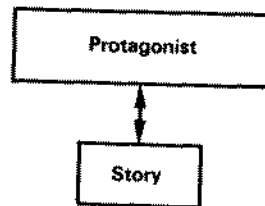


Fig. 2

Gossip relies on reputation while at the same time it expands on it. The fact that a man is known as a murderer certainly affects the way others treat him and the distance they maintain; and a story about a past murderer may easily trade on the man's reputation without explicitly stating it. Here is one basis for Gluckman's argument that gossip excludes outsiders. A man's proper name may even come to connote

aspects of his reputation. One woman, for example, was reputed to seduce men with the object of stealing their good luck and wealth; she used a certain magical trick to take their good luck:

"That's what she would do you see; she would get her riches from receiving just one thrust of the penis."

"That is wicked!"

"And our compatriots would end up just like Mat."

The speaker refers to a person named Mat, a notorious crazy man who wears a beard and refuses to work, living instead by begging.

Similarly, two men were once discussing the crooked land deal being arranged by another man. They talked about how the affair would end in assassination if it came out publicly:

"If this is true, *kavron*, you'll see, he will end up like Lol C.; he will finish sitting behind a rock just like Lol C."

"It will come out, *kavron*, the whole affair won't be settled easily. This argument will be decided with bullets."

Lol C. was murdered in an ambush as a result of his alleged witchcraft activities.

In a slightly different way, gossip identifies its protagonists not only by past reputation but in terms of culturally defined roles. For example, an observer must be familiar with the cargo system and individual cargo-holders before he can understand references to cargo positions. And so on. The seemingly simple ability to talk about people presupposes considerable knowledge about who people are and how they may be described.

Similarly, to use nicknames speakers must have mastered considerable native lore. A man's nickname in Zinacantan often seizes on an outstanding feature of his past identity. Thus a man is called *komite* ("ejido committee") because he served for a long time on the committee responsible for overseeing lands gained under land-reform laws; he has retained a reputation for abilities in dealing with ladino authorities. Another man is called by the name *kapon* ("capon, castrated animal"). He inherited the name from his grandfather, whose older brother never married and who himself married late. The present generation has similar characteristics; the man in question married very late, and his brother is not married at all. In one gossip session everyone said: "Well, they are aptly named even now!"

Gossip often draws on its protagonists' personal associations and factional affiliations. Information about a person's friends, or about the groups with whom he is *jp'ej sjol xchi'uk* ("of one head with"; i.e., in agreement with) is significant only to someone who knows the factions,

who is familiar with peculiarities shared by certain groups. Thus, to say that a man is "there with the Valik family" is to imply where he stands on a number of disputed issues in the hamlet of Nabenchauk. And to remark that a boy is a good friend of one Antun K. condemns him as a rake, a licentious misuser of women. Identifying formulas in gossip are rarely neutral.

Nor is a man's gossip about someone else's factional ties or moral state likely to be disinterested (see fig. 3). Gossip reveals a set of relationships between narrator and protagonist. If the narrator is himself involved in a factional dispute with which the protagonist is also connected, we obviously expect the gossip to reflect whether the two are



Fig. 3

on the same or opposite sides. Moreover, gossip often draws an implicit moral contrast between the protagonist and the narrator. Some Zinacantecos take advantage of others' misfortunes or misdeeds to draw attention to their own successes and otherwise to give themselves airs.¹¹ Thus the man who criticized another for letting his son be disobedient went on to declare that if he himself were treated that way he would throw his sons out, let them find their own food. At a wedding, one Zinacanteco told me how the proceedings disintegrated whenever he wasn't there to tell everyone what to do. He said: "Old Petul is supposed to be the adviser, but he doesn't give orders the way I do."

Again, one ex-cargoholder used gossip about another cargoholder as a thin disguise for his own self-aggrandizement:

"In the middle of our circuit of all the *alfereces'* houses, we stopped to rest. Our musicians went to sleep. The time came for us to leave, and I said that we should wait. But Chep said that we should leave:

"We'll never finish our rounds if we don't go. We are already overdue at the next house."

"I said: 'But we can't leave without the musicians. We had better wait until they sober up.'

"But Chep wanted to go. He said he would play the violin and old Xun would play the guitar. He used to be a musician. I told them to wait. I said I would stay behind and bring along the musicians when they awoke.

"But why should you do that? You are supposed to be playing the part of the Jaguar. Let them sober up by themselves."

Eventually the musicians did awaken. They were angry to find the party of ritual entertainers gone. They decided to go home. Only after strenuous pleading did my informant convince them to return to the group and continue to play. The moral of the story, which I heard the man repeat four or five times to different people, was clear: "Chep, for all his good qualities, knows less than I do about the correct way to handle cargo duties."

I suggested above that a gossip story represents an "emic" description of behavior; but the fact that a gossip story originates with a particular narrator makes it more than an "emic" description. A narrator is a complex filtering mechanism; telling a story involves both selecting and construing events, motives, intentions, and so forth. We know from conflicting versions of the same story that people gossip about the same event for different reasons; and part of the task of understanding gossip is untangling these reasons.

Rush (1971) demonstrates how people on opposite sides of a major factional split in Nabenchauk tend to give almost unrecognizably different accounts of the events which led to particular manifestations of factional disputes. On a smaller scale, I followed the progress of a dispute between two men, Xun and Lol, centering on Xun's wife.

Here are two versions of the story, one from a friend of Lol, the other from a friend and ally of Xun.

Version 1 (from Lol's friend):

Lol stole Xun's wife. Before she was married, Lol courted her, since she was very pretty. But Xun elbowed in and was the first to get the consent of the girl's mother. Lol went to the girl to ask whether she would marry Xun. The girl replied that she must. So Lol decided to marry the girl's younger sister. But Xun was a bad husband. He did not provide his wife with corn; he was often drunk; he beat her. The wife and children suffered from hunger. Luckily the wife was industrious, and she wove clothes to sell, buying the thread from her own labor. She was unhappy, and finally she went to Lol (who was then an official at the town hall) to ask him to help her find work as a maid somewhere in San Cristóbal? She wanted to leave her husband. Lol thought: "Why should I send her off to San Cristóbal? I might as well marry her myself." So he sent her out to collect firewood, as his own wife was feeling ill. Soon Xun arrived and, as he came near the house, he caught a

glimpse of his wife there. He said to Lol: "Where is my wife? Have you seen her?"

Lol replied that he had not. "Why should she come to me?" he asked.

"Well," replied Xun, "I got drunk and scolded her, so she ran away."

"If you've lost your wife, don't come to me; go tell the presidente," was the reply.

Xun did take the case to the presidente, who summoned Lol. But Lol waited several hours before going to Zinacantan Center, and during this time Xun got very drunk and was no longer able to plead his case at the town hall. The presidente scolded Lol for not having admitted that Xun's wife had come to see him. But Lol said he was willing to marry the woman, although he had not himself solicited her attentions—she had, after all, been driven out by her husband's ill-treatment.

Xun tried to have Lol jailed, but since the whole affair was his own fault, he was unsuccessful.

Eventually, Lol's first wife grew angry and threatened to leave. Lol told her: "Go on if you want to." Now Lol just has the one stolen wife, the older sister (who is prettier anyway); and Xun just sits all alone at home.

Version 2

(from Xun's companion):

Xun's wife was always dissatisfied with her husband's bad luck, and she took it ill when he would drink with his friends and scold her. However, he never beat her. One day she simply took it into her head to run away. She went to Lol's house, where her sister lived, and asked to stay. Lol agreed to keep both women.

Soon Xun's wife said to Lol: "You must murder my husband; otherwise he will come to murder you."

Lol agreed, and he hired a friend named Petul to shoot Xun. Petul was a powerful *ejido* official with many lawyer friends in the ladino world.

Petul hid by the path and tried to ambush Xun. He shot at him twice and put a hole in Xun's shirt, although Xun managed to escape. Xun knew that since Lol was an official at the town hall he would have no success pleading his case in Zinacantan; so he went to the municipal town hall in San Cristóbal and had both Lol and Petul jailed for attempted murder. He brought in his shirt with the bullet hole as evidence, and he produced witnesses who had seen the attackers shooting and brandishing machetes.

However, after only a few hours in jail, both Lol and Petul managed to secure their releases. And they were walking the streets again that very same day.

That's how it is when you have money and friends. You can always bribe your way out of trouble.

Although in my fieldwork I did not systematically collect variant accounts of stories, I am aware that all the gossip I heard is likely to be as selective and as biased as these two versions of the same story clearly are. The stories must be understood as coming from particular narrators, each with his own interests and allegiances, and natives regularly reckon with such factors.

The identity of the narrator intrudes on gossip in another way. Different people are variously well-informed about the events in gossip; more interestingly, they may have different preoccupations. A man named Lukax was discovered in an adulterous relationship with the wife of a high town hall official. Men from his own hamlet, when telling the story, were most interested in the history of the liaison and in Lukax's previous evil tendencies. A man from another hamlet, who is incidentally extremely concerned with his own public image, related only the circumstances through which the guilty couple were punished and shamed by having to perform hard labor in the middle of a large fiesta. Similarly, the fact that a particular man is himself reputed to have fathered several illegitimate children and possessed several dozen mistresses lends extra significance to the large number of gossip stories he tells about such womanizing behavior in others.

The interaction between the storyteller and his audience involves considerable manipulation of ideas, opinions, and information (see fig. 4). Paine (1967) and Cox (1970) use the term "information-management"—after Goffman's "impression-management" (1959), which itself characterizes gossip sessions—to describe a narrator's use of gossip to influence his interlocutor's opinions, and, in fact, to control the other's access to information—either by giving information or by withholding it.

Clearly, the identity of the interlocutor will influence what a narrator says. One never gossips directly to one's victim; and one is reluctant to gossip to those who are in a position to blab.¹² Contrariwise, Zinacantecos at first seemed reluctant to gossip in front of me as an outsider; only when I showed some familiarity with the people in question (by letting slip some bit of gossip I had heard elsewhere) and when they were familiar with me would Zinacantecos decide it was possible to talk freely in my presence.

Gossip is plainly *aimed* at the interlocutor. People try, through gossip, to convince their interlocutors, to arouse their sympathies, or to recruit

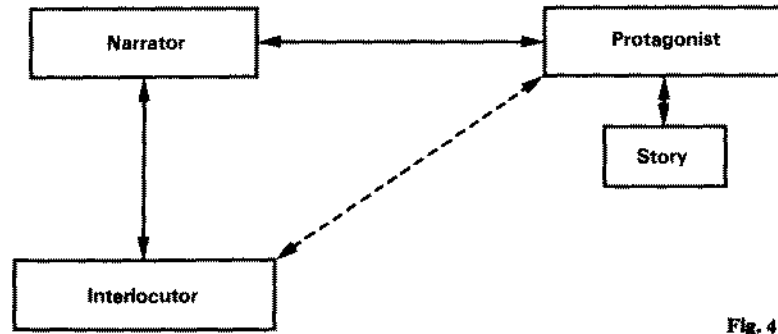


Fig. 4

their support. During the preparations for a wedding in the hamlet of Nabenchauk, members of both the groom's family and the bride's family took time to gossip with the godfather, who is ritually charged with the care of the souls of the couple (Vogt 1969, p. 216) and who will "mediate between the couple in any disputes that arise" (J. Collier 1970, p. 159). Before setting out for the church in Zinacantan Center the groom's family told the godfather how uncooperative the bride's father had been, how the mother of the bride had continually sent messages to her daughter (who had for several weeks been living with her fiancé), trying to lure her home on some pretext. They shook their heads and said, "This wedding is not going well. The relatives of the bride are too ill-tempered."

Later, while the godfather and the bride's family rode together to Zinacantan Center, the bride's father complained of the boy's misconduct. He alleged that the boy got angry with the girl and beat her whenever she went home to visit her mother and her sick grandmother.

The godfather tried to soothe both sides, urging them to wait until after the wedding to see how the couple got along.

The object of all this gossip was quite specific. The bride's family wanted to avoid a civil marriage and to have only the church wedding. If the girl eventually decided to leave her husband, she would be required to pay a large sum to expunge a civil marriage from the Zinacantan records. Without a civil marriage, she would be free simply to leave. The groom's family, on the other hand, planned to insist on a civil marriage to bind the girl. Therefore the bride's family gossiped to convince the godfather not to insist on the civil marriage after the church ceremony. (In this case, the godfather's own interest was to make the marriage permanent; though he listened sympathetically to the pleas of both sides, he nonetheless made sure that the civil marriage occurred.)

Ironically, when this particular marriage fell apart after two years, gossip was again aimed at the godfather, but the strategies of both sides

had backfired. The wife had left her husband, complaining of mistreatment and frequent beatings, of never being allowed to visit her mother. The man claimed that he was glad to see her go, that she had been lazy and ill-tempered with his mother. Several points of contention festered during a year-long separation. The woman returned in secret one afternoon and abducted her year-old daughter whom she had left behind when she ran away and who was being cared for by the man's mother. But the wife was unable to regain her own clothes and possessions (weaving and cooking implements). In turn the husband accused the woman of having stolen not only the little girl but also some cash which had been in the house. He accused the woman of having a lover, who had never ceased to meet with her during their married life.

The godfather had the duty to try to reconcile the pair. The wife's family now argued to him that the boy was acting badly, was refusing to care for his own child; that he had robbed the girl of her personal belongings and had never made a proper attempt to reconcile the matter by approaching his father-in-law in a formal way. They urged the godfather to force the boy to settle the matter.

The boy gossiped to the godfather about the wife's wretched behavior and retold the rumours about her having a secret lover. Moreover, he disclosed confidentially that he could never live with the woman again, that she had accused him of having a bent penis. He wanted to enlist the godfather's help in dissolving the civil marriage (that he and his group had insisted upon at the marriage ceremony!).

In the end the godfather withdrew entirely from the matter, saying:

"If you plan to reconcile your differences and begin living together again, then I will help you. But why should I stand before the presidente as godfather of your marriage and be shamed if you divorce one another once and for all?"

Because of his formal duties and responsibilities as godfather he was able to accept the gossip from neither side, despite the sympathies he might have felt as a private citizen. He was forced to be a quite unsatisfactory interlocutor, neither assenting to nor openly opposing the moral interpretations of events suggested by the gossip of one side or the other. (In fact, as the divorce began to seem more and more inevitable, the godfather actively sought to avoid conversation with either side.)

Gossip clearly propagates factions in Zinacantan; much of the informal talk between Zinacanteco men who are in San Cristóbal for business purposes has to do with the latest developments on issues that are the focus of disagreement and hostility. Recently, such factional issues have included the introduction of (and payment for) schools, electricity, all-weather roads, potable water, and so forth (cf. Rush 1971; Haviland 1974b).

Zinacanteco narrative style, and the nature of the interaction between narrator and interlocutor, gives gossip its power as catalyst of factional disputes. Perhaps gossip can be said to “reaffirm cultural values” in the sense that in gossip events are discussed and their outcomes rationalized.¹³ But this is more than reaffirmation: the narrator tries to manipulate his interlocutor’s opinions; he not only makes statements with which the interlocutor will necessarily agree, but he actively solicits agreement and sympathy. The patterned responses of an interlocutor, the interjections and grunts between the narrator’s phrases, are morally charged. Far from being merely neutral, they express agreement, surprise, acceptance, or discomfort over the narrator’s conclusions. The skillful gossip appeals selectively to rulelike propositions to create and deliver the desired impression.

Moreover, a prudent gossip often elicits as much information from his interlocutor as he himself is prepared to divulge (if not more). A woman in Nabenchauk whom I had frequent occasion to visit always grilled me about the doings of my neighbors—people whose affairs she knew well enough herself—simply to discover what my reactions were and how much I knew. She delighted in scoring points against her rivals by revealing to me details about them of which I was unaware. She also tried to elicit allegiance from me, at the expense of other Zinacantecos with whom I had some relationship. (She wove my clothes, and she constantly fished for declarations of the form: “I ask you to weave this for me because my *comadre* X cannot weave as well as you!”)

Similarly, during the Who’s Who sessions for one hamlet, a particular old man who knew the histories of all concerned often feigned ignorance. He could thereby hear someone else’s gossip and observe someone else’s opinions.

Finally, I may extend my diagram to include the salient groups to which protagonist, narrator, and interlocutor belong and to relate the particular story recounted in a single gossip session to the entire “cultural code” which “governs” behavior (see fig. 5). One might study what groups can (or commonly do) gossip with what groups about what other groups. That is, in the most general sense, gossip can be understood as a phenomenon taking place between individuals who belong to groups,¹⁴ just as the particular transgressions of individuals (which provide the material for gossip) can only be fully understood as departures from some general standards of appropriateness. The striking thing about gossip is its absorptive capacity; it contains clues to an unlimited set of ethnographic facts. Despite particular uses to which we put it—as, for example, the survey of the subjects of gossip stories in the next chapter—we are able to master gossip as an activity only when we have, essentially, mastered the whole culture.

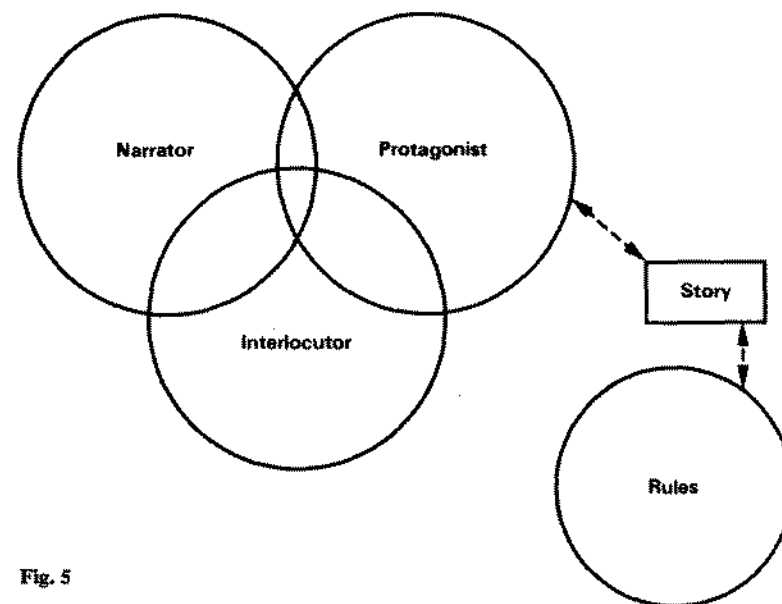


Fig. 5