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## (Mis)understanding and Obtuseness: “Ethnolinguistic Borders” in a Miniscule Speech Community

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*Building on two of Gumperz’s foundational concerns—multilingual speech communities and linguistically linked intercultural miscommunication—I extend (or perhaps reduce) a couple of Gumperzian concepts to an almost limiting case: a single extended family in Chiapas, Mexico, where three deaf siblings interact with their hearing relatives of three generations. Here a spoken Mayan language (along with a little Spanish) is used side by side with a spontaneously emerging homesign or sign language. Linguistic tension emerges from misunderstandings and failures of communication in even this tiny speech community, and the complex pattern of interaction between its members suggests analogues of ethnolinguistic divisions, here even between siblings or parents and children, as well as nascent ideologies of language, mind, and identity familiar from much larger and more diversified speech situations. In particular I examine the crucial nexus of linguistically mediated social relations between the first deaf individual in the family and four categories of others: her parents, her deaf siblings, her hearing siblings, and her young (hearing) child. [homesign, Chiapas, micro-speech community, language ideology, misunderstanding, miscommunication]*

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It is a privilege to help celebrate John Gumperz’s long and illustrious career by elaborating, as he did throughout his life, on the variety of human languages and the situations in which people use them. For many of us not fortunate enough to be among his students, Gumperz’s ideas came to life first via seminal articles that are still among those canonical readings we ask students to absorb. I had the good fortune to count him as a mentor, starting in the 1980s and thereafter in various shared haunts, from Konstanz and Berlin, to Nijmegen and California. Many themes of his work—from the composition of groups whose speech varies systematically according to socially defined criteria, arising from his earliest research in rural India (Gumperz 1958) and Norway (Gumperz 1964), to definitional forays (“speech community” [Gumperz 1968], “contextualization” [Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz 1978]) that set the agenda for interactional sociolinguistics, to foundational studies of code-switching (Blom and Gumperz 1972) and to those impediments to “mutual understanding” (Gumperz 1992) that arise from contrasting expectations about speech—inform everything most of us still seek to learn about language. In this brief paper my topic will touch rather less on misunderstanding than on deliberate obtuseness, even where one might not expect to find it. And I will make the perhaps surprising claim that internal divisions within communities of speakers of the sort that Gumperz characterized throughout his career can also

afflict even the tiniest of speech—or in this case "sign"—communities, with only a handful of members.

### Zinacantec Family Homesign or "Z"

I have been studying language and social life in a Tzotzil (Mayan) speaking community in Chiapas, Mexico, for many years. As part of living in one village off and on for long periods of time, I have acquired kin-like ritual relationships with several families. Although I have known the deaf children of one of my *compadres* all their lives, only a few years ago did I start work on the first-generation manual communication system developing in their extended family in Zinacantán. Indeed, because these deaf children have always been reluctant to sign in the presence of anyone outside their immediate household, it was probably only because of my long-standing relationship with the family that they ultimately agreed to let me study their communicative practices at all. "Zinacantec Family Homesign," hereafter simply Z, is the invention of three deaf siblings, their hearing sister, and two nephews—none of whom have met other deaf people or had exposure to any established sign language.

The miniature genealogy in Fig. 1 shows the central people in the signing community of Z. Jane (a pseudonym, like all personal names used here for the signers), the oldest, was the only deaf person in the village for the first six years of her life. When her brother Frank was born the visual communicative system, or "homesign" (Goldin-Meadow 2003), that Jane had already worked out with her caregivers over that time was immediately available to him. The Tzotzil word that applies to deaf people like Jane and Frank is *uma`*—"dumb" or unable to talk. Neither Jane nor Frank ever learned speech; their younger sister Terry started out the same way until, around the age of 3 she suddenly started to spout fluent Tzotzil, as though until then she simply couldn't be bothered to talk at all. The youngest brother Will, also deaf, was

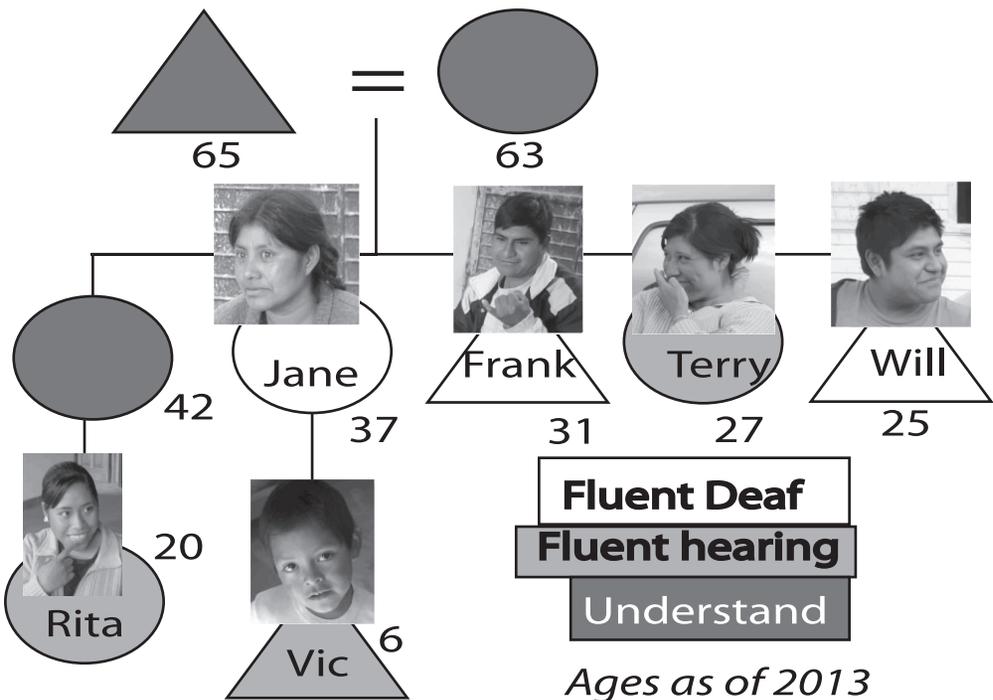


Figure 1  
A simplified genealogy of the family of signers

thus born into a household with three older siblings—the oldest of whom was 13—who were already using manual signs to communicate. Later a niece, Rita, whose mother was abandoned by her husband and returned to live with her parents, arrived as an infant into the household where her nearest age-mates were signers. Rita accordingly grew up bilingual in spoken Tzotzil and in signed Z. Finally, added to the mix was young Vic, Jane's son, hearing and in many ways a typical Tzotzil-speaking child, who started life with Z as his first language and mother-tongue, as it were.

I remember Jane as a very shy Zinacantec child, more retiring even than most other little girls—especially around outsized *gringo* visitors—growing up in a household of much stronger-willed older sisters. She was sent to primary school (in those days, a Spanish-language immersion school which served a population of basically monolingual Tzotzil children) with other little girls her age but lasted less than a week. After that she was put to work caring for her younger siblings, and later in a variety of unskilled employments from making tortillas for other, better-off families, to balling acrylic yarn for use with back-strap looms. Frank was outgoing and of sunny disposition, seemingly quite unselfconscious about his deafness, always eager and helpful around adults. He, too, took on odd jobs as a child, and eventually learned to be a skilled mason and a willing *ch'omil*, or helper for ritual office holders. Will, though *p'ij* “clever” and communicatively insistent, was deemed by his father to be *pukuj*, “ill-tempered.” He was and remains smart but moody, a somewhat solitary individual, closest to his immediately older sister and brother, but with limited social relationships outside the family.

During the years that the deaf siblings were young, together with Lourdes de León I was engaged in a long-term project on spatial language and conceptualization in Tzotzil. My *compadre's* household was one of several in which we filmed interaction, including pseudo-experimental elicitation tasks with young children, for which the deaf kids' father was a principal assistant. Although I was aware at the time (when linguistic studies of the then newly emerging Nicaraguan Sign Language [see, for example, Kegl, Senghas, and Coppola 1999] were beginning to appear) that the possibility that the deaf children, their playmates, and caregivers might develop their own sign language merited detailed attention, given my total ignorance of sign linguistics I found the prospect of trying to study it impossibly daunting. Nonetheless, there are tiny videotaped glimpses of their interactions in the early 1990s: Frank, helping his father or bringing him his hat, even making suggestions to participants in “space game” experiments (de León 1991) although never properly taking part himself; Will, as a toddler also trying to get his father's attention, sometimes getting whacked on the head for his trouble by a teenaged Jane, who was charged with keeping him out of mischief.

### Micro “Speech” Communities

The entire community of Z signers is virtually coextensive with my *compadre's* extended household, which occasionally includes not only the four children and two grandchildren who are “native” signers of Z, but also his other daughters, their children and also their grandchildren. Because the deaf siblings largely refused to sign in the presence of non-kin, the boundary between family members and outsiders also mechanically marked the effective communicative limits of the signing community, at least until the deaf siblings grew to adulthood. Although the situation is changing as Frank and to a lesser extent Will have sought employment and friendships outside the household, the world in which the Z signers communicate coincides largely with the family itself.

Another significant division in the household is between those who themselves sign and those who do not. Until her recent death, my *comadre* effectively ran the household, assigning domestic tasks and usually issuing obligatory suggestions for gainful employment to her children and co-resident grandchildren. She barked directives in Tzotzil to all comers, and Jane, exceptionally—and probably as a result of her

early childhood as the only deaf member of the household—seemed able to lip-read many of them, often relaying them in sign to her brothers. The older sisters only rarely try to sign with their deaf siblings, preferring simple gestures and simultaneous spoken Tzotzil.

The household members also diverge rather strikingly in how much they appear to be able to follow the signers' communication. Dad, for example, tries hard to make himself understood, with expansive gestures and somewhat overloud Tzotzil, but he is woefully unable to interpret even simple signed conversations, relying on his hearing daughters to clue him in. Mom was much better at understanding what signers said to one another, although she also used to turn to Terry or Rita for detailed glosses. Recently, Jane's young son Vic has—as they say in Tzotzil—*yul xa xch'ulel* "had his soul arrive"; that is, he has begun to show signs of common sense, and he is more and more frequently asked to interpret for the deaf signers, especially his mother. Both Terry and Rita confidently participate as both interlocutors and translators with the deaf signers, although even they are sometimes bamboozled if not by direct conversation at least by filmed interactions which I have occasionally asked them to help me gloss.

There is also an obvious division, with strong communicative correlates—for example, in mechanisms for regulating turn taking—between the hearing and the deaf members of the family. The deaf signers have a repertoire of interpretable vocalizations which they use with hearing interlocutors. There are less obvious boundaries between the four deaf siblings, who are remarkably close as a group, and the younger or more distant relatives, most of whom have spent much of their lives living outside the household and thus do not partake of the unusually broad range of "common ground" that Jane, Frank, Will and to a slightly lesser extent Terry share with one another because of their special biographical closeness.

There are also other special bonds and structural positions within the Z "speech" community. For example, the two brothers, often thrown together for work and thus spending long periods together away from the rest of the family, are clearly the most practiced at using Z as a multipurpose and multicontext vehicle for conversation. (Terry, indeed, insists that they have a *secret* way of talking that uses just the face without the hands, to which they sometimes resort when they don't want others to understand them.) Their conversations seem, impressionistically, to be the most fluent, the most rapid, and the most complex of all spontaneously occurring Z discourse. Jane and her son, too, have a special relationship that incorporates two conflicting asymmetries: that Jane is the mom and Vic the child; but that Vic can hear and talk, whereas his mother cannot but knows that he can. The most multivalent signer is Terry—third of the four youngest siblings, perfectly fluent in both Z and spoken Tzotzil, still—in her mid-20s—an unmarried woman and thus a somewhat subordinate member of the household, but also the main conduit in and out of Z for non- or nonfluent signers (including me).

### Portable Signs

My research on Z as a first-generation spontaneous sign language began with its structure: evidence of systematic grammar. For present purposes I will present only one piece of this emerging structure: what I have been calling "portable" signs—those sufficiently emancipated from the particularities of the speech situation (and from the vast shared biography among the members of this single household) to be easily movable between different contexts. Where do such signs come from, and what produces and guarantees their conventionalization? And more pointedly, who makes it happen?

Of such portable signs in Z, I will limit myself to the seemingly quite simple domain of common nouns, and in fact I will present just one characteristic example, "the Z sign for 'chicken.'" (The scare quotes here are meant to call cautionary attention both to the definite article—who is to say that there is just one such sign? how can

we know?—and to the putative English gloss—how can one characterize adequately what a sign denotes?) Many Z signs—indeed, many if not most conventional signs in sign languages around the world—are built around a common trope, what Adam Kendon (1980) calls “enactment” and Jürgen Streeck (2009) dubs “gesturecraft,” or the visual exploitation of common human patterns of (manual) action to characterize the world.

One of the pseudo-experimental eliciting techniques I inflicted on the Z signers at the beginning of the research was a kind of photo-matching game in which one signer was given a picture to describe to interlocutors who were then instructed to pick the presumed stimulus picture from an array of similar photos.

For example, when Will was asked to describe a photograph of a hen standing in a barnyard to his interlocutors, he appeared to sign CHICKEN by means of a stylized pantomime (Fig. 2) plainly based on the way Zinacantec villagers typically kill chickens: with a sharp jerk of the hands, one holding the chicken’s body and the other its head, to break the animal’s neck. Note that Will, signing, even gazes at his hands, as if observing himself killing the virtual bird. He also typically adds an “effortful face” to the performance (seen more clearly in Fig. 3 below), suggesting that breaking a chicken’s neck in this way is neither easy nor particularly agreeable, even for an adept young man like himself.

Let me make two linguistic observations about a Z sign like this one. First, it is polysemous in a familiar way. The suggested gloss CHICKEN tells us rather little



Figure 2  
Will signs CHICKEN



Figure 3  
Will’s “turkey”



Figure 4  
Will performs "gobble, puff"



Figure 5  
The size-shape specifier Will used to describe the hen

about the sign's full denotative range, which seems to have more to do with what sorts of entities receive this kind of treatment at Zinacantec hands than with any a priori notion of "natural kinds." Thus, for example, Will also describes a drawing of an adult male turkey with a similar lexical sign (Fig. 3).

In this case he also elaborated on the sign, modifying it as it were with two further signs which I gloss as representing a turkey's typical gobbling noise/motion and the somewhat comical strutting and puffing out of feathers that constitutes part of its optimistic mating display (Fig. 4).

Second, in addition to being polysemous, signs like Will's "neck-breaking" pantomime illustrate the apparent emergence of a nascent syntax for nominal expressions in Z. Signs that seem to act as simple nouns—often, as in this case, depicting what they stand for via some selected bodily enactment—are usually performed together with more "grammatical" elements. Will's "things-we-do-this-to" or "things-we-kill-like-so" sign, for example, was preceded by another sign—a pair of cupped hands facing each other (Fig. 5)—which in sign linguistics might typically be dubbed a specifier, used seemingly to indicate the rough size and shape of the chicken in question by showing how it might be held in the hands.

To demonstrate that Z has conventionalized both the lexical item for "chicken" or "domestic bird" and the rough syntax, let me show how Will described the picture in Fig. 6 which depicts two baby chicks, animals that even the most hardened Zinacantec does not ordinarily dispatch by breaking their necks.



Figure 6  
A stimulus picture

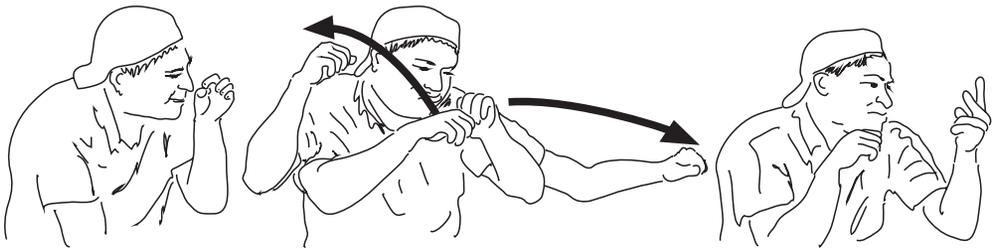


Figure 7  
"Two chicks": SPECIFIER:tiny, chicken, two

Will first produced a size/shape specifier to show the miniature dimensions (holding closely outstretched thumb and forefinger in front of squinted eyes), then the neck-breaking sign for "chicken" (albeit with a somewhat stylized or reduced jerk compared to that in Fig. 2 above), followed by the number "two," as in Fig. 7.

The full range is beyond the scope of this short chapter, but there are many size/shape specifiers in Z. Most of them use the hands to show some aspect of how an entity is typically handled, thus conveying information about its dimensionality, aspects of its weight or heft, as well as other tactile or haptic properties. Z also has more general specifiers—for self-propelling animals, for human beings (using their relative height to distinguish adults from children), and so forth—and these elements can be used alone when context permits, or further specified by a following nominal "characterizing" sign, sometimes also further qualifying signs, quantifiers, and so on. The normal syntagm for such nominal expressions is as in Will's "two chicks" utterance:

Specifier (+ Characterizer (+ Qualifier/ Quantifier\*))

Returning to the characterizing "neck-jerk" sign, its use by different members of the family in both elicited and natural discourse suggests that it is simply the normal Z sign for "chicken" (or "domestic fowl"). Will and Terry together describe a different stimulus picture, of a young hen pecking in the dirt, by producing the noun almost in unison (Fig. 8), followed by a further description of what the chicken is doing (Fig. 9).

The noun also surfaces in less contrived, more spontaneous natural discourse. For example, Will identifies a picture of a church by telling his interlocutors that it is just around the corner from a restaurant where they have eaten roasted chicken. He describes the latter first by signing chicken and then illustrating how the bird is roasted on a turning spit (Figs. 10 and 11).



Figure 8  
Will and Terry sign CHICKEN in unison



Figure 9  
...and then sign that the hen is scratching in the dirt for food

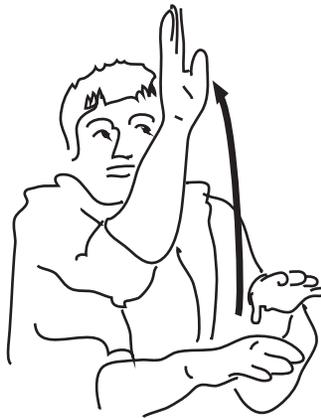


Figure 10  
Will signs CHICKEN again



**Figure 11**  
... and then shows how it was roasted on a rotating spit

In another spontaneous conversation, videotaped when the signers were taking a break between eliciting sessions, Will shows his sister a scratch on his wrist received when, as he tells her, he tried to throw a recalcitrant chicken back into its enclosure (Figs 12 and 13).



**Figure 12**  
Will signs an animal flying up and over a fence



**Figure 13**  
...and clarifies that it pecked him, and that it was a chicken

### Jane's Minimal Chicken

Recall that Gumperz argued in some of his earliest work that "the distribution of minor speech variants . . . [is] not idiosyncratic . . . but . . . patterned and socially determined" (Gumperz 1958:668). There is something more interesting here than simply a conventionalization or normalization of Zinacantec patterns of action in the creation of a signed lexicon. Even in such a tiny (and such a young) speech community, there is variation in the Z signing, even at the level of individual lexemes. Given the differing linguistic biographies already sketched, and thinking about insights central to Gumperz's work about speech and identity—for example, his early observation that, even in a small Indian village, "life is not a single whole, but rather a broad grouping of sets of distinct relationships signaled by differences in linguistic and other modes of behavior" (Gumperz 1964:148)—this is perhaps less surprising than it might seem.

In particular, Jane typically signs "chicken" in a way that is different from her brothers and the hearing signers. Her version clearly suggests something about the ontogenesis of both individual signs in a nascent sign language like Z, and of the mini-syntax we just saw in Will's rendition of "two chicks." Consider first how Jane describes another chicken photo as part of a picture-matching elicitation task. After glancing briefly at the photo, she performs the sign shown in Fig. 14.



Figure 14  
Jane's minimal chicken

Her sign appears to incorporate only the "size shape specifier" part of Will's more complex performance, as she indicates with the configuration of her hands how she might hold a chicken like the one she wants to denote. Her interlocutors appear to have no difficulty understanding her and immediately pick the matching photograph from a printed array, as Jane looks away from what they are doing (Fig. 15) and apparently repeats the sign to herself, opening and closing her hands three times in the same configuration.



Figure 15  
... repeated three times "to herself."

Of course, a limitation of artificial picture matching tasks is that they are heavily constrained compared to fully fledged ordinary conversation, where referential hints are provided by the unfolding discourse itself rather than by deliberately constructed sets of contrasting stimuli. It is striking, then, that in normal talk, Jane's sign for "chicken" is consistent with her descriptions in the elicitation tasks. Here is a fragment of a spontaneous conversation—about the garden at home—that Jane had with one of her sisters when both were minding a vegetable stand in a nearby town. (The other sister was not living at home at the time, and Jane had come to town to help out for the day.)

Jane told her sister that some plants at home (in reconstructing the conversation it is unclear whether she is talking about flowers or green vegetables) had not been growing as fast as expected because chickens were eating them. Figures 16–21 provide a schematic version of what she says. (The "sign abbreviations" or putative glosses given here should not be taken too seriously.)

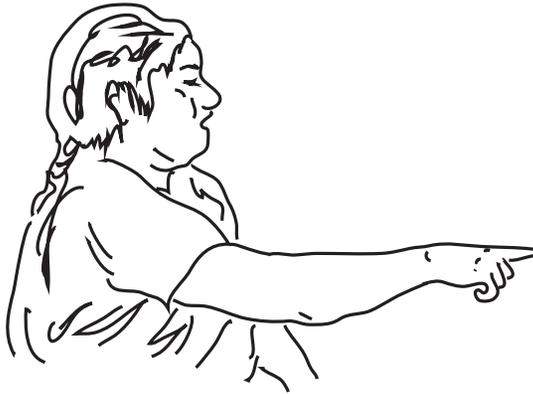


Figure 16  
(Plants) THIS HIGH



Figure 17  
BEING EATEN



**Figure 18**  
**(by) CHICKENS**



**Figure 19**  
**EATING**



**Figure 20**  
**THERE (at home)**



**Figure 21**  
EATEN UP

Analyzing how to parse the syntax of this entire utterance would take us far beyond the relatively straightforward issues of conventionalized “portable” signs which concern me in this brief paper. It is at least worth noting that the signs for EAT, articulated entirely with the mouth except in the final sign in Fig. 21, seem to combine with nominal arguments (either logical patients or agents) with which they are co-articulated. Judging by the grouping and rhythm of the signs and the major breaks in the utterance—when the hands either are held still or return to at least a partial rest position—Jane’s whole utterance consists of several linked phrases, roughly glossed as follows: “The plants are only this high. Eaten, by chickens, who eat them. Over there at home. They’re all eaten up.”

For present purposes, the crucial thing to notice is that Jane’s reference to chickens is again accomplished with a sign that resembles just Will’s size-shape specifier, without the neck-breaking jerk. Using familiar principles of historical linguistic reconstruction, one can hypothesize that Jane’s lexeme is the archaic form: derived perhaps from her own initial attempts, as the single deaf child in a hearing universe, to give consistent and interpretable signed names to familiar things in her environment—chickens being prominent exemplars, whose catching and carrying would have doubtless been part of Jane’s domestic chores. Whether or not Jane felt the need for further lexical specification, it seems clear that individuals who joined this nascent sign community later did invent ways to specify further what sort of chicken-sized object they wanted to refer to, leading to the sort of specifier-noun sequence seen earlier.

In any case, Jane’s interlocutor in the conversational extract just described seemed to have no difficulty understanding her, and a different hearing signer also easily glossed the interaction when we later transcribed it, although she had not been present during the original filmed interaction.

### **Normativity: Vic’s Simple “Chicken” Corrected**

Here ideologically loaded mini “ethnolinguistic” divisions begin to rear their ugly heads. Young Vic, brought up by his Mom, frequently also produces just Jane’s simplified form to sign “chicken.” In one of the first formal eliciting sessions in which he took part, when he was around four years old, Vic described a picture containing a chicken in just this way. His uncles gently corrected him, albeit in a good-natured indulgent way. First Frank commented with a laugh on the sign Vic had used (Fig. 22).



Figure 22  
Frank remarks laughingly on Vic's sign for CHICKEN

Then, with a mock-angry frown, Frank made a critical vocalization to attract the boy's attention (Fig. 23), and demonstrated how, according to him, the sign *should* be made: with a specifier (Fig. 24) and the neck-jerk (Fig. 25).



Figure 23  
Frowning, Frank calls for Vic's attention



Figure 24  
The specifier



Figure 25  
The neck-jerk

The boy, watching carefully, in turn responded to the prescriptive teaching. Duplicating both the specifier (Fig. 26—note that the ethnographer, on whose lap Vic is sitting, seems also to be mimicking Frank's "effortful face" which, for the two deaf brothers, seems to be part of the proper articulation of the "chicken" sign), identical to what he had produced spontaneously in his original description, Vic then performed a somewhat slack version of the neck-jerk (Fig. 27), which made everyone laugh.



Figure 26  
Vic's reperformed sign, starting with the specifier



Figure 27  
Vic adds a slack neck-jerk

Evidently intent to have Vic reproduce the correct "effortful" articulation, Frank repeats his demonstration of what the little boy "ought to have said" with an extra dynamic to the neck-jerk (Fig. 28, note that he gazes intently at Vic to direct his metalinguistic point clearly)—a signed analogue of correcting his nephew's pronunciation.



Figure 28  
Frank's repeated demonstration

Indeed, it appears that the entire interaction, though playful, was an occasion for linguistic reflection. Slightly later, when the group had moved on to a different set of stimulus photographs, there was a brief break in the eliciting session when several of the signers were briefly called away to another part of the house compound. Frank was caught on the videotape signing CHICKEN, as it were, to himself. Indeed, he appears to rehearse the normative citation form of the sign twice, while at least part of his attention was evidently elsewhere (Figs. 29–30).



Figure 29  
Frank rehearses the sign for CHICKEN to himself . . .



Figure 30  
and repeats it while attending elsewhere

### Jane: Correction by Suggestion

Sadly, the nascent normative ideologies of “correct Z signing” are not always so good-natured. On a different occasion, Jane gave a slightly more fulsome description of a stimulus video in which a small white chicken runs across the yard. She again used just an apparent size-shape specifier to refer to the chicken (Fig. 31), but she went on to sign RUN (Fig. 32), and then began what I call a “color search” in which she tried to find an exemplar of the chicken’s color, looking here at her own blouse (Fig. 33), which had a white pattern woven into a dark blue background.



Figure 31  
CHICKEN



Figure 32  
RUN



Figure 33  
WHITE

Frank had no trouble selecting the appropriate match from an array of possibilities. But he went on to make fun of her lexical choice: with a ridiculing smile he demonstrated to his sister Terry (who was seated to the side waiting for her turn to participate) what he thought Jane *should* have said (Fig. 34).



Figure 34  
Frank's correction of Jane

### Correction by Condemnation

The metalinguistic remarks can also have a still nastier edge to them. On yet another occasion, Jane described a slightly different stimulus photo (in which a chicken walks past some partially cleaned ears of corn) with the following sequence of signs (Figs. 35–40).



Figure 35  
Jane: CHICKEN



**Figure 36**  
**STANDING?**



**Figure 37**  
**THERE (on the computer screen)**



**Figure 38**  
**THERE (at the bottom of the image? on the ground?)**



**Figure 39**  
**ELOTE (corn-on-the-cob)**



Figure 40  
Jane: CHICKEN

If one understands Jane's signs at Figs. 35 and 40 as her conventional lexeme for "chicken" rather than as a general size-shape specifier, the denotational content of her description seems reasonably clear: "a chicken, standing, with corncobs (Figs. 42–45) on the ground." This time, exceptionally, the brothers had a hard time finding a matching picture, and they asked her for clarification (Fig. 41).



Figure 41  
Will puzzles over the photos, and Frank asks for clarification

Jane provided it, starting this time not with the chicken but with the corncob.



Figure 42  
CORNCOB



Figure 43  
THROWN DOWN



Figure 44  
CHICKEN



Figure 45  
WALKING

Finally the brothers figured out what picture she meant, but this time, their suggested correction was demonstratively more critical. Will aimed an accusatory finger at Jane, while Frank, with escalating apparent grumpiness, offered her ever more insistent corrected formulations (Figs. 46 and 47).



**Figure 46**  
Will criticizes Jane's signing, and Frank corrects it



**Figure 47**  
A second correction

Frank ended his metalinguistic tantrum with a power-laden affective performance, directing an extremely annoyed look at Jane (Fig. 48), demonstrating an even more exaggerated neck-jerk (Fig. 49), then sharing his anger with the assembled audience of signers (Fig. 50) and shaking his head, eyes closed in exasperation (Fig. 51).



**Figure 48**  
Angry look



Figure 49  
Demonstrative correction



Figure 50  
Annoyed looking around for allies



Figure 51  
Head-shaking with closed eyes

### Iconization: Language (In)Competence

As should be obvious, nascent linguistic ideology of an all-too-familiar kind apparently surrounds even this level of mini variation in a micro-speech community with only a handful of members. Partly with this in mind, I have gone back to my very first videotapes of the adult Z signers with new eyes. When I first tried to transcribe and

analyze the mealtime interaction I filmed the day in 2008 when I went to ask my *compadre* whether his now adult deaf children might be interested in working on a project to document their communication system, my main interest was finding "linguistic structure," as evidence that Z was a "real language." I now realize that, following Gumperz, I could have been looking for linguistic-ideological evidence instead. The processes Gal and Irvine (2000) call "iconization" were already hard at work right before my (then incompetently blind) eyes.

For example, Frank mocks his older sister for not knowing the prices of things. Jane has proposed that as a visitor I be offered a hospitable drink, and she asks her father for money to buy a bottle of soda. But she doesn't know how much it costs (Figs. 52–57).

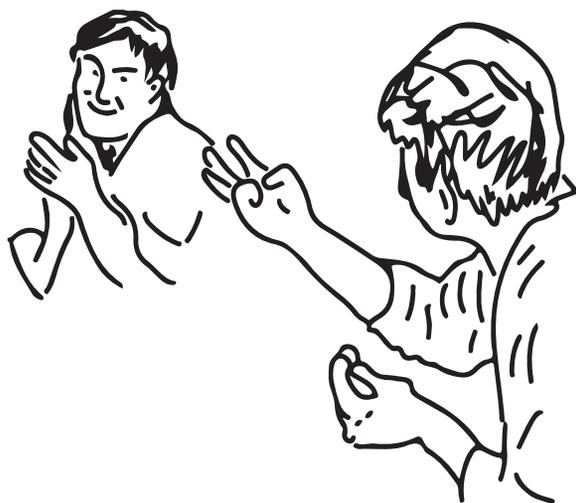


Figure 52  
Frank to Jane: HOW MUCH (does it cost)?



Figure 53  
YOU (should know)



Figure 54  
Jane to Frank: (How much is) a BIG (bottle of soda)?



Figure 55  
"Don't ask me!"



Figure 56  
Frank to Jane: HOW MUCH?



Figure 57  
DUNNO

After challenging Jane to say how much money she needs to buy the soda—a task she somewhat abashedly fails—Frank addresses the others present to criticize her for not knowing “how to count,” as he puts it (Figs. 58–60).



Figure 58  
SHE (doesn't know)



Figure 59  
"... (how to) COUNT."



Figure 60  
"SHE (is useless)."

Slightly later, unbidden, he demonstrates that he himself *does* know how much soda costs (Figs. 61–64).



Figure 61  
"TWELVE (pesos)"



Figure 62  
“(for a) SMALL (bottle)”



Figure 63  
“(and for a) BIG (one)”

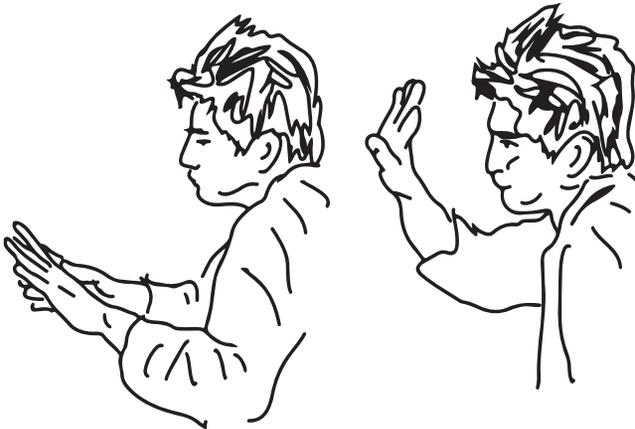


Figure 64  
“FOURTEEN”

### Bad Language = Bad Person?

Furthermore the mutual iconic projection of language ability onto personality and responsibility goes further. Frank immediately segues into criticizing Jane as a deficient mother, by analogy, I now believe, with what he sees as her deficient language. He mentions that earlier in the day Jane's son, the 10-month-old baby Vic, had been crying. But Jane was asleep (Fig. 65).



Figure 65  
Frank criticizes Jane for sleeping

Frank tried to awaken her (note that for his utterance he uses Will as a proxy direct object, Fig. 66), but without success (Fig. 67).



Figure 66  
Frank: "I tried to wake her."



Figure 67  
Frank: "But I couldn't."

He points an accusatory finger again at Jane (Fig. 68), and ends the anecdote with another exasperated shake of the head, exactly as we have seen him do elsewhere in criticizing her manner of signing.

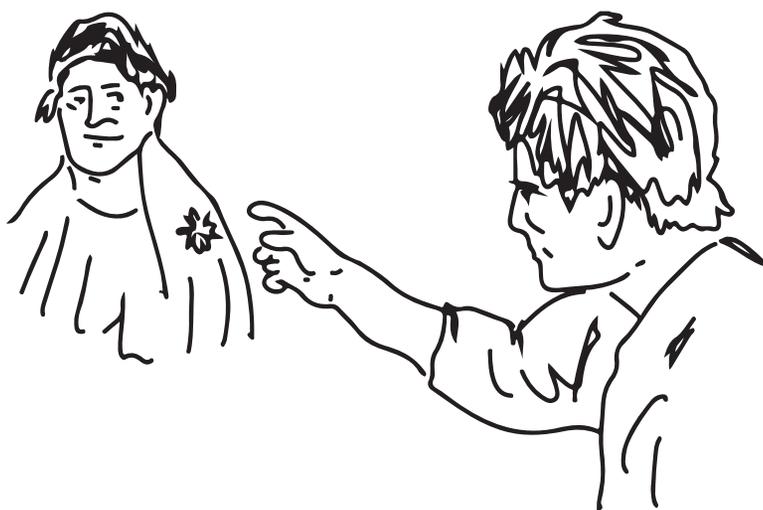


Figure 68  
Exasperated pointing and critique

Sadly even this tiny sign community has isolated Jane as the least capable person in its midst, the "dumb" deaf-and-dumb person, stigmatized by the stigmatized, at the bottom end of every asymmetry of which she partakes, unable or unwilling to sign properly, and even suspect as a mother. This, then, is my final point. Despite Jane's seniority and what seem to me her remarkable communicative skills across a wide range of practical contexts, even her son Vic—raised during much of his life by hearing aunts so that he would be sure to learn to speak Tzotzil—himself often refers to her as *chich me`el*—"a foolish (or linguistically incoherent) old lady" who cannot understand what you tell her. John Gumperz spent much of the latter part of his

career writing about miscommunication and misunderstanding, linked to differences in “contextualization practices” across dialects, languages, and cultures, and in “institutionalized networks of relationships” where “their acquisition is constrained by economic, political, and ideological forces that serve to minoritize large sectors of the population” (Gumperz 1996:402). Z illustrates almost the limiting case of such forces writ small. In this tiny first-generation speech community, whose standards of conventionalization and well-formedness are still in the making, we discover a particularly poignant kind of Gumperzian “crosstalk” where one might least expect—or at least hope—to find it.

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