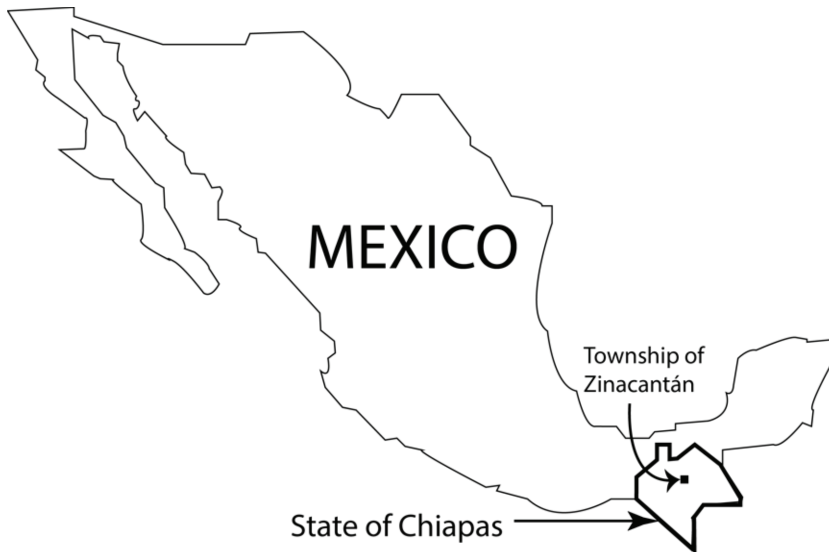


Zinacantec Family Homesign (or "Z")¹

John B. Haviland

In 2008, I began intensive research with the deaf members of a family I have known well over the roughly fifty years of my ongoing ethnographic work with Tzotzil (Mayan) speakers in the highland village of Zinacantán, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico (see Map 1). "Z"—my abbreviation for Zinacantec Family Homesign—has emerged in a single extended Tzotzil-speaking family. It has developed among three deaf siblings, their hearing sister and niece, and several hearing children in a second signing generation. According to their own accounts, the members of the family have never interacted with any other deaf people. Z does not, therefore, draw on any previous sign language, although it appears to make some use of visible gestures frequent in Tzotzil conversations among hearing household members and their village-mates. A complete bibliography of publications to date about Z appears below.



Map 1: Location of the Z signers in Mexico.

¹ Thanks are due to the editors for suggesting and providing a template for this brief sociolinguistic sketch; and to Elena Collavin for helpful suggestions.

The *municipio* or township of Zinacantán is one of a dozen or so predominately Tzotzil-speaking communities in Chiapas, with a total population, according to the 2015 Mexican intercensus survey (INEGI 2016:252) of just over 41,000 inhabitants, living in around three dozen small *parajes* or hamlets, the largest of which is the *cabecera* or civil and religious town center, also called Zinacantán. It is a community with a long and intense history of anthropological research, which in the modern period of ethnography since the 1960s, has ranged from economics and the ritual *cargo* system (Cancian 1965), kinship and marriage (J. Collier 1968), law (J. Collier 1973), and agriculture (G. Collier 1975), to shamanistic curing (Fabrega and Silver 1973), ritual (Vogt 1976), and gossip (Haviland 1977), to mention only monograph-length studies. There are also general ethnographies of the community (Vogt 1969, 1970), and historical treatments of colonial, post-colonial, and also post-revolutionary eras in the region (Wasserstrom 1983, Rus 2012). The Tzotzil (Mayan) language of Zinacantán is also well studied, with published grammars (Haviland 1981, Aissen 2012), a study of language socialization (de León 2005), and comprehensive dictionaries, both modern (Laughlin 1975, 2007) and colonial (Laughlin 1988).

Zinacantecs, in the last century, largely dedicated themselves to peasant corn farming, although for most modern Zinacantecs slash and burn sharecropping has given way to other trades: flower-growing and trading, transport, masonry and construction work, and, even more recently, other sorts of wage labor in Chiapas towns and cities, as well as emigration farther afield. In the case of the family where Z originated and whose simplified genealogy appears in Figure 2, the father was both a cornfarmer and a truck owner, who mainly delivered building timber from the Chiapas highlands to various furniture factories in the Yucatán peninsula, while his recently deceased wife maintained the household at home in the village. The deaf children grew up without schooling, unlike their hearing sisters who attended some years of primary school, and they spent much of their childhoods either aiding their mother with childcare and domestic endeavors, or working for neighbors at such tasks as washing, cooking, and, for example, candlemaking, or repackaging commercial yarns and thread for resale to village weavers. Swelling debt and financial disasters eventually meant that the family had to leave their natal home, to become landless renters in the *cabecera* or “administrative center” of the township, where their income derives from casual labor (the father, although now in his seventies, often serves as a night watchman), re-selling foodstuffs, fruit and vegetables, charcoal etc., or backstrap-loom weaving and embroidery, and, in the case of the two deaf men, irregular contract labor in local construction.

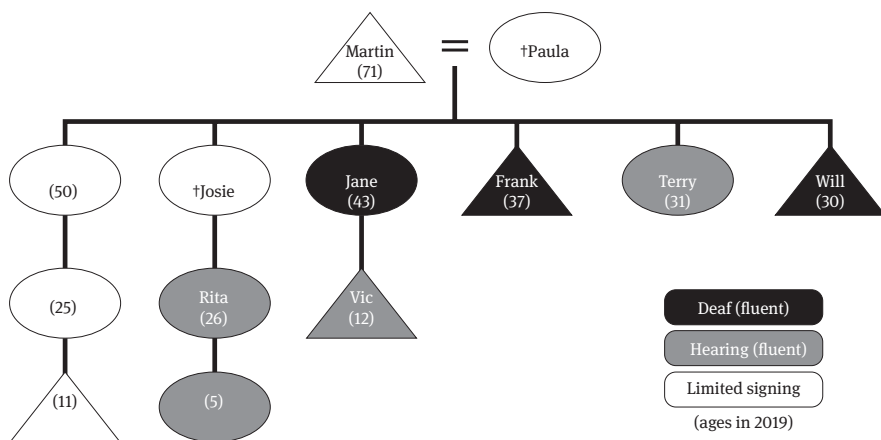


Figure 2: Simplified genealogy of the Z signers, 2019

Z originates with Jane, born in 1976, who is, as one says in Tzotzil, *uma'*—a Tzotzil word with almost the same range of meanings as the English word ‘dumb.’ She is the daughter of my long-time friend Martín, whose second oldest daughter became my goddaughter at her baptism. Jane and her siblings were born and originally grew up in a smaller village on the western side of the township territory, but, as mentioned, for a variety of reasons almost the entire family moved when she was a young adult to the *cabecera* of Zinacantán. Although there are doubtless other deaf individuals elsewhere in the township (as well as in other nearby Tzotzil-speaking townships), I know of no others in either the Z family’s original hometown (of around 3,000 people) nor in the somewhat larger *cabecera* where they now reside.

As the Tzotzil word *uma'*—derived from a root that suggests “hold in the mouth” (Laughlin 1975: 74)—suggests, unlike her older sisters, Jane never learned to speak. It was not until her brother Frank was born, and likewise did not talk, that the family began to suspect that both children were deaf. There followed another sister, Terry, who hears but who did not herself begin to speak Tzotzil until she was about three, and then Will, also deaf, born several years later. At some point when he was a child, one of his father’s non-indigenous acquaintances (about whom I have no further information) evidently offered Frank a hearing aid. Frank quickly rejected its use, and it fell into disrepair (although he sometimes recalls and describes it).

Figure 2 shows the three deaf siblings, their hearing sister, and two further hearing native signers (a niece Rita and a nephew Vic) who grew up in this extended household with Z and spoken Tzotzil as their primary means of communication. Jane’s son Vic was raised with both Z and spoken Tzotzil as his

native languages. Rita's young daughter is evidently able to understand signed interactions, but so far, she rarely attempts to sign herself; nor is she encouraged to do so. There is also a niece and her young son who have lived sporadically in the household, thereby learning some signing. The other adults in the family—the older sisters and their spouses and grown children—largely do not attempt more than minimal signing.

Z is the exclusive medium of communication for the deaf signers, and it is routinely used as well by both Terry and Rita, although mostly only in conversation with the deaf individuals. Both the parents and the other older siblings have interacted at least partially in sign with the deaf individuals over the entire course of the latter's lives, but they frequently claim to be unable to follow in detail the signed conversations between the fluent signers, and, when they feel the need, they often ask Terry or Vic for interpretation, bi-directionally. (I had the impression that Jane could at least partly lip-read the speech of her late mother, whereas neither deaf brother seemed to have developed nor been interested in such a capacity.) By contrast, Z is never used by outsiders, and, indeed, rarely performed in its efflorescent form in the presence of non-family members. None of the Z signers has attended school for more than a few weeks, and all are illiterate, although the men are able to read numbers and interpret calendars. In their work as masons, and occasionally as assistants in flower selling operations with their father's siblings, the two men sometimes travel and interact with people outside the immediate extended family. Their parents have rejected suggestions from me that the deaf brothers might earn more by joining construction crews outside the village (on the not unreasonable presumption that such crews drink up most of their wages on weekends). The parents were reluctant even to send the boys on distant selling trips, lest they become stranded and unable to return home alone. Nonetheless, in 2016 the elder deaf brother Frank (usually assisted by his younger brother Will and attended by his father, who himself had once enjoyed a distinguished ritual career as both a civil authority and in service to religious institutions) was dragooned into an official year-long *cargo* or ritual office in the Zinacantec public ritual hierarchy (see Vogt 1969, Cancian 1965). Mostly in that context, a group of Zinacantecs outside the family who were engaged in the same ritual activities had regular interactions with both men, using what amounted to nonce gestural systems to communicate with the deaf individuals.

A first generation sign language like Z is particularly compelling, especially since it has arisen in such a short time. Jane, now in her late thirties, spent the first six years of her life as the only deaf person in her community. Her deaf brother Frank was followed by a hearing sister Terry and then by Will, also deaf, born when Jane was already thirteen. Jane thus became one of Will's primary caregivers. Jane's linguistic experience, as the only deaf person in her household

(and, indeed, in her entire village) for her first 6 years, stands in marked contrast to that of Will: born into a household where his three immediate older siblings already signed. The experience of young Vic, Jane’s son, was different again, as he was born hearing with a deaf mother in a household where he was surrounded by spoken Tzotzil but where most of his early caregivers communicated exclusively or by preference in the family homesign. Indeed, the proximate motive for me to begin to study Z in 2008 was that Vic, at 11 months of age, had clearly already begun to sign, even before uttering his first Tzotzil words (see Meier 2016). I made a trip to the village explicitly to ask my friend Martín if his children would work with me to teach me about their language. Although my ignorance of sign linguistics had previously made me reluctant, if not terrified, to venture into the study of Z, the challenge of working with the first—and perhaps the last—generation of a brand new language was something I as a linguistic anthropologist could not responsibly continue to ignore.

Z builds on a lexicon of invented conventional signs, supplemented by an extensive system of deictic indications, to produce highly structured, interactive, and collaborative conversation. Patterns of grammaticalized utterance structure have also emerged, with corresponding emerging grammatical categories—signed analogues of “parts of speech,” for example. At the same time, variation in lexicon and apparent morphosyntax—for example, diverse patterns of use with emergent “size shape specifiers” (Safar & Petatillo Chan, this volume)—can be observed in even this tiny sign community, along with clear metalinguistic discourses and ideologies. (See Haviland, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019.) My own entry into the research, conducted entirely in Tzotzil and more recently in my own halting use of Z, was clearly dependent on interpretation by Terry, Rita, and more recently Vic, who also routinely serve in such a mediating role between the deaf signers and the rest of the family, not to mention with outsiders.

As mentioned, Tzotzil speakers categorize the deaf signers as *uma* ‘dumb.’ As in English, the word carries the further connotation of reduced intellectual incapacity. There are multiple Tzotzil expressions that mean ‘deaf’ but they tend to characterize the growing hearing loss that people experience as they age. One such expression—the humorously critical *pak’-jol* (literally, “daubed/patched head” [Laughlin 1975:263])—invokes the idea that hard-of-hearing people “answer sideways” because they misunderstand what other people are saying to them. (Tzotzil is heavily endowed with disrespectful and mocking epithets for disabilities of various kinds—blindness, lameness, intellectual and physical incapacities—which, like the one just cited, often combine the rich affective or positional lexical resources of the language with particular body parts.) Another epithet, equally critical, that even family members sometimes hurl at the deaf

signers, perhaps because they routinely vocalize as they sign, is *chich* which means ‘foolish,’ most commonly used in the context of overly talkative children. Laughlin (1975:117) glosses the word as “extremely loquacious, saying everything that occurs to one.” Given the emphasis in Zinacantec social life placed on verbal skill and dexterity, deafness is considered a severe disability, and it diminishes the social prospects of those affected. One explanation offered for the reluctance of the Z signers to sign in the presence of non-kin is expressed by the Tzotzil word *k'exlal* ‘shame.’ A central dilemma for both deaf men is whether, and from where, they will ever manage to find wives because of their deafness, which seems to make them undesirable as spouses. Jane, as a single mother whose child’s father refuses to acknowledge him, is considered unsuitable for marriage.

A central topic of my own ethnographic research has been the attitude toward deafness evinced by the immediate family members themselves. The deaf siblings’ late mother expressed concern that the infant Vic, Jane’s son, would—like his mother and uncles—never learn to speak Tzotzil, and that he should not be encouraged in his acquisition of Z signing. She frequently scolded her own children when they encouraged Vic to sign at all. At a certain point, when Vic was about three, she decreed, in fact, that he should be separated from his mother and sent to live with an older aunt who had already raised her own child, and who could teach him proper Tzotzil. The resulting experiment lasted less than half a year.

More relevant to the interactions I routinely observe between the deaf signers themselves is the fact that Jane is often ignored and dismissed by her own siblings, part of the miniature sociopolitics of talk in this tiny speech/sign community (see Haviland 2013b, 2016). As I argue in the main chapter on Z in this volume, there are both social tensions as well as humor and mutual affection in the occasional alignment of the boys (and sometimes Terry) against their sister, Jane. There is an asymmetric power structure in even the tiny Z signing community, and Jane—despite being the oldest and first signer—clearly occupies a subordinate role within it, in ways and for reasons that remain an active topic of investigation. Part of the explanation, in addition to gender inequalities more widely in the community, is surely that Z has evolved rapidly in the context of the small sign-community, with at least some innovations in lexicon and grammar that have clearly left Jane behind.

Whether Z will survive the deaf individuals, something I once was hopeful about, seems ever more dubious as Vic distances himself from his mother’s native language, learns to read and write in Spanish, and moves potentially ever farther from his natal speech-sign community. Although a newly created language, Z is already severely imperiled.

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