3 The Domain of Gossip

Pero mi yech xal ʔo mi loʔil no van?
"But is he telling the truth, or is it just gossip?"

It will be apparent that what I am calling "gossip" in this book includes a somewhat wider conversational realm than one might ordinarily understand from the word. From all the talk I heard in Zinacantan, I selected for particular attention conversations about absent third parties.[1] I hypothesized that such conversation would not be open: that it would neither range over all subjects nor dwell on all actions. Conversation has its own rules: not all facts are worth repeating; not all speculation is (or can be) mouthed. Or at least an audience will not be interested in every disclosure. Thus I was willing at the beginning to take as my subject (as "gossip in Zinacantan") all conversation of the following form: A tells B about an absent C. Moreover, I gathered any information which rendered such conversation intelligible to its participants. Gossip rests on reputation. And in English it leaks into "spreading news" at one end and "slander" at the other. I have included in the study of gossip elements of news, report, slander, libel, ridicule, insult, defamation, and malicious and innocent gossip.[2] In my discussion I use the word "gossip" as a convenient gloss to label a wide range of conversational phenomena.

Two issues arise from this usage. First, a certain ethnoscientific tradition seems to require that I show that "gossip" labels some coherent class of phenomena in the Zinacanteco scheme of things. When I speak of "gossip in Zinacantan," am I talking about an activity that Zinacantecos recognize? Second, calling various sorts of Zinacanteco conversation "gossip," even if the term is

loosely applied, suggests that Zinacantecos do something that we ourselves should recognize as gossiplike; it suggests, further, that Zinacantecos feel about such activity what we might feel: nervous and anxious, but fascinated—doubtful about the propriety of talking behind someone's back, but secretly eager to hear some deliciously awful tidbit; and so on.

Rather than argue for the universality of gossip (in some well-defined sense), I shall concern myself in this chapter with Zinacanteco native theorizing about the nature of talk about one's neighbors and countrymen. Zinacantecos do recognize a domain of verbal behavior that resembles gossiping. Despite the fact that no Tzotzil word is adequately glossed "gossip," a considerable body of native speculation and theory surrounds the sort of conversation I have described above. This constitutes what we might well call a Zinacanteco theory of gossip. In this chapter I shall concentrate on native intuitions regarding these matters and avoid the thorny and fruitless search for a monoleximic domain label, for a neat taxonomy, for an unambiguous eliciting frame, and for Gossip.[3]

Various ethnographers have offered taxonomies of verbal behavior or verbal genres in Tzotzil. The results, however, are disconcertingly indecisive. (In Appendix 1 I present some of these taxonomies in detail.) It seems unlikely that a single hierarchical lexical structure is adequate to characterize Zinacanteco conceptualization of verbal behavior. A diagnostic test is the possibility of using labels from tree-diagram nodes to initiate further eliciting. Will a word which seems to correspond to "gossip" prompt a Zinacanteco to gossip? Will a phrase glossed as "myth" encourage a storyteller to tell the desired sorts of stories? Wasserstrom (1970) had little success:

> "I tried to elicit tales concerning the Virgen del Rosario using the question,
>
> *Mi ʔoy ʔantivo k'op skwenta jch'ulmeʔtik rosario?*
> Is there a story about the Virgen del Rosario?
>
> Much to my surprise, I often had difficulty in conveying to informants my desire to hear such a story. Not only was this fact due to the artificiality of contrived eliciting situations (I was invariably more successful when I went to the spot at which something had happened and then asked about it), but also I believe that the domain of *ʔantivo k'op* is not well-defined in the minds of Zinacantecos. Thus I was better understood by some informants when I asked the simple question,
>
> *Mi ʔoy k'opetik skwenta . . . ?*
> Are there words about . . . ?" [p. 27; orthography altered]

Certain nominal expressions in Tzotzil suggest to otherwise reluctant Zinacantecos stories which might legitimately be called gossip. However, a taxonomy based on nouns fails to exploit the rich vocabulary of verbs which denote activities that resemble gossiping. These activities are grouped into a coherent domain by a body of theory about the origin and consequences of conversation about one's neighbors. This theory is implicit in language; talk about talk draws heavily on the grammatical and semantic resources of Tzotzil. The semantic properties of key expressions having to do with talk, stories about others, truth, and intent are evidence for the existence of a Zinacanteco conceptual domain even where more ordinary lexical structure is absent.

The two relevant Tzotzil noun roots for speech, *-k'op* ("word") and *-lo?il* ("speech") combine with a number of affixes to form stems from other surface structure "word classes"; they co-occur with other nouns and verbs in patterned contexts. In the examples that follow, all drawn directly from actual ordinary speech, I mean to present not a semantic analysis of the terms but rather data enough to lead the reader to an understanding of this segment of Tzotzil vocabulary.[4]

Consider first the root *-lo?il*, which means "talk" or "conversation." Ordinary usage includes the following forms and contexts:

1. j-koj *lo?il*
"one *story*"

Lo?iletik are discrete and can be counted; in Tzotzil the same numeral classifier (cf. Berlin 1968; Haviland 1970*a*) is used to count "stories" as is used to count steps, layers, curing ceremonies, levels in the religious hierarchy, songs, floors of a building, and crimes. When someone says in the midst of a discussion of another person's reputation

2. ?Oy ?otro jkoj *lo?il* ika?i . . .
"I've heard yet another *story* [about him]. . . ."

he conjures the image of piling one story on another.

3. Vinajem *lo?il.*
"The *story* is apparent."

4. Mu xa k'usi k'op yilel pero syempre ilok' *lo?il.*
"It seemed that there was no longer anything wrong, but the *story* came out anyway."

When *lo?il* occurs with certain intransitive stems, notably *-vinaj* ("be apparent, visible, audible") or *-lok'* ("exit from, leave, go out"), it implies a story which is liable to become public, and hence to induce scandal: scandalous gossip.

5. Lek yilel tze?ej lo?ilik ya?el chak k'u cha?al li? chotolotik.
"It seemed just like friendly *conversation*, just as we are having sitting here."

6. Mu no?ox *lo?il*-k'opuk.
"It wasn't just ordinary [innocent] *conversation.*"

The word *lo?il* can express the quality of a conversation. In (5), the word *tze?ej* ("laughing") indicates talk that is all smiles, friendly: some men accosted another on the path and, while appearing to engage him in friendly conversation, murdered him. In (6), two enemies meet each other; one tries to act naturally. The other immediately picks a fight, unwilling to ignore their enmity; he will not allow their meeting just to be ordinary *lo?il k'op.*

7. Tztzak sbaik ta *lo?il.*
"They engaged each other in *conversation.*"

8. Ilik s*lo?il*ik.
"A *conversation* arose between them."

9. Mu xbak', mu?nuk stak' *lo?il*, mu?nuk stze?in, te nijil.
"He doesn't make a sound, he doesn't answer *when you talk to him*, he doesn't laugh; he just sits with bowed head."

One can *-tzak* ("grab") another in conversation, often to initiate some joking sequence. Or such conversation can just *-lik* ("arise") naturally. But it is considered antisocial and rude not to respond to invitations to friendly talk.

10. Lek yamiko sbaik ch*lo?il*ajik.
"They *converse* just like friends."

In fact, the best sign of a good nature is the ability to carry on conversation, to *-lo?ilaj*, and to avoid

11. pukuj x*lo?il*aj
"*speaking* ill-temperedly."

Lo?il contrasts with adjectives *melel* ("true, right") and *yech* ("true, so, thus") in the following interesting way:

12. Mu?nuk *lo?il*uk yu?un chkal ta abail ta asatil.
"This is not just *talk*, for I'll tell you to your face. . . ."

13. Mi yech van; mi *lo?il* no van.
"But is it true? But is it just *talk*?"

14. Ta melel kere.
"Boy, that's the truth!"

15. Mu *lo?il*uk ka?uktik.
"That's not just *hearsay*, you're right."

When activated by such a contrast, *lo?il* clearly has the sense of simple hearsay, of stories and rumors that are not verified.[5]

Finally, there is a transitive stem formed by adding the modestly productive suffix *-ta* to form *-lo?ilta*. Consider the following examples of transitive stems formed with *-ta*.

?anil "race, running"	*-anilta* "make run"
?ov "shouting"	*-apta* "shout at"
tzo? "excrement"	*-tza?ta* "shit on"
chikil "a tickle, ticklishness"	*-chikilta* "tickle"
pom "incense"	*-pamta* "cense"
xuk'um "elbow"	*-xuk'umta* "elbow"
lo?il "story, conversation"	*-lo?ilta* "tell stories about, gossip about"

To *lo?ilta-* someone is to tell a story in which he is involved, usually to his disadvantage.[6]

16. Yu?nan ?ilbil, k'u ma cha?al ti x*lo?il*taat.
"It is probably the case that he was seen [doing it]; otherwise why would he be *reputed* [to have done it]?"

17. I*lo?il*tabat stzebal.
"He had *stories told* on his sister."

This is clearly a verb which would be felicitously rendered "gossip" in English; moreover, it is accompanied by the same connotations of sneakiness, enjoyment at another's discomfort, behind-the-back snideness, and so forth, that we associate with gossip—even as we enjoy it. In fact, in ritual couplets[7] *lo?ilta* is paired with *laban* ("mock"):

18. Mu jk'an cha*lo?il*taon, mu jk'an chalabanon.
"I do not wish you to *slander* me, I do not wish you to ridicule me."

From *-lo?ilta* comes the deverbal noun *-lo?iltael*, which is always possessed, and which translates as "the gossip about ______" or "what is said about ______."

19. Stalel li buch'u ?o yabtel yech ?o s*lo?il*tael.
"That's the way it is with people in [civil] office: there is always *gossip* about them."

20. K'al tana mu xpaj s*lo?il*tael.
"And ever since then the *gossip* about him hasn't ceased."

One is often able to elicit gossip in Zinacantan by asking with regard to a specific person whether there are *slo?iltael* ("stories about him"). Such a question prods Zinacantecos to recount those parts of a man's reputation that would be appropriate "stories" to "tell on" him—that is, to ridicule him with. In natural gossip contexts, however, conversation begins not with particular individuals but with particular noteworthy events, with unusual behavior. The resulting gossip accrues to individual reputation and is subject to recall later—for example, when the anthropologist asks about it.

To summarize these semantic properties of *lo?il*:

a. *lo?il* represents a discrete story, which can be known or not known, which can remain hidden or suddenly become public (examples 1–4);

b. *lo?il* stands for friendly conversation and can be used to emphasize the quality of an interaction (5–11).

c. In certain contexts *lo?il* can represent the extreme of unverified (and dangerous) hearsay, as opposed to verified truth (12–15); and finally

d. *lo?ilta* labels storytelling activity which is conceptually related to ridicule, slander, and gossip (16–20).

The root *k'op* has more complicated properties. Laughlin (1975, p. 196) gives the following formidable gloss:

k'op:
"word, language, affair, matter, situation, argument, dispute, war, curing ceremony."

Jane Collier (1973, pp. 94ff.) discusses the notion of *k'op* as legal dispute, court case, or argument presented for settlement to various hamlet or municipal authorities. A plaintiff can *sa?* ("search for") such a dispute until it reaches a conclusion:

Ilaj *k'op*.
"The *dispute* ended."

Imeltzaj *k'op*.
"The *dispute* was settled."

Similarly, the ordinary verbs derived from the root, *-k'opon* ("talk to") and *-k'opoj* ("talk, speak"), have a formal sense.

21. Ba s*k'opon* preserente.
"He went to *petition* the presidente."

22. Snaʔ x*k'opoj*, lek xtojob ta *k'opojel*.
"He can *speak*, he can successfully *speak* for one [as a lawyer]."

K'op—as dispute—can "be eased," "appear and become public," "arise," "worsen," "be multiplied," "cool off"; and it is possible to "hush up," "settle," "take responsibility for," "accuse another of responsibility for," and "exaggerate the seriousness of" such disputes.[8] The root *k'op* probably occurs most commonly in ordinary speech to indicate this sort of legal dispute. By contrast with *loʔil* it suggests formal or public language (see Appendix 1).

Certain other contexts are of more immediate interest.

23. Iskoʔoltasbe sba *sk'op*.
"They agreed on the same *story*."

24. Koʔol *sk'op*ik.
"They are in *agreement*; they share the same *position*."

25. Ik'ejp'uj *sk'op*, isok xa ye.
"His *word* went astray; he made a slip [he changed his story]."

One's "word" is conceived as one's position on a matter, one's story. Zinacantecos are aware that it is possible to manipulate such stories. *K'op* appears in several couplets with a related meaning.

26. Voʔot ʔonox ta apwersa voʔot ʔonox ta a*k'op* li xʔelan inupun li jtzebe.
"It was at your demand, at your *urging* that my daughter got married as she did."

27. Muʔyuk a*k'op* muʔyuk arason. [Laughlin 1975, p. 96]
"You have nothing to *say*, you have no thoughts."

28. Muk' bu *sk'op* muk' bu smantal.
"He has no *word*, he has no authority."

In each of these couplets, *k'op* represents the verbal element in some decision. In (26), it is a matter of *pwersa* ("force") and argumentation; in (28) a child goes wrong because a parent fails to exercise his *mantal* ("authority") and his spoken *k'op*. And in (27) someone is criticized

for failing to speak up and exercise his *rason* ("reason") in suggesting a course of action. In each of these examples *k'op* appears in possessed form: someone's *k'op* is his verbal contribution to an argument, an inquiry, or a decision.

I remark above that conversation allows social interaction in Zinacantan to proceed. The man who cannot or will not talk with his fellows is considered antisocial as well as ill-tempered.

29. Mi jaʔuk *sk'opon* jp'eluk i stote.[9]
"He didn't even *say* a single word to his father."

30. Yuʔvan xaval ti ʔo jset'uk xchikin xa*k'opon*.
"Don't try to tell us that he'll lend you the slightest ear when you try to *talk* to him."

31. Lek ʔamiko j*k'opon* jba jchiʔuk.
"I *get along/talk* with him like a friend."

Example (29) concerns a son, estranged from his father, who no longer accords his father even minimal respect and courtesy. Example (30) describes a man with whom it is impossible to reason. The man charges outrageous interest on loans; his brother by contrast is described as follows:

32. Mas yo jtz'uj jaʔ mas xaʔi *k'op*.
"He's not as bad; he is willing to listen to *reason*."

Though the ideology reflected in these examples resembles that of sentences (5)–(11), the occurrence of the root *k'op* implies talk for a specific purpose, discussion of some problem or plan, rather than aimless *loʔil* or conversation. In this connection I may cite the ordinary usage[10] of the phrase *lekil k'op* ("good words").

32*a*. Yuʔvan *lekil k'op* anaʔoj.
"Don't tell me you think this is a *proper* thing to engage in!"

32*b*. ʔAk'o yik' ta *lekil k'op* litzebe.
"Let him marry the girl *without a fuss*."

32*c*. Timi chavak' jpastik preva lavajnile chakol ta *lekil k'op*.
"If you let us try out your wife, then you will be set free *unharmed*."

When something is done *ta lekil k'op* parties are agreed; calm prevails; no rules are broken, and no dispute arises from the matter. *Lekil k'op* represents the triumph of reasoned argument over impulsive, rash action.

Finally, the noun *-k'oplal* is derived from the root *k'op*. The word is used in a legal context, as described by Jane Collier (1973): "When

it is said that someone went to the *Presidente* or an elder to *sa?be sk'oplal* it means that he is looking for a settlement. *K'oplal* means 'a plan,' and the plaintiff who goes to *sa?be sk'oplal* is literally 'looking for a plan' that will be agreeable to all parties to a dispute" (p. 95). But *-k'oplal* is commonly used to mean "news [of ______]," "the affair [in which ______ is involved]." It is always possessed, and often occurs in couplets with *-lo?iltael*.

33. Mas chabal to?ox *sk'oplal* slo?iltael.
"He used to have less of a *reputation*, less gossip about him."

34. Mu xlam *sk'oplal*.
"This *affair* about him will not be hushed up."

35. Ja? to inopoj ti k'alal ch'abal mas *sk'oplal*.
"He only came near again when the *affair* was mostly forgotten."

Just as *lo?iletik* can be counted with the numeral classifier *koj*, so we can speak of *jkoj sk'oplal* ("one story about him"). Similarly, someone's *-k'oplal* can "be made public," can "come out," and can "pass" (i.e., be forgotten, blow over)—as can gossip. A person's *-k'oplal* is the gossip about *k'opetik* in which he has been involved: arguments to which he was party, ventures in which he participated, and so no. Notably, when a man dies it is possible to say

Laj *sk'oplal*.
"He died [lit., his *story* ended]."[11]

At death, the dossier on a man closes, even if gossip about him persists.

It is possible in interviews to elicit gossip about an individual by asking for *-lo?iltael* or *-k'oplal* about him. But in ordinary conversation Zinacantecos generally initiate gossip with more leading questions. That is, Zinacantecos realize that it is easier to evoke an interesting response by asking "Has Xun done anything stupid recently?" than by asking "What has Xun been up to recently?" No one ordinarily talks about (remarks upon) unmarked behavior.[12] And nothing marks behavior more than positive badness—than transgressions of one sort or another.[13]

Tzotzil has a rich vocabulary for describing mistakes, faults, sins, crimes, stupidity, failure, and so forth. But there is a small set of particularly potent words which prod gossipy tongues into action. The key words are italicized in the examples that follow.

36. ?Oy nan *sbolil* jutukuk ?onox.
"I guess he has his little *stupidities* after all."

37. Mi chatz'ikbotikotik *jbolil*tikotik.
"Will you endure our *stupidity*?"

38. ?A?ibil *sbolil*, yech'o ti ikom ta jwera.
"People have heard about his *stupidity* and he has therefore been left out."

I successfully elicited gossip by asking about a person's *-bolil* ("stupidity, foolishness"); a man with a particularly bad reputation may be described as having a "great amount of foolishness." Similarly, a person (typically a wife) may disclaim responsibility for another's transgressions by saying:

39. Mi ta jna? k'u j?elan *sbolil*.
"How should I know the extent of his *stupidity*?"

Similarly, Tzotzil uses a loan word from Spanish, *maña* ("a defect or bad habit") (J. Collier 1973, p. 93).

40. Lek vaxal mol yilel xcha?le sba pero te nan yunen *manya* jset'uk.
"He seems like a well-behaved old man—or he tries to act that way—but all the same he probably has his little *wickedness*."

41. Kavron toj *manya* molot.
"Son of a bitch, you are a *wicked* old man!"

Zinacantecos use questions about a person's *-manya(il)* to prompt tales of sexual misconduct or promiscuity. Men rarely utter the word without a smile in ordinary conversation (although the technical implications of the word in, for example, a legal dispute are not humorous; cf. J. Collier 1973, pp. 92–94).

Finally, references to jailing tend to stimulate conversation. The Tzotzil root *chuk* means "jail, tie up, tether." Zinacanteco men are fascinated to learn that someone *sta chukel* ("went to jail"); frequent jailing is a sure sign of evil propensities.

42. ?Ayem ta *chukel* jayib bwelta xchi?uk taj xryoxe.
"He's been to *jail* who knows how many times with his [talking] saint."

43. Ko?olko?ol sk'upinik *pus*.
"They have equal desire for the *sweatbath* [the jail]."

Let me review the linguistic argument so far. Though no single noun in Tzotzil can be adequately glossed "gossip," there are numerous ex-

pressions, mostly based on the roots *lo*ʔ*il* and *k'op*, that refer to a cluster of activities, speech genres, and properties of speech. This cluster has a clear kinship with the constellation of ideas we associate with "gossip" in English. Coming to understand an expression or a lexical domain in Tzotzil depends more on learning ordinary usage, common verbal collocations, and contextually activated lexical contrasts than on, say, the position of the expression in a single formal structure.

Consider the two verbs *-lo*ʔ*ilta* ("tell stories on") and *-laban* ("mock").[14] Both words contain elements of the English "gossip about," though the precise semantic relationship between the two is not easily stated. When the two words occur together in a formal couplet, the meaning of *-lo*ʔ*ilta* stretches to include a touch of mockery. Yet, when to describe the shrewish public ridiculing of a man by his wife a speaker chooses *-laban* over *-lo*ʔ*ilta*, he emphasizes a contrast. (*-laban*: "She wanted the world to know how awful he was—that she wanted no more to do with him. She mocked and ridiculed him"; *-lo*ʔ*ilta*: "She let everyone in on his transgressions.") Understanding the conceptual mechanisms of a language leads an ethnographer to the salient domains of a culture, even when such domains are not otherwise labeled. I shall return to this question in chapter 7.

But the evidence for a native Zinacanteco idea of gossip is not limited to the existence of certain Tzotzil expressions. Zinacantecos talk, and talk about talk, in ways that suggest a definite theory of the properties of talk, the motives that underlie it, its consequences and dangers. In the remainder of this chapter I shall present evidence for this native Zinacanteco theory about reputation and the transfer of information through gossiplike conversation.[15]

Gluckman (1963) remarks that belonging to a group entails knowing the gossip of a group, knowing about other people (and their ancestors). He writes that in Zululand "I found myself excluded from groups because I did not know enough gossip. Gradually I learnt the gossip; but I never acquired enough certainty in knowing when and, more importantly, when not to use it, ever to become a member of Zulu society" (p. 309). My work in the field was aimed explicitly at overcoming at least in part the lack of knowledge that excluded me from Zinacanteco society. When I first arrived in Zinacantan gossip was meaningless to me not because I did not know enough about the people involved, but because I didn't know them at all. Through such devices as the Who's Who I gradually began to recognize names and associate them with reputations, until eventually I could respond appropriately to new revelations, or ask informed questions, or even offer tidbits of gossip myself. Zinacantecos found my acquired expertise amusing, but my friends began to talk to me in a new way. They came to expect me to know the

background to their gossip; and they showed a new eagerness to share news and comment with me.

The difference between the inside and the outside was demonstrated one afternoon when a notorious slattern approached my wife at the waterhole and asked a favor. In all innocence, my wife agreed; she was bewildered by the giggles of our *comadre* who observed the exchange. When the women returned to the house my *comadre*—knowing that I knew the girl's reputation— could not restrain herself from rushing up to tell me what had happened, giggling behind her hand; she knew that I knew who the girl was and that my wife did not.

Much of what a Zinacanteco knows about his fellows has practical value; it is what Hotchkiss calls "useful information": "Useful information about others, however, is obtained in contexts that most often are not neutral, that is, in affectively charged conversations with others—gossip. Useful information about someone is conveyed along with evaluations of him. New bits of information are continually added to a body of knowledge, a dossier, that a person has for each of many of his fellow townsmen" (1967, p. 713). In Zinacantan such instrumental knowledge typically includes information about what men are good for loans and how much interest they charge, if any; we have already seen this explicit subject in gossip. Similarly, it is important to know which men are curers and which are powerful. Because of the constant danger of witchcraft, a Zinacanteco must know which men can reverse witchcraft and which are capable of sending sickness in the first place.

Not all information carried by gossip (or, as Gluckman might urge, presupposed by gossip) is of this instrumental sort. Not all such information is fact. Zinacantecos are aware of the questions surrounding the nature of the information conveyed in informal conversation. What I have called their "native theory of gossip" concerns: (*a*) the separation of public from private (privileged) information; (*b*) the question of truth versus hearsay; and (*c*) the general ethics of telling tales on people.

Zinacantecos are aware that the facts of court cases brought to the town hall become public knowledge, and that others are likely to talk about one's misfortunes if they result in public hearings. People draw an explicit parallel between the town hall and other modern mechanisms for disseminating information (with which Zinacantecos are essentially unfamiliar: there are no newspapers, no relevant radio broadcasts).[16]

> Cep remembered hearing that a man under discussion had been up to some mischief. No one could remember the details.
>
> "Maybe it never became public knowledge; perhaps it was a secret affair."

"Well, if the *agente* settled the matter in his house no one would have heard about it."

"Yes, when a story comes out at the town hall, then a newspaper report goes out to every part of the country."

"It comes to every streetcorner; we hear about it on the radio. . . . (Ha ha ha.)"

"But when it doesn't come out (at the town hall), then nothing shows up on the radio; no newspaper is published. (Ha ha ha.)"

"Is it true that the old lady divorced old Manvel?"

"Yes; she says she woke up each morning with a wet skirt. The old man would piss on himself at night. Just like a child. . . ."

"At night? Wasn't that just when he was drunk?"

"No, no, according to her he didn't have to be drunk. Even when he was sober. 'What a rank odor his urine has! Not like a child's,' she would say."

"That's right. The old woman even said such things right out at the town hall!"

Zinacantecos realize that children are often the carriers of gossip; there is an attempt to exploit children's apparent harmlessness to find out about one's neighbors. Hotchkiss reports that in the nearby ladino town of Teopisca children have access to otherwise unavailable information by virtue of being "nonpersons." "Children . . . are not subject in the same way as adults to conventions that insure privacy, and they can also be used to breach the walls of secrecy. The child who brings a condolence message to a family where there has been a death is sent by his parents not only to express his family's sympathies, but by this ruse to gain access to a household's inner or "back region" (Goffman 1959), where he can act as a spy . . . children are always underfoot in situations like these, and adults act as if they were not there" (1967, p. 714). A similar situation obtains in Zinacantan; children are frequently cited as the first ones to report some juicy bit of news. A newcomer to Zinacantan finds the inquisitive, touchy children the most visible and ubiquitous people in the *municipio*, even as he tries to ignore them. In the story of chapter 1, little children first reported that the lewd old man was fiddling with his own daughter. The case is not unique.

A man was divorced for embracing the daughter of a neighbor during a curing ceremony.

"Well, listen, while they were in the midst of preparing the candles, old Maryan went outside. The old fucker was drunk, you see. It was children who saw it all, according to what was said at the *cabildo*. They were out embracing each other behind the house—old Maryan and Mat's daughter. That's what came out later at the town hall."

Similarly, one of my friends in Zinacantan was estranged from his brother-in-law because the latter's son had made slanderous remarks at a public hearing. My friend was angered, even though the boy was only five years old.

In conversation Zinacantecos reveal that other factors limit the availability of public information suitable for gossip. Geographical boundaries limit certain transfers of information; and some people, despite their evil desires and many transgressions, may be able to cover their tracks.

"But that man has always been a big woman-grabber."

"I know. He had such an experience when his brother was *martomorey*. . . ."

"His older brother."

"He was simply beaten up terribly; it was all due to his woman grabbing. But I don't know the whole story. . . ."

"That's true, we don't know who the woman was. . . ."

"Now that you mention it, I think it was one of his brother's helpers, there together with him. . . ."

"Ah, but if it happened over in Jteklum, that is why it never became public knowledge here."

"Right, the affair never came out. It happened in Jteklum and that's why we didn't hear anything about it."

"The man is a ritual adviser today."

"He's a holy elder now, but he gave injections. (Ha ha ha.)"

"He made a holy child under the pine trees. (Ha ha ha.)"

"But that's about all I know about him."

"That man has had lots of foolishness; there are probably other things like this that he's done, or maybe there were other times [when he got girls pregnant] that never came to light."

"No. It's just that in this case we all heard about it."

"If there were other times, it was all secret."

I have shown that the contrast between *loʔil* ("hearsay") and *yech* ("true") or *melel* ("true"), as well as the contrast between a plain declarative sentence and a sentence containing the particle *la* ("quotative evidence"), can draw attention to the unverified quality of a story or statement. Zinacantecos believe that gossip *must* contain a grain of truth; yet they know from direct experience that some gossip is unreliable. The opinion that all officeholders are subject to malicious gossip ex officio appears above. The tension between the "hearsay" and "whole truth" positions is illustrated in the following excerpts.

"The man is a curer, but he also knows how to send sickness. He talks to the Earth Lord; he transforms himself into a [supernatural] goat."

"Well, has anyone actually seen him doing that, or is it just gossip?"
"He must certainly have been seen, otherwise why would he be reputed to do it?"
"Whoever says he does it must have seen him."
"When our faces aren't seen when we do what we do, then we aren't gossiped about."

"Listen, old lady Xunka is the most quarrelsome old lady there is."
"She's always taken to the town hall; and it's all the fault of her mouth, of her gossip. If she hears any story she immediately goes to tell other people about it."
"But she doesn't just tell the story the way she heard it. She always thinks up new things to add. She has gossiped about lots of her companions, but never the truth. That's why she got into such trouble —all because of the stories she told."

Zinacantecos present their versions of events as true; but they rarely hesitate to discredit conflicting accounts.

Gossip is often especially useful to the ethnographer, since it sheds light on the "exotic beliefs of the natives." Stories about people who transform themselves into supernatural creatures or who witch their relatives illustrate the different constraints in Zinacantan which allow people to believe "apparently unlikely" stories.[17] In a tradition which accepts witchcraft as a prime source of disease, allegations that someone is a witch are at least plausible; moreover, skepticism about such gossip can take two forms: (1) a denial of the existence of witchcraft; (2) an assertion that the person in question is unlikely to be a witch. An elaborate instance of witchcraft gossip involves a man who was estranged from his elder brother and father. Several stories relate to their quarrel:

a The younger brother, Yermo, was unwilling to obey his father's wishes about how to farm and work. Thus he moved out, violating the ordinary rule that the youngest son stay with his father while the older sons move out to set up their own households.

a′ The father, old Manvel, was a domestic tyrant who gave his sons very little land to work independently, and who commandeered most of the household resources. Smarting under the yoke of his father's will, Yermo moved out.

b Yermo treats his father badly and no longer accords him the respect that he deserves. He also avoids and speaks angrily to his older brother Antun, even though Antun lent him money and support during a recent religious office. He is just waiting for his father to die so that he can dispute the land division his father made between his children.

b′ Old Manvel, being displeased with his youngest son, has systematically cheated him out of his inheritance, giving him only inferior tracts. He has effectively disowned Yermo.

c Yermo got involved with some disreputable men in the ownership of a corn mill. He placed the mill on a corner of his land where it polluted one of his father's waterholes and caused people to tread and throw trash on his brother's cornfield.

c′ Antun has tried to cause official trouble for his brother Yermo by claiming before civil authorities that the land on which Yermo put his mill was not his to use. The claim is false and was made only to get Yermo jailed.

d Yermo's daughter died of measles, during an epidemic which also brought two of Antun's children close to death. Antun even contributed money toward the burial expenses of Yermo's daughter. The fault for this ill-feeling rests with the curer who slandered old Manvel; but Yermo should never have believed the curer's diagnosis—or should, at least, have confronted his father directly with the charges.

d′ Yermo's eldest daughter—almost of marriageable age—contracted a disease and, after a long illness, died. The curer discovered that the disease was due to witchcraft activity by old Manvel himself, a well-known curer. Yermo feels that his father caused his daughter's death as part of a general campaign of evildoing against his youngest son.

I have heard all these stories in different conversations. Note that story (*d*) may take two forms: some say that old Manvel was unlikely to witch his own granddaughter, while others claim that witchcraft itself is suspect. Two *compadres* of mine have, over time, changed their alliances with the two sides of this family, and their willingness to repeat different versions of these stories has accordingly changed. The first was a nephew of Yermo's wife who was for a time planning to move onto land Yermo was to provide. At first he willingly told all of the stories marked with a prime; he was eager to talk about old Manvel's ill-temperedness and Antun's propensity for scolding. Later, after fighting with his mother and consequently with her sister (Yermo's wife), this man switched to story (*d*) to account for the fact that the two sides

of the family don't get along. My other *compadre* is, at least in conversations with anthropologists, a skeptic with respect to witchcraft. He first was closely allied with Antun; when I asked him about the dispute between Antun and Yermo he told me story (*d*), emphasizing his conviction that suspected witchcraft was never sufficient grounds for such a dispute. More recently, this *compadre* has cooperated strongly with Yermo on a land deal, and his version of the family conflict in question has changed predictably. He now suggests that stories (*b′*) and (*c′*) are most likely to explain the schism, and the witchcraft story has totally dropped from view. (I shall return to these questions in the next chapter.)

Zinacantecos' awareness that gossip is rarely "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" leads to a last element of "native theory" about gossip. There is a general ambivalence about gossip: it is a powerful and hence dangerous tool. An individual can use gossip to control others by managing (Goffman 1959) the impressions his listeners have of him and of the person about whom he gossips. At the same time, he fears corresponding control by others who gossip about him. But there is no Sicilian "law of silence" in Zinacantan; Zinacanteco men seem to have a genuine passion for gossiping—so long as there is no possibility of retaliation. In recorded gossip sessions at my house, informants were often reticent and obviously nervous until someone jokingly said: "You know, of course, that Xun here is not going to play these tapes at the town hall, that he just uses them here for his work." Such an assurance amazingly allowed most men to shed their reservations and join in with gusto.

The deep-seated ambivalence over the ethics of gossip is a recurrent theme in gossip itself. Zinacantecos emphasize the potential for danger in telling stories, true or not; they know that bad feelings may follow well-intentioned disclosures.

> A boy saw his older brother's fiancée in a compromising position under a bridge with another man.
>
> "He saw them embracing each other near the waterhole. He couldn't see who the boy was, but he recognized his brother's sweetheart. But evidently he went to tell his brother.
>
> " '*Kere*, who knows if you're telling the truth. I don't believe it,' said the older brother to his younger brother.
>
> " 'Well, see. You don't want to be told. I guess you'll be satisfied if you get a bit of his cast-off leavings,' Chep told his older brother.
>
> "But the older brother just wouldn't believe; neither would the parents. '*Kere*, don't break your brother's heart with your babbling,' said the old man and his wife.
>
> " 'See, you just won't listen,' said Chep."

Gossip travels its own paths with sometimes disconcerting swiftness. The bad feelings that arise must often be settled by formal procedures: giving liquor, formally asking pardon, accepting the mediation of an elder.

> "Didn't she quarrel with Xun the Musician during her husband's cargo?"
>
> "Yes, she would gossip about him. 'What a disgusting way that musician has! He has cut off lots of my apples and peaches. He has taken ears of corn to eat without asking.' That's what she would say. And she complained that he would say lewd things even when women could hear. She said, 'That old twisted-leg man; he can't restrain his tongue!'
>
> "But the musician's wife heard what had been said. The musician had been called a thief, but he denied it. 'I just cut some peaches to eat; I just had the desire to eat a few.' He offered to pay for them, but the woman would take no payment. Finally they settled the affair over a bottle."
>
> "But Xun must have been embarrassed; for he was maligned as a thief."

Zinacantecos also understand that people spread damaging gossip for different kinds of reasons. Factional disputes engender long exchanges of gossip and slander as each side tries to revenge itself on the other through ever more serious accusations (cf. Rush 1971). Realignments within factional disputes may cause onetime allies to turn informer. Tzotzil uses the root *pak* ("fold") to mean "reciprocate": as when a person slandered in turn slanders his opponent; or when a jailed man devises a pretext to jail his jailer.

> A famous attempt to get wealth in exchange for selling souls to the Earth Lord was revealed through treacherous gossip.
>
> "The way it was revealed was through the gossip of Chep. He was the one who told all."
>
> "I didn't know which one of them told. . . ."
>
> "But didn't Chep tell Antun from *Chaynatik?*"
>
> ". . . That's right. First Chep had friendly conversations with Antun. They were good friends. . . ."
>
> ". . . Chep probably told him that this was what they had done, this was where they had been. . . ."
>
> ". . . maybe Antun was thinking of going along with them."
>
> "Anyway, at first they were friendly. But later they quarreled. After that, old Antun came to Nabenchauk and told what he had heard. That's how the story came out."

"They fought over a plan they had together; that's what Antun said. 'We had borrowed money from a bank, but when it came time Chep gave up. He couldn't pay back his debt. I had to pay it off for him.' After Chep backed out of the bank plan, Antun said to himself, '*Puta*, I guess I'll just tell all about their [witchcraft] plans. Let the rest of the people decide what to do. You can't tell me that they will get away with it.' That's how the whole affair was revealed."

"There is a story about the old man's son Chep too, when he divorced his wife."

"Ah, so he divorced her."

"Yes, she didn't stay married to him long, because she claimed Chep was too ill-tempered. She couldn't bear being scolded all the time and having no corn to eat. Also, she didn't want her husband to slander her; when she heard what he said about her she started to gossip about him, too."

"So the husband first slandered his wife?"

"Yes, he would say why he divorced her. He told his friends that she was no good; she didn't want to sleep with him. She wouldn't let him embrace her. 'I don't want to have you in my bed; I'm too little and you can't yet enter me,' she would say even though the man wanted her. The man got angry; he beat her and wanted his bride payments returned.

"But when the girl heard that she had been gossiped about, she started talking herself. Whereas the man said that she wouldn't sleep with him, the woman claimed that the man would just pester her for nothing. He was useless; he would just wake her up and then do nothing. He wouldn't let his wife sleep, but would fidget in the bed. That's what the woman said at the town hall. That is how everyone knows that Chep is impotent."

I suggest that the examples of native speculation I have presented show that Zinacantecos are aware of a domain of behavior similar to that we call "gossip." Despite the unhappy lexical fact that no Tzotzil word glosses cleanly as "gossip," and despite the unfortunate situation that prevents us from uniformly eliciting gossip with a single question or frame, Zinacantecos in fact seem to treat certain sorts of talk and conversation as a coherent body of phenomena. Gossip in Zinacantan includes more, perhaps, than gossip elsewhere: it is conversation which bears on reputation; it is scandal and slander as well as ridicule; it can be friendly and amused, but also hostile and serious. The sort of domain it is can, I caim, be judged from the sort of thing Zinacantecos have to say about gossiping in the examples above.

I began this chapter by suggesting that all conversation about people and their alleged actions is fair game for a study of gossip. (Zinacantecos do, in fact, follow our convention of not gossiping about another to his face, though they may mock him in his presence.) I presumed the possible subjects of such conversation to be limited in range (and see chap. 5). Moreover, native theory on the matter further constrained the sort of conversation I was able to elicit—Zinacantecos have, as we have seen, their own ideas about what it means to tell interesting stories about people.