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Mu xa xtak'av: "He Doesn't Answer"

Society regiments argument: what one fights about, with whom, and the frontiers of possible resolutions. But arguments can catastrophically rearrange social relationships. I consider a Zinacantec theory of the links between mutual talk and sociality, then sequential facts of Zinacantec fighting, and wider sociopolitical constraints on who can fight with whom, as illustrated by an extended family dispute. Whereas orderly disputes may refashion social arrangements but leave them largely intact, a common Zinacantec idiom for winning a verbal battle—reducing one's opponent to silence—suggests how argument can entirely close down a social relationship. [Tzotzil, Mayan, Zinacantán, Chiapas, Mexico, fights, verbal interaction, legal argument, indexicality, ritual language, land tenure]

What does it take for people to fight, and I mean *really* to fight: to transform what might have been an amicable social relationship, warts and all, to open antagonism and perhaps to complete rupture? (And what could it mean to "win" such a fight?) The people I work with in southeastern Mexico have an explicit theory about one sort of "rupture" that fights can produce—a social relationship characterized by profound and often enduring mutual silence—and they seem to live through cataclysmic, transformational fights resulting in such silence with disconcerting regularity.

There are many ways to explain the brittleness and susceptibility to eventual fracture of certain relationships in the Tzotzil (Mayan) speaking community of Zinacantán, in highland Chiapas. A husband and his family are suspicious of a new bride's loyalties, and vice versa. People are concerned both with prying neighbors and with prying on neighbors. They fight over possessions: anyone who has anything, from wealth and happiness or a 3-ton truck to an embroidered skirt or new pot, fears and expects envy (and perhaps concomitant witchcraft) from a neighbor who doesn't. Most public disputes seem to center on inherited land. Siblings are in competition for their parents' property, even if recent population growth has reduced inheritable land to little more than a potential house plot.

It was once the case that Zinacantec parents bequeathed land, mostly to their sons at their pleasure (see G. Collier 1975), and contingent on the inheritors' continuing to render care and assistance to the parents in their old age and, crucially, to contribute to their burial costs. Parents were free, however, to complain to community officials and to reclaim land if the inheritors did not comply. As Mexican law has gradually come more directly to influence Zinacantec patterns of land tenure—as Zinacantecs have learned to employ Mexican bureaucratic institutions for their own benefit—legal protection for inheritors has made it less easy for disgruntled parents simply to dispossess estranged children from inherited land. One result has been increased bureaucratic caution when plots of land are "officially" transferred to offspring rather than simply made available for their use. Too complex to detail here are multiple possibilities disputing parties have for pursuing land disputes. As with all bureaucratic transactions in modern indigenous Mexico, choice between legal options

involves everything from party affiliation and networks of friends, to knowledge of Spanish, to the contingencies of financial resources, potential witnesses, and the existence of written documents to substantiate claims.

When people fight things can come to blows (and in post-Zapatista times Zinacantecs may resort to more serious weapons). Local courts thus sometimes have to deal with brothers who have punched each other in a drunken rage, husbands who have battered (or sometimes been battered by) their wives, and suspected witches dragged from their houses in the middle of the night who have survived to complain to a magistrate about it.

Usually, however, Zinacantecs fight with words. A powerful axiom of modern linguistic anthropology puts interaction—the real time encounter of interlocutors—at the heart of multiple mutually reinforcing “orders of indexicality” (Silverstein 2003) from which most of our evidence for social categories writ large must be drawn. People talking together, and the linguistic forms they employ, give us first order, ground-level evidence about social life writ small. Higher-order theorizing (native but also analytic) about such first-order encounters is the basic stuff of further social analysis. In Zinacantán, for example, just as friendliness is framed in a verbal idiom, so, too, is antagonism: when things go well, people *lek sk'opon sbaik* [talk together well]; when they don't, *mu xa sk'opon sbaik* [they no longer talk to each other] at all. “Talking together,” in fact, is a standard euphemism for being a friend, an ally, or a lover; it is what miscreant teenagers and would-be spouses do, as well as formal petitioners seeking a favor, politicians making a deal, or even just friends agreeing to hang out together. Conversely, the transitive verb of saying *ut* (to tell someone [something]) also means “to scold” or “to upbraid,” and its reflexive form comes close in meaning to verbal “fighting”: a mutual exchange of angry words. When people *yutoj sbaik* [have scolded each other] they have quarreled in such a way that one can presume their relationship to be somehow at least temporarily broken. When agreements are reached or arrangements made in a proper way, they are said to have been achieved *ta lekil k'op* [with good words]. On the other hand, the root *k'op* (speech, language, word) also means “serious matter, dispute, fight,” especially when in grammatically possessed form. When people have a disagreement, *oy s-k'op* (3E-k'op)¹, literally “their word exists, i.e., there is a dispute between them,” and if the matter is complex people observe that *ep s-k'op-lal* (3E-word-SUF) [there's a lot to be said about it]. Telling a lie is to *nop k'op*, literally “think (a) word.” The root *k'op* also underlies the metaphor behind the name for a magistrate or dispute settler, *j-pas-k'op* or *j-meltzanej-k'op*, literally “maker or fixer of words.” All of these verbal tropes for social relationships rely variously on how people actually address themselves to one another in different face-to-face situations, and the stances (DuBois 2007, Jaffe 2009) they adopt on such occasions. By attention to specific formal details of how argumentative exchanges are constructed, “the sociocultural reality manifested in-and-by discursive interaction becomes analytically visible, an immanent semiotic fact in such events of self- and other-definition” (Silverstein 2003:227).

In this article, I consider one main aspect of Zinacantec verbal fights: how people sometimes conceive of winning them by reducing an opponent to silence. But silence has its own social and interactive consequences, and these too will be part of my concern. The overall theme, shared by other articles in this issue, is the universal tension between opposition and collaboration in social life, or between aggression and other kinds of engagement (and non-engagement). Society mediates these tensions by providing the spaces in which people come together for both conjoint and disjoint ends, for both competition and cooperation. The arenas in which both fights and peace are manifest are in some sense the same, just as conflict and agreement are intertwined and conceptually inseparable. Thus, to summarize with an aphorism, fighting is constitutive of social order, even as it transforms it.

An ambiguity in the word “fight” points in the same direction, for only sometimes do we mean by “fight” a gloves-off, no-holds-barred free-for-all. More often fights are heavily regimented, partly orchestrated, rule-governed battles—a chess or basketball

[1]

game, a boxing match, or a debate—with more or less well-defined “rules of battle.” Courtrooms, which will be one locus of attention in this study, are also arenas of combat with well defined constraints on open aggression, and they have received considerable attention, both in general and in the same ethnographic area which concerns me (see for example J. Collier 1973, Brown 1990). Explicit discourse about fights can both reflect and help lay out ground rules of battle (consider everything from Robert’s *Rules* to those of the Marquis of Queensbury) and part of my focus will be fragments of such Zinacantec meta-argument.

Greetings, Silence, and Anger

My data derive from the last decades of a prolonged family fight, centered on the vitriolic dispute between Paco, a senior man with a distinguished ritual career, and his son-in-law Ran, a young political leader. After many years of squabbling about different pieces of land, variously bequeathed by Paco to his children, including Ran’s wife, and shuffled amongst them as circumstances changed, Paco—now old, deaf, and almost blind—had summoned all his children to the municipal town hall to complain about their behavior. As mentioned, according to Zinacantec tradition, in return for inherited land children must show their parents respect and in particular help feed and care for them as they grow old. Although Paco lived with his adult daughters and enjoyed an uneasy kind of cooperation with his younger son Antun, he had for years been at odds with both his older son and with Ran, Paco’s eldest daughter’s husband, over the fact that they inherited land from the old man but maintained only minimal contact with him. As everyone knew, *muk’ bu lek sk’opon sbaik* [they do not talk together well].

Figure 1 shows the rough spatial layout at the court. Several hamlet and municipal officials sit in a row on a bench in front of the town hall; they orchestrate the hearing by directing questions at individuals and trying to tame unwanted insurrection. The central combatants are the old man Paco and his son-in-law and enemy Ran. Flanking the old man is his younger son Antun, currently allied with his father, although he formerly followed Ran along with his older brother in shunning the old man. In between, but singled out spatially and in terms of formal recognition by the dispute settlers, sits Xap, another politically influential man who has come to help the old man Paco present his case. Both sides have come *en masse*, with relatives, political

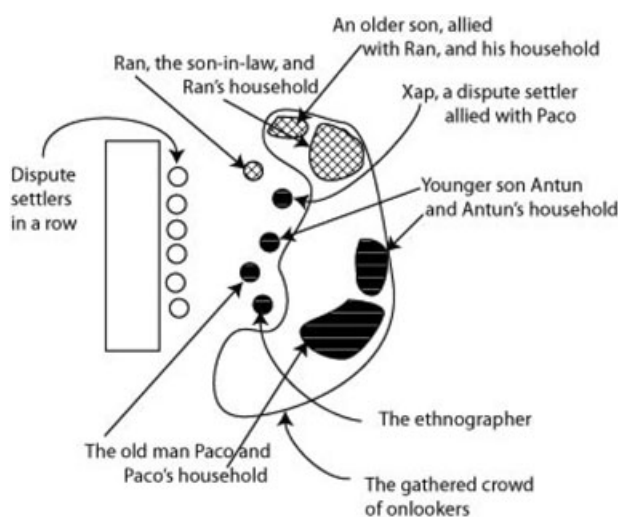


Figure 1
The rough spatial layout of protagonists at the town hall

mu	xa	x-a-k'opon	a-me`	//	<i>You no longer speak to your mother.</i>
NEG CL ASP-2E-speak 2E-mother					
mu	x-a-k'opon	a-ni`-	me`-el		<i>You don't speak to your mother-in-law.</i>
NEG ASP-2E-speak 2E-AFFINE-mother-SUF					

Figure 2
"Diagraph" of a near parallel couplet

allies, and spokespersons skilled in the language of public argument. Toward the back of the assembled crowd of onlookers but directly behind their principals stand the women from both Paco and Antun's immediate households. Similarly, members of Ran's household (including his wife, Paco's daughter) are arrayed behind Ran in the crowd, standing next to Paco's older son—allied with Ran against his father—and his family.

Fragment A, the first extract I present from this dramatic scene, provides evidence about the conceptual link in Zinacantec discourse between friendly social relations and talk. It involves direct mutual accusations about the lack of basic verbal sociality: talking together. Paco accuses his estranged son-in-law Ran of failing even to exchange greetings with him or his wife on the path, saying that "you just brush past" (Line 3 in Fragment A).

Fragment A²

- 1 **Paco;** mu xa xak'opon ame` //
You no longer speak to your mother.
- 2 mu xak'opon . ani` me`el
You don't speak to your mother-in-law.
- 3 xajaxjon xa jelavel ta antz ta vinik
You just brush past, both men and women.
- [
- 4 **Ran;** mu xik'opoj vo`one?
I don't speak?
- [
- 5 **Paco;** ijo la chingada
You son of a bitch!

The older man condemns Ran with 2nd person pronouns ("you no longer speak to your mother") and an explicit vulgar epithet (Line 5).

Paco's coupled lines in 1 and 2 echo the parallel poetic construction characteristic of Tzotzil prayer, religious language, and public declamation, which normally involves two or more matched lines which differ only in the root of the final lexical word (Haviland 1992b, 2000c). In Figure 2 I borrow a representational device DuBois (2001) dubs a "diagraph" to display the partly parallel structure shared by Paco's opening lines.

Paco's use of couplets lends weight and authority to his words, because it alludes to his mastery of ritual language from a lifetime of cargo service. It also highlights the intensity of the old man's anger, since intensity of feeling is conventionally indexed precisely by this departure from ordinary conversational language (see Gossen 1974b). Even the exact choice of the final doublet is a sly accusation. Part of the son-in-law Ran's respectful treatment toward his mother-in-law would include routinely addressing her not as "mother-in-law" at all but more intimately as *me`* (mother), a canon of ignored etiquette captured in Paco's pairing of *a-me`* (2E-mother, "your mother") with *a-ni`-me`el* (2E-affine-mother, i.e., "your mother-in-law").

Ran retorts in turn, building dialogically on Paco's opening salvo. First he demands rhetorically (Line 4 above), "Am I the one who doesn't speak?" With studied pronominal indirection³ he launches his counter accusation not directly at Paco but in the 3rd person plural (Line 8 below), footing his remark so as to address it to the audience at hand (that is to the assembled multitude, most pointedly the magistrates themselves) rather than to his accuser, who is now subsumed under an unspecified 3rd person collectivity.

- 6 **Ran;** ali vo'one *As for me*
 7 chik'opoje *I do speak.*
 8 mi ja'uk xtak'avik *But they don't even answer.*
 [
 9 **Paco;** ma'uk yech *That's not the right way to act.*

In the sequence that follows, Paco uses similar pronominal delicacy to make clear by switching to the plural⁴ (Lines 10 and 11—see the Tzotzil glosses included on the transcript below) that it is not only Ran he is criticizing. "Have you no mouths? Are you animals?" he demands:

- 10 **Paco;** mi muk' av- e
 Q NEG 2E- mouth
 Do you have no mouths?
 11 mi animal -oxuk
 Q animal -2APL
 Are you animals?
 [
 12 **Ran;** o x- xtijet jkot sil ik'al tz'i'
 They have their awful black dog following behind
 [
 13 **Paco;** lok'em jpas-k'op
 A former dispute settler
 [
 14 **Ran;** ja' =
 And it—
 15 =sbitzluj sne
 —wags its tail.
 16 **Paco;** lok'em jpas-rason
 A former fixer of disputes.
 [
 17 **Ran;** yan stukike mi ja'uk xtak'avik
 But they themselves don't bother to answer.

Paco gives the offense a collective character by extending it explicitly to an under-specified set of 2nd person addressees, suggesting that Ran and his whole family (including, most damningly, Paco's own daughter) fail to offer even the minimal expected greetings. In a pragmatic countermove to Ran's pronominal indirection (which obliquely demonstrated that he was not really in dialogue with his father-in-law but instead with the magistrates), Paco goes directly on the attack against his son-in-law and his entire entourage. He also laterally addresses Ran's own pragmatic move (that is, addressing the magistrates rather than his opponent), at Lines 13 and 16, by observing scathingly and also in the 3rd person that Ran, a former magistrate himself, should know better how to behave.

However, starting at line 12, in unabashed shouting overlap Ran counters that it is instead his parents-in-law who do not respond to his greetings, although "even their disgusting black dog, following close behind, will wag its tail."

I argued above, partly on the basis of the standard usage of Tzotzil verbs like “speak” and “tell,” that in Zinacantán a breakdown in mutual speech is a central diagnostic index of social antagonism: people fighting with each other eschew talking together, and others can draw appropriate conclusions. This first discursive fragment demonstrates in multiple ways the same point: that talk is a basic Zinacantec idiom of amicability. In this public squabble, an explicit substantive bone of contention *is* mutual talk (and its absence). The discourse also demonstrates breakdowns in mutual talk by means of an indexically potent *withholding* of mutuality in the play of pronouns. Talking *about* talking together (or not) is coupled with talking together (or not), and both the talk and the meta-talk are clear signals about the broken social relationship writ large: a pragmatic metonym.⁵

Replies, Retorts, and Insults

The court session from which Fragment A was drawn pits two warring sides of a single family against each other in vituperative, insulting, mutual accusation, sometimes in elaborately structured parallel Tzotzil, and usually with little apparent regard for niceties of sequence, relevance, or adjacency. The whole interaction, far from displaying an overarching ambience of cooperation, is combative, angry, and defiantly uncooperative. Rather than construction of common ground, here one has its withholding or withdrawal; rather than conjoint action (Clark 1996), one has disjoint and oppositional parrying.

To anticipate one conclusion: a bit like that between battles and wars, there is an ironic relationship between “winning” a verbal duel and “losing” the social game. The basic collaborative mechanism that underlies all conversation, including verbal antagonism—providing for a next turn (see Stivers et al. 2009), the possibility of a “future engagement”—requires winning without trouncing. A boxer is not supposed to murder his opponent. Shutting up your enemy can shut down your relationship, perhaps permanently, by allowing *no* next turn. If the aim in verbal battles is to reduce one’s adversary to silence (as in the Tzotzil phrase from my title, *mu xtak’av* [he doesn’t—i.e., *can’t*—reply]), as such battles are repeated they can concomitantly reduce one’s relationship to a state where people *mu xa sk’opon sbaik* (no longer talk to each other).

What does it mean to “reply” or “answer” in Zinacantec interaction? How is “answering” supposed to work in contexts of official disputing, and how does it change in serious fights, receding sometimes into silence? The Tzotzil root for “answer” is *tak’*, which surfaces in an intransitive verb stem *tak’av* (to respond), as a transitive stem *tak’* (which means both “answer” and “be possible”), and as an applicative (“reply to someone” and sometimes “talk back”). Ordinary Tzotzil conversation cannot proceed without interlocution: there is virtually no monologue in normal talk. Turns are short, punctuated by an interlocutor’s frequent backchannel.⁶ Without someone to *tak’van* (answer back)—often with heavy repetition—talk grinds inexorably to an uncomfortable halt. When a speaker addresses a group, one person usually emerges as a kind of designated *jtak’vanej* (answerer). In a parallel way, the minimal Zinacantec social encounter—an exchange of greetings—involves a highly regimented sequence of embedded adjacency pairs, which one person initiates (*chibat me’tik* [I am going, ma’am]) and the other completes (answering *batan kere* [go, boy!]). If someone greets a person who for some reason (deafness, inattention, drunkenness) fails to respond, others will usually prod with an imperative *tak’av-an la* (answer-IMP CL, i.e., answer!).

The evidential “hearsay” clitic *la* in the last form cited hints at a wider social configuration for properly socialized Zinacantec speech. In contrast with other more specific evidential clitics or an evidentially unmarked utterance, *la* shows that the “principal” in Goffman’s (1979) terms is someone *other* than the speaker—namely, here, the person who initiated the greeting (Haviland 1987a, 1989d, 2002a). That is, *la* nods in the direction of someone other than the person doing the reminding,

implying minimally a discourse triangle. Though I will talk about the Zinacantec metaphor for besting an opponent—"he cannot answer"—in which one person silences another, in fights, as in most dialogue (Bauman 2004:60), matters are rarely dyadic.

When a dispute is serious enough to be brought for formal resolution before Zinacantec magistrates or elders, there is a macroscopic regimen of responsive talk. It involves first a *monologic phase*, followed by a *free-for-all*, followed by a *pronouncement* or verdict formulated by the magistrates themselves.

Since the object of the exercise is to get disputants to *laj yo'onik*, (lit., "finish their hearts" or stop being angry)—i.e., to resume talking together—experienced dispute settlers first let opposing sides *chap* (prepare or arrange)—that is, lay out—their positions. They are encouraged to tell their own stories, with interlocution from the magistrates themselves but with minimal interruption from opposing sides. This is the "monologic" phase of the dispute settlement, although it is a far cry from a true uninterrupted monologue.

Magistrates also know, however, that sooner or later they will have to loosen the reins and let people have it out. The idea is to give people a chance to reveal what they really feel and want, both in monologue and in open shouting matches, before the dispute settlers finally take control of the interaction to try use their experience and moral authority to reconcile conflicting desires and to forge a compromise that embraces their construal of "tradition" and "law." The discourses of self-revelation when individuals lay out their own sides of a dispute regiment selves: they allow speakers to indulge in naked self-presentation in the monologic phase. On the other hand, when magistrates allow the shouting to begin in what I call the "free-for-all" phase of the settlement, it is argument which regiments if not truth (only laterally an issue in most Zinacantec court settlements—magistrates assume that everyone is lying to some degree, but conversely that there must be a grain of truth in what most people say) then settlements. The agreement and closure that a court session aims to produce—in the final "pronouncement" phase dominated by the magistrates—only emerges once people have had a chance to vent their anger and shout out their grievances. My exemplary fragments largely come from the verbal contests that emerge in the free-for-all phase of the critical court case between Paco and his son-in-law Ran.

Contrast the form of stylized verbal dueling: Tzotzil speakers have their own "ritual" or "playful" verbal battles, documented by Gary Gossen (1976), who describes a routine among Chamula men that resembles Mexican *albur*: exchanges of veiled allusions often to the other's homosexuality. "[T]here is always a winner, he who says the last word, and a loser, he who cannot answer the challenge." (Gossen 1976:126)

A more common variant in Zinacantán takes the form of extended sequences of humorous, frequently ribald, puns, based on someone's chance remark, where each person tries to outdo the others in the cleverness of his word play and the outrageousness of his image, often pointedly directed at another's person. Here instead the "winner" is usually the penultimate contributor, the one whose pun gets the biggest laugh, after which only a feebler attempt follows, thereby exhausting the motif. In both the Zinacantec and the Chamula cases, the "losers" *mu xtak'av* (cannot answer).⁷

Native Zinacantec categories do not match well with English folk fighting terminology. There is as far as I know no very good Tzotzil word meaning "insult" despite perhaps related categories like scolding (the verb *ut* mentioned above) or mocking (derived from the root *lab* which is conceptually linked to bewitchment and "critical or hostile glances" [Laughlin 1975]). In a society where age, status, and rank are usually clearly indexed in interpersonal demeanor and mutual terms of address, what we might call an insult may simply be a perceived lack of proper deference and respect: *mu xisp'is ta vinik* (he does not respect me, lit. he does not measure me as a man) is a frequent complaint. Alongside such folk metalinguistic labels that Laughlin

(1975) finds appropriate to apply to Zinacantec Tzotzil words as “male joking speech” or “ritual speech” are other rubrics like “scolding speech,” “mocking speech,” or “denunciatory speech”—seemingly characteristic of various sorts of verbal conflict. Zinacantecs, as we shall see, use many of the same specialized “honorific” devices that allow them to be appropriately polite and respectful—treating others “like a man”—in a kind of ironic inversion to display bald faced lack of respect.⁸ Notably this includes the parallel couplets ordinarily associated with ritual and prayer but turned to disrespectful ends. Furthermore, Tzotzil’s elaborate evidential devices (Haviland 2002), including the “hearsay” clitic *la* mentioned earlier, usually leave little doubt when a referentially innocuous remark amounts to an ironic criticism or a stinging rebuke.

Zinacantecs can also have unregimented verbal battles, both behind closed doors and in the open. In the following fragment Paco’s daughter Xunka` describes another scene from the same family land dispute, which took place far from the constrained confines of the court. One of Xunka`’s brothers allied himself with his brother-in-law Ran against his father Paco. Though this hated brother had inherited paternal land, the old man and his adult unmarried daughters—of whom Xunka` is the leader—continually challenged the brother’s right to use it, since he no longer maintained cordial relations with them.

When Zinacantecs *retell* serious verbal battles which involve angry exchanges, they typically portray—i.e., “voice”—the antagonists as verbally and physically aggressive, and the vanquished (perhaps with certain wishful thinking) as like those bested in a verbal duel: rendered mute, as if physically “unable to answer.” Of course retellings are reinterpretations, opportunities for n+1th order indexical demonstration of an nth order indexical performance (Silverstein 2003), in which typified or stylized views of how an encounter went (or a narrator wants to argue that it went) inhere in the very depiction of what happened. This is the power of gossip (Haviland 1977) as evidence for native metapragmatics.

In Fragment B, Xunka` describes in triumph how she upbraided the brother and his son when she surprised them taking firewood from the disputed land, deep in the forest, far from the village. By her account, she accosted the men fearlessly, rebuking them with angry, hostile words.

At one point in the retold scene the nephew over-ostentatiously pulled out a mobile phone and gave at least the appearance (since he was almost certainly out of the limited signal range) of trying to summon village authorities to arrest her for her verbal abuse. Xunka` “quotes” him at Lines 1–3 as he describes her—indirectly “on the phone”—with the offensive epithet *lev-sat me`el* (gash-eyed old woman).

Fragment B

1	Xunka`;	li` me li: lev sat me`ele:	<i>“The uh . . . gash faced old woman is here-</i>
3		ja` tal ilinu:k	<i>“She has come very angry.”</i>

In Xunka`’s account of the events, these are the very last words the nephew manages to utter. She responds immediately, angrily, and with hyperfluent parallel constructions. Even as she recounted the story, sitting in her kitchen addressing the assembled household, she was flushed, breathing hard, and clearly transported to the scene and her rage in retrospect. She retorts that the boy by mocking her mocks God himself, and she underlines the point first by quoting herself and then by putting hypothetical speech into the boy’s mouth.

4	vo`one levlev jsat //	<i>‘As for me, I may be gash faced</i>
5	vo`one yak`oj kajvaltik	<i>That is how God made me.</i>
8	ali vo`ote	<i>But as for you—</i>
9	mas chopolot //	<i>You are worse.</i>
10	ali vo`ote	<i>As for you, (you say)</i>

- | | | |
|----|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 11 | ay | <i>"Ay.</i> |
| 12 | ali kajvaltike | <i>"Our Lord God (you would say)—</i> |
| 13 | mas to chopol // | <i>"—is still worse.</i> |
| 14 | mas to yan x'elan | <i>"Is still more disgusting."</i> |

In her retelling, Xunka's words pour from her mouth in a breathless torrent, and her co-present interlocutors are given as little air space as the feckless nephew probably was in the moment.

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 16 | ali kajvaltike | <i>(But) Our Lord—</i> |
| 17 | te luchul ta altal // | <i>—is perched atop the altar.</i> |
| 18 | ali vo'ote | <i>But you—</i> |
| 19 | na'tik bu la.tal // | <i>Who knows where you've come from?</i> |
| 20 | ch'ul rreyot le' krem | <i>You are a holy king, boy.</i> |
| 22 | vo'one | <i>As for me,</i> |
| 23 | ja' ti k'u x'elan volol chanul liyak'
li kajvaltike: // | <i>I am however enclosed an animal I was made by God</i> |
| 25 | ja' ti k'u x'elan . muk' lek patbilon ⁹ | <i>however badly I was formed,'</i> |
| 26 | xkut un | <i>I said to him.</i> |

She finally observes in triumph (Line 30, below) that after this onslaught the cowed nephew could muster no scolding retort. *Mu xa xtak'av un.*

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 28 | ijo solel mi . batz'i | <i>Damn! He couldn't even—</i> |
| 29 | stz'ejtz'on | <i>—keep scolding.</i> |
| 30 | mu xa xtak'av un | <i>He could no longer reply.</i> |

This little performance has a complex structure of embedded reported speech, diagrammed in Figure 3, in which while speaking to her assembled household, Xunka presents first the nephew's "telephone call" for help and her subsequent verbal counterattack. This latter in turn includes an embedded interlude where, rather than allow the nephew to retort, she speaks for him, putting hypothetical words into his mouth and thus both occupying the full floor of the reported encounter and recasting the nephew as the sort of person who thinks himself better than God. Each layer of represented talk here is also a layer of action (Clark 1996). Each corresponds at once to a report of the supposed events in this angry encounter and a locus for Xunka's interpretation of what transpired and how, in the end, it contributed to the besting of her opponent.

The extemporized parallel constructions throughout the rant have similarly multiple effects. They demonstrate Xunka's altered and emotional state of mind; they resonate with the social power associated with ritual genres of speech to show how effectively she is able to put her nephew in his place; and, notably, their fluency smothered under a torrent of words any chance the nephew might have to reply.

A Sequential Template for Argumentative Cooperation

By contrast, when there is cooperation even with opposition—as in the next short fragment from the settlement of a marital dispute (see Haviland 1996)—rather than giving him or her *no* space to reply, interaction is constructed so as to constrain an opponent's turns by maximally regimenting them. This is how dispute settlements are canonically *supposed* to proceed in Zinacantán.

Several Zinacantec elders have been called to resolve a dispute between Andrés and his wife, whom Andrés has badly beaten. Xun, the main dispute settler, argues that it is all right for husband and wife to quarrel; but their anger should be expressed and then cease. He is quickly joined by Lukax, another elder, who repeats the same

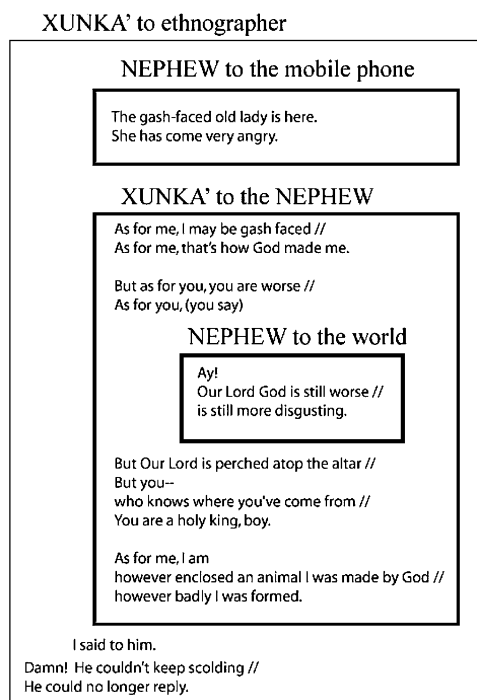


Figure 3
Embedded depicted speech in a retold rebuke

sentiment (Lines 8 and 10–11 below) in overlap with Xun who simultaneously goes on to produce an alternate formulation of the same point (Line 12): one quarrel is alright, but not repeated fights day after day.

Fragment C

7	Xun;	bat o ta ik' mel-el- [	<i>It just blows away on the wind</i>
8	Lukax;	jp'el nan e [	<i>Maybe just one word (of scolding)</i>
9	Xun;	yan solel . [	<i>On the other hand-</i>
10	Lukax;	k'alal =	
11		ta jlikele lek un = [	<i>When it only last a short while, ok.</i>
12	Xun;	ta jujun k'ak'al ta jujun k'ak'ale	<i>But every day, every day . . .</i>
13		mu yorauk un	<i>That's hopeless.</i>
14		mu xtun .	<i>It won't do</i>

Only now does the accused husband, Andrés, manage a turn (Line 16, below), echoing submissively what the elders have just said. Even his turn is overlapped by a third dispute settler Petul (at Line 17), who continues in further alignment with Xun's argument.

16	Andrés;	mu xtun che'e [	<i>It won't do, no.</i>
17	Petul;	puta mu ja'uk xive'otik o ya'el.	<i>Damn, that puts no food on the table.</i>

The object of this cooperatively framed dispute settlement is not to silence the misbehaving husband into submission, but by a chorus of argument to elicit the wrongdoer's agreement—indeed, to induce him to join the dispute settlers' chorus.

Insult from Implicit to Insistent

In stark contrast, let me return to the cataclysmic court case from which Fragment A was excerpted. The case marked the decisive final confrontation in this family rupture, and each move in this public face-off is a masterpiece of malice, a tiny ingot of interactive invective, constructed so as to maximize offense in both substantive content and interpersonal contour.



Tensions about inherited land are clear in Fragment D, extracted from Paco's normatively monologic "laying out" of his version of the crucial events following the initial verbal skirmishes from which Fragment was drawn. Paco describes how his son-in-law reacted scornfully when the old man first offered his daughter, Ran's wife, part of her inheritance. The old man places disrespectful and arrogant words (and an angry tone of voice¹⁰) into his son-in-law's mouth: "What do I care about a woman's land? I have my own."

Fragment D

1	Paco; k'elo lavosilike xkut	<i>"Take care of your land," I told him.</i>
2	mu k'u jtu'un yosil antz	<i>"I have no use for woman's land.</i>
3	o k-osil uk //	<i>"I have my own land, too.</i>
4	oy j- balamil uk	<i>"I have my own earth, too."</i>
5	xi li ran ya'ele	<i>said Ran it seems.</i>
6	mu la k'u stu sk'el la yosil antz un	<i>According to him it's of no use to him to take care of woman's land.</i>

The anger in the younger man's alleged reply is also portrayed by the parallel couplets (pairing the words *osil* and *balamil* "land, property" in Lines 3 & 4) that Paco attributes to him. Moreover, although the son-in-law is sitting physically nearby in court, Paco maintains a double interactive remove from him. In Line 6, Paco paraphrases Ran's words in the third person, and he marks it twice with the quotative evidential *la* which, by contrast with an evidentially unmarked formulation, distances the speaker from both sentiment and formulation in the implicated (reported) original speech act. (It also suggests that Ran disdainfully rejected the offer of land behind the old man's back.)

The younger man angrily retorts—interrupting the old man's privileged narrative—with a direct counter accusation at Lines 7 & 9 (below): "But first you give the land, and then you steal it back."

7	Ran; pero julikel chapoj sutel chava i une	 <i>But every little while you steal it back again, you see.</i>
8	Xap; bweno [	OK
9	Ran; chavak' y chapoj sutel	<i>You give it and then you steal it back.</i>

Note as well the apparent attempted intervention by Paco's supporter, Xap, at Line 8. We shall return to Xap shortly.

Irvine's (1993) deconstruction of the notion of insult in her analysis of the Wolof *xaxaar*—poetic abuse aimed at a new bride and her family, publicly performed at a wedding—elaborates a formulation that requires both a local theory of what counts as insulting coupled with a participation structure (counts for whom? If said by whom? In front of whom? And so on). Like a Wolof wedding, the Zinacantec town hall brings together people—often whole families—who might usually try to avoid

direct confrontation with each other, and it frequently attracts a large crowd of onlookers as well, putting insult both bald and off the record into public circulation. Contrary to the Xaxaar case, however, here there is little mitigation of responsibility or hiding behind professional mouthpieces or Griots: the principals largely talk for themselves, and the official context gives them no room to squirm away from responsibility for their words. Nonetheless, the layered piling on of accusation and squabbling by family members and friends in the backstage potentially mitigates the confrontation of principals: the latter can treat each other with at least nominal civility, leaving the background teams to spit out their vituperative poison. The social organization of fighting thus allows—indeed, encourages—cooperation and antagonism to coexist.

The phases of the dispute settlement, sketched above, remind us of a further sequential dimension to potential “insult”: one can speak “out of turn” (by interrupting when one is not entitled to the floor, as in Fragment D); and one can fail to speak at all when adjacency seems to demand it. In Fragment E Ran, the son-in-law, angrily challenges Antun, Paco’s son and a younger brother of Ran’s wife, with a highly disrespectful rhetorical question. Antun has complained that after the official division of the disputed land, Ran boycotted the standard protocol and failed to attend a ritual meal at Antun’s house for those who had witnessed the inheritance procedure.


Fragment E

- 1 **Antun;** muk’ bu a ve’an ta na le’e vi
But you didn’t even go to eat at the house over there.
 2 te xa lakom ta ana
You just stayed in your own house afterwards.
 3 **Ran;** k’usi batz’i pwersa chive’ ta ana
What? So am I obliged to eat at your house?

Ignoring Ran’s implicit insult at Line 3, Antun ploughs on to chide his brother-in-law for upbraiding the village officials who presided over the division of the land (Fragment F, below). The implicature is about Ran’s arrogance in disrespecting such political authorities. In response, Ran jumps in three more times with unanswered challenges: “I scolded him?” (Lines 7 and 10).

Fragment F

- | | | | |
|----|---------------|---|--|
| 1 | Antun; | povre komiteetike | <i>Poor land commissioners.</i> |
| 2 | | utel to iyich’ | <i>They were given a scolding.</i> |
| 3 | | mi ja’ la yech li x’elan spasulan ta
sp’isulan = | <i>“Is that how you are supposed to
do it, when you measure land?”</i> |
| 4 | | =balamil | |
| | | [| |
| 5 | Xap; | i tambyen imeltzaj akta noxtok li’
kumpa | <i>And there was also an agreement signed
here, compadre.</i> |
| | | [| |
| 6 | Antun; | chaxi xava’i une, te lajav = | <i>(That’s what) you said, remember. Then</i> |
| | | [| <i>you ran back-</i> |
| 7 | Ran; | ikut vo’one? | <i>I scolded them?</i> |
| 8 | Antun; | =tal ta PV | <i>here from PV (place name).</i> |
| | | [| |
| 9 | Xap; | mi. | <i>Did— ?</i> |
| | | [| |
| 10 | Ran; | ikut vo’one? | <i>I scolded them?</i> |
| | | [| |
| 11 | Xap; | mala to | <i>Just wait.</i> |
| 12 | Antun; | kere | <i>Damn!</i> |

This has been e than a shouting match between Ran and Antun, however. Throughout (Lines 5, 9, and 11), Paco's spokesperson Xap has tried repeatedly, though unsuccessfully, to intervene in the aggressive dynamic between the two brothers-in-law, perhaps to calm their tempers, but also to introduce what he presents as a more relevant argument against Ran, namely that at an earlier court confrontation a formal *akta* or legal agreement had been elaborated and signed which should have resolved the matter. Nonetheless, Ran overrides these attempts to break the dynamic, challenging his younger brother-in-law (Lines 14–15 below) once as a direct imperative to Antun, then as an apparent command to the magistrates with Antun treated as a 3rd person, to bring forward the supposedly ill-treated land commissioner.

13	Xap;	mala to	<i>Just wait,</i>
14	Ran;	albo much'u komiteal ikute	<i>Which land commissioner did I scold?</i>
15		ak'o yal k'u x'elan ikut	<i>Let him say how I scolded him.</i>

Both in what he says and how and when he chooses to say it Ran interactively asserts his dominance not only over his immediate opponent Antun, but also over Xap and, by implication, perhaps even over the assembled hamlet officials themselves. Argument here, via sequential manipulation, regiments authority and power.

Metalinguistic talk about turn-taking can also insult. That is, just as turn-taking can be used to manipulate power in fights, explicit sequential matters can also be introduced as topics into argument, providing further rhetorical ammunition. In Fragment G (below), several minutes later, Ran has counterattacked. Although Antun may now be allied with his father Paco, Ran asserts that formerly Antun had opposed the old man, going so far as to sponsor a witchcraft ceremony against him. Ran aims both to divide Paco's camp and also to discredit everything Antun might have to say about cooperating with the old man. Ran asks that witnesses be summoned who can testify to Antun's boasts about trying to witch his father. Antun now breaks in to argue that this whole topic is irrelevant to the matter at hand—a position that Paco himself echoes (at Lines 13–14 below) once he understands what is going on.

Fragment G

7	Antun;	bweno k'u'n ti ja' to atam o tal abae	<i>Well, but why are you just now bringing this up?</i>
8		li'e ma'uk ta jtzaktik ak'-chamel [	<i>Here we're not talking about witchcraft.</i>
9	Ran;	anch'an vo'ote	<i>You shut up!</i>
10	Paco;	ataj (?????????) [	<i>As far as that-</i>
11	Ran;	malao vo'ote anch'an [	<i>You wait, shut up!</i>
12	Antun;	((shouting)) [
13	Paco;	((shouting)) ja' to =	<i>Only now are you coming-</i>
14		k'ot aval ta komite chatal =[	<i>-to tell the land commissioners this.</i>
15	Ran;	vo'ote m- anch'an- anch'an	<i>You shut up, shut up.</i>
16		anch'an [	<i>Shut up!</i>
17	Paco;	atimi chak'an chameltzane chatakbat	<i>If you want to settle that, wait until—</i>
18		ta ik'el ta = =ta ik'el ta ajente	<i>you are summoned by the magistrate</i>

19		chatal ta meltzanel yechuke [	<i>You should come for a proper settlement instead.</i>
20	Antun;	unen pasob-rason uk	<i>You're supposed to know a little about how to settle disputes</i>
21	Paco;	a li'e tambil latal // ik'bil latal [	<i>Now you were forced to come // you were brought</i>
22	Ran;	malao malao	<i>Wait! Wait!</i>
23		vo'ote mu xatik' aba	<i>You, don't butt in!</i>

Ran repeatedly orders Antun to shut up, in terms normally too direct for public discourse. He has thrown down a verbal gauntlet, not dueling his adversary into silence but nakedly commanding it. Paco also starts to shout angrily at this point, charging that Ran is being disrespectful to the current process, which involves land commissioners rather than the magistrates who might deal with witchcraft accusations. Ran avoids answering Paco's charges, instead dismissively telling his brother-in-law Antun to shut up (Lines 11, 15–16, and 22–23), after Antun points out (Line 20) that Ran, as a former magistrate, ought to behave better.

As a powerful political figure in the village, Ran is on fairly safe ground openly confronting his brother-in-law, a notoriously unreliable town drunkard and a much younger man, who would normally owe his senior brother-in-law respect. The fact that Antun does not *tak'be* "answer him" in Fragment F or that Ran claims the right to shut him up in Fragment G without bothering to address any substantive arguments shows that Ran has indeed managed effectively to devoice the younger man. The baldness of Ran's challenges to Antun indexes Ran's stronger, dominant position. As Irvine points out, "in some relationships a speaker needs no lines of retreat at all, for the relationship itself provides one" (1993:129).

More striking than his dismissive silencing of his younger brother-in-law is the naked hostility Ran expresses publicly toward Xap, his *compadre* and a man of similar age and political influence who was supporting the old man Paco's cause in court. When Xap repeatedly tries to break the effective wall of silence between the two brothers-in-law (shown in Fragment H below), Ran suddenly turns on him with what in the context is an outrageously aggressive move. In insistent overlap Ran challenges Xap's authority and ability to involve himself in this dispute resolution at all.

Fragment H

1	Xap;	bweno . pero	<i>OK, but—</i>
2		kaltik ava`i un kumpa	<i>Listen, compadre.</i>
3		poreso ali k'op k'u xa(??) [	<i>That's why, as for this fight, what will—</i>
4	Ran;	meltzano k'u x'elan xana` smeltzanele kumpare	<i>Settle the dispute however you know how to settle it, compadre.</i>
6		alo raso:n	<i>Give your advice!</i>
7	Xap;	an por eso yu'un ta lek onox lok'em jpask'opot= [	<i>Why, yes, let's settle it positively; you are a former dispute settler—</i>
8	Ran;	mi oy avunen abtel chava'ie	<i>If you think you have some little official job.</i>
9	Xap;	= chava`i [	<i>—you understand</i>
10	Ran;	karajo	<i>Shit!</i>

In Line 7 Xap, somewhat taken aback, acknowledges Ran's own past history as a high-level magistrate and dispute settler. (Ran is a former municipal president who presided over the town's most senior court, and Xap has held similar slightly lower

level offices himself.) But Ran continues the attack, questioning the other's competence to participate in this family matter when he holds no official status as a member of the current court's hierarchy. This is an arrogant ploy, because by questioning the ability of other senior men present, Ran potentially questions the authority of the entire court procedure.

The encounter escalates into one of Goffman's (1967) "character contests" (Goodwin and Alim, this issue). Ran has finally managed to provoke Xap, both by his tone and insistent non-yielding of the floor through prolonged overlap (see his angry *karajo* "son-of-a bitch" at Line 10 and his angry sounding almost childish non-sequitur in Line 12–13 below), and also by his insulting insinuations about Xap's lack of authority as a *j-pas-k'op* "fixer of *k'op* (lit. words, i.e. disputes). The dispute moves from the specifics of the current speaking dynamic and its miniature social organization, to a higher order evaluative comment on the speakers' "more enduring subject positions and social categories they take up or have thrust upon them" (Buchholz 2009:166).

[2]

- | | | | |
|----|-------------|--|---|
| 11 | Xap; | yu'n me la jmeltantik ta ko'oluk k'usi | <i>Why, let's settle it together, eh?</i> |
| | | [| |
| 12 | Ran; | yechot u:k | <i>Same as you, too.</i> |
| 13 | | pasaro jpask'opot chava`i une: | <i>You are a former dispute settler,</i> |
| | | [| |
| 14 | Xap; | yu`van- | <i>You don't suppose that-</i> |
| 15 | | unenotik to | <i>-we are still babies.</i> |
| 16 | | yijubemotik | <i>We are grown ups.</i> |

Xap in turn tries to shame Ran by indirectly accusing him of acting like a child (Lines 14–16).

Irvine (1993) points out that, regardless of its "traditional" character and its mediated delivery, Wolof *xaxaar* insult poetry can have dramatic life-altering consequences. The long term, potentially catastrophic consequences of verbal fights move us from the realm of discourse to biographies and social lives irrevocably altered by the apparent vagaries of talk, that is, refigured in part by repeated indexical maneuvers in interaction. The highly public dispute between Paco and Ran involves many people both inside the extended family and well beyond it, and it takes place in the most exposed of public circumstances—the town hall—in a community where people prefer to conduct their affairs if not in secret at least behind enclosing courtyard fences and walls (see Haviland and Haviland 1983). Arguments in such a public setting inevitably link to public power, embodied most nakedly by those who have a public voice themselves, and by those who assume the sequential authority both to authorize and to silence other voices. Public conflict is an index of public might, and private squabbles as well as public disputation thus deserve a central place in studies of politics writ both large and small.

Of course, in some circumstances (academic department meetings, or family fights, for example), one can be silenced but retain a certain dignity through the tried and true technique of "walking out" when the insults fly too fast. The centripetal structure of family (or professional) relationships may keep the group together even in the face of transitory rupture. In this public forum, with the village's most influential people present, no easy retreat is possible. Since Ran's insults are baldly produced, unambiguous, and non retractable, there is really no turning back from the consequences of public wounding and shaming. In particular, Ran has earned Xap's enmity. Indeed, the two men have continued to run each other down publicly in subsequent years and to square off against each other in dispute after dispute, having established themselves as spokesmen for two opposing political factions in the village.

Conclusions

Political life perhaps inevitably breeds feuds like the one between Ran and Xap. I know that some political actors rate their successes in terms less of the friends they have than the enemies they have cultivated. In this sense, too, arguments can be constitutive forces in social life. But *constitutive* here usually also means *transformative*. Arguments in a community like Zinacantán form part of the social fabric, but they rarely leave it intact, unpatched, or even recognizably part of the same garment. For many Zinacantecs this is the terrible part of “not speaking”—since social interaction largely consists of mutual talk, not being able to talk means one cannot comfortably share a social space with an enemy. Angry exchanges of words, and transgressing the boundaries of normally regimented public speech refashioned Ran’s and Xap’s relationships as one of public enmity and opposition.

Of course, social relationships (and arguments as part of them) have histories and evolve over time. It is probably rare in Zinacantán (outside of ideologized retellings like Xunka’s in Fragment B above) that one interlocutor so thoroughly silences another that “no reply” is literally possible.¹¹ The reciprocity of turn-exchange—generalized from a default conversational sequencing device to a metaphor for social life through the Zinacantec ideology of sociality as “speaking together”—may at least in this society mean that there always remains the possibility that an enemy, once shut up, will pipe up again; or that a family wrenched by schism will kiss and make up, and again start to “talk together.” This happens in Zinacantán sometimes even after decades of enmity, so that perhaps one day even Ran and Xap will find themselves on the same side of a future battle and thus open themselves again to mutual speech.

More serious, therefore, were the consequences of Ran’s undisguised though somewhat less “direct” insulting exchanges with his father-in-law Paco. These coupled with similar affronts to the old man addressed to others in ways so public they could not help but reach the old man’s ears (see Haviland 2005) turned the two men into bitter enemies, a fact of social life that no reworking of the “facts of the case” could ever reverse. And though each man could argue, for any given fighting encounter, that he might have “won” the skirmish by virtue of putting his opponent into a position where the other “could not reply,” this was a fight that overall could not be won. In fact this court case, which took place more than a decade ago, represented for most of the battling protagonists the last time they ever *isk’opon sbaik* (talked to each other). Paco and his son-in-law never again exchanged words directly, and the old man carried his angry silence to the grave.

Notes

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1. Grammatical abbreviations used in glosses include: CL = sentential enclitic, Q = interrogative proclitic, ! = presentative predicate nominative, IRREAL = irrealis enclitic, ASP = neutral aspect, PL = plural suffix, NEG = negative particle, 1E = 1st person ergative/possessive, 2E = 2nd person ergative/possessive, 3E = 3rd person/ergative/possessive, 2APL = 2nd person absolute plural.

2. Tzotzil is written in a Spanish based practical orthography in which ‘ represents IPA /χ/, *ch* is /tʃ/, *x* is /x/, *tz* is /ts/, *j* is /j/, and *y* is /j/. Transcripts are drawn from audio recordings of public court settlement, or recorded spontaneous conversation, each labeled at the beginning of each fragment. Most are simplified to show only *free English glosses* (in italic Roman font) and transcribed Tzotzil (shown in courier font) to which indications of synchrony and overlap are linked. An open square bracket (|) marks places where the material transcribed on the line below the square bracket overlaps material in the line before it. Latch marks (shown with “=”) link lines that follow each other directly without a discernable pause. Where questions of overlap are non-essential to analysis, and where space permits, I present Tzotzil and English

free glosses in two columns, partly to allow inspection of parallelism between matched Tzotzil phrases. When one Tzotzil line can be formally paired in this way with the line that follows, the first is marked with final double slashes (/ /).

3. See Brown (1990) for more detailed treatment of "indirection" as a trope of both politeness and its opposite in neighboring Tzeltal.

4. The form *av-e* (2E-mouth) 'your mouth' is unmarked with respect to plurality, but the predicative *animal-oxuk* (animal-A2pl, you are animals) is formally plural.

5. Insofar as that particular sort of speech relationship—pointedly failing to talk together—can be taken to stand for a wider antagonism, the pragmatic act that indexes it has a tropic character, signaling the whole by exhibiting one of its central component parts, another illustration of "the complex, real-time process whereby linguistic forms associated in the first instance with interpersonal stance-taking may come to be ideologically tied to larger social categories" (Bucholz 2009:147). See, too, what Silverstein calls "baptismal" essentialization" of indices (2003:203), and of the "figuration" of indexical facts at higher metapragmatic levels (2003:208ff).

6. For treatments of dialogic repetition in other Mayan communities, where the phenomenon is widely described, see Gossen 1974a, 1974b, 1976; 1985; Bricker 1974, Brown 1990; Brody 2000, 2005, among others. On the general issue of different interactive turn-taking styles and other concomitants, linguistic, corporeal, and social, see Levinson 2006.

7. Recall Labov's early observation about trying to elicit rhymed dozens. "One must be quite careful in using the rhymed dozens with younger boys: if they cannot top them, they feel beaten from the start, and the verbal flow is choked off." (Labov 1972:308.) See also Pagliai's remarks (this issue) about how experienced *Contrasto* poets use care in setting challenges to younger opponents.

8. Brown (1990) makes a similar argument about inversions of normally "polite female" speech in a Tzeltal court case for ironic, argumentative ends.

9. Zinacantecs sometimes describe the process of birth as pairing a human soul and body with a corresponding animal spirit, kept in a supernatural corral inside the mountains and guarded over by ancestral deities. The root *pat* used here suggests that God formed Xunka' in the same way that a potter molds a clay pot. The syntactic and categorical parallelism in Tzotzil discourse is too complex a topic to treat fully here; but see Gossen 1974b.

10. Goodwin and Alim (this issue) argue for analysis of "transmodal" means for stylizing oneself and others, following work of C. Goodwin (2000) and many others. Such transmodality is clearly audible in voice quality, tempo, and other prosodic features in the audiotapes not visible on written transcripts.

11. There are certain bureaucratic contexts—certain official Mexican land tribunals—where judges simply tell Zinacantec disputants to sit down and shut up, a possibility breathtakingly unlike what happens in Zinacantec dispute settlement.

I am informed by Marco Jacquemet that he once witnessed a *Contrasto* duel between Roberto Benigni and Umberto Eco in which Benigni so thoroughly bested Eco that to cap the performance he permitted himself the "atomic bomb" of *Contrasto*, using the closing pair *tigre/pigre* for which Italian simply has no further rhymes, a device so thoroughly *chiuso* (Pagliai, this issue) one could otherwise never use since it guarantees that there can be no further riposte.

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