



“But you said ‘four sheep’ ...!”: (sign) language, ideology, and self (esteem) across generations in a Mayan family



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ABSTRACT

A first generation family sign language, dubbed Z, emerging in a single extended household in an otherwise Tzotzil-speaking community of indigenous peasants in highland Chiapas, Mexico, provides an example of both rapid language creation and change and of the evolution of ideologies of appropriate language form and use in even such a minimal speech/sign community. Adding the new sign language to (the bottom end of) an existing inventory of differentially evaluated language varieties, including Tzotzil and Spanish, positions the signers with respect not only to hearing speakers, but to one another. The most striking contrast presented is between the oldest fluent signer—the first deaf person in her community—trapped by her sign language, and the youngest—her hearing son—propelled beyond it.

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1. Introduction

For the past few years I have been studying the manual communication system in a single household in highland Chiapas, Mexico, dubbed “Zinacantec family Homesign” or “Z” for short. The township of Zinacantán is a heavily studied (for example, Vogt, 1969, 1976; Laughlin, 1975; G. Collier, 1975; J. Collier, 1968; Cancian, 1965, 1972, 1994; Haviland, 1977) largely “indigenous” community where nearly everyone speaks Tzotzil (Mayan) as a first language. Formerly peasant corn-farmers and itinerant traders, some Zinacantecs over the past half century have become bilingual or at least well educated in Spanish and have moved into professions or entrepreneurial activities (from teaching, to large and small scale flower or agricultural farming, to transport or trade in everything from vegetables to acrylic yarns and patent medicines). When I first began ethnographic work in Chiapas, half a century ago, the community was determinedly monolingual in Tzotzil, although the oldest men in the township were the most likely to speak Spanish—often ungrammatical but prolific in obscenities—because their erstwhile work as muleteers had brought them into more intimate contact with *ladinos* (non-Indians) than did their sons’ almost exclusive economic reliance on *milpa* cultivation at mid century. (Similarly, some elderly *ladinos* in San Cristóbal, especially those who relied on trade with Indians, could once speak passable commercial Tzotzil, something now unheard of among non-Indian Mexicans.) Nowadays in Zinacantán it is teenagers and young adults who are most likely to trade text messages in Spanish, although some lament that they never learned to write in Tzotzil, which would be more useful as a private code.¹ Although there once used to be a significant number of Spanish speaking residents in the township, culturally

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¹ While composing this essay, sitting at a desk in Italy in the summer of 2015, I received an email message in Spanish from a San Cristóbal lawyer who introduced himself as a grandson of the senior musician from whom I had learned to play traditional Zinacantec music 49 years before. When I replied to him in Tzotzil he excused himself, saying that while he was fluent in both languages, he felt incompetent to communicate in writing in anything but Spanish.

non-Indian but with kinship and commercial links to the community, and bilingual in Tzotzil, almost all of these people have now left Zinacantán. Now only a few individuals remain in the township—most notably *ladina* wives who have moved into their Zinacantec husbands' homes—who are effectively monolingual in Spanish.

Adding an emergent “homesign” system (Goldin-Meadow, 2003) like “Z” to the language mix complicates matters, most notably by adding a third layer of potential linguistic difference to the community. In addition to Tzotzil monolinguals, those who also speak Spanish, and the few Spanish monolinguals, there are—at least in the tiny social world of the Z household—also deaf signers who speak no Tzotzil, and a few hearing signers fluent in both Z and Tzotzil. In terms of size alone, but also given how they are represented in individuals' repertoires as well as the presumed attribution of different sorts of value to these linguistic varieties—evidence for which I present in this chapter—we can provisionally arrange these different languages by rank,² as follows: Z < Tzotzil < Spanish. Refining this crude scale against the actual complex linguistic trajectories of individuals, and calibrating it both with respect to the social selves speakers project (or have projected upon them), and against different time scales—that of an entire language, the lifespans of individuals, and the embedded temporalities of individual sign forms themselves—will be the main tasks of this essay.

Talk of “values” and “ranks” for languages is, of course, ideological talk, and it does not square well with the standard lessons one imparts to fledgling linguists about the ultimate equivalence of even the most “exotic” and endangered languages. The tenor of most academic research on emerging sign languages—like that of sign linguistics in general—has an even stronger polemic: to show that even relatively young sign languages display (or move quickly towards) certain familiar kinds of linguistic structure: parts of speech (see, for example, Haviland, 2015b), morphosyntax, and duality of patterning, among others. As a researcher one often feels compelled to de-emphasize difference or limitation, and to assert comparability and complexity even in a first-generation sign language like Z: to show, that is, that Z is a language. Nonetheless, our researchers' prejudices against attributing differential values to languages stand in obvious conflict with ubiquitous and undeniable local social valuations. However much we might argue that Tzotzil, for example, displays complex synthetic morphology, ergative syntax, and delicate semantic partitioning of different denotational domains, or that its developed speech genres rival the richness of any literary tradition, or that it equips its most masterful speakers with rhetorical skills that would be the envy of any Western politician, it remains a perhaps sad fact that in many situations Tzotzil speakers readily abandon the language in favor of Spanish (or, when immigrating to the United States, English). In the present case, as we shall see, the hearing members of the signing Z family hardly imagine that signing enriches the lives of those who should also be able to learn to speak. (In fact, they find curious and a bit comical my obsessive linguist's interest in Z, which they sometimes characterize as merely a system for *ak'el iluk* ‘showing’ rather than *k'opojel* ‘speaking’ or *alel* ‘saying.’)

The values and stigmas associated with specific linguistic varieties accrue ideologically to individuals who manifest them in their communicative repertoires; moreover, familiar properties of such language ideologies (Gal and Irvine, 2000) imply that languages, whether spoken or signed, project onto individuals associated with them other, parallel scales of value, including—in the case of Z—scales of personhood and social age. In this essay I step back from my own ideology as a linguist who concentrates on the undeniable details of Z linguistic structure, to reflect ethnographically on the preoccupations, attitudes, and decisions that shape what it means to be a Z signer in the community itself.

After introducing the full—if tiny—Z speech (i.e., sign) community, I concentrate on the signing of the first deaf person in the extended family and then turn to the single fluent second generation signer, her hearing son. How has he been socialized into language, and what sort of person is he as a result? How is this consequentially different from the situation of his mother? I rely on aspects of directed acquisition to adduce evidence for nascent linguistic norms, or standards of well-formedness, in the emerging sign language—that is, in part, to show that Z is, indeed, formally a language in the received sense. The phenomena I present are thus intended to help us reflect on the biographical, sociological, and corporeal bases of creating a language, as it were, out of thin air. More pertinent for the present collection, I consider how linguistic interventions and interactions among signers, and between caregivers and child, shape not only signers' linguistic abilities but also their senses of what kind of (communicating) persons they are, contrasting the case of the bilingual child as he grows into language with that of his monolingual signing mother, the first and for several years the only deaf person in the family.

2. Z

Fig. 1 shows an abbreviated genealogy of the community of Z signers, including the three deaf siblings, their hearing sister, and several further hearing native signing nephews and nieces who grew up in this extended household with Z and spoken Tzotzil as their means of communication. Z has emerged with no input from other sign languages or deaf people. Vic, son of Jane, the first signer, is the child whose growing linguistic capacities and sense(s) of self are, along with those of his mother, the main focus of this essay.

Consider the sort of linguistic experience Jane must have had, as the only deaf person in her household (and, indeed, in her entire village) for the first 6 years of her life, with no direct access to any language system. Contrast this with the language learning experience of her son Vic, born with normal hearing thirty years later into a household where, at least at first, his caregivers communicated with him by preference in the already emerging family homesign, as well as in spoken Tzotzil. What sorts of conceptual tools and categories did Jane develop as she interacted with the world around her? How did she come to

² I thank the editors for suggesting that I make explicit such a scale.

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