

Talking with the face only: multifunctional gaze in speech and sign in highland Chiapas

John B. Haviland

In the first-generation sign language, dubbed Z, developing in a single extended family including three deaf siblings in a rural indigenous village in Chiapas, Mexico, gaze is central to the morphology of a variety of grammatical devices, serving aspects of utterance construction ranging from reference and argument structure to clause parsing, turn selection, and reciprocity (see [1-2]), as it does in other sign languages (see, for example, [3-6]). Indeed, hearing members of this tiny signing community say that the deaf individuals, in conversation with one another, sometimes choose to “talk with their faces only”—that is, using minimal manual signs—as a kind of “whispering” or secretive style of communicating when, for example, they wish to avoid eavesdropping.

One highly likely source of inspiration and raw material for the Z sign language is gesture—that is, visible aspects of the utterances of speakers—in the surrounding Tzotzil(Mayan)-speaking community. How, exactly, such visible elements of spoken communication are incorporated into the emerging sign language (as they demonstrably are [1]) and adapted to and by it are issues of considerable import and debate in understanding how a young sign language grows and develops. Investigations of such processes of cross-modal language borrowing, grammaticalization, and change are also crucial to understanding the multiple semiotic underpinnings of language writ large.

Research has been conducted into various aspects of Tzotzil speakers’ gestures, especially their indexical and iconic links to the spoken word (for example [8-14]). At the same time, the roles of gaze and the eyes among the visual elements of spoken utterances have in general been the object of sparse attention (but see [15-25]), especially in the case of Tzotzil and other Mayan speaking communities. This study presents a close comparison of the communicative use of gaze in Z signing as opposed to comparable spoken interactions in the surrounding Tzotzil-speaking community, to theorize differences both in frequency and apparent import of gaze-linked semiotic elements among linguistic systems centered on different perceptual (and corporeal) modalities.

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