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### PROJECT

## Social Interaction and Conversation in Tzeltal Mayan

This project involves researching and writing a book on interactional principles and conversational structure in the Mayan language Tzeltal, a language spoken in southeastern Mexico where I have conducted linguistic and ethnographic research over nearly 40 years. The book will be the culmination of my work on Tzeltal interaction, based on the belief that from the in-depth comparative study of talk-in-interaction we can explore the extent to which interaction has a universal base and at the same time ask how culture influences the structure and interpretation of speech in naturally occurring conversations. Drawing on a large corpus of audio- and videotaped natural conversation in Tzeltal, I will use the methods of Conversational Analysis to examine particular conversational practices for their universal vs. culture-specific features, thereby contributing to a cross-linguistic base for conversation analysis and for social interaction more generally. Taking the whole communicative repertoire (speech, prosody, gesture, facial expression) as contributing to the meanings expressed in interaction, I will present micro-analyses of particular structures and actions, with the aim of constructing a holistic picture of the characteristics of Tzeltal conversational practices and exploring what they can contribute to an understanding of general principles of social interaction. I will set the work on Tzeltal in the context of what is known about conversational interaction in English, in European languages and cultures, and, to a lesser extent, in Chinese, Japanese, and other languages.

### Recommended Reading

Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Brown, Penelope. "Conversational Structure and Language Acquisition: The Role of Repetition in Tzeltal Adult and Child Speech." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 8, 2 (1998): 197-221.

Brown, Penelope. "Principles of Person Reference in Tzeltal Conversation." In *Person Reference in Interaction: Linguistic, Cultural, and Social Perspectives*, edited by Nicolas J. Enfield and Tanya Stivers, 172-202. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

## Comparative social interaction: Mayans and Rossel Islanders face to face

Talking to one another is something we all do, routinely, without thinking about it as an activity most of the time. Talk in interaction is the context in which children initially learn a particular language, and through which they learn to become competent social members of their group. Talk is how much of the business of social life gets done.

Yet in some ways talk-in-interaction is a miraculous achievement:

- \* we take turns with only minimal gaps (average zooms.) between offset of speaker A and onset of speaker B, though it takes on the order of 600ms. to formulate an utterance from thought to muscle movements
- \* this means that we anticipate and project (foresee) where another speaker is going, what action (e.g., question, offer, agreement or disagreement) is coming as they speak, and we begin preparing our response before they stop talking
- \* we display "mind-reading" abilities both as speakers and as hearers, interpreting intentions, calculating inferences and projecting courses of action
- \* and thereby produce a kind of minutely coordinated joint action - meaning in interaction is a jointly achieved accomplishment.

This process can be treated as a distinct coherent level of social life (Erving Goffman's "interaction order"), and it can be studied by looking at the sequential development of communicative actions that emerge turn by turn as people talk. There are certain generic interactional problems that have to be solved in any community: constructing turns at talk and distributing chances to speak across speakers, launching courses of action and coordinatively managing their expression, identifying and repairing any troubles of speaking, hearing, understanding as they occur. Solutions to some of these generic problems are strikingly similar around the world (i.e., there are universals of interaction), but these solutions are shaped by the specific set of locally available semiotic resources, including grammar and lexicon, prosody, and deployment of the body (gaze, facial expression, gesture) as well as by cultural beliefs, values, and habits (i.e., language-and-culture-specifics).

In my talk I will attempt to shed some light on the interplay between universals and culture-specifics by looking at social interactions in two distinct cultural contexts: the Mayans of southern Mexico and the Rossel Islanders of Papua New Guinea (based on joint work with Stephen Levinson). I will focus on a particular mechanism: the "feedback" and response system - the set of rules and expectations about how to do minimal responses during conversation - and show how different linguistic repertoires, gaze practices, and cultural preoccupations combine to produce distinct "styles" of interaction in these two cultural contexts. The payoff of looking at interaction comparatively in this kind of detail is (hopefully) a subtler understanding of the nature of the human communication system, the range of, and limits to, its variability.

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PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Brown, Penelope (New York, NY [u.a.], 2021)

Cross-speaker repetition and epistemic stance in Tzeltal, Yucatec, and Zapotec conversations

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1800864442>

Brown, Penelope (2012)

Time and space in Tzeltal : is the future uphill? \$dPenelope Brown

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1046046128>

Brown, Penelope (2009)

Universals and cultural variation in turn-taking in conversation

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=896013251>

Brown, Penelope (2009)

Universals and cultural variation in turn-taking in conversation

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=757398022>

Brown, Penelope (New York, NY [u.a.], 2008)

Crosslinguistic perspectives on argument structure : [implications for learnability]

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1610028767>

Brown, Penelope (2008)

Verb specificity and argument realization in Tzeltal child language

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=896011747>

Brown, Penelope (2007)

Principles of person reference in Tzeltal conversation

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=896011321>

Brown, Penelope (2006)

A sketch of the grammar of space in Tzeltal

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=896012220>

Brown, Penelope (2006)

Language, culture and cognition : the view from space

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=896010988>

Brown, Penelope (2002)

Everyone has to lie in Tzeltal

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=896012530>