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Immigrant Family Settlement Processes and the Work of Child Language Brokers: Implications for Child Development

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Immigrant families face many challenges as they settle in their new homelands. Managing even everyday tasks can be daunting; such things as making and answering phone calls, shopping, reading the daily mail, and talking to teachers, doctors, dentists, waitresses, and store personnel demand language skills that parents may not have, as well as knowledge about “how things are done” in this new cultural context. In some situations, translation services are available for immigrants, but often they are not....except, perhaps, in the form of their children. And so children are often called upon to leverage their linguistic, cultural, social and pragmatic knowledge in order to help their families as they navigate life in a new land.

In this chapter we attend to how immigrant families organize to accomplish the tasks of everyday life, with a particular eye to the work that children often do as language and culture brokers for their families. We focus on what has been called “language brokering” because this practice ubiquitous in immigrant communities, unique to immigrants, and consequential for youth development. Language and culture brokering is a particular dimension or subset of the kinds of new family responsibilities that immigrant youth are often asked to take on as their families adjust to life in a new cultural, social, and linguistic environment. It is linked to

more general forms of family obligation, such as caring for siblings, running errands, and taking care of household tasks. It both shapes and is shaped by families' cultural values, beliefs and norms, and it both shapes and is shaped by particular family dynamics.

At the outset it is important to emphasize that immigrant families vary on many dimensions. This includes family size and composition, length of residence, educational experiences, citizenship status, and access to social, cultural, financial, legal, material and linguistic resources, among many other things. All of these variations matter for the way language brokering is distributed in families, and the effects it has for particular children. We must keep these variations in mind as we consider how families organize as they "settle" in their new homelands, as well as for our considerations of language brokering shapes youth development.

Language and culture brokering

We'll begin with a portrait of one language broker, whom we interviewed at age 19 when she was a college student (see for example Guan, et al., under review). We discuss this case in relation to what we know about a wide range of language brokering experiences, based on our interviews with many young immigrants and detailed observations of immigrant families over long periods of time. (see Orellana, 2009)and 2012 for details of this ethnographic research.) We use this portrait to show how language brokering is integrated into other family settlement processes, and how it both shapes and is shaped by family dynamics, as these unfold in relation to particular tasks, situations and contexts. We also contemplate how the practice

can change over time as families' needs and circumstances change, and as family members grow and change.

Estephanie. Estephanie was the youngest of three children, and the only one in her family to be born in the United States. Her father had moved the United States before she was born; her mother and older siblings remained in Mexico for several years until her father secured a green card and earned enough money to send for them. Eventually, the family reunited in San Diego, and shortly after that Estephanie was born. As a result, Estephanie was the only child to have U.S. citizenship status.

When she was young, Estephanie would sometimes accompany her father on trips to visit family and friends in Mexico City. Estephanie's siblings were not able to cross the border. Estephanie's citizenship status thus gave her privileges within the family; it also gave her opportunities to maintain and strengthen her Spanish language abilities, which facilitated her language brokering work. Estephanie's citizenship status also provided a measure of protection when she served as the family translator in public spaces; the fact that her family needed translating marked them as immigrants, and they were uncomfortable speaking in public themselves even after they had mastered some degree of English, because they spoke with heavy accents.

Estephanie initially viewed language brokering for her parents like a "game;" she found it fun when she was asked "simple things like 'How do you say this?'" Like most of the kids we interviewed, she was happy to help her family, and proud that she could speak two languages. Much of her work involved "everyday" things like

answering the phone, reading and interpreting written materials that came in the mail or from school, and speaking for her parents in public spaces like stores, restaurants, schools, and clinics. But as she got older and “knew more,” the work sometimes became more challenging. Estephanie described a difficult situation that she managed as a young teen:

Five years ago, maybe seven years ago, [my father] fell at work and something from the ladder—they had to like remove it. It was a really important surgery. So whatever a letter said, we had to really understand. So there would be—they would ask my sister and when she wouldn't do it, they would ask me. And when there were words I didn't understand, they would go back to my sister. Like a single word could be crucial to the case, that's why we made sure we understood everything....I felt more pressure to get it right....Or even when I translated, I felt like I wasn't doing well enough—like, what if they understood it differently than what I explained? So I would go to Google and translate the word to Spanish.

This is the kind of language brokering situation that has drawn a good deal of attention in the news media; it's a high-pressure situation with consequences for the health and well-being of Estephanie's father, or at least for his understanding of his situation and his rights as a patient. As Estephanie notes, in encounters like this, even the mistranslation of a single word could matter, or at least, participants may *feel* that it matters and may feel responsible for anything that goes wrong. (It's important to note that in most everyday translation there is redundancy in texts,

and paralinguistic and contextual cues that allow participants many ways of understanding the meaning even when individual words are unknown. But this does not eliminate the burdens that language brokers may feel.)

We see from Estephanie's description of this encounter, however, that she did not act alone; she collaborated with her sister. Often, language brokering work is shared in families, and parents as well as siblings pool their linguistic, social and cultural knowledge to accomplish the tasks at hand. Indeed, many parents both speak and understand some English; they call on their children to *assist* with brokering language, but not necessarily to *do* it all by themselves. Thus, the ages and composition of the family can matter for how well children are able to share the responsibility or get support for their work. Eldest children in immigrant families generally experience more of the burden – as well as potential benefits – of language brokering; but as we see in Estephanie's case, who gets selected as “designated family translators” may depend on many things, including perceptions of children's abilities, their willingness to help, and citizenship status.

Often, too, language brokering is just a part of larger tasks that the family accomplishes as a collective: filling out forms, researching information on the internet, reading and making sense of financial, legal, medical and educational documents. In this example Estephanie notes that she drew support from online resources. Access to the Internet, and knowledge of how to navigate it, can make a big difference for family translators, as they search for information to help their families to navigate a new land. Youth often broker technology even as they broker language and culture.

How language brokering shapes youth development

Given the many variations in how language brokering practices, as well as other entwined family dynamics, such as citizenship status and language ability that are evident in Estephanie's vignette, it's perhaps no wonder that many different "effects" of language brokering have been found by psychologists and educational researchers. In the next section, we consider some of the potential developmental implications of language brokering for immigrant youth, along with research evidence for such outcomes.

Socioemotional development: stress, anxiety and depression

Early research on language brokering focused almost exclusively on its potentially damaging effects. The assumption was that the practice was inherently harmful because it exposed young people to information beyond their years, created "role reversal" within the family by giving young people too much power, and put children into stressful situations. But as the body of research on language brokering has grown, we have developed much more nuanced understandings of its socioemotional impact. As we saw in Estephanie's case, some situations she translated in were stressful, but not all, and the burdens she experienced were shared with family members. There were also other stressors on her family – their mixed citizenship status, for example – and these were entwined with the need for language brokering.

Certainly, there is qualitative evidence that brokering situations in which families' health, well-being, or financial or legal security are threatened are stressful for children – as they would most likely be for anyone, of any age. Estephanie had distinct memories of the time she had to translate for her father's operation. Other research corroborates this; Hall and Sham (2007), for example describe the anxiety felt by a child broker who had to interpret between his father, a restaurant owner, and an agent from the Health and Safety Environment Department. The teen reported "shaking with fright" as his dad told him not to answer the agent's questions for fear that they would lose their shop. Reynolds and Orellana (2009) discuss the pain children experienced when they translated in places where their families were viewed in racist and xenophobic ways. Guske (2010) describes the pressure that immigrant youth in Germany experienced in medical, financial, and legal situations, and how this was aggravated when parents did not realize how difficult translation could be.

Quantitative research has found relationships between language brokering and depression (Love and Buriel, 2007), adolescent stress (Jones and Trickett, 2005, Kam, 2011), and internalizing symptoms (Chao, 2006). Among Mexican American adolescents, for example, Love and Buriel (2007) found that brokering for more people was associated with higher levels of depression. However, girls who brokered in more places and reported being given more responsibilities within the family had lower levels of depression. Chao (2006) found that translation for mother and father predicted higher levels of internalizing symptoms (depression-anxiety, somatic complaints, and withdrawal symptoms) among Chinese and Korean

American ninth graders from eight high schools in Los Angeles. Interestingly, she found no association between translation for parents and psychological symptoms among Mexican American adolescents.

More recent research suggests factors that can mediate the negative effects of language brokering. This research also locates language brokering within the complex dynamics of immigrant family settlement processes, and considers more nuanced and multi-faceted effects of the practice on children and their families. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001), for example, note that the stability of the post-migration environment can vary greatly, and that that stability impacts all family processes.

Feelings about brokering

Most, if not all language brokers likely encounter some stressful and anxiety-provoking situations such as the one Estephanie detailed. But for some youth, these experiences are relatively few, and they do not color their overall view of the practice. Youth vary in how they feel about their language brokering experiences, with some reporting overall positive feelings, and others reporting decidedly negative ones (see for example Morales and Aguayo, 2010). But for the most part young children seem to feel that language brokering is “just normal” or “just something you do to help your family” (Orellana, 2009). (See also Cline, et al., 2010 and Weisskirch, 2005).

There is some evidence to suggest that views about language brokering may change as youth grow older, not just because adolescents and young adults may be

asked to broker in more complicated circumstances than younger children (as Estephanie noted), but also because they begin to compare their own experiences with those of other youth. This may change their views of their own family processes, and they may come to see what was once “just normal” as somehow deviant, non-normative, and *wrong*. (see Orellana, 2009 for more discussion of this.)

Research indicates that young people who associate negative feelings (e.g., anger anxiety, shame, embarrassment, nervousness, pressure, fear, discomfort) with their language brokering experiences are more likely to have lowered self-esteem, and to engage in adolescent substance use (Kam, 2011, Weisskirch, 2006, Weisskirch, 2007) than youth who report feeling good about their experiences. Perhaps youth who associate negative feelings have indeed *had* more negative experiences; perhaps they have had more brokering experiences overall.

But as we saw in Estephanie’s case not all language brokering involves high stress situations, and not all youth shoulder heavy burdens of language brokering. There is both qualitative and quantitative evidence that children garner pride from being able to help, build understanding, and acquire resources for their families and others (Hall and Sham, 2007, Orellana, et al., 2003, Tse, 1995, Weisskirch, 2005). And engaging in pro-social behaviors may have pay-off in terms of the development of pro-social competencies.

Psychosocial competencies

In recent years, researchers have given more balanced attention both to potentially positive and negative effects of language brokering on youth

development. Brokering can provide opportunities for youth to build their ethnic identities given the importance of social and linguistic interactions with and in relation to others in identity formation processes (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, Erikson, 1968, Phinney, 1989). Higher levels of and more positive feelings about language brokering have been linked to higher levels of ethnic identity, or one's sense of belonging and commitment to one's ethnic group (Weisskirch, 2005, Weisskirch, et al., 2011). And language brokering is related to biculturalism - the involvement and comfort in both heritage and host cultures (Acoach and Webb, 2004, Buriel, et al., 1998). A possible explanation for this is that language brokering encourages the maintenance of ties to heritage cultural practices as well as to language.

Another potential result of children's exposure to parents' heritage cultures in language brokering may be children's enhanced understanding of other people and other cultures. Based on ethnographic research, Orellana (2009) built the case for how language brokering may shape the development of "transcultural dispositions"—psychosocial competencies such as keen reading of social cues, the ability to see the world through the perspective of others (perspective-taking), and flexibility in understanding and using language for particular audiences and cultures. More recently, Guan et al (under review) have found that brokering for parents is associated with greater transcultural perspective-taking capacities (being able to understand different cultural perspectives) and brokering for others (other family, teachers, and friends) is associated with empathic concern, a component of empathy.

Mitigating negative effects

As the body of research on language brokering has grown, it has begun to illuminate factors that may either exacerbate or mitigate the potential negative effects for youth. Qualitative research has led to a more nuanced understanding of the practice, and facilitated the exploration of more complex models of its impact on youth development.

First, as we saw in Estephanie's case, language brokering is generally a *family* practice – one that is distributed among siblings, and in which parents participate alongside their children. It is most certainly a practice that is shaped by the dynamics of family relationships. If there is tension in those relationships, that tension may both shape and be exacerbated by language brokering activities. Research suggests that, when there is trust and support from parents and others in their networks, potentially-stressful situations may not be experienced as so burdensome (Hall and Sham, 2007, Love and Buriel, 2007). Greater warmth within the parent-child relationship may also be protective, and there is evidence that higher levels of parent-child bonding are associated with more positive feelings about brokering (Buriel, et al., 2006). Work by Hua and Costigan (2012) suggest that frequent language brokering may be more strongly associated with poor psychological outcomes for children who perceive parents as highly psychologically controlling (i.e., who use coercive methods to ensure obedience). And problematic family relationships where children report not enjoying time with their family, not being able to depend on them, or feeling annoyed by them has been linked to greater negative emotions about language brokering (Weisskirch, 2007).

Some researchers have suggested that families' levels of "acculturation" - or their familiarity with their new cultural context -- needs to be taken into account when examining the effects of language brokering on youth development. Families with little local cultural knowledge may both need and demand more language brokering from children (Jones and Trickett, 2005, Weisskirch and Alva, 2002). Lower levels of acculturation can lead to increased acculturative stress; work by Kam (2011) suggests this may be linked to children's negative feelings about brokering and higher rates of risky behaviors. It is important to remember, however, that family contexts in which greater language brokering is needed—i.e. where both parents speak very limited English and have little knowledge of the local culture—are also associated with greater levels of immigration stress, occupational stress, parental depression, and lower parental involvement (Martinez, et al., 2009). These types of high-stress family contexts may be one explanation for why youth who broker more frequently report poorer psychological well-being.

Children's own cultural value orientations can also moderate the relationship between brokering and negative outcomes. In one of the few longitudinal studies on language brokering, Wu and Kim (2009) found that children with a strong sense of family obligation (a cultural value orientation that emphasizes prioritizing, respecting and helping one's family) reported increased feelings of mattering to parents, which in turn was associated with a higher sense of competency and lower rates of perceiving language brokering activities as a burden. Hua and Costigan's (2012) research seems to contradict this finding, however; these researchers found that children who endorsed higher family obligation values were more likely to

experience internalizing symptoms at higher brokering frequencies. What these contradictory findings suggest is that a sense of family obligation can lead kids to experience *both* a greater sense of competence *and* a greater sense of pressure.

Finally, qualitative evidence points to families' different ways of supporting children in their work as language brokers. When language brokering is a shared experience – with the family pooling its linguistic, cultural and social knowledge to accomplish the work – not only are the burdens on children lessened, but learning and development may be enhanced.

Cognitive and linguistic development

There is growing evidence that language brokering can be beneficial in terms of linguistic and cognitive growth. Malakoff and Hakuta (1991) suggest that children's rule-governed code-switching during language brokering is evidence of children's metalinguistic awareness of the nature and nuances of different languages. To broker effectively children must assess the mode and message in one language and decide on the most appropriate way to convey that information in the second language. This demands – and thus develops – metalinguistic processing. Qualitative analyses of how children handle different kinds of language brokering situations makes evident the linguistic, social, cultural and pragmatic demands of the task (García-Sánchez, 2010, Hall and Sham, 2007, Harris and Sherwood, 1978, Orellana, et al., 2003, Orellana, 2001, Reynolds and Orellana, 2009).

Virtually no quantitative research has explored the direct links between language brokering and linguistic or cognitive development, but some research has pointed to academic pay-offs. Buriel et al. (1998), for example, found that higher levels of language brokering were associated with higher self-reported grade point averages (GPA). In an extension of this study, Acoach and Web (2004) found that language brokering had a direct effect on academic self-efficacy (a sense of competency in school) and this, in turn, had a direct effect on GPA for high school students. Dorner et al. (2007) found that, in comparison to non-brokers, 5th graders who were active language brokers scored higher on standardized reading and math scores, even after controlling for early test scores.

Changing family dynamics

Language and culture brokering is part of a larger set of family obligations that immigrant youth are often called upon to engage in as their families navigate life in a new land. Children may also be needed to assist with household tasks (cleaning, cooking, running errands) or participate in sibling care. They may feel obliged to help their families out in many ways, including by leveraging their linguistic and cultural skills.

Most research on the impact of language brokering on child development has been with populations who may be said to come from “collectivist” cultures where children are *expected* to contribute to the family good. Thus families may see children’s participation as family language brokers in the post-migration stage as an extension of home cultural practices into a new context, more than as a changed

familial dynamic. Families may *expect* youth to contribute to the collective good, and children too may – at least initially – see this as “just normal.”

At the same time, some of the specific demands of language brokering may be new ones for youth to shoulder, as their families reorganize to meet the demands of life in a new land. And changes in family processes in and of themselves likely puts stress on families, which in turn can heighten the stress children experience doing this work. Moreover, youth have to navigate both their families’ expectations of them and the assumptions that teachers and other authority figures have for what children should be allowed or expected to do.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the work that children do as language and culture brokers for their immigrant families, as their families organize to accomplish the tasks of daily life in a new land. We have surveyed research on the effects that this practice has on youth development, which are varied and multi-dimensional. The impact of the practice is also influenced by many factors, both specific to language brokering (i.e. the supports available, and how children experience the activities), and more general to family dynamics.

Children’s work as language brokers is a specialized dimension of their more general contributions to household settlement processes. Children play an important role in most immigrant households, because their skills and labor are *needed* for survival. Further, many immigrants endorse obligations to family as an important cultural values, and so children are *expected* to contribute their language and cultural skills for the good of the collective.

Teachers, social workers, and other professionals often express concern about the possible negative effects of language brokering on child development. Our review of the literature helps to complicate the discussion, as we consider what children learn from the practice as well as how it may impact them socially and emotionally. Whether or not we think children “should” be doing these things, they *will* be doing so, because their skills are both needed and expected, and language brokering is part and parcel of the immigrant settlement process. It therefore behooves educators, social workers, psychologists, and others who are concerned with youth development to consider carefully how to support children and families in immigrant communities, so that the most damaging effects of this practice are mitigated, and their benefits enhanced.

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