

# Child language brokers in immigrant families: An overview of family dynamics

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Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going. (Rita Mae Brown)

## 1. Introduction

Immigration places a great amount of stress on families. Individuals, and the family as whole, must secure housing, attain employment, enter the educational system, navigate new cultural mores, and learn a new language among other tasks required in acculturation (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). For many families, children often acquire the new language at a faster pace than parents and are asked to then act as translators on behalf of the parents and family, a task called language brokering.

These children often translate a variety of communication face-to-face and in writing (Orellana *et al.* 2003; Acoach and Webb 2004; Morales and Hanson 2005). The depth and complexity of the communication varies from casual conversation to complex governmental forms. The language brokering process may place a strain on the children who may not have yet acquired adequate cognitive or linguistic skills to accurately convey the information. At the same time, the children may also have acquired understanding of the subtleties of communication and alter communication to politely convey the intent, given the communicators (McQuillan and Tse 1995).

Research on the psychological and socioemotional outcomes of language brokering have been mixed. For some language brokers, the experiences result in positive outcomes such as greater academic performance (Dorner *et al.* 2007) or self-efficacy (Buriel *et al.* 1998). For others, the outcomes may be stress (Weisskirch and Alva 2002), shame (Kaur and Mills 1993), or burden and obligation (Wu and Kim 2009). The outcomes are likely to stem not just from individual experience but also from the language brokering experiences within the family.

For the child language broker, being in the position of communicating for the parents and family can place the child in a position of power in the current acculturative environment. Some likened this to “parentification”, where the child is emotionally or behaviorally responsible for the parent (Peris *et al.* 2008), or “role reversal”, where the children act as the authority and parents defer to children. The implication is that being in that kind of position is detrimental for the child and for the parents. In contrast, some research indicates that for immigrant families, the child language broker communicates on behalf of the parents but in collaboration with the parents and within appropriate role boundaries (Dorner *et al.* 2008). That is, the child consults with the parents and works with the parents to convey accurately their intentions as well as content of the communication. The impact of language brokering on the family dynamics of an acculturating immigrant family may have ramifications for the family and the individual child.

## **2. Theories of family development and immigration**

Over time, families grow and change, adjusting to developmental change within individuals and to accommodate the changes that are the foci of the family (e.g., an adolescent's athletic competitions). The normative family experience within a cultural group becomes disrupted by immigration – even if emigration is chosen rather than forced. The family must then contend with naturally-occurring family development and with the intervening needs of acculturation.

Family systems theory stems from general systems theory where entities in the unit of analysis are perceived as inexorably linked. A change in one area of the system affects another, but the system is viewed holistically (Whitchurch and Constantine 1993). The parts of the system are interdependent (i.e., the individuals and the relationships between and among them) and vary in periods of closeness and distance or separateness (Falicov 1988). Additionally, the system's boundaries can be closed or open, permitting or prohibiting outside influences on behavior or functioning. The family system, as a whole, fluctuates as individuals grow and change and, yet, strives to maintain equilibrium.

For immigrant families, the family system develops a sense of disequilibrium as a consequence of immigration. The typical relational boundaries may vacillate from being open to elements of the new culture to being reticent and seeking refuge in heritage cultural norms and practices. Typical boundaries of relationships, particularly around authority, power, and decision making, may be thrown off balance, and children are tenuously in relatively powerful positions as language brokers, which may affect the whole of family functioning (García Coll and Magnuson 1997). The family system shifts because the child is placed in a position to modulate contact between the family system and outside systems and resources. For example, De Ment *et al.* (2005) reported that several of their interviewees indicated bypassing parents' input and making big decisions that affected the family members. On the other hand, the parents may anticipate the level of adjustment required in immigration and create flexible boundaries that are necessary to maintain adequate equilibrium for the family to continue to thrive. Parents may manage the child's language brokering as within the culturally expected norms of family obligation (Tseng and Fuligni 2000).

In the Ecological Model of Human Development (also known as ecological systems theory), Bronfenbrenner (1995) describes development within contexts and the sociohistorical framework in which the development occurs. He describes a series of dialectical systems that have proximal and distal influences on development. Specifically, the microsystem includes those elements with which the individual interacts on a daily basis and thus have close, proximal impact on the individual's

development. For example parents are elements of the microsystem for a child. The mesosystem includes the interactions of elements of the microsystem which less directly affect the individual's development (e.g., a teacher-parent conference). The exosystem are those more distal elements or processes which indirectly influence the child like a parent's work hours. The macrosystem is the overall sociohistorical and cultural milieu at the time of development. For instance, today, many children are developing at a highly technological time where information and communication are readily accessible. The chronosystem is the historical time in which development is occurring. For example, attitudes towards Muslim Arab immigrants may be particularly difficult after the events of 9/11 and subsequent bombing attempts. The ecological systems perspective values the context of development and the interrelationships among various contexts that influence development. As such, the model helps to illustrate how language brokering could affect a child and immigrant family.

For a child, immigrant parents remain within the microsystem and the dynamic interactions between parent and child influence one another's development. Language brokering may shape how children develop because they are given tasks of responsibility, but also parents' ongoing development is affected by their interactions with their child language broker. Wong and Tseng (2008) found that youth often translate political materials such as voter guides and sample ballots to their immigrant parents and, in the course of doing so, engage in socializing their parents to the political processes and structures in the United States. Parents' interactions with others outside the family or with documents or processes outside the family (all within the mesosystem) may influence the child. For example, the immigrant parent may learn of a housing assistance program from a co-worker and then prompts the child to ask information about the program. From the exosystem, the child's development may be influenced by longer parental absence because of work obligations, access to transportation, or other cultural community members. Many of the differences in culture and understanding of the nuances of cultural communication may stem from the macrosystem. Subtle messages about the value of the immigrant group to the receiving society may arise as part of the

chronosystem, prompting the child to perhaps limit speaking Arabic in public, for example.

### **3. Language brokering as an acculturation strategy**

Language brokering may serve as an acculturation strategy, not just in acquiring language skills but also in developing understanding in cultural practice and norms. Acculturation strategies are the myriad ways that individuals and groups seek to acculturate (Berry 2007). These strategies can occur individually (e.g., learning the new language) or as a group (e.g., living in an area with co-ethnics) and is dependent on the attitudes of the dominant society (e.g., toward multiculturalism or segregationism). These strategies can include adoption of the national language balanced with maintenance of the heritage language, interaction with those from the new country as well as co-ethnics, participation in national and cultural institutions and so on. Language brokering may serve the purpose of teaching parents and adolescents enough about the receiving culture to access resources and achieve success in adapting to the new culture—a strategy for acculturation. Language brokering may also provide a sense of social support for parents and their children, which is often sought by immigrant families (de Leon Siantz 1997). Because acculturation is ongoing, immigrant parents may still utilize their children as language brokers, even when the parents' understanding of the new language is sufficient, in order to build redundancy in understanding (Valdés *et al.* 2003). In this situation, parents are using language brokering to further their acculturation by verifying and confirming the communication. As acculturation continues and language proficiency increases, parents may rely on the child language broker less and less (Orellana *et al.* 2003).

#### **4. Heritage Language and Cultural Maintenance**

Language brokering may serve a means of preserving heritage language competency among children within the family (Tse 1995). Maintenance of the heritage language appears to be a means of sustaining positive relationships between parent and child and within the family. For example, Tseng and Fuligni (2000) reported that immigrant youth (of East Asian, Filipino, and Latino backgrounds in the US) who mutually communicated with their parents in the same language indicated having greater family cohesion in their relationships with their parents in comparison to those who indicate communicating in different languages. Further, Oh and Fuligni (in press) asserted that Latino and Asian descent youth who maintain heritage language proficiency sustain connection and respect for the heritage culture, which then positively influences the quality of their relationships with their parents. Language brokering may also be an opportunity for parents to scaffold the child's learning experience by providing vocabulary and meaning to concepts in the heritage language (Orellana *et al.* 2003).

Dorner *et al.* (2008) noted that many of the Latino youth of immigrant parents in their study learned more about their heritage language and culture by language brokering. Language brokering may be part of the family's ethnic socialization, where parents explicitly teach the children about ethnic culture and practices (Umaña-Taylor and Fine 2004). In teaching about the ethnic culture, parents are maintaining cultural values and practices in their children and supporting healthy ethnic identity development in their children (Umaña-Taylor *et al.* 2009). Embeddedness in the heritage culture may then affect how language brokering is perceived by the children. Among Chinese American youth, Wu and Kim (2009) found that adolescents who were more Chinese oriented than American oriented felt a sense of efficacy when language brokering whereas those who were American oriented felt a sense of burden when language brokering. Cultural rootedness may be an influential component in the outcomes of language brokering for children and for parents.

## 5. Discrepancy in Acculturation between Parent and Child

Language may be an area where a discrepancy between the acculturation level of parents and children is particularly evident. In some families, parents may speak the heritage language to the children but the children may speak English back to their parents, or parents adopt English for specific types of communication to the children and the heritage language for other types of communication such as content that is emotionally-laden. Even further, some children, particularly those who are born in the U.S. or immigrate at a very young age, may not develop sufficient heritage language skills and have parents who may not have sufficient English language to communicate effectively with their own children, creating a large communication barrier (Rumbaut 1994). Santisteban and Mitrani (2003: 129) noted that “in families in which parents and adolescents can only speak a common language with great difficulty, communication frequency is diminished and is sometimes limited only to conflicts”. The gap between the parents’ level of acculturation and the child’s level of acculturation may create a “generational dissonance”, which is associated with poorer outcomes (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Furthermore, Kim *et al.* (2009) found that acculturation discrepancy between Chinese immigrant parents and their adolescent predicted depressive symptoms among the youth. Parents may also perceive that children using English to convey certain content may indicate rejection of the heritage language and culture as well as becoming too Americanized (Dorner *et al.* 2008).

Language brokering may serve as an opportunity to bridge the acculturation and communication gap because child and parent are engaged in a collaborative process of meaning-making (Valdés *et al.* 2003). By language brokering, children may be helping their parents understand more about American culture as well as English language. Several studies have indicated that children report their parents learning more about Americans and improving English skills when the children engage in language brokering (Bajaj 2008; Tse 1995; Weisskirch 2005; Weisskirch and Alva 2002). In addition, the children may develop a sense of sensitivity and insight into parental responsibility because the children language broker (De Ment *et al.* 2005). Adolescent native language fluency also predicted quality of

communication and respect for parents among Chinese and Korean American youth (Boutakidis and Chao 2004). In contrast, Martinez *et al.* (2009) reported that high language brokering Latino family contexts – those they defined as with the greatest discrepancy of acculturation between parent and child – were related to poorer adjustment, less effective parenting, and poor self-reports of adolescent well-being. They continued that in the most dissonant households with Spanish monolingual parents and bilingual children there were higher rates of paternal depression, less paternal monitoring, less positive involvement, and less maternal skill encouragement in comparison to low language brokering families (i.e., with one bilingual parent). More research, specifically longitudinal, is needed to determine how language brokering functions when there is an acculturation gap between parent and child.

## **6. Birth Order and Gender Influences**

A few studies have indicated that the oldest child and girls are most often designated as language brokers in the family (Chao 2001; Morales and Hanson 2005). Because many non-Western immigrant families emphasize rank and position in the families, eldest children tend to assume more responsibilities than their younger counterparts. In addition, linguistically, it is more likely that the eldest child retains facility in the heritage language. Subsequently, younger siblings may develop less capacity in the heritage language and are then less likely to act as language brokers (Stevens and Ishizawa 2007). The eldest children may then unwittingly shield their younger siblings from language brokering because the younger siblings fail to develop high enough levels of heritage language ability and are unable to translate effectively. There is evidence that this language brokering may continue as children move into adolescence and adulthood (Weisskirch 2006).

In many immigrant families, girls are viewed as family caretakers and develop a sense of family obligation, which includes language brokering activities (Fuligni *et al.* 2002; Orellana 2003; Tseng and Fuligni 2004). Greater family obligation has

been related to poorer academic achievement (Tseng 2004), reduced work hours (Sy and Brittan 2008), and increased time on weekends being spent with and assisting the family on weekends (Fuligni *et al.* 2002). Specifically, several studies, retrospective and prospective, have found that girls were more likely than boys to engage in language brokering (Buriel *et al.* 1998; Buriel *et al.* 2006; Chao 2006). Boys who felt positively about the language brokering experience also have reported greater parent-child bonding. For girls, positive feelings about language brokering and higher educational expectations predicted greater parent-child bonding (Buriel *et al.* 2006). In some cultures, it also may be acceptable for girls to appear less efficacious or knowledgeable than boys. For example, De Ment *et al.* (2005: 262) wrote that one female Vietnamese American participant stated that “she could afford to ‘lose face’ in brokering situations because of her gender”. Cultural views of gender roles may then affect language brokering.

Gender relations and cultural mores of cross-gender, parent-child relationships shape how language brokering may occur. De Ment *et al.* (2005) found that girls reported language brokering for mothers and boys for fathers. Chao (2006) also reported that girls were more likely to translate for mothers, in particular single mothers, although there was variability by cultural group and generational status. Moreover, among Chinese and Mexican American youth in that study, translating for the mother and for the father was each associated with greater respect for each parent. In addition, adolescent’s perception of mattering to parents may also influence whether language brokering is perceived as building efficacy or burdensome (Wu and Kim 2009). Chao (2001) also reported that language brokering is more likely to be shared among siblings as family size increases. Also, as elder children move into adolescence and outside the home, the language brokering tasks may pass down to a younger sibling (Dorner *et al.* 2008).

## **7. Parentification: Positive process or pathological?**

Parentification, a term that emerged from clinical work with children, families, and adults, refers to when a child assumes typically parental responsibility for caregiving to siblings or to parents or both. Winton (2003: 3), noted that “the children [of immigrants] often have better English skills, driving skills, and technology skills than their parents, so they serve as translators, chauffeurs, and liaisons between the parents and the outside world. In this way, they are caretakers of their parents, helping the parents have their needs met”. As noted above, language brokering may be among several responsibilities that children of immigrants must handle. He also asserted that parentification is a common practice in immigrant families and complicates normative parent-child relations. Chun and Akutsu (2003) asserted that parentification can complicate the child’s ability to meet individual developmental milestones. In discussing Latino children, Chamorro noted that

parentification may be felt in the following ways: having greater dominion of the English language than Spanish-speaking parents and thus often being in a position to speak on their behalf; vigilant learning and translating to parents the rules of conduct, behavior, and values insidious to the adopted United States’ culture; or defending a parent whose accented English often awards them condescending service at a restaurant, health clinic, or check-out stand. (Chamorro 2004: 69)

The impact of parentification may depend on whether the parentification is adaptive or destructive (Jurkovic 1997). Adaptive parentification may arise in the face of family crisis (e.g., immigration) and is described as when family members recognize, appreciate, and acknowledge the child’s contributions (Winton 2003). In destructive parentification, the child is overburdened by caregiving responsibilities and receives little to no acknowledgement for his/her work. For immigrant families, language brokering may be part of how the child contributes to the family’s acculturation and specifically for the parents’ well-being.

Parents’ reaction to the language brokering the children are engaging in may be additive to the children’s experience of adaptive or of destructive parentification.

Hall (2004: 292-293) noted the precarious nature of the dynamic in that “they [child language brokers] have their agency recognized and acknowledged by people who in other areas of life would be more likely to be distrustful of their actions”. As a specific example, Latino adolescents reported that strong feelings of anger, anxiety, shame, embarrassment, nervousness, obligation, fear, discomfort, and worry when translating for parents were associated with more problematic family relationships, indicating a potential for destructive parentification (Weisskirch 2007). Oznobishin and Kurman (2009) also suggest that, for the former Soviet Union immigrants to Israel in their sample, the parents’ negative feelings of loss of status at having to have their children speak on their behalf creates an negative climate for children when language brokering, resulting in lower self-esteem and lower self-efficacy for the youth. On the other hand, Bajaj (2008) reported that the Asian Pacific American youth in her study indicated that instances of providing oral and written interpretation were opportunities to talk with their immigrant parents, who work many long hours and otherwise would be unavailable to the youth. The youth further reported feeling that language brokering gave them opportunity to discuss family issues and participate in family decision making, an indicator of adaptive parentification. Trickett and Jones (2007) found a “middle ground” in studying the parentification of Vietnamese adolescents in the United States. In their study, they reported that the amount of cultural brokering (i.e., language brokering) was unrelated to adolescent perception of family satisfaction or family cohesion but did find that cultural brokering was related to family adaptability. They go on to suggest that cultural brokering may play a role in increasing family interdependence and including the adolescent in family coping strategies—indicating some familial benefits of adaptive parentification. Orellana (2003) also noted that the children in her study tended to view language brokering as normal, regular occurrences in the household and were just routine tasks they engage in to help their parents.

The pathology of parentification may be in the eye of the beholder. Parentification, as a construct, stemmed from the work of family therapists who treated families in need of help and who demonstrated severe behavioral and emotional difficulties.

As a consequence, parentification has been applied to families where a parent is abusing substances, mentally ill, or otherwise absent or unavailable and cannot provide expected caregiving for the children. Therefore, the ethos has become that children should not supplant parents in their adult areas of responsibility and authority. However, from an “emic” perspective (i.e., from within the culture), the inclusion of children as language brokers and co-decision makers may be adaptive for the family who strive to acculturate and survive in the new culture. In the native country, the family hierarchy may have remained intact. However, the needs of acculturation and survival may require parents to become innovative and more flexible about the family structure in order to achieve success. Parents who utilize children as language brokers may be accessing family assets to maximize functioning (Dorner *et al.* 2008). For the child, the “parentification” that some identify may be perceived by the child and family as what is necessary and required for the family’s current circumstances.

## **8. Concluding Remarks**

Research on language brokering tends to focus on the outcomes for the child or the relationship between the child’s experience and perceptions of family relationships or individual variables. Other than a few qualitative studies, the voice of the parents is relatively silent. Given that language brokering is dialectical, there is little understanding of how parents feel about their children translating for them and how the language brokering experience affects their individual development as well. With greater input from parents, there would be more understanding of family dynamics around language brokering than currently exists.

The findings above required extrapolation from across many studies with a variety of ethnic groups about issues related to families and language brokering. Cultural differences of families, family structure, and family dynamics and language brokering need more clarity. Language brokering may function very differently in one family from one cultural group than in another family from another cultural

group Chao (2006), for example, reported that differences in internalizing and externalizing symptoms among Chinese, Korean, and Mexican American adolescents depending on whether they brokered for their mothers or fathers. The differences in experience by dyad merits study, particularly in consideration of culture. Since many cultures maintain prescriptive roles for boys and girls, child language brokering experiences may affect boys and girls differently, depending on for which parent they translate. Culturally, gendered language brokering may support cultural values. Outcomes of language brokering may be different by culture, and yet there may be some commonality of the language brokering experience within and across immigrant families.

For many, the presumption is that language brokering is not good for children and adolescents. Many have assumed that language brokering burdens a child and sends ripples of power shifts within the family, leading to dysfunction and poor outcomes. Yet, there is little evidence that parents and adolescents experience an entire shift in power or a reversal of roles. This perspective adopts a deficit-model in viewing immigrant families - perceiving them as “less than” the dominant cultural group. However, from a strengths-based perspective, language brokering can be seen as a creative way for the family to communicate and interact with outside entities, maximizing a valuable asset. Helping immigrant families build upon the assets they currently have may be one optimal way of easing the acculturation process.

In summary, the family is the context of language brokering. Children engage in language brokering as a functional task to aid the family and particularly the parents. In the process of doing so, the children may develop a stronger grounding in the both languages and cultures, explore and resolve a sense of ethnic identity, and enhance their sense of self-efficacy. At the same time, more research is needed to understand other variables that may influence the language brokering experience as well as the outcomes for individuals and parent-child relationships.

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