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Recent research on child language brokering in the United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

The population profile of the United Kingdom has changed radically over the last half century. In 1951 the non-white population of Britain was very small, perhaps less than 50,000 (Peach 1982). By January 2007 one school pupil in five in England was recorded as having an ethnic minority background (DCSF 2007). At the same time there were nearly 800,000 pupils learning English as an additional language (DCSF 2007). The data for adults is less reliable than the data for children. By 2001 the best estimates were that at least three million people living in the United Kingdom were born in countries where English is not the national language and that 1 - 1.5 million adults lacked the English language skills required to function in society and employment (Schellekens 2001). There have been no questions about language use in the national census to date, but the next decennial census in 2011 will include new questions on the issue so that there will be a firmer basis for the planning of services (ONS 2008, para 3.66).

At present, in spite of the rapid increase in the numbers of residents who have a limited command of English, the provision of professional interpreting support in public services is very patchy. Within the National Health Service, for example, there are interpreters, bilingual Linkworkers or Health Advocates in some areas, and there is a national telephone interpreting service known as Language Line. But studies of family doctor consultations have indicated that in the London area the majority of consultations for which interpreting is needed rely on informal arrangements. This has been confirmed in surveys of both general practitioners (Cohen *et al.* 1999) and patients (Lam and Green 1994). Furthermore, problems of access to professional interpreters may be worse when a medical need arises during the night or at weekends (Free *et al.* 1999). Outside health care settings informal interpreting arrangements are common. This review will focus on those arrangements that involve children and young people acting as “language brokers”, i.e. informal interpreters or translators. Young respondents have reported acting in this capacity for their parents in situations as diverse as a sales person on the doorstep (Kaur and Mills 1993), visits to general practitioners and school meetings (Abreu *et al.* 2004), a fire inspector’s visit to take-away food premises (Hall and Sham 1998), the arrangement of a hire purchase agreement in a shop (Free *et al.* 2003) and phoning a government office to protest about a deportation order on the child’s father (Candappa 2000). Children have also reported acting in this capacity for other adult relatives, family friends, neighbours, fellow students at school and even strangers in the street (Kaur and Mills 1993; Abreu and Lambert 2003).

There is well-founded professional resistance to the use of children as interpreters in sensitive or challenging meetings. Like other non-professional interpreters they are likely to make mistakes in their translations (Flores *et al.* 2003). This may occur for many reasons, for example when technical words are misunderstood or the two languages do not have obvious equivalent terms or enquiries touch on subjects that are culturally sensitive or are sensitive in the context of the language broker’s particular relationship with the speaker (Ebden *et al.* 1988; Cohen *et al.* 1999). The responsibility placed on the broker may be stressful and excessive. Some commentators have advocated that children should never be used as language

brokers in medical settings (e.g. Rack 1982), and this view is endorsed by many professionals who have been surveyed, especially when sensitive or confidential matters are to be discussed (Gerrish *et al.* 2004; Chand 2005). But other surveys of those directly involved have suggested a more pragmatic approach that allows for their use in relatively straightforward consultations when that is the wish of the family (Cohen *et al.* 1999). It is in fact well documented that for some purposes many immigrant parents and grandparents prefer a language broker from within their own family to an external professional interpreter (Rhodes and Nocon 2003), though this is certainly not a universal view (Gerrish *et al.* 2004). Those who were in favour of using family language brokers saw them as more accessible when you need them (Free *et al.* 1999; Abreu and Lambert 2003), more likely to understand exactly what their relative requires (Free *et al.* 2003) and more likely to respect family confidentiality (Cohen *et al.* 1999). With their child as interpreter parents may feel that they can retain more control over the conversation, having some appreciation of the extent and limits of the child's understanding of the language and the situation and being able to interrogate them more closely about what is being said when they feel that is necessary (Hall *et al.* 1990). Whatever may be seen as its disadvantages, child language brokering (CLB) is now an established social practice in multilingual areas of Britain (Cohen *et al.* 1999). The focus of research has not been so much on how often it occurs as on its personal and social outcomes and the implications it may have for family roles. To a lesser degree researchers have addressed questions about its effectiveness as a means of communication, especially in health care settings. But, first, they had to agree on what CLB involves and what to call it.

2. Is the child a translator, interpreter, language broker or cultural broker?

Early studies of translation focused solely on the word-for-word transformation of a piece of source language text into a parallel piece of target language text (Hall 2001). This model of the process omits the communicative purpose of the exercise (which requires an intervening stage in which the translator makes sense of the

meaning of the source text and decides how to convey that in the target language). Traditional models also ignore the context of the translation event (which requires that the translator combines pragmatic and metalinguistic skills in both languages) (Malakoff and Hakuta 1991). In contemporary society the context frequently involves a setting where stakeholders have different perspectives on the service or provision that is being discussed. The tasks of the translator/interpreter in between may then include filling in information gaps, appreciating and compensating for cultural differences and helping both sides work towards a shared understanding of the situation (Shackman 1984). One of the advantages that the children of new immigrants have when faced with these considerable responsibilities is that their experience of the host community at school means that they often know more about its expectations and concerns than their parents do, at least in the early stages after the family's arrival in the country, while at the same time they know their parents and *their* concerns very well indeed. A child in the British Chinese community in Manchester explained that she did not always translate the words of the speakers in her family's take-away exactly:

Sometimes I did it on purpose to misinterpret for my parents benefit. For example, when the fire inspector came to our take-away shop, I just translated it totally differently to my parents because it would stop them worrying about it, and then I told the fire inspector what I thought the appropriate answers were to avoid my parents getting into trouble, you just get used to that situation. (Hall 2001: 2)

Tse introduced the term "language brokering" to emphasize that those involved in acting as intermediaries between linguistically and culturally different parties "influence the contents and nature of the messages they convey, and ultimately affect the perceptions and decisions of the agents for whom they act" (Tse 1995: 180). In a commentary after quoting the extract above Hall argued that using the term is helpful because

it focuses attention on the whole cultural meaning of such an event, of which any translation or interpretation is simply a part, albeit a central part [...] It is the nature of the activity as a whole, linguistic and social, that forms the focus of any analysis in studying language brokering. (Hall 2001: 2)

A similar point was made by Jones and Trickett (2005: 407) who preferred the term “culture broker” because they “viewed the tasks of translation as often involving the transmission of cultural knowledge as well”. Orellana *et al.* (2003: 15) used the term “para-phraser”, deliberately invoking “a play on the Spanish word *para* and its English translation (‘for’), to name what children do when they ‘phrase’ things *for* others, and *in order to* accomplish social goals”. That research team actually employed the more commonly accepted term “language broker” in most of their later reports (e.g. Dorner *et al.* 2007) – a practice that is followed in this paper with the same intention that the term should be interpreted broadly so as to capture the range of nuanced activities and tasks that children and young people undertake when they act in this capacity on behalf of an older family member or a peer or third party (cf. Martinez *et al.* 2009).

3. Studies of the language brokering process

Language brokering presents serious challenges to a child’s knowledge of each of the languages that are spoken and of the situation that is being discussed. Talking about a meeting at school a girl told Kaur and Mills (1993: 119-120):

Teachers think that, because you can speak Punjabi, you will be able to explain it quite nicely, but sometimes it is difficult to find the right words in Punjabi, and it is hard to explain things to your parents and that puts a lot of pressure on you.

Young people who use their parents’ first language only at home may have a limited vocabulary in other domains outside of the domestic setting. A 14 year old Vietnamese respondent explained difficulties he had had when accompanying his parents to the doctor in London in this way: “You don’t know how to say parts inside you or anything like that in Vietnamese” (Free *et al.* 2003: 533).

That research team found that there was variation between ethnic groups in the degree to which this presented a specific problem. Bangladeshi and Vietnamese participants emphasised that “their mother tongue was the language of childhood

and domesticity and not of the 'technical' world of biology or health care" (Green *et al.* 2005: 2103). This observation does not seem to have been reported in the same way by the Kurdish and East European respondents who formed the other main groups in their sample. The authors noted that the older participants from Eastern Europe reported greater familiarity with 'medical' vocabulary "from schooling in their first language and because of the reported similarity of many medical words across different European languages" (*ibid.*: 2104).

In one of the other London medical studies a family doctor illustrated the same kind of vocabulary problem with an account of a consultation in which the problem was with an English word rather than the word in the target language. A teenage boy who was interpreting for his mother, kept mentioning the word 'stomach' as the area of the body affected by ill-health, "yet his mother kept pointing to her throat:

[...] he was saying that her stomach was a problem, but she kept on referring to here (points to throat), I said do you mean the stomach or do you mean the throat, he'd actually just got the words wrong, he'd thought that stomach had meant throat [...] (Cohen *et al.* 1999: 173)

Working with the Gujarati-speaking community in Leicester Ebden *et al.* (1988) reported that problems arose because there are differences between English and Gujarati in the way the body is descriptively divided up into different parts. Confusion was also found when words that sounded similar were used with different meanings in related discourses in the two languages, e.g. the English "cough" alongside the Gujarati "kuf", which means phlegm.

While it would be wrong to suggest that successful brokering is possible without mastery of the relevant vocabulary in each language, word finding problems are often overcome by the English-speaking professional re-phrasing or re-explaining their meaning, through the use of mime and through calling on assistance from other speakers (Green *et al.* 2005). However, there is a more profound challenge when there are substantial differences in the discourse genre (e.g. in the way a form of illness is described in medical discourse) or when there are differences in the way the consultation is represented (e.g. allowing for greater or less latitude for

patient/client questioning) or when the fact that an interpretation is needed is seen by an official as evidence of a social problem (Reynolds and Orellana 2009).

In most cases children who act as family language brokers are not detached or independent in the sense that a professional interpreter would aspire to be. They are seen to be working actively to support the family's interests and are partly trusted by their parents for that reason. They are *mediators* or *advocates* on behalf of the family. When an immigration official or other bureaucrat appears to threaten the family's interests, they aim to support their parents to deal with the threat. Sometimes that may be a reason for failing to provide a literal translation of what is said. This was illustrated in the example given above of a British Chinese child mistranslating a fire inspector's words during his visit to the family take-away shop (Hall and Sham 2007). Similarly, Harris and Sherwood (1978) reported an Italian-Canadian girl (BS) adapting her father's words during a business interaction so as to increase the chances of a successful outcome:

Father to BS:	Digli che è un imbecille (Tell him he's a nitwit.)
BS to 3 rd party:	My father won't accept your offer.
Father angrily in Italian:	Why didn't you tell him what I told you?

(Quoted by McQuillan and Tse 1995: 196)

Many parents in such situations are more grateful for what their children achieve than angry for the way their own words are treated. Valdés *et al.* (2003: 96) reported that their interviews with young people and parents in such situation indicated that generally the parents in their sample remained in charge. In their account the parents and children together comprise a "performance team", the parents "see themselves as retaining their parental roles", and the young people "see themselves as simply carrying out tasks that may more appropriately be thought of as analogous to specialised 'household chores'".

These studies present a positive picture of the ways in which children and their parents can operate as a team in the face of challenges in the host society. It is

important to recognise that there are situations where the interests of children and parents are not necessarily identical. Chand (2005) analysed the problems that may arise when children or other family members are used in social work interventions when there are concerns about possible violence within a family in which key adult members speak little or no English. One example he quoted from the earlier social work literature concerned a conversation between a social worker and a mother about a child aged two and a half who had a fractured skull and was severely underweight for her age. She was the subject of a Place of Safety Order, and the mother had to be interviewed over a bank holiday weekend. The only available interpreter was an eight year old cousin who gave three different accounts of the injuries, all apparently directly from the mother.

Language brokering at school represents a less extreme situation in which the interests of parents and child may not always be aligned. In this case the *child* may have something to hide. Meena, a girl from a Punjabi-speaking family in the West Midlands or North East of England, reported that she would “pretend my school report wasn’t as bad as it was. I would pretend the teacher had told me to buy or do certain things, knowing my parents couldn’t easily check up on me” (Kaur and Mills 1993: 115). In some cases the motives for distortion appeared less egocentric, arising from sensitivity to the perceptions of people in the host community. Thus a 12 year old girl from the British Chinese community in the North West of England described how she sometimes changed the notes that her father wrote to teachers explaining why she could not attend some of the school activities after school: “Because I work in the chippy I did not want my teachers to know that. So I just replied that I did not find it interesting or useful to do it” (Hall and Sham 2007: 25).

That sensitivity can lead to children being embarrassed by their parents’ accents or mistakes in English. Burck (2005: 125) described that situation from the perspectives of both the child (“I remember having enormously sort of emotional feelings about my father doing something wrong and being laughed at by somebody”) and the parent (“What I have noticed is both my son and my daughter

if I make a mistake in English they look at me and they say ‘Daddy, how long have you been in this country?’ and it means, speaking English better”).

Almost all those studies relied on participants’ reports of language brokering activities after the event, a research strategy that has significant limitations. Thus, for example, Green *et al.* (2005: 2099) explained:

This study used interview data, and does not therefore contribute to our understanding of the actual processes of interpreting or mediating. The data we generated are “accounts” of the processes young people chose to discuss, and are not necessarily reflections of what happened in any actual encounters. These accounts were provided in specific situations (interviews with an adult interviewer, who was not from the same linguistic community as any of the interviewees, in the setting of a community centre which often had the explicit aim of fostering pride in community or culture) and are clearly shaped by these contexts. They are, for instance, likely to be in part serving rhetorical functions, such as redressing a perceived stigmatization of their work.

To our knowledge there have been no direct studies of naturally occurring language brokering episodes in the UK along the lines of the study by Shannon in a chiropractor’s office in California (Vasquez *et al.* 1994) and the programme of research by Orellana and her colleagues in which a wide range of translation episodes were recorded (Sánchez and Orellana 2006). Hall (2001) reported on a realistic simulation of a school meeting in the Manchester area in which 10-11 year old participants acted as language brokers to facilitate an “interview” at their school. The characters in the simulation were a non-English Urdu-speaking mother of a young boy who was said to want to enrol her son in the school and a representative of the school who spoke no Urdu. Hall showed how three of the four children featured in his report acted as advocates for the mother rather than neutral translators. When she lied about her child’s behaviour, making it appear less negative than she had told the broker it was, these three children changed the text in such a way that social equilibrium was maintained and the interview did not degenerate into an argument or break down completely. Thus the simulation study provided direct observational evidence to corroborate the reports by professionals, parents and young people cited above. A simple cognitive model of translation

cannot provide an adequate account of what happened. It requires a sociocultural analysis of what Hall (2001: 15) called “multi-level interactive activity demanding awareness of local and global contexts as all the participants jointly constructed the text”. Similar conclusions were drawn by Valdés and his colleagues (2003, Chapters 4-5) on the basis of a simulation study with a somewhat older sample of high school students in the San Francisco area.

4. The social and cultural significance of child language brokering

Research and public debate on child language brokering has generally been dominated by Western cultural assumptions about the nature of childhood. The account that has dominated Western thinking since the late 19th century has portrayed children as freed of adult responsibilities and properly spending their time on play and schooling. They must be protected from most adult concerns and tasks so that they only gradually come to engage in more adult style responsibilities and work for a living (Zelizer 1985; Crafter *et al.* 2009). When they do so, they will function as autonomous individuals who have grown into a capacity for independent citizenship. Against this image of the process Dorner *et al.* (2008) highlighted a wider range of possible developmental scripts in which taking more responsibility as one grows older may mean accepting responsibilities in relation to others as well as being more autonomous in oneself. Children who act as language brokers for their parents appear to act within that kind of script of continuing interdependence rather than one in which separation and autonomy are stressed as the highest priority of individual growth in adolescence. This leads to two kinds of concern. Firstly, there is a concern that requiring children to engage with “adult” affairs such as their parents’ health and financial problems will undermine the innocence and freedom from anxiety that are seen as conducive to strong emotional growth (Cohen *et al.* 1999). Secondly, there is a concern that the “natural” power relationships in a family will be upset, as the children who act as brokers to get things done outside the home will have knowledge and influence that would have been restricted to adults in other circumstances. Children who

facilitate access to powerful organizations become powerful in themselves. This reversal of roles could contribute to the further destabilization of a family structure that has already been strongly challenged by the experience of migration (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001: 75-77).

Generally these arguments have been conducted on a theoretical basis without any attempt to collect relevant empirical data, but recently some North American researchers have attempted to test the predictions that are made in the debate in large scale studies. For example, Trickett and Jones (2007) interviewed 147 Vietnamese adolescent-parent dyads in the Washington DC area and found no relationship between the amount of culture brokering reported by the children and indices of overall family satisfaction and family cohesion. There have been no comparable large scale studies in the UK, but a number of qualitative reports have offered insights on the issue, and some of the authors have attempted to produce theoretical accounts of the situation on that basis. For example, Song (1999) analysed the roles of sons and daughters in Chinese families' take-away businesses in England. She described an implicit but very powerful "family work contract" within the families she studied in which all saw and valued an interdependence across generations. For instance, Jacqui, who was integral to her family business, reported,

The dependency, it was almost an equal dependency in many ways, between the parents and children, in the business [...] My parents didn't speak much English when they first started out. We as children were dependent on our parents because they had the business. It was a way of getting food on the table, clothes. (*ibid.*: 79)

It is clear that many young language brokers recognize that their relationships with their parents are different from those of most of their White British peers. Nadia, a 16 year old Portuguese immigrant, explained:

I feel important! I feel useful because I can speak the languages and so on... it is also very embarrassing for me because no one of my age does that with their parents. That is... I mean, Carmo does. The Portuguese all do, but the English don't. [...] It is to the contrary. Very often when they go

to the doctor, their parents go with them, but I have to go with my parents.
It is different... (Abreu and Lambert 2003: 207)

Parents acknowledged their dependency too. One of the Punjabi respondents in Kaur's informal survey, Joginder, said:

In the Punjab, parents don't need to involve children in decisions until they are much older. In England it is necessary to involve the children even when they are young, because there are some things that the parents don't know about. (Kaur and Mills 1993: 116).

This could be interpreted positively as a sign of the family's closeness and cohesion, a "reciprocal dependency (that) was recognized as mutually rewarding". Thus one parent explained:

Parents do a lot for their children, so I think it's not bad if children do something back for them. It makes them confident that 'I know these things and I'm helping my parents.' It probably brings the family closer. (*ibid.*:116)

But other parents felt embarrassed and humiliated that their perceived inadequacies in their new circumstances made them so reliant on their children. The anecdotal case study material provides a powerful counterblast to the assumption in some of the debates on the issue that all child language brokering in all circumstances will have a particular positive or negative outcome. It is clear that the outcomes of enhanced interdependency within a family will vary according to pre-existing family strengths and weaknesses. It will also be affected by the context in which the activity is being framed, for example by the degree to which language brokering for one's parents is a normative activity in a particular school (Cline *et al.* 2009).

The main trigger for child language brokering is that children learn the local language more quickly than their parents because they have better opportunities to do so at school and because the young are fast learners of new languages. But, as was emphasized above, language brokering involves more than simply linguistic knowledge. A language broker bridges different cultural worlds and requires a good knowledge of both and a sensitive appreciation of what gaps the monolingual

speakers in the meeting may have in their understanding of the cultural world of the other. Typically at the outset child language brokers show some understanding of the perspectives of their immigrant parents but have much to learn about the official and commercial institutions with which they are negotiating. Gradually they will learn the necessary routines of everyday life as a consumer or a patient, such as how to ensure service when there is confusion about appointment dates (Green *et al.* 2005: 2105) or how to read the gestures and facial expressions of a person from another culture (Free *et al.* 2003: 534) or what aspect of a situation to stress in a benefit application (Reynolds and Orellana 2009: 215). The speed of their learning will depend in part on the support they are given. This support might come from their family, e.g. when a 14 year old girl and her parents tackled an English legal document word by word with Chinese and English dictionaries beside them (Hall and Sham 2007: 22). Or the support might come from the English-speaking professional or official who seeks to understand what their parents want to say.

Surveys of young people with experience of child language brokering (e.g. Free *et al.* 2003) make it clear that they are sensitive to signals that their role is not valued by those with whom their parents are trying to communicate. Reynolds and Orellana (2009) emphasized the racialised nature of such interactions in the Chicago area, and there is every reason to suppose that similar factors of communal hostility to new immigrants will have an influence on reactions to child language brokers in Europe too. In a recent study of young people with and without language brokering experience Cline *et al.* (in preparation) found a range of expectations of how teachers and peers would react when a 14 year old boy in a vignette missed school in order to act as a language broker for his mother. Their comments included:

I think the teacher would respect him for what he's doing but the teacher would still want him in school because that's what the teacher gets paid for, to teach and if he's not there then the teacher might think he's not going to school for other reasons.

Reflecting on how the boy's friends might react, some of those with experience of language brokering suggested that they might see his language brokering as

“normal” or “not unusual”, while those with no such experience were more likely to see it as “strange” or uncommon and to take a negative view of it. Thus one language broker said:

Um, they’re like, they’re Portuguese so they’ll understand because at some stage they’ll have to do the same. But like someone, if someone only speaks one language and they don’t have to do the same as he does then they’ll laugh at him and say “ah your mum doesn’t speak English and all that”.

There may be a difference between mainly monolingual and multilingual areas. For some of the young people in the study language brokering was simply “normal”:

Well my friends all speak Spanish, it’s normal for us because everyone has to do the same thing and for others, no, they think it’s alright. But sometimes they’re like “why do you have to miss school to translate for your mum, can’t she get someone else?” so, sometimes I’m like “yeah whatever” innit? I don’t really pay attention.

A positive comment from a Year 11 boy in the monolingual group sets this perception of “normality” in context. He thought that Eduardo’s teacher would “probably be proud of him cos he can speak two languages” even if also annoyed that he is missing school. For most of the bilingual speakers multilingual competence was not a special source of pride but just a common characteristic that they and those around them shared.

The ultimate impact of repeated experiences of language brokering seems likely to contribute to the enhancement of bicultural identity, increasing the young person’s understanding of the host community’s institutions, their mastery of English in unfamiliar domains and its use in unfamiliar settings, their proficiency in the family’s first language and their appreciation of the acculturation processes that their parents have to go through. The exploration of these consequences in UK research has been largely anecdotal, and there is no evidence yet of a move to follow pioneers in the USA who have attempted to study the sequelae for the child and the family more systematically (e.g. Valdés 2003; Martinez *et al.* 2009). The conclusion of this review must be that research in this field in the UK to date has been limited in scope, mainly small-scale and uneven in coverage. Few attempts

have been made to theorise either the psychological processes involved in the activity or its social and cultural significance. It is suggested that the research community here could do more to investigate and support the prodigious efforts of children and parents in new immigrant families around CLB and the slowly changing acceptance of those efforts in professional services.

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