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How to cite:

Cline, Tony; Crafter, Sarah; Abreu, Guida de and O'Dell, Lindsay (2017). Child language brokers' representations of parent-child relationships. In: Antonini, Rachele; Cirillo, Letizia; Rossato, Linda and Torresi, Ira eds. *Non-professional Interpreting and Translating: State of the art and future of an emerging field of research*. Benjamins Translation Library (129). John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 281–294.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1075/btl.129.14cli>

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Child language brokers' representations of parent-child relationships

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Abstract

This paper reports the analysis of qualitative data from a broader study of young people's representations of conflicting roles in child development. Just over a quarter of the group, bilingual students who spoke a variety of first languages, had had personal experience of child language brokering (CLB). Employing vignette methodology, they were invited to reflect on the implications of an adolescent boy's language brokering activities for, among other things, his relationships within his family. In this paper we will present brief case studies to illustrate different positions that members of the group adopted in relation to developmental scripts emphasizing independence and interdependence between young people and their parents (Dorner et al. 2008). Through an analysis of individual CLB case studies, we illustrate various ways in which individual young people reported the balancing of the demands of autonomy and connectedness in their analysis of relationships between young people and their parents.

Introduction

In public and academic debate, CLB activities are sometimes portrayed negatively as imposing excessive burdens of responsibility on the young people (e.g. Wu & Kim 2009; Tse 1996). In addition, critics have expressed concern that translation errors will be more likely to occur than in interactions with trained interpreters, that interviews may focus on family or personal matters that it is not appropriate to share with children, that young people may find the experience stressful and will miss time at school, and, in particular,

that the arrangement may lead to a reversal of roles between children and parents within families (Morales and Hanson 2005). Previous research has suggested that, while many immigrant parents prefer their own children as translators to any professional or non-professional alternative (e.g. Cohen et al. 1999), the young people themselves hold diverse and sometimes ambivalent views on the issue. Surveys of young people on the subject have not generally attempted to explore the underlying reasons for different views (e.g. Free et al. 2003). But a study of a small sample of Mexican American college students by Weisskirch (2006) indicated that self-reports of negative emotions while language brokering such as feeling angry, anxious, frustrated, guilty or uncomfortable were associated with scores on an Index of Family Relations that suggested greater disharmony in the family.

In this paper we are reporting on the analysis of qualitative data from a broader study of young people's representations of conflicting roles in child development. Previous reports on this study have focused on young people's representations of "work" (Crafter et al. 2009) and on the early assumption of adult-like responsibilities as a young carer (O'Dell et al. 2010). We examined young people's representations of language brokering in a study that investigated how people's direct experience of that activity and of bilingualism might have influenced the views that are developed (Cline et al. 2011). The aim of that analysis was to clarify the impact of personal experience of the CLB process by comparing the views of young people who reported that they had performed CLB activities with those of a group of bilingual speakers who had not, and also with those of a group of monolingual speakers living in the same areas of England where there had been significant recent immigration. It became clear that in our sample young people who had had varying levels of personal experience of language brokering and of bilingualism did indeed represent language brokering in predictably different ways. While participants generally represented the personal qualities, skills and feelings of a language broker as mainly positive, a small number of those with language brokering experience offered more searching analyses of specific issues (e.g. of what a teenager might learn from the experience). A small number of those with no experience as a language broker, in particular those who spoke only one language, adopted a negative emphasis, suggesting a demeaning view of the parent for whom a young person was acting as translator.

The groups differed radically in how they thought teenage language brokers might be seen by those around them. Participants with experience of language brokering were more likely to suggest that friends would see language brokering as “normal” or “not unusual”. Those who saw it as “strange” or uncommon or had a negative view of it mostly came from the other two groups. We noted that, when a girl in the language broker group spoke in those terms, she explicitly attached that view to “someone who only speaks one language”. For people like her, language brokering duties were just a normal obligation of life in an immigrant family. The position was asymmetrical: she could appreciate how those outside her community might perceive such activities, but her monolingual peers appeared to have only a vague understanding of what multilingualism might mean in practice in the lives of their fellow students. However, all the participants shared a broad view of child language brokering that tolerated some interruption of schooling in the interest of supporting one’s family. They agreed with the normative view in UK society that childhood should usually be a period when a person’s chief responsibilities are to meet school requirements and (limited) family obligations. Most of them accepted that new immigrant families might encounter exceptional circumstances where that norm should be ignored and a parent would be justified in asking for help from their child. At the same time a parent should move on from that position as quickly as possible so that they no longer need their child to support them during school time. We concluded that the views expressed by the students participating in that study were compatible with the notion espoused by Dorner et al. (2008) that developmental scripts emphasizing both independence and interdependence are required to understand the phenomenon of language brokering by young people. In this paper we wish to take this analysis further by examining the dynamics that influenced individual participants who described different positions in balancing the competing demands of autonomy and connectedness in relationships between parents and children.

2. Methodology

2.1 Procedure

The data reported here was collected during the second phase of a project conducted in six schools and colleges in the South East and South Coast of England. On the basis of a questionnaire survey about their working activities 46 young people aged 15 to 18 years old were selected, and agreed to individual interviews at school or college (O'Dell et al. 2006). Some of the schools/colleges were mainly White British with a smaller representation of a linguistic minority group and others were multiethnic with substantial representations of students from linguistic minority communities and a high proportion of recent arrivals in the UK. The students who are the focus of this paper all lived in metropolitan or urban areas that had substantial numbers of recent adult immigrants. The sample selected for interview in the main study included students with experiences of work activities that could be considered 'atypical' such as acting as a young carer or language broker and students who had engaged in working activities that could be considered 'typical' such as delivering newspapers or serving in a shop on Saturdays. The analysis conducted for this paper concentrated on a small group of bilingual students who had had experience of acting as language brokers for one or both of their parents. The semi-structured interviews, which were conducted individually by one of two members of the research team, used a series of four story vignettes to structure the discussion and provide prompts for participants. The characters were 14 years old, slightly younger than the research participants to allow them to identify with the characters and feel that they were familiar (a point confirmed by the pilot participants). The vignettes implied a variety of cultural backgrounds (indicated by culturally specific or ambiguous names such as Samuel and Mira). Two vignettes depicted young people engaging in 'typical' work roles such as babysitting and having a Saturday job and two depicted the 'atypical' work roles in which we were interested - language broker and young carer. The analysis reported in this paper concentrates mainly but not exclusively on the vignette of a language broker who was given the name "Eduardo":

(1) Eduardo is 14 years old. He speaks English and Portuguese. Eduardo's mum can't speak English, so she often asks him to help her. Eduardo is proud and pleased to help his mum but is embarrassed when he translates for her at the doctors. Eduardo misses school some days because his mum needs him to help translate for her.

The other vignettes which are mentioned in the analysis below concern “Mary” and “Mira”:

(2) *Mary is 14 years old and lives with her dad and her brother who is 15 years old.*

Mary's dad is disabled and needs help during the day with activities such as getting out of bed, getting dressed and making lunch. Mary loves her dad and is happy to be there for him. However she also misses school some days if her dad has a bad day and needs extra help. Sometimes Mary wishes that she could see her friends after school like her brother does.

(3) *Mira is 14 years old. To earn some extra money she does babysitting for some of her parents' friends at the weekends. She feels it is her responsibility to contribute to the household and when she can, gives some money to her mum to help towards food. The rest she spends on music and going to the cinema with friends. Mira also helps in the house such as the dusting and vacuuming.*

For each vignette character respondents were asked questions designed to explore their perceptions of the character's attributes as individuals, their position within their family and the impact of their activities on how others around them might see them:

- What do you think about what Eduardo is doing?
- What would their teacher/parent/friends think?
- What do you think about Eduardo's mum?
- Would you change anything about Eduardo's life?
- What advice would you give if Eduardo were your friend?
- What do you think will happen when Eduardo grows up?

2.2 *Composition of the sample for this study*

Reports on the interviews with the full sample of 46 participants may be found in O'Dell et al. (2006) and Crafter et al. (2009). For the purposes of this paper a subsample of 11 was selected where the available information enabled us to identify that they lived in bilingual or multilingual families and had been involved in language brokering themselves (n = 11). Three were aged 15-16 years and eight aged

17-18, and three were male and eight female, reflecting the commonly reported pattern that girls act as language brokers for their families more often than boys do.

3. Analysis

After the full interviews had been transcribed, a Framework Analysis strategy was employed to investigate variation within the sample (Pope et al. 2000). The key findings from the analysis of group differences in the full sample may be studied in detail in Cline et al. (2011). For this paper we selected a purposive sample of four students whose personal histories and family situations were typical of those represented in the larger group in the original sample. Each of the selected students had had relevant CLB experience previously and expressed clear views on their CLB activities during their interviews. Between them the four appeared to illustrate key aspects of the range of perspectives on parent-child relationships that emerged from what members of the group had to say during their interviews. For each of the four a case study analysis was conducted with the aim of identifying ways in which their CLB experiences and their family relationships might have influenced their representations of CLB as an activity.

Case study 1 Bana

Bana was aged 16 when interviewed. She had come to England with her parents from Albania when she was 11. Her mother had been a teacher in Albania and her father a chemist, but they had more menial jobs in the large town where the family now lived. Both were studying English at college with a view to further professional training and returning to the kinds of jobs they had had before they migrated. "They don't like being vulnerable... So here they have values to learn for themselves, trying to learn English." She and her brother had translated for their parents at the beginning "just for a while until they learn English." They could soon understand but they could not speak very well. "So um, when they went to a doctor they could find the doctor, but they couldn't describe how they felt but now they can speak on their own." She had not found it embarrassing as Eduardo did but "I just feel it's quite boring". It was "not really a big deal, I feel good helping my parents... Well, it wasn't, well it got quite tiring but it wasn't a big deal

because, you know, I have my brother so when I wasn't able to translate my brother went with them.”

There were some places where professional interpreters were available, and their parents would use them. However, Bana suggested that her parents tended to feel “more comfortable” with their own children in the role. At the same time she described how they felt “quite frustrated” and felt “the pressure because they couldn't speak themselves but all the time they learn”. Asked about Eduardo's mother, she assumed that “she might be quite frustrated that she had to take her son out of school sometimes”. She thought that everyone would want to learn English and not want their children to speak for them. But “it depends how quick they pick it up or what sort of things they do”. There was an implicit contrast with some other parents. Hers learned English fairly quickly because they had learned other foreign languages in the past. Their experience of travel to other countries meant that they were familiar with the situation, knew it was “no big deal” (one of Bana's favorite phrases) and that it was “just temporary. They are learning English now and then don't really need me.”

Bana empathized with Mary, the young carer in another vignette, but also with her disabled father. “...probably, he might feel quite vulnerable, might feel quite embarrassed because he has to be so weak and he has to expect some of the things from his daughter”. Ideally she should be given more help from her family and friends, even from teachers, “so she can have more of a life”. In the long term, however, while her education could suffer, “possibly this situation could make her stronger, more, you know, strong”. But Bana returned to the dilemma later with a more cautious view: “possibly in life, possibly in life this experience will make her stronger but she will find it much more harder to grow up if she continues looking after her father long”. She contrasted Mary's situation with Eduardo's and her own. “Eduardo has a smaller responsibility and it might be temporary, you know, and it's not very difficult and it's not a very big job. But for Mary this might be temporary, you know, for a couple of years or it might be a long time. Plus she has the biggest responsibility because she has to look after someone, an adult and she's only fourteen years old.” It was clear that Bana gave attention not only to the serious nature of Mary's duties but also the potential length of the commitment that might be required of her. Her own experience was of supporting her parents in a dependent role

for a relatively short period which was seen from the outset by all those involved as planned to be temporary.

Case study 2 Elena

Elena was aged 16 when interviewed. She had been born in Ecuador where she had lived up to the age of 9. Her parents worked as cleaners in London, but in Ecuador her father had been a college principal and her mother an office secretary. She hoped to go to college and train as a midwife. She acknowledged that she missed school quite often. When this was because she needed to translate for her mother, she felt there was a justifiable reason. Asked about Eduardo's CLB activity, she said: "It's good because at least you're helping your mum but at the same time it's bad 'cause you're missing school and then you get behind on your studies." Asked how she felt about it, she said: "Well, I feel quite happy because at least I'm helping my mum but of course I feel, well not sad, but, how can I say it? I feel upset because my mum doesn't talk English and I have to miss school and my work is behind because I have to concentrate on my mum." She discussed with the interviewer the dilemma of having to miss school in order to help one's family, balancing the two and suggesting she would put her mum first. "If it was mum and my mum was proper sick and she need something, it was an emergency then of course my mum, it's my family. But if it's like something not really important, well er school 'cause it's gonna help with my future." Her perspective on CLB was limited. She did not see Eduardo as learning anything from translating for his mother. His future would be dependent on whether he attended school more regularly, committed himself to studying and caught up with the work. "It's up to him. Like if he studies, of course he will get a good job but if he doesn't study then he ain't gonna go far in his future." At one point Elena's mother had gone to college to learn English but she did not continue with her classes. The reasons for this were not made clear in the interview. She does now understand a little English but spends a lot of time watching TV in Spanish. "Cause we've got um the TV channels in Spanish. So she's twenty-four hours watching Spanish." Returning to that college course was "something I would secretly quite like her to do. No she doesn't do, she used to but not any more." Explaining embarrassment at the doctor's Elena saw it as arising from the child's omniscient perspective on the situation,

having insight into what is going on in the meeting when neither the doctor nor the parent fully understands it. She feels embarrassed for herself because it is hard to translate, but she feels embarrassed for her mother because “she thinks she understands something but she doesn't and all that.” This sense of her mother's inadequacy was a frequent theme in the interview. Elena said that her mother assumed that taking one's child out of school to help was “normal” and “she doesn't understand...” Of Eduardo's mother she said: “I don't think she even realises, I don't think she realises that he shouldn't miss school... she'll think that if you miss school it's like normal, fine, nothing is gonna happen. Maybe she might think the same as my mum.” Elena recognized that some parents whose own experience of schooling had been very different from what their children experienced after migration might be unaware of the extent of their misunderstandings of the system in their new country. A similar perspective emerged during an earlier study of mathematics learning in multiethnic primary schools (Abreu et al. 2002).

Case study 3 Rosana

When Rosana was interviewed aged 19, she had a place at university to study accounting and finance and then auditing. The family came to the UK from Brazil. Her mother had always worked as a hairdresser and now had her own business which was expanding. Her father had left his job and was now helping with the administration of the business. In the past Rosana had translated not only for her mother but also for other adults in the family and their network of friends. She did not miss school or college very much though, as she tried to make people arrange appointments around her schedule and just took an hour or two off if that was impossible. She enjoyed translating, partly because of learning new words, but on the downside also had some difficulty in finding the words that were needed. “You do get, get confused and I... I don't know, it depends how often you do it... 'cause you, you don't always speak two languages, you, you know, it's not that easy to feel, you feel all roped up and... (Interviewer: So is it difficult kind of moving from one to the other or knowing the words?) Well, the words, and also how to put them in phrases that would make sense.” She thought Eduardo might be embarrassed because he could not follow the meaning of what was said at the doctor's or could not explain it in

Portuguese. In her own life, her mother did not need her so much now as she did at first. She could manage on her own at the doctor's, for example, but "some... like business matters she'll ask me to do it for her... yeah but she does and she learns as well after doing it... after when we go out she's like oh... what do you say again? You know she learns... well." She enjoyed teaching her mother in this way. At the same time she was often asked by family friends and would usually do it if she could. "If it's for my mum I would miss college but if it's for other people they have to use... because I don't, I don't get paid or anything; I just like to help." In contrast, her younger sister disliked being involved. "I usually do it, she doesn't really like it I think she, she feels like him... (Laughs)... Takes time and she's like... you know... having to think a lot and she doesn't know what it means and then she gets like angry."

Rosana was not sure how to judge Eduardo's mother. "It depends how long she's been here... if it's been a long time, then she should feel bad because she doesn't understand anything... Because you know maybe she, she, the next time she, she should be able to understand. She's a erm, when you you're new, then it's okay. But I've seen that situation before. Some people they've been here like for ten years twenty years and they still sound..." She thinks Eduardo should encourage his mother to learn English more quickly and not rely on him. Missing school a little is OK but not if you miss a lot of school. "I think that he could, could talk to his mum about it. But I don't know how she would react." She anticipates that otherwise his mother could go on relying on him, "because erm some people they, they like, they depend on their sons they get used to it, they get used of they doing all the work all the translating and so on. Sometimes they do understand it but they because it's easier for them to keep up the help."

A repeated theme in Rosana's interview was her appreciation that having extra responsibility when one is young, as Eduardo did and as Mary, the young carer in our vignettes did, may be difficult but may also have a positive impact. Of Mary she said: "She'll know more about life than any other 14 years old is 'cause she's got more responsibility now... So when she's older she'll you know... she'll look... more mature." On her own translating activities she commented: "Yeah, you do learn a lot when you're translating... like the doctor's, I've learned a lot of illness, the effect on people. For my

mum's business things I didn't know before... You do learn things that you never thought you would had done, I should mean have done, or exist.”

A second theme was her commitment to mutual support within a family. She laid less emphasis on a teenager's rights and more emphasis on family values. She celebrated the sacrifice that a fourteen year old might be making by helping their parents inside or outside the home and was less critical than some other participants of the adults who made that sacrifice necessary. Of Mira, another vignette character who contributed to the household budget from her part-time earnings and also helped with the housework, Rosana said: “I think it's good, I used to do that and my mum used to be really pleased. I mean I still do but my mum was really pleased and all her friends kept saying how they wish their daughter was like that (laughs). So I think it's good.” When Mira grows up, she thought “she's gonna feel really proud of herself when she comes to be just your other 14 years old and...all that the life is computers and TV and you know you didn't I dunno not really worry about that because the parents do everything for them. I think she's gonna be really, really proud.”

Case Study 4 João

João was aged 17 when interviewed. He had come to England with his mother and sister some years earlier. Their father had left them in Portugal when he was five and established a home in England. After they joined him there, he and his older sister often had to translate for their mother because of their father's working hours. He was working as a courier and now training to be a driving instructor. His mother worked in a restaurant where her use of English was slowly improving. His sister was at university, and he hoped to go on to higher education after college, possibly studying computer graphics. João was impressed with what Eduardo was doing: “I think it's very noble, I mean, you know he's helping his mum and she can't do something, it's kind of like giving back what she done when he was young.” Missing school was all right in his eyes because it was for his mother. “It's not like he's skiving off school.” His judgment of Eduardo's mother was uncertain: “Honestly she should do something about not speaking English, being here and not speaking English. But um, if she can't help it she can't help it. (Interviewer: So its just one of those things in life.) And you've got to deal with it.”

However, he went on later to add: "Well, I would feel that if a member of my family is in need then I would take care of them for as long as they need. But I also think that if she is not gonna learn English then he's got to sort it out, obviously, 'cause you can't just be dependent on anyone forever." Like Rosana, he saw advantages to a boy translating for his mother when young. "I mean, it gives him more of an, it could be seen as an advantage, because you know he's learning to be with other people and he's learning at a young age to deal with different things that a fourteen year old boys don't usually have to deal with." His own memories of translating for his mother were not entirely positive though. He could empathise with Eduardo becoming embarrassed at the doctor's. "As he said it's really, really embarrassing when you have to go to the doctor with your parents, it's just so embarrassing and you're like 'please, I don't want to know about this sort of thing'."

João's awareness of a distance between adults and children influenced his evaluation of some of the other vignettes. He thought that Mary who cared for her disabled father was being put upon. "She doesn't really have a real life, she's got school and then home to help her dad, school and home, school and home, so no social life and well, hardly any." Of Mira, the vignette character who gave her earnings from babysitting to her impoverished parents, he said: "This is too good for a fourteen year old, I think... I would knock some sense into her and say 'keep the money, don't give it to your parents'." He showed a strong sense of what he thought a normal teenager's experience of life should be and was reluctant to accept the special circumstances that young people like Eduardo and Mary find themselves in. While acknowledging the priority that they gave to family obligations, he wanted the situation to be changed without the child being involved. Eduardo's mother should just get on and learn English; Mary's father's disability should be cured by magic; Mira's parents should refuse the money.

4. Discussion

In previous research that examined family relationships and language brokering, Weisskirch (2006) noted that feeling angry, anxious, frustrated, guilty and uncomfortable when language brokering was associated in his sample of college students with reporting

more problematic family relations. The Index of Family Relations (Hudson 1982) that was used in that study measured perceived difficulties in family members' relationships along a single dimension. In this paper we aimed to take this analysis further by examining the dynamics that influenced individual participants who described different positions in balancing the competing demands of autonomy and connectedness in relationships between parents and children. The qualitative research that is reported here confirms that there are subtle and complex family dynamics that influence the perspectives on CLB activities adopted by those involved. Our findings suggest that there is more than a single dimension of "difficulty" at play when an individual adolescent evaluates a parent's reliance on their child as a language broker.

The responses to our vignettes indicated that the young people evaluated language brokering requirements that were laid on them and their peers in the light of how they perceived the overall family situation at the time. A factor of particular importance was how they viewed the relevant parent's position on a path of adjustment to their new country. Thus Elena belittled her mother in an unhappy frame of mind, offering a limited view of translating and expressing a bleak sense that the demands on her for support would not diminish over time. She saw her mother as retreating from the challenge of learning English ("24 hours watching Spanish"), lacking the resources even to appreciate the limits of her understanding. Bana, on the other hand, saw her mother as following a trajectory that would lead to her being settled in this country quite quickly. She would then no longer need to be dependent on her daughter in the way that she was at the beginning. She thought of both her parents as bringing to their new situation considerable resources from multiple previous experiences of migration - an awareness of what was needed to make settling in possible and a readiness to learn a new language. Rosana was aware that her mother had a longer struggle than that ahead of her, but she was optimistic. She saw her mother as a committed learner and herself as a resource for help. She enjoyed assisting her mother to learn and was sympathetic to the difficulties she faced. While these children of immigrants saw the language brokering process through the prism of their perception of their parents, they also, like any adolescent, were aware of what their peers might think. Distinctive positions on that spectrum were adopted by João

and Rosana with the former laying greater emphasis on the ('Western') rights of teenagers and the latter highlighting the benefits of family approval and ('South American') interdependence. A degree of cultural adjustment is built into a young person's ability to act as a language broker: not only do they speak the main local language, but in addition at that point in time they understand some aspects of the host society more clearly and confidently than their parent. The importance of cultural brokering has been recognized since the beginning of the recent growth in research interest in child language brokers, but the emphasis has often been on their cross-cultural knowledge and skills or on the stress this engenders (McQuillan & Tse, 1995). The analysis of the final two case studies in this report suggests that the adoption or rejection of local cultural values will have an impact on how young people evaluate the need for language brokering in their families. João appeared to distance himself from the situation in which his mother had needed this help, while Rosana remained committed to mutual support within a family and saw language brokering as one expression of it.

5. Conclusion

In our earlier paper (Cline et al., 2011) we concluded that the findings about students' views that were reported there supported the argument that developmental scripts, emphasizing both independence and interdependence, are required to understand the phenomenon of language brokering by young people (Dorner et al., 2008). In this chapter we have focused more closely on individuals' perspectives on the relationships between parents and children. The young language brokers who responded to the vignettes in this research appeared to adopt different positions when balancing the competing demands of autonomy and connectedness within a family. Their responses to the study vignettes could not be explained solely in terms of a simple developmental script for adolescence that focuses on the dimensions of independence and interdependence. First of all, the assumptions in that script may vary when families come from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, when a family migrates from one cultural milieu to another, the developmental script of adolescence interacts with an overlapping developmental script of cultural adjustment. The analysis of individual stances on child language

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brokering has proved to be a fruitful approach to unpicking the complex dynamics that operate in this situation.

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