

Language brokering: Practicing active citizenship

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1. Introduction

It is well known that many migrants to a new country are assisted by their children who have learned the language of the new country, in situations that require interpreting (verbal communication) and translating (written work). The literature on this phenomenon defines what children do as "language brokering", an activity in which the child mediates between a parent and different language speakers or writers, converting meanings in one language into meanings in another (Hall and Sham 1998). "Such activity is not simply a neutral, formal, linguistic, dictionary exercise in the ability to translate one set of words into another" (*ibid.*: 3), but also fits definitions of intercultural transactions, because translating involves finding alternatives to multiple sources of linguistic and cultural knowledge in order to create meaning, negotiate a task, or solve a problem (Hall and Robinson 1999: 3). The term "language brokering" was originally coined by anthropologists, to describe the activities of individuals who connect local and national worlds as "cultural brokering". These anthropologists suggest that the "broker" makes more independent decisions in negotiating and initiating action (Paine 1971, cited in Hall 2007). Thus, it is believed that when immigrant children interpret and translate, they are "not simply constructing the world for themselves, but are acting as brokers who are playing principal roles in constructing versions of the new world for

other family members” (Hall and Robinson 1999: 4). Orellana, for example, in her study of Latino children in the United States, views the activity children do in language brokering situations as “para-phrasing”. According to Orellana, children “‘phrase’ things *for* others [...] ‘sum things up’, and ‘put things in their own words’ – in other words [they] paraphrase” (2003: 15) in order to accomplish the social goals required. Moreover, as Orellana (2009: 21) and Hall (2004) cogently show, as translators children become actors and agents by making things happen for themselves and for their families. For example, they forge connections and open up lines of communication, they make it possible for adults to do things that they could not have otherwise accomplished, and their actions also release space and time for others in less direct ways (for example when a child helps a younger sibling to read thus providing the free time for his/her mother to do housework).

Researchers on the whole agree that the outcome of the language brokering experience depends upon a number of variables including: the choice of the broker (age of child, gender of child, previous experience, interest of child); the complexity of the task (the child’s ability to understand two languages, the child’s knowledge of technical terms, and the number of people involved in a brokering event); and the setting and the situation (the range, age and status of participants, the formality or informality of the setting, the number of people involved in the setting). However, existing research paints contrasting views on the impact of the language brokering experience on children. Some findings indicate that sometimes some children find the experience of language brokering enjoyable, while sometimes some children find it stressful and a burden (Hall and Robinson 1999; Cohen *et al.* 1999; Weisskirch 2006; Morales and Hanson 2005). Others highlight the impact of language brokering on the child’s cognitive development, suggesting that brokers “may develop higher levels of cognitive ability, given the types of documents (e.g., bank/credit card statements) they translate and interpret for their parents. In addition, the situations where they translate or interpret (e.g., doctor’s office, bank, government offices) highlight their adult-level cognitive capability” (Morales and Hanson 2005: 495-496).

With regard to the impact of language brokering on the parent-child relationship, studies in this area also show opposing findings. Thus, some researchers contend that the experience negatively affects the normal dynamics of the parent-child relationship (cf. Cohen *et al.* 1999), and leads to unhealthy role reversals within the family, resulting in parents becoming dependent on their children (Umaña-Taylor 2003 cited in Morales and Hanson 2005: 494). Others report more positive experiences associated with language brokering. For example, some find that language brokering facilitates a stronger bond between parent and child (Dement and Buriel 1999, cited in Morales and Hanson 2005: 494). Others view language brokers as active advocates of their parent's rights in complex situations (Valenzuela 1999, cited in Morales and Hanson 2005: 494). Finally some suggest that language brokers use their position of power to protect the welfare of their parents and other family members (i.e. by protecting them from humiliation and embarrassment in certain situations) (Orellana *et al.* 2003; Valdez *et al.* 2003).

Very little is known, however, about what language brokering means to children, and the implications for their adulthood (cf. Orellana 2009). No research to date has explored how adults narrate their experiences as child language brokers, and how their perspectives on their language brokering experience change as they grow from children into adults. Additionally, issues on the link between language brokering and citizenship contributions remain to be explored. For example, a major gap in the literature that is not related to generally, is children's engagement as citizens in their activities as language brokers.

This paper is based on a study with adults from migrant families, who have grown up interpreting and translating for their parents. The paper draws on the perspective of active citizenship in order to understand: What form of citizenship are children practicing as language brokers, based on the re-collective accounts of individuals in the study? The paper aims to add to existing work by addressing this issue, and highlights the ways in which by paraphrasing in language brokering situations in childhood, and using language as a means of exercising agency and

independence within families, individuals are training themselves and practicing as citizens at the same time. Thus, they are making contributions to themselves as people who are acting as citizens now, and who will take up citizenship as adults: they are learning the skills of citizenship.

2. Citizenship

“Citizenship” is a powerful and much contested concept (see Lister 1997; Pell 2008: 143-144). The concept found its historical roots in certain Greek cities where the definition had an Aristotelian notion of “ruling as well as being ruled” (Yuval-Davis 1999: 120). In western societies, the common conception of citizenship is that of belonging to a political community, in particular a nation-state, and having the rights, privileges and responsibilities as members in that community. This connection between citizenship and the “nation-state” originated during the French revolution, and denoted the relationship between individual and society (Yuval-Davis 1999: 120-121). The rights and responsibilities include civil, political, and social rights and responsibilities such as paying taxes, abiding by certain laws, and possessing appropriate identification (Pell 2008: 143). It follows that to be a citizen, the individual is recognized as “An actor, performing (or refraining from practicing) particular acts, within specified locations. It simultaneously demarcates who, what, and where is excluded from such an identity and status” (Pell 2008: 143, citing Bosniak 2000). However, this conventional/traditional notion of citizenship as exclusively bound to nation-state poses some limitations.

As Pell (2008) points out, the conventional concept of “citizenship” is automatically assigned a political status, while the social, economic, or private character is ignored, and this makes the concept subject to contestation (*ibid.*: 143). Furthermore, assuming that the nation-state is the basis of citizenship does not account for experiences - often due to migration - of pluralism, multi-nationalism, and multiculturalism among individuals within the “community” (*ibid.*: 144).

However, it is precisely due to these new developments of multiculturalism, pluralism and multi-nationalism within the nation-state that new citizenship practices and identities are emerging which challenge the conventional definitions of citizenship.

Feminist writer Susan Pell has argued for an alternative consideration of citizenship, “one that starts with the creative acts of people in sites they deem necessary” (Pell 2008: 144). A consideration that conceptualizes citizenship as flexible, and as “a process that produces multiple practices and identities, in addition to rights and responsibilities afforded to formal membership within a political community” (*ibid.*). Pell argues that for this an analysis of citizenship is required that is not rigidly fixed to membership within the nation-state (*ibid.*). Moreover, by expanding the conventional notion of citizenship, we are also able to account for the ways in which rights, participation, and identity work as useful concepts within the definitions of citizenship (Grabham 2007). Others have also pointed out, that in order to understand the relationship of people to politics and society in contemporary times, without abolishing the notion of citizenship all together, we need to expand it, and separate it analytically from the “nation-state” (Yuval-Davis 1999: 120; Pell 2008). They contend that consideration of contemporary citizenship cannot be complete without examining the diverse and shifting ways in people’s intimate lives, their family and friendship networks affect and are affected by their activities as citizens (Yuval-Davis 1999: 123; see also Plummer 2003). One relevant way in which citizenship is theorized to expand the conventional notion of the concept is through the notion of active citizenship.

“Active citizenship” is broadly understood as any kind of productive contribution that the individual makes to society. However, the common tendency is to define contribution in terms of paid work (see Cox 1998; Fuller *et al.* 2008; Martin 2004). Jenson and Saint-Martin (2004: 15-16) for example, argue that “employment lies at the heart of the notion of activation as a social policy, and an ‘active society’ as a policy goal” (cited in Fuller *et al.* 2008: 157). However, as Fuller *et al.* (2008) point

out, while there has been a common tendency to define “active citizenship” in terms of paid work, unpaid care work in the family and the community, as well as other forms of voluntary work also contribute to society (*ibid.*: 158). From their work on lone mothers on welfare who also participate in community volunteer work in British Columbia, Canada, they show that unpaid work can be viewed as making social contribution to society, effectively reducing government expenditure, while simultaneously mobilizing them as women, and “strengthening their citizenship claims and experiences” (Fuller *et al.* 2008: 159, 172; see also Orellana 2001; 2009). Additionally, volunteer work can be seen as a stepping stone to formal employment, by opening up access to new networks and opportunities for skill development by volunteering, thereby enriching individuals’ social and human capital (Fuller *et al.* 2008: 158).

From her work on Spanish-speaking children of Mexican and Central American immigrant families in the United States who use their skills in two languages to read, write, listen, speak and perform other duties for their families – in other words, to interpret and translate for their families, Orellana (2009) demonstrates how, and cogently argues that, “the indirect nature of some children’s contributions to family processes is especially important considerations of immigrants’ contributions to society” (*ibid.*: 21). This is so, because in many ways these children support and sustain their parents as workers in the United States, thus allowing them to engage in productive work. However, children’s labour - as with that of homemakers – is largely invisible and often not factored into the labour cost equation (*ibid.*). Orellana urges us to think about children’s contributions to their families’ household economies within the much larger structural frame, where we can link the relationship between everyday life and larger institutions and social structures. For although children’s actions may be small in any given household, added up across households, their efforts may represent a significant contribution to society (*ibid.*: 21-22). What these scholars demonstrate is how the active, hidden, free, and unpaid work that some people do, contributes in significant ways to their communities and to society. Thus, their labour offers an arena for

demonstrating social worthiness within discourses of active citizenship (Fuller *et al.* 2008: 163).

It is with this alternative approach to conceptualizing citizenship, that the constructions of citizenship by the language brokers in our research find common ground. In this paper I build on feminist analysis of citizenship to illustrate how the work language brokers do shapes them as engaging in active citizenship. Their work as language brokers for their family, “helping out” as many of them put it, and the volunteer work that they do in their communities as interpreters and translators can be seen as making productive contributions as citizens in their societies.

3. The study

This study is part of a programme of work entitled “*Transforming experiences: Re-conceptualising identities and ‘non-normative’ childhoods*”. The funding for this research arises from the Economic and Social Science Research Council Professorial Research Scheme (ESRC Award No: **RES-051-27-0181**), and is being conducted at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. The central research issue concerns the ways in which adults from different family backgrounds negotiate their identities as they re-evaluate their earlier experiences. It aims to advance empirical and theoretical analysis of the factors that produce adult citizens who are “unremarkable” in not requiring social work intervention despite having childhood experiences often viewed as “non-normative”. To that end, it considers three sets of family experiences, where children: (i) from the Caribbean come to Britain to rejoin their parents in the process of serial migration; (ii) have grown up in families of mixed ethnicity and (iii) have sometimes taken responsibility for their parents as interpreters and translators.

This paper is based on research done on the third strand of the research, exploring the experiences of adults from migrant families who grew up interpreting and translating for their parents. To date forty qualitative, in-depth interviews with adults have been conducted, twenty three females and seventeen males. At the start of each interview, participants are asked to tell their stories, and we follow up their stories to find out more about their identities, and the ways in which they have come to new understandings of their experiences as language brokers over time. Various sampling strategies have been used to recruit participants, including advertisements in newspapers, on websites, snowballing, and by approaching individuals, including in public places.

The individuals in our sample have experience of language brokering between English and fifteen other languages: Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Croatian, Greek, Gujarati, Italian, Mandarin, Punjabi, Sign language (not ASL or BSL, but self-constructed), Somali, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish and Urdu. Additionally, one participant has language brokered from Arabic (Syrian) to Swedish. The age at which the participants reported that they began interpreting and translating ranged from 5 to 13 years, and many continue to do so for their parents and other family members. Their mean age at the time they were interviewed was thirty three years old. All the interviews have been fully transcribed.

4. Some preliminary findings

4.1. Language brokering as part of the practice of active citizenship

The help that language brokers provide for their families through their interpreting in situations such as parent-teachers' meetings, the doctor's office, the local housing office, and in their translation of official and legal documents (such as mortgages, bank loans, legal documents etc.), and for some, in their communities as volunteers, may be seen as making productive contribution to society. Through

this, they are contributing to citizenship. The work they provide as language brokers in families may be considered as a care activity, because although their informal unpaid language brokering activities are intimately connected with their responsibilities and obligations as children in families – “helping out” (in ways comparable to Song’s (1999) findings for British-born Chinese young people) – their activities are also significant in the context of the wider society. As Orellana (2001) argues, the “work” children do in language brokering activities makes enormous contributions that are unrecognized to schools and various other institutions in society. Hence, their language brokering activities can be seen as work, because a) they are helping their parents to solve problems, and b) they reduce the need for professional interpreters and translators in language brokering situations, thereby reducing the need for public government expenditure. Thus, it could be said that through their activities, they achieve social goals and earn social worth in their families, and in society, where they may be regarded as active citizens.

In this spirit, Nora (a Somali woman who migrated to Britain and began interpreting for her mother at age ten) claims that her social worth comes not only from her interpreting activities in her family, but also from the form of language brokering apprenticeships which she has been providing for her younger siblings. Nora hopes that through her language brokering activities she has been a “good role model” and has set “good standards” for her siblings, so that “if there is someone that needs their help... they can do that because they’ve seen me do it”. Laris (a Bangladeshi woman who migrated to Britain and began interpreting for her parents at age eleven) learned to language broker from her older brothers, and she taught her younger siblings. Laris acknowledges that there is a sense of responsibility attached to her role as a language broker, but according to her, “sometimes you like the responsibility”, because she is “helping” her parents to understand the society in which they now live. Additionally, as with Nora, by teaching her brothers the skills of language brokering, she is not only preparing them for the future when she leaves home, but teaching them the value of self-worth that comes from

helping others. According to her, “it’s more knowledge, and it feels good to help”. Effectively, both Nora and Laris are contributing to their siblings’ ability to be engaged as citizens.

As mediators, language brokers are crafting themselves as citizens who are agents. This is evident in their accounts of paraphrasing where they are thinking through relationships in particular contexts and situations and modifying what is being interpreted in order to achieve the best possible solutions.

4.1.1. Paraphrasing

In language brokering situations, Orellana (2003) suggests that people “paraphrase” or put things in their own words using the cultural tools (words, values and symbols) available to them to achieve social goals. Participants indicate that they are conscious of a variety of ways in which they actively interpret – paraphrasing in order to convey the information they want to as best they can while negotiating social constraints. This chimes with what participants in the research reported here say. Phrases such as “giving the gist of things”, “do a picture”, “story telling”, “I make it my way”, “say that differently”, “go round about it”, and “dilute the language” are clear examples of this. For example: Pavna (a Bangladeshi woman who migrated to Britain at age eight and began language brokering for her parents at age 12) recalls her earlier interpreting experiences for her mother:

Sometimes I’m not able to say exactly what they are saying... so you go round about it... So you would paraphrase a lot in that situation, and then... I’ll get the question answer from my mum and then say it to them, and then also come back to her saying, “Is that what you meant?” So ... I would do the exact as I feel, but it’s not the exact word. It would be similar words, but not exactly what they would say ... but in terms of what they are trying to say, you would go round it.

For some, paraphrasing involved more than simply “toning down”, or “giving the gist” of the information. It also involved censoring or omitting certain information in order to protect their parents, other family members, or the language broker her/himself. Mei-Ling is a Chinese woman who, in her teens often interpreted for her mother and her brother’s teachers at parent-teacher meetings. Because Mei-Ling’s parents expected a certain level of achievement from their children, if her brother was not performing satisfactorily at school, at parent-teacher meetings Mei-Ling would “phrase” the message in a “certain way” or “leave out” certain information from the teachers to her mother, “so that my brother would sound like he was doing well”.

By censoring information to their parents in parent-teacher meetings, both Purna (mentioned above) and Sonita (born in Britain of Bangladeshi parents) spoke about wanting to protect their mothers from worry, while at the same time, protecting themselves from possible reprimand by their parents. Sonita, for example, recalled a particular time in school when her “behaviour” and her “attitude” weren’t “that great”. According to Sonita:

When the teacher used to say bad things about me I never used to mention it... You don’t say everything to your mum if it’s something bad or you think it’s going to worry her. You just keep it inside you... It’s like you’re protecting her, cos she’s got other responsibilities at home, she’s got enough to deal with. But then sometimes you just want to come across that you’re such a good person and everything, and you don’t want to show your mum that, you’re being naughty or you’re not doing this or you’re not doing that.

Karim (a Moroccan man who began interpreting and translating for his parents at age five) also mentioned that he often “diluted” the truth about his disruptive behaviour in class, in order to position himself as the good student to his father, who might have otherwise reprimanded him for bad behaviour in class, but also if he is caught lying. The following illustrates how Karim recasts his teacher’s narrative to his father:

Elaine: *Did you always interpret exactly word for word what your dad, or the teacher would be saying?*

Karim: ... I mean you couldn't lie to my dad... You just didn't want him to get angry with you and be upset with you, because he would let you feel it for quite a while if he was upset with you or disappointed with you. But with the parent teacher thing, I remember a lot of the time, the teacher'd say, "He's very intelligent and he's got a lot of ability but he's very talkative and sometimes that's very disruptive not just for him but for the rest of the [class]"... And he [dad] wouldn't quite get the gist, and she'll go, "He talks too much". And he'll say to me, "Like you talk too much?"... And the rest of it like "disruptive" and I'd have to explain. You wouldn't say "disruptive", you would translate it in a kind of diluted way... I'd probably say something to him ...that he would understand. "That it spoils it for everybody else"...In Arabic one word in English, you've got three ...different ways of saying the same thing.... So I wouldn't say like I was disrupting the rest of the class, I'd just say, "The teacher finds it that she loses her concentration... it disrupts her in terms of her concentration". I wouldn't go into detail like that if I could get away with it... you would tone down the language slightly. You wouldn't be 100% if you knew it was going to get you into trouble.

Paraphrasing did not only take place during interpretation but also sometimes in translating written documents. Yasmin, an Asian woman born in Uganda, spoke of how she would just give her mother "a gist of" the information that appeared on her school reports. Pavna (mentioned earlier), spoke of how she often read letters and documents in their entirety, but would only "briefly" explain the contents to her mother, "not a hundred percent [or] word by word, but in a nutshell".

Effectively, through paraphrasing, language brokers are making independent decisions as social agents about how much information to give while still, in most cases, conveying the message in order to achieve the required goals. Moreover, they are not only demonstrating agency, but are crafting citizenship, because they are doing free work that is important to maintaining society in many ways. Without their unpaid and unrecognized work, their schools, family doctors and local housing offices would have had to hire professional interpreters as a cost. Thus, their free work becomes significantly valuable not only to these immediate micro institutions to which they are directly associated, but also to the more macro institutions by

reducing government expenditures (see Orellana 2001, 2009). As one participant, Leung (a Chinese man who translated for his parents) mentioned, not only does language “have its benefits” in the way that the language broker “get this sense of importance” from helping his/her parents, but their activity is beneficial to society as well, because through their communication skills and language mediation activities, institutions are spared the work and the cost of providing professional interpreters.

4.1.2. Disagreements during language brokering

Sometimes during multiple mediating, arguments develop between children and their parents. Typical situations are times when parents become doubtful that their children are relaying the full range of information, and they become critical. Thus, some children find it difficult to mask their “frustration”, and in the process, they argue back, or resist certain demands of their parents based on what they judge as best possible social outcome.

Pavna (mentioned earlier) reports that she sometimes argued with her mother in language brokering situations. She acknowledged that in situations such as the doctor’s office, if she felt there was “too much information”, she would not interpret everything either to her mother or to the doctor, in order to “avoid her [mother] getting stressed out”. She recalled events at the GP’s when her mother was not convinced that she was giving the doctor complete information about her illness:

Elaine: Were there situations where you felt that your mum wasn’t quite happy with the way you interpreted?

Pavna: She pushes me to tell more. She says, “Tell them that!”. And you tell them and then she [says], “No, you haven’t told them enough. Can you tell them more”. And I’m like, “I’ve told them what you told me”. But then it’s like, “No, you haven’t told them enough, elaborate”... Although there is nothing more to elaborate...And I’m like, “You don’t even know how to speak English and then you get me to do something for you, and NOW you’re not happy”.

And then she'll say, "It's enough"...But if she could speak she would say everything that's in her heart. Sometimes we hold back things.

For Karim, having minority ethnic parents who did not speak English was an "embarrassment" for him more generally, and in particular situations when he had to mediate between his parents and his teachers, or the housing officers, or at the doctor's office, he found the activity even more "embarrassing", "intimidating" and "humiliating". Karim positioned his father as someone who was often "quite frustrated" in language brokering situations. According to him, "there was a lot he [father] wanted to say", and because he couldn't speak or understand English, he felt that his message was not being conveyed precisely or correctly. Karim feared these situations, knowing that if he hadn't conveyed the exact message, his father would project his frustration onto him on their way home, in a manner that would make Karim feel unintelligent and unworthy. However, there were situations where Karim felt that in the process of trying to get him (Karim) to interpret his father's anger and frustration, his father was asking too much of him. According to Karim, although his father would argue with him in these situations, Karim would decline, by saying, "Dad you can't really say that. No, I won't say that", because, even as a young person he felt that "pushing the issue" would probably be counterproductive to the goals that his father was trying to achieve.

What Pavna and Karim's examples demonstrate is how language brokers learn from a young age to navigate and negotiate the dynamics of the situations, and make independent decisions in order to achieve what they deem will bring about the best possible solution. It is about being able to challenge issues they disagree about, and this is about citizenship, taking an engaged part in society. It could be said, therefore, that when children paraphrase and argue with their parents, they are acting as agents who are practicing citizenship in their very activity of language brokering in the public world. Because they can make decisions about what is important to convey to their parents, and argue if need be, they are acting as agents, contributing to the institutions in which they interpret as well as to their

parents, and learning early how to operate independently as citizens. The following section provides a further example of this point.

4.1.3. The use of language as means of exercising agency and independence

Language is also used as a means of exercising agency and independence within their families. Nargis (born in Britain of Pakistani parents who began interpreting for her parents between age seven and eight) did just that after her father “embarrassed” her at her first parents-teachers’ evening at primary school, by asking questions that Nargis felt “weren’t appropriate”. After this first incident, Nargis refrained from informing her parents about parents-teachers’ meetings, and she subsequently took reports from school for signing by her mother who neither speaks English, nor has been formally educated, but who the children had taught to sign her name.

For Nargis, having parents who could not negotiate the public world in English meant that she had more “freedom” to decide the extent to which she wanted them to participate in her education and in her life. Effectively, it meant that as a citizen she could “exercise that independence of thought”, and her “freedom to explore [her] own interests”, and make her own decisions regarding her schooling and her course options. The freedom Nargis allowed herself resulted from the fact that her mother cannot understand English. Thus, it can be argued that while some researchers point to the disadvantages associated with language brokering (see Cohen *et al.* 1999), Nargis’ example demonstrates how the experience of language brokering can give children freedom to practice and exercise their citizenship (see Orellana *et al.* 2003; Orellana 2009).

Additionally, Nargis and her siblings have taught their mother how to sign her name, something she was keen to do, and which her mother treated very seriously by dressing up, clearing the table and sitting down to learn from her children. By

teaching their mother to sign her name, the children can be said to have opened the possibility of her having limited access to participation as a citizen. In signing her name, she can consent to things independently of her husband (as when she signs the children's report), even if she is not totally aware of what she signs. This shows us one aspect of the children's active citizenship, in that they are giving their mother a gift of citizenship – partial contingent citizenship, but nevertheless citizenship.

4.1.4. Volunteering

Finally, as children, some individuals did voluntary work as language brokers in their communities, and it has been argued that “volunteer labour provides an arena for demonstrating social worthiness within discourses of active citizenship” (Fuller *et al.* 2008: 163). The relationship between volunteering and active citizenship is particularly significant in the context of social assistance (Fuller *et al.* 2008: 163). In the case of language brokering, volunteers believe that they are contributing to society by giving something free of cost to their community. For Nora, who volunteered at her local community centre where she interpreted and acted as an advocate for the minority ethnic children from her language group, “doing something without getting paid” was not only fulfilling for her, but it also meant that through her language ability, she was able to bring about social understanding through communication, and connect people from diverse backgrounds. Nora's example highlights the understandings that volunteer work, with its symbolism of altruism, provides her with a sense of “social worth” and connectedness to her community. Effectively, through her contribution, she highlights the way in which her volunteer work is creating “belonging and solidarity across differences”, and draws upon “an alternate discourse of social worth and contribution that challenges [her] positioning as non-contributory citizen by discourses of dependency” (Fuller *et al.* 2008: 163).

In sum, the contributions that children make and the negotiations that they engage in during language brokering situations make them active citizens, and prepare them for a particular kind of adulthood which is thoughtful, reflexive, and able to contribute to society. These qualities are evident among some of the individuals in the study who have claimed that their childhood language brokering experiences have influenced the interests they have developed in their adult lives. Nora (mentioned above) for example, continues to do volunteer and advocacy work in her local Somali community. Nora felt that because of her language brokering experience, “I felt like I was equipped for it in the sense that I was able to communicate with different people at different levels, and I felt that I could do the job well”. Furthermore, she felt that she is in a position to be able to help others in her community who do not lack English language ability, but are also “under represented” as minority ethnic in their community. Regarding her advocacy work in particular, Nora felt particularly delighted that her work has resulted in change for the individuals involved.

Leung (a medical student born to Chinese parents) also felt that his language brokering experiences have influenced his current work with an Asian Pacific community service group for patients’ health screening in his community. These patients are primarily first generation Chinese who do not speak English. According to Leung, his early language brokering experience encouraged him to want to continue to communicate and interact with people from his family of origin, while also enabling him to practice and maintain his Cantonese. In short, language brokering may be seen as a form of volunteering which parallels adult activities as volunteers, and which may profoundly influence not only the child interpreter, but also their parents and families: a form in short of active citizenship.

5. Summary and conclusions

In this paper I have used the accounts of adults who as children interpreted and translated for their parents, to demonstrate how in the work that children do as language brokers for their family – “helping out” as many of them put it – they are making productive contributions in society. Hence, they may be seen as contributing to citizenship, and in particular to active citizenship. Their mediating activities and their strategies for managing in language brokering situations such as in the doctor’s office, at parent-teachers’ meetings, banks, housing offices etc., suggest agency and activity on their part, as individuals who are creating particular roles, and effecting desired outcomes as active citizens, and not merely being passive in these situations. I have also shown that during language brokering situations, when children paraphrase they are thinking through relationships and making independent decisions about how much information is necessary to give while still conveying the main message. Additionally, when they argue with their parents, they are learning from a very early age how to navigate and negotiate the dynamics of relationships and situations, and how to make independent decisions about what to say, and what is appropriate or not to convey in order to get the best results. It is about challenging issues they disagree with, and this is also about citizenship: being actively engaged in society.

In language brokering situations children are also learning to become citizens through the content of what they are interpreting and translating, because they become aware of their societies much better and much sooner than many other children of their biological age. Thus, they are both training themselves and practicing as citizens at the same time. Additionally, the contributions children make to society through their language brokering activities are sometimes unseen because they occur in the privacy of their homes. Yet I would argue that even in these situations, they are also making huge contributions to society by actively encouraging citizenship among members of their families who will take up citizenship in the present, but also in the future. This is evident in the language

brokering apprenticeships which some individuals provide for their younger siblings. Another example of this may be gleaned from Nargis' case, in which her experience of language brokering had not only given her the freedom to practice and exercise citizenship, but Nargis also taught her mother to sign her name, thus making it possible for her mother to participate in citizenship. In a similar spirit, Tilly (a Moroccan woman who interpreted and translated for her mother), while reflecting on her experience mentioned that although she felt that language brokering is "a big responsibility... it's an important responsibility also, because whilst it may be difficult to kind of be the messenger and sometimes you don't want to say certain things or do certain things... sometimes, it's basically giving a voice to your parents when they can't express themselves. Or they don't have the tools to express themselves". Thus, Tilly is here also pointing to the possibility of allowing her mother to participate in citizenship.

In sum, from their language brokering activities where children mediate between two linguistic worlds, and are engaged in decision making processes that affect social outcomes, they are learning the skills of citizenship where they are engaged in decision making processes that affect social outcomes. Furthermore, their experiences lead some of them towards a particular kind of thoughtful and reflective adulthood, in which they continue to contribute freely to society as translators and interpreters. Hence, language brokering by children, whether for their parents or for others in their families, is a form of active citizenship which brings early experience of adult society, and which may profoundly shape not only their own presents, but also the futures of themselves and their families.

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