

# A GLIMPSE INTO THE SOCIALIZATION OF BILINGUAL YOUNGSTERS AS INTERPRETERS: THE CASE OF LATINO BILINGUALS BROKERING COMMUNICATION FOR THEIR FAMILIES AND IMMEDIATE COMMUNITIES

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## Abstract

Work on bilinguals who act as family interpreters, while not focused particularly on the development of translation and interpreting abilities, contributes to our understanding of life experiences of the individuals who begin to interpret early in their lives (Valdés and Angelelli 2003). With some exceptions (Harris 1977, 1978, 1980, 1992; Toury 1984, 1995) very little has been written about the lived experiences of young interpreters and/or about their socialization as family interpreters. Since most of the community interpreters of today were interpreters in their late childhood and adolescence, getting a glimpse into their lives and experiences may help researchers (and teachers of interpreting) understand the *habitus* and ideology of these individuals who later may populate interpreting classrooms and workplaces. This paper explores some of their experiences and perceptions as well as the controversies surrounding their role. The paper ends with some suggestions for incorporating coursework on translation and interpreting at high school levels

## Resumen

Los estudios sobre individuos bilingües que actúan como intérpretes para la familia, si bien no se concentran en el desarrollo de aptitudes de traducción e interpretación, contribuyen a nuestro entendimiento acerca de las experiencias de vida que han tenido estos individuos que comienzan a interpretar a edades tempranas (Valdés y Angelelli 2003). Con la excepción de algunas investigaciones (Harris 1977, 1978, 1980, 1992; Toury 1984, 1995) se sabe muy poco acerca de las experiencias de los

intérpretes jóvenes y acerca de su socialización como intérpretes de la familia. Dado que muchos de los intérpretes comunitarios de hoy han servido como intérpretes de familia cuando eran pequeños o adolescentes, el poder aprender acerca de las vidas y experiencias de estos individuos permitiría a los investigadores (como así también a los profesores de interpretación) comprender el *habitus* y la ideología de aquellas personas que podrían asistir a clases de interpretación o que trabajarían como intérpretes. Este trabajo explora algunas de las experiencias y percepciones así como también las controversias que despierta dicho papel y finaliza con algunas sugerencias para incorporar tareas de traducción o interpretación en las escuelas.

### **Keywords**

Circumstantial bilingualism. Elective bilingualism. Societal language. Language broker. Linguistic minorities.

### **Palabras clave**

Bilingüismo circunstancial. Bilingüismo electivo. Lengua societaria. Mediador lingüístico. Minorías lingüísticas.

## 1. Introduction

When a family of immigrants settles on a new land where a societal language different than their own is spoken, it is not unusual to see bilingual youngsters brokering communication for their families and immediate communities. Research has reported occurrences of this in Latino communities in the US (between English and Spanish see Valdés 2003; Valdés, Chavez and Angelelli 2000; Zentella 1997) as well as between other language combinations in the US (De Ment, Buriel and Villanueva 2004 report on Chinese, Vietnamese and also Mexican youngsters) and in other multilingual communities of the world (e.g. see Harris 1977, 1978, 1980, 1992; Harris and Sherwood 1978 for research on English/French bilingual youngsters interpreting and acting as ambassadors for recent immigrants in Canada).

Earlier work on bilinguals who act as family interpreters, while not focused particularly on the development of translation and interpreting abilities, contributes to our understanding of life experiences of the individuals who begin to interpret early in their lives (Valdés and Angelelli 2003). With the exception of early work on young interpreters (Harris 1977, 1978, 1980, 1992; Toury 1984, 1995) and recent historical work on translation and interpreting (Baker 1998; Karttunen 1994), very little has been written about the lived experiences of interpreters and/or about their socialization as family interpreters. Since most of the community interpreters of today were interpreters in their late childhood and adolescence, getting a glimpse into their lives and experiences may help researchers (and teachers of interpreting) understand the *habitus* and ideology of these individuals who later may populate interpreting classrooms and workplaces. In the next sections of this paper we explore some of these experiences. We start with a brief discussion on the bilingualism of these young interpreters. Then we look at the controversies surrounding their role as family interpreters and the relationship of this controversy and empirically founded arguments. In so doing we look at how young interpreters perceive themselves and how they are perceived by their families and the immediate communities which use their services. In this paper it is not my intention to take a position on the use of children or adolescents as

interpreters in private family matters or public service settings. I concur with those who argue that it is the responsibility of the institutions and organizations that interact with speakers of minority languages to provide them with interpreting services so that they can fully participate in society. Rather, I intend to expose and reflect on situations that surround the lives of bilingual youngsters. The paper ends with some suggestions for incorporating coursework on translation and interpreting at high school levels.

## 2. Definitions and Typologies of Bilingualism

Bilingual youngsters who act as language brokers for their families vary significantly in their age, level of language ability in each of the languages they use, degree of literacy in both languages they speak, motivation, affect, and views on the tasks they perform. Most of these bilingual youngsters become family interpreters because they have a certain degree of command of two languages. In other words, it is not just their bilingualism, but rather their ability to put their bilingualism to work to broker communication for their immediate family that sets them apart to become family interpreters.

Bilingualism is complex and multifaceted. The mainstream literature on interpreting fails to problematize sufficiently the relationship between interpreting and bilingualism. In a way it assumes that language competency is monolithic and that equilingualism can be assumed. Statements such as “complete mastery of both languages” are encountered frequently in the literature on professional interpreting (e.g. see AIIC 2005), and language mastery is assumed to be a pre-requisite to interpret (cf. Vazquez Mayor 2007, Angelelli and Valdés 2003, Angelelli 2002 for exceptions). Researchers working in the field of bilingualism (Valdés and Figueroa 1994) have attempted various definitions of it and have proposed various typologies (Valdés and Figueroa 1994: 7-20). For the purpose of this paper we will limit our discussion to the terms elective and circumstantial bilinguals.

Most of the young interpreters who broker communication for their families are children of immigrants, and therefore can be considered circumstantial bilinguals. In 1994 Valdés and Figueroa (10-19) suggested the following distinction among bilinguals. An elective bilingual is an individual who becomes bilingual by choice, and a circumstantial bilingual is forced by life circumstances to add a language other than the mother tongue to fully participate in the new society. In other words, a person, be it a child or an adult, becomes bilingual by choice, when there is a desire to learn another language either to travel, become familiar with another culture, etc. In the case of a child, the choice is not necessarily his/her own, as much as it is made by his/

her parents. Regardless of who makes it, it is still a choice to be made by members of the family. In other words, the individual could participate fully in all aspects of society (have access to education, health, or community services, justice) using his/her language of origin without the need to add another language. The language of the individual and the language of the society where he/she lives are one and the same.

On the other hand, when an individual/group of individuals is forced by circumstances, such as immigration, mixed marriage, geographic disasters, economic or political struggles, etc. to leave the country of origin and to move into another one where the societal language is different from that of the homeland, the individual/group of individuals has to acquire the societal language in order to fully participate in society. This second type of bilingualism is referred to as circumstantial bilingualism. Unlike elective bilingualism that generally occurs in individuals, circumstantial bilingualism is more frequent among groups that move together to the target nation (e.g. families, extended families, neighborhoods, small communities). These young bilinguals generally have not acquired another language based on a choice, as it is the case of bilinguals who populate second or foreign language classes, but rather had to acquire the language in order to survive in and integrate themselves into the new society.

Most of the bilingual youngsters who become family interpreters are circumstantial bilinguals. As mentioned earlier, they are socialized into this role given their abilities with languages and with processing information and their willingness to help their families. When a family settles down in a new society, children and youngsters have more chances of acquiring the new language as they attend school and interact more with others (Zentella 1997, Valdés *et al.* 2003). It is therefore not unusual than when parents, grandparents or any other family/community member need to communicate and cannot do so in the societal language, and no interpreters are available to met their communicative needs, those family members who are indeed fluent in the new societal language offer their help so that other family members can communicate. They generally are the younger generations of a family of immigrants, those that are being schooled in the new societal language. The language broker role performed by circumstantial bilinguals, however, is not uncontroversial, especially when performed by minors. In the next section we explore the main issues surrounding the roles of young bilinguals as language brokers.

### 3. A controversial role

As mentioned earlier, the language-broker role is often performed by circumstantial bilinguals who are attending elementary, middle or high school. This role however, is not necessarily limited to children and young adolescents. De Ment, Buriel and Villanueva (2004: 259-261) report on Asian and Latino college students who continue to be called upon to translate for their parents, as immigrant parents continue at times to feel uncomfortable with their English language abilities and their limitations in communication.

While some researchers (for example Grosjean 1982; Harris 1977, 1978, 1980, 1992; Harris & Sherwood, 1978; Hakuta 1986; Malakoff & Hakuta 1991; Pfaff 1997; Toury 1984, 1995; Valdés 2002; Valdés, Chavez & Angelelli 2003; Valdés, Chavez, Angelelli *et al.* 2003; Zentella 1997) have studied the abilities of these youngsters in order to understand and demonstrate the special cognitive, linguistic and sociolinguistic abilities they exhibit as they perform the role of family (volunteer) interpreter, other sectors mostly represented by professional associations (CHIA, MMIA), organizations such as The Office of Civil Rights, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, and the legislature, either expressly discourage or severely condemned the use of minors in health care interpreting. Even when there are instances in which bilingual youngsters have to interpret for their parents and members of their immediate families because society cannot meet their communicative needs, the presence of these bilingual youngsters is either denied or regarded with some suspicion. This may be due to the fact that US welfare departments, as well as other agencies receiving federal assistance through the Department of Social Services in charge of administering Public Assistance (e.g. food stamps or child support programs), are required to ensure effective bilingual services to serve the needs of non-English speaking populations. So having children performing roles that agencies should be offering is definitely problematic. According to the Modern Language Association data of 2005, 57.59 percent of California residents age five and older speak English as a first language at home, while 28.21 percent spoke Spanish. In addition to English and Spanish, 2.04 percent speak Filipino, 1.59 percent spoke Chinese (which includes Cantonese [0.63 percent] and Mandarin [0.96 percent]), 1.4 percent speak Vietnamese, and 1.05 percent speak Korean as their mother tongue. In total, 42.4 percent of the population speaks languages other than English. Over 200 languages are known to be spoken and read in California (Modern Language Association, 2005).

Evidently these demographic changes increasingly challenge all aspects of U.S. society, especially in the delivery of services such as healthcare, justice and education. In spite of the fact that government-funded programs for health care institutions, for example, have been mandated to provide interpreting services to limited-English-speaking patients (Allen 2000), the truth remains that, in spite of the linguistic diversity observed in California like in many other parts of the United States and the world, and in spite of all the rules and regulations, when a family of Latino immigrants settles in America, and parents do not speak the societal language, it is often the case that bilingual youngsters act as language interpreters (Valdés, Chavez, Angelelli *et al.* 2000), on behalf of their family.

Due to the use of ad-hoc interpreters, various bills and regulations have been created to impede children from interpreting for relatives, including their parents in health care institutions (Yee, Diaz and Spitzer 2003). Additionally, untrained interpreters such as a bilingual janitor or native speakers (or bilinguals who volunteer to act as interpreters) have been notably criticized when used in health care institutions (Allen 2000; Baker, Hayes and Fortier 1998; Cambridge 1999; Gilbert 2005; Marcus 2003). Interestingly, it appears that the use of untrained interpreters (among whom we include bilingual youngsters) has started a discussion regarding the value of health care, how societies struggle to accommodate the linguistic needs of its members, and how access to services for speakers of non-societal languages in a multilingual society continues to be problematic. For more information about this tension the reader is directed to Valdés, Chavez and Angelelli (2003: 63-66).

#### **4. Bilingual Youngsters Brokering Communication: what research reveals**

Between 1996 and 2001 Valdés, Chavez, Angelelli *et al.* conducted an ethnographic study on Latino bilingual youngsters brokering communication between members of their families and the community of the South Bay area in California. Participating in this ethnographic study were eleven families and 25 bilingual youngsters enrolled in two different high schools. Thirteen were entering ninth graders enrolled in a remedial summer school program (all of them Latinos and spoke Spanish at home) and twelve were juniors and seniors advanced in Advanced Placement Spanish (ten Latinos who spoke Spanish at home and two students from India enrolled in Spanish as a Foreign Language). The student population was considered at risk of abandoning school.

These twenty five students were asked to take part in a simulated interpreting task in order to identify, study and assess their interpreting skills. The simulation task lasted between twelve and fifteen minutes and the script was

representative of what these youngsters were asked to do in their schools (e.g. interpret in the principal's office between the principal and a parent, during teacher-parent conferences, translate materials to be sent home, etc.). The simulated interpreting tasks were audio and video taped, fully transcribed and analyzed for content and language (for a complete discussion on performance see Valdés, Chavez, Angelelli *et al.* 2003: 99-118). Although these youngsters' language abilities were varied and most of them (except for the 2 students from India) were acquiring English, which resulted in some linguistic disfluencies (e.g. lack of verb or pronoun agreement, transfer of syntax structures, wrong choice of lexical items), they manage to produce and understand highly complex chunks of information in two languages and keep up with communicative demands. Through systematic observations of the bilingual youngsters at school and at home, as well as by a series of in-depth interviews with eleven of the youngsters themselves and their families and teachers, we gained an understanding of how, when, why and with whom young interpreters use the two languages and the circumstances in which they interpret. This research also shed light on the perceptions that youngsters have of their own role as family interpreters, as well as the perceptions that both parties using them to communicate (parents and community members) have about them

#### *4.1 Self-perceptions of young interpreters*

Thirteen youngsters volunteered for in-depth interviews. With the exception of one, all came from working-class families, were foreign born, and had emigrated at an average age of eight. When youngsters were asked to recall the situations in which they interpreted more frequently they mentioned at home, in their apartment complex where they sometimes helped other neighbors, in the neighborhood, at church, in stores, at school, in work settings and at health care, business and legal settings. Their recollection of settings coincides with those of their parents except for the church. Youngsters explained how they interpreted because they had to help their families as no one else was there for them. They spoke of what they did with some pride. In many cases they also shared they had volunteered their help to members outside their families, as they realized they could not communicate in English and they could lend a hand.

In order to ascertain their level of English and Spanish, we used both languages during the interviews. For the most parts, participants answered in the language they were asked and in only two occasions they changed to their more dominant language. When asked to evaluate their language proficiency, students reported to perceive both languages as "the same", although some of



them mentioned they felt more comfortable in Spanish. When asked to discuss their performances, or how they knew if they were doing a good job, they mentioned they could tell they were successful when they could understand the message and made the other two parties understand the same message too. They were able to articulate more and less successful experiences, which is revealing about their metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness.

#### *4.2 Perceptions of both parties using young interpreters*

Like any immigrant group in the US, Latino parents arrived knowing little or no English and settled in neighborhoods where they found affordable housing and where they were able to carry most of their everyday business in Spanish. Sometimes, Spanish was not enough. Of the eleven families interviewed, one came from Guatemala, one from Mexicali, four from Michoacán, three from El Salvador, one from Jalisco and one from Guerrero. During the interviews parents reported that they enlisted the help of their children when they need to communicate in English and interpreters are not provided. Examples included communicative needs at home (answer the telephone, talk to people at the door), at the apartment complex (talk to the manager, explain safety rules), at school (to enroll a child in school, make an appointment, communicate with teachers, translate information received from school in English), at clinics and other health care institutions (to make an appointment, to communicate with doctors and nurses), at work settings (for filling out applications), in stores (to ask questions, to shop), and at other organizations, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles to obtain a driver license, or businesses or legal settings. Parents talked about having their sons or daughters interpreting for them as part of a family team effort, even when they could have friends interpret for them they also brought their children because they were an extra set of ears in the conversation, they valued the trust they had on them. They were family. They reported always appointing the older child as the family interpreter because they thought older children had spent more years at school and therefore their English could be stronger, and also because some public or business settings would not take younger children very seriously. Parents also expressed that they preferred children who were confident, extroverted, good-natured, and who liked to be social and friendly.

In terms of community and school perceptions, when we started our observations, we realized that our inquiries on the use of young interpreters were met with suspicion and hostility (Valdés *et al.* 2003: 64). This was due to existing requirements governing access to services (see section 3).

Interestingly, while initially teachers classified the students as low level English speakers, their English skills were functional when interpreting for their families. Although they committed minor mistakes which caused linguistic dis-fluencies, they managed to communicate the meaning of the message which was well understood by the interlocutors. It was evident that when the youngsters were interpreting, they were able to understand English at an advanced/sophisticated level (Valdés *et al.* 2000 & 2003). Additionally, their interpreting abilities were so sophisticated that they could even transmit the tone and stance of the English message to their parents. Neither the experiences these youngsters had, nor the validation of their talents were in sync between school and home. Many times at school, bilingual adolescents were placed in the lowest ESL course, however at home they were able to read, translate and interpret complex and intricate materials in English for their parents and family members.

Additionally, the common trend for children of second and third generation immigrant families is to accept and adjust to the new culture and its language, which tends to lead to the loss of their native language. In spite of this trend, the students in our study acquired English and maintained their home languages (e.g. Spanish and Hindi). Even though teachers of the language used at home (Spanish) disapproved on the non-standardness of their Spanish, these adolescents functioned successfully in interpreting for new arriving immigrants of diverse educational backgrounds and ages. These young interpreters were often called upon to aid teachers at school by interpreting for a new student or to translate written messages to be sent to the parents at home.

An enlightening finding in the study of bilingual youngsters acting as interpreters (Valdés *et al.* 2000) is that many of these gifted bilinguals executed various forms of interpreting in the educational setting with no difficulty for their families with absolutely no training. This was also the case for the participants in the study of Puerto Rican children living in New York (Zentella 1997). These young interpreters facilitated complex communication actions as language brokers who acted as a go-between during the interactions and were able to perform them quite successfully, even with some linguistic dis-fluencies between two monolingual individuals (for additional information and transcripts see Valdés *et al.* 2003: 147). In a way, these young interpreters were carrying out a similar task to the one professional translators and interpreters perform. What sets them apart from professional interpreters is that they are not socialized into the idea of neutrality, due to the fact that they are mediating different interactions between members of communities with which they have strong bonds and cultural ties. Another distinction between

professional interpreters and young interpreters is that while professionals may have some choice among interactions, settings, topics and situations in which they participate, bilingual youngsters acting as interpreters are faced with challenging situations in which they do not always chose to perform. Many times the situations involve the welfare of their family members. This makes the act of interpreting much more personal and sensitive for them, and, to some degree, some may perceive that their participation in these situations is a moral obligation.

### **5. Arguing for Turning our Attention to the Interpreting Skills of Bilingual Youngsters**

As it has been unequivocally demonstrated by research, bilingual youngsters who perform as young interpreters are talented and unique individuals. As I have argued above, the way in which these young bilinguals, who are heritage speakers of a non-societal language, go about mediating communicative needs reveal important information about their abilities. Interestingly, in the United States, these abilities generally are perceived as average or even as non successful by their regular schooling programs. It is not unusual to see heritage speakers tracked in English as a Second Language classes, or remedial English.

In a society as diverse as the United States, nurturing and enhancing the linguistic talents of heritage speakers and young bilinguals who may or may not become language interpreters later in their lives is an imperative. This became evident through recent tragedies involving the nation's inability to deal with less commonly taught languages (e.g. the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> when intelligent services in the US failed to understand communications in Arabic due to a lack of specialized linguistic capacity). Bilingual youngsters are an untapped linguistic resource for our nation. In addition to national security and international interactions, the US is a linguistically diverse territory and many times educated interpreters are not available to deal with every day communicative needs of its people. Many times, however, these linguistic talents go un-nurtured and overlooked in spite of the increased need for interpreters.

If programs were created to enhance their special linguistic abilities then bilingual youngsters would be able to recognize the value of knowing two or more languages. In addition, they would value their own interpreting and translating skills that they use to help members of their communities. As bilingual youngsters attempt to help monolinguals whose linguistic needs are not accommodated by our society it would be beneficial for them to receive

positive attention in a classroom, be encouraged to speak two languages, and be assisted in improving their skills as interpreters. It would also help them as they begin the road of socialization into this role. That is why a curricula or classes based on their skills and needs would promote and prolong their learning and most definitely benefit them in the future (Angelelli, Enright and Valdés 2002).

In the Foreign Language Curriculum in K-12 (and K-16) reflection upon one's own bilingualism is not present. Through simple definitions and examples, in an introductory course on Translation and Interpreting at high school, students could be encouraged to reflect on their own bilingualism. They could work through constructs such as English Language Learner, Language Minority Student, Heritage Language Learner, as well as Balanced Bilingual. They could look at examples that come from empirical data (observations and interviews Valdés *et al.* 2000 and Angelelli, Enright and Valdés 2000). The following paragraph illustrates an example of a story that introduces terms that students may use to reflect on their own bilingualism.

#### Example 1

Now, let's follow Lucila through her language learning experiences. We know that when she was little she spoke only Spanish. After being in school for a few years she started to speak and read English. Little by little, Lucila's English was stronger than her Spanish because school consisted of 100% English instruction. Once that happened, Lucila's dominant language changed from Spanish to English. The **dominant language** is the language in which we feel more comfortable when we express ourselves, either orally or in writing. Even though the first language she learned was Spanish, or her **native language**, because of her experiences, her dominant language as she got older changed from Spanish to English.

In addition, in Example 2 we see a sample activity that could be used with students to reflect on their own bilingualism. Students could be reading about bilingualism, discussing the different types of bilinguals, reflecting on their own linguistic history, on what is commonly said about bilingual individuals, and they could learn to identify common myths and facts.

#### Example 2

1. What are some myths involving bilingualism? Turn to your neighbor, and tell him or her two of them and explain why it is a myth. Then give your work partner the opportunity to do the same.
2. How does an individual get defined as a language minority student?
3. Can you be bilingual and be 100% fluent in two languages? Why or why not?
4. Think of and discuss ten positive aspects about being bilingual.

When considering implementing translation and interpreting in high school as a way of nurturing the talents of bilingual youngsters, schools could approach this task in various ways, from adding activities to a language class, to adding a course to a language arts curriculum, to designing a whole curriculum that would complement the teaching and learning of the societal language and a foreign/second one (for complete guidelines for designing translation and interpreting curriculum at the high school level the reader is directed to Angelelli, Enright and Valdés 2002). The only criteria required is that the school/community presents high levels of bilingualism/multilingualism; that the school/community is committed to providing and promoting bilingual education, and that the school/community has a large number of students interested in learning about and developing skills in interpreting and translation. It is important to emphasize is that, in order to implement these activities or courses, teachers do not need extensive experience in interpreting and translating, as they will not be preparing professional interpreters. Rather, they will be using translation and interpreting techniques and exercises to enhance what students are already doing, to validate their experiences, and to teach languages. What is needed is enthusiasm and interest and a desire to explore their own resources and talents in this area. Many different kinds of schools can effectively support a Translation and Interpreting program by following guidelines available to educators.

## 6. Conclusion

Every society must engage in Language Planning and Policy as part of ordinary business in all sectors of society as well as to protect the human rights of individuals within its borders. A society's policies governing its official language, as well as contemplating access on the part of speakers of minority languages, has profound effects on the identities, cultures, and social status of the speakers of those minority languages. One could assume that a crucial part of those policies should deal with how linguistic minorities gain access to information in order to access services (health, community) and enjoy rights (education, justice). A policy governing language interpreting is a crucial and necessary service in a multilingual society to afford all individuals equal access to services and information in society. In the absence of such policies, individuals get organized in ways that are available to them. In this paper we took a glimpse at how bilingual youngsters step up to the plate to help their parents and members of their immediate families with their communicative needs. In so doing, and may be unintentionally, these bilingual youngsters begin their process of socialization as interpreters. They perform similar tasks to

what community interpreters do and they exhibit various degrees of success without any education or preparation for these tasks. While discussing these interpreting experiences, both young interpreters and their family members refer to what they do as a team effort, as part of what children and youngsters do to help the family. Youngsters were not chosen to interpret by chance, but rather on the basis of their language skills and maturity.

Ideally all members of society should have their linguistics needs met. In the absence of this, families get organized and resort to their family members, some of them quite young. Although some of these interactions could be considered problematic, as in any instance where children are exposed to topics that are not suitable for their age, the talents these bilingual youngsters exhibit cannot be denied. Identifying and nurturing the talent that these bilinguals display should not continue to go unnoticed. Rather, those talents need to be nurtured and celebrated.

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