



Immigrant Youth as Linguistic and Cultural Brokers in Parent-School Interactions.

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Resumen/ Abstract

In this paper I examine the transcultural negotiations that the children of immigrants from Mexico to the United States engage in when they serve as “language brokers” (Tse, 1996), “family interpreters”(Valdés, 2003), or “para-phrasers” (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner and Meza, 2003) between their families and the English-speaking world. Translation events represent a kind of “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991), a meeting ground between people from different cultural and linguistic perspectives. Within these contact zones, youth position themselves in particular ways vis a vis their different audiences, even as they are positioned and repositioned by others. This involves a process that Guerra (in press) calls “transcultural repositioning.”

The transcultural repositioning that happens in translation events is shaped in particular by immigrant youths’ paradoxical positionalities within relationships of power. On the one hand, as children (and as the children of immigrants in particular), youth translators constitute subaltern others (Spivak, 1988) who are not authorized to speak as adult, English-speaking citizens are, but at the same time they must speak if their parents’ voices are to be heard. Their positions are complicated by the fact that they may speak for interlocutors who hold very different beliefs about what children should do, what they need, how they should be have, and how adults should interact with them. They may also be evaluated by these adults by very different criteria.

Immigrant youth translators’ positions are further paradoxical in that they give voice to subaltern others whose words and ideas are often not represented in public spaces; but they simultaneously take up the voices of authority figures and institutional representatives as they speak to their families. Davidson (2000) notes how hospital interpreters become complicit in power relations, inadvertently acting as sociolinguistic gatekeepers for the medical establishment. Youth translators’ work is not just one of service to their families, but of surveillance of them, and thus, of themselves (Wadensjö, 1995). Urciouli (1998) writes: “When people migrate, become political minorities, or become colonized, they find their lives structured in ways that force them to work across languages and place on them the burden of understanding and responding correctly.” And the children of immigrants may especially shoulder this burden for their families. But understanding and responding “correctly” is particularly problematic given their positions as children of immigrants, in a place and time where there is great ambivalence about immigrants in general and about Mexican immigrants in particular (Santa Ana, 1999; 2002). Speaking English is essential for being seen as “American,” but it is not enough – who one is seen to be while speaking also matters. Translation encounters, which mark families as immigrants, may serve to heighten racializing discourses (Urciouli, 1998), placing youth translators in the paradoxical position of being needed for their English skills but not being seen as “American.”

Palabras clave / Keywords: Youth, Immigrant, Family- School Interactions.

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In this paper I look closely at the translation work that two children performed in conferences involving their English-speaking teachers and their Spanish-speaking immigrant parents. I zoom in on these activity settings because they offer particularly rich insights into the complexities of what is involved when children use their knowledge of two languages to interface between their families and “mainstream” institutions. This is a practice that has variously been called “language brokering” (Tse, 1996), “family interpreting”(Valdés, 2003), or “para-phrasing” (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner and Meza, 2003), and it has been the focus of my ethnographic research in three immigrant communities over the last decade.

Conceptual Framing.

Translation events represent a kind of “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991), a meeting ground between people from different cultural and linguistic perspectives. Within these contact zones, youth position themselves in particular ways vis a vis their different audiences, even as they are positioned and repositioned by others. The positions that youth take up are shaped in particular by immigrant youths’ paradoxical positionalities within relationships of power. On the one hand, as children (and as the children of immigrants in particular), youth translators constitute subaltern others (Spivak, 1988) who are not authorized to speak as adult, English-speaking citizens are, but at the same time they *must* speak if their parents’ voices are to be heard. Their positions are complicated by the fact that they may speak for interlocutors who hold very different beliefs about what children should do, what they need, how they should be have, and how adults should interact with them.

Immigrant youth translators’ positions are further paradoxical in that they give voice to subaltern others whose words and ideas are often not represented in public spaces; but they simultaneously take up the voices of authority figures and institutional representatives as they speak to their families. Davidson (2000) notes how hospital interpreters become complicit in power relations, inadvertently acting as sociolinguistic gatekeepers for the medical establishment. Youth translators’ work is not just one of service to their families, but of surveillance of them, and thus, of themselves (Wadensjö, 1995). Urciouli (1998) writes: “When people migrate, become political minorities, or become colonized, they find their lives structured in ways that force them to work across languages and place on them the burden of understanding and responding correctly.” And the children of immigrants may especially shoulder this burden for their families. But understanding and responding “correctly” is particularly problematic given their positions as children of immigrants, in a place and time where there is great ambivalence about immigrants in general and about Mexican immigrants in particular (Santa Ana, 1999; 2002). Speaking English is essential for being seen as “American,” but it is not enough – who one is seen to be while speaking also matters. Translation encounters, which mark families as immigrants, may serve to heighten racializing discourses (Urciouli, 1998), placing youth translators in the paradoxical position of being needed for their English skills but not being seen as “American.”

Parent-teacher conferences are especially useful for illuminating the challenges that interpreters face when they engage in interactions that would normally be dyadic. Cecilia Wadensjö (1998), in her extension of Goffman’s (1981) concept of participant



frameworks, points out that the presence of translators makes dyadic exchanges into multi-party ones, though participants often continue to act as if the interaction is guided by the principles of two-party conversations. She further notes that translators have to be good listeners as well as good speakers (in both languages). But in parent-teacher conferences these multi-party exchanges are perhaps even more complex than the kinds of interpreter-mediated interactions to which Wadensjö refers. In these situations, interpreters are multiply positioned. They are children whose social, linguistic, moral and academic trajectories are being evaluated by their parents and teachers; they are the objects of those evaluations as well as the vehicles for transmitting them. They are sometimes expected to relay words between the adult participants, and they are sometimes treated by teachers and parents as conversational participants. The skills of listening that are demanded of them take on another dimension as they must be prepared to respond appropriately from the different positions they are placed into by adults.

Finally, as objects of adults' evaluation, children may be judged on quite different criteria by their parents and their teachers, who hold different beliefs about children's developmental processes, and about what children should be allowed or expected to do. They must mediate between adults who may bring different values, beliefs and assumptions to the communicative exchange, and who hold different kinds of authority over them. The parent-teacher conferences thus provide windows into intergenerational relationships (between children and different kinds of adults), as well as into beliefs about children, childhoods, development and learning. These relationships and beliefs shape the nature of the translation encounters as well as how they are experienced by youth.

The Larger Study.

The parent-teacher conferences that I analyze here were gathered during a larger ethnographic study that documented the translation experiences of 18 young people who were the children of immigrants from Mexico to the United States. Some of the youth in our study had immigrated to the United States with their families, while others were born here to immigrant parents. Thus they are members of a borderland space not really from here but not really from there either - what Portes and Rumbaut (2001) call the 1.5 generation.

Data include thousands of pages of field notes based on our participant observations of these children in their homes and classrooms; transcripts of interviews with the children, their teachers, parents, and administrators; transcripts of more than eighty audio-taped translation encounters; and 132 journal entries about translation situations written by the youth. For this paper I focus on transcripts of three audio-taped parent-teacher conferences, but my analyses are informed by the larger data set.

The transcripts come from participants living in a mixed-ethnic, mixed-income, urban/suburban community near Chicago. This is a context in which children must frequently engage in transcultural work, because many public services do not have bilingual personnel. Moreover, families' identities as immigrants are particularly marked, and there is a large "polarity of inequality" between what Urciouli (1998) terms the "inner" sphere of kin relationships and those of "outer sphere" public spaces.



Data were analyzed using discourse analytical methods that focused on how power relations were negotiated in interpreter-mediated interactions. This includes attention to what was and was not translated, and how; what information was clarified, challenged, questioned or assumed; and how the youth positioned themselves vis a vis their adult co-participants.

Three Parent-Teacher Conferences.

María's Fourth Grade Conference

It was a cold November day when I met María and her mother at Jefferson School in Edmonville. María's three-year-old brother was present as well, adding to the multiple roles that María took on in this setting. As an older sister, María was vigilant to her younger brother's movements around the room throughout the conference, as evidenced by the fact that in the middle of the conference she cautioned him about something that could fall. I had pre-arranged consent to record the conference with María, her mother, and her teacher, Ms Salinger, and so after speaking briefly with Ms. Salinger, I positioned the tape recorder on the table, and sat nearby to watch.

Ms Salinger initiated the conference by giving María a few items (a bookmark and some pamphlets); she prompted María to translate by directing her to "tell your mom about this." Throughout the conference, Ms Salinger made careful efforts to contextualize the information she put forth, explain it in more than one way to María, prompt her to translate, and check for her understanding. When she used specialized school vocabulary, sometimes she explained the terms to María; other times she checked the meaning with her. María, in turn, would check with Ms Salinger when she wasn't sure about something, an indication of María's comfort level with her teacher. For example, when Ms Salinger referred to "the specials teachers," María checked by asking "like drama teachers and=" In María's translation to her mother, she spelled this out, using the English terms: "drama, art, music y library," then checked again with her teacher: "y gym, too?"

Ms Salinger began the conference by reporting on María's work habits and citizenship, which she explained as "how she does her schoolwork, how she acts in class, what she does with the other students." These "work habits and citizenship" reflect larger cultural values of using time constructively, being cooperative, practicing self-control, being consistent, and participating in class discussions. (Participating in class discussions is the school-sanctioned way of talking in class, in contrast with "talking too much," which is considered problematic – a distinction that may be unclear to immigrant parents, who may have different expectations about how much children should talk in class.) In reporting to María's mother, Ms Salinger spoke *about* María in the third person, but she directed her gaze mostly to María as translator. She interspersed this report *on* María with a comment directly *to* her (italicized here), and then directed her to speak at the end:

These are the worksheets, work habits and citizenship. How María, you know, does her schoolwork, how she acts in class, what she does with



the other students and she's always consistently very, very good. She uses her time constructively, she's very cooperative with other students. Um, always does her homework and her classwork. Um, practicing self control. She's been very good. *I know you're excited to hear that, aren't you?* She does a really great job. Her, uh, she completes her homework with quality and her, uh, her classwork with quality. But there's one area where she's not as consistent. And that's her tests. All her homework, she does very well and she participates in class discussions very well, but she doesn't seem to get the marks on her tests that I would expect from, from what she shows me in class. *Now you have to tell her.*

In response to Ms Salinger's directive to tell her mother all of this, María protested: "I don't know how to say all that!" This may involve an explicit recognition of the challenge of translating these culturally-loaded terms, as well as the sheer length of the utterance. It also reveals something about María's relationship with her teacher – she felt comfortable enough to resist her command. In response, Ms Salinger recapitulated her points, chunking them in smaller pieces.

An important thing to note, in examining María's translations, is that Ms Salinger had only glowing things to say about María. In the translation of this segment, we see an example of a pattern that occurred consistently across all of the parent-teacher conferences that we recorded:¹ the children consistently *diminished* and *downplayed* their performance, and took up greater responsibility for problems than their teachers accorded to them. This diminishment happened on multiple dimensions through a series of linguistic moves that included the frequent use of hesitations and false starts when reporting on positive behavior and a disproportionate focus on any problems the teachers named. Much praise simply was not translated, or glossed over. The children also generally assumed direct, personal responsibility for the problems; here María claims that she needs to practice more in order to do well on the tests, something that her teacher did not in fact say:

María: Dice que, um, todo asina muy bien en todo asina, bien mi tarea, o sea todo el trabajo de la escuela en la clase tengo bien, um, pero, dice que, um en las tests? Necesito más práctica.

She says that, um, everything like is very good in everything? like, (I do) well on my homework, or like all my work in school in class I do well, um, but she says, on the tests? I need more practice.

In glossing the positive detail into a simple "She says I do well," several things may have been going on. First, María was taking up a socially appropriate position as a child speaking to adult authority figures: diminishing her ego and assuming of a self-effacing stance. This may also reflect a transcultural move, an implicit recognition that the kinds of things that school values (for example, participating in class discussions)

¹ See García Sánchez and Orellana (2007) for analyses of patterns in the data from across all of the parent-teacher conferences.



might not be valued by her mother in the same way as by the teacher, and an awareness that her mother is fundamentally concerned with the *teacher's* evaluation of her behavior and schoolwork - is she doing well, and being good, or not.

A similar sort of transcultural move took place later in the conference, when Ms Salinger invited Sra. Gutiérrez to ask any questions she might have. María translated this for her mother, and Sra. Gutiérrez spoke to María in this way: “Yo quería decir, preguntarle a ella, si te portas bien aquí.” (“*I wanted to say, to ask her, if you behave well here.*”) When María translated this to her teacher, she did not just ask if she “behaves well;” rather she inserted the possibility of being bad (something she did at two other points in this conference as well): “She said that if like, how like, um::, am I being good in here like, um, like acting good or bad?” In response, Ms Salinger took up a child-centered discourse and authorized María to evaluate her own behavior, asking her: “What do you think?” María’s reply (“I don’t know”) arguably revealed her implicit understanding that her mother is not interested in her self-evaluation, but rather in what the teacher thinks. In this case, Ms Salinger did not persist in placing María in this position, but instead took up the authoritative voice and replied directly to Sra. Gutiérrez: “Very good. Yeah, wonderful. She’s delightful. I mean, just great.” (María did not in fact translate this praise, but Sra. Gutiérrez’ immediate response of a smile and a laugh suggests that she understood the gist of the message.)

When María mentioned “tests,” Ms Salinger, who had been tracking the translation, asked María what she had just told her mother. María back-translated faithfully, reporting that she told her mother “that I need more practice. Like, um, I need to learn more.” By checking for understanding in this way, Ms Salinger had an opportunity to clarify to María that that’s not quite what she meant. She spoke directly to María to further elaborate her theory of the discrepancy between María’s test scores and her schoolwork:

Ms Salinger: Well, not quite learn more. It seems like you know what, what you’re, what we do when we do your, when you do your homework, and when you are in class and you’re doing your work, like the beautiful job you did on the presentation?

María: Mhm.

Ms Salinger: Right. But then when you take the tests, it doesn’t show me how much you’ve shown me in class or in your homework. It, it doesn’t quite, look the same. You miss a lot more questions on the tests than you do on your homework or: the work that you do.

This turn constitutes a dyadic exchange in that Ms Salinger had spoken to María in the first person and looked directly at her as she spoke. María seemed to recognize the ambiguity of her position (as translator and dyadic partner) when she asked her teacher if she should explain this to her mother. Ms Salinger replied that yes, she thought so, that “that’s the important part about it.” María again struggled with the challenges of transculturation, settling for: “En mi tarea hago asina, enseño lo que hago



en mi tarea, verdad? Pero en, en los exámenes, casi no, no enseño asina como el trabajo.” (“*In my homework I do, like, I show what I do on my homework, right? But on, on the tests, I don’t really, I don’t show like on the (other) work.*”) In the next segment we again see that much positive detail was lost as María focused on a problem identified by her teacher, that her English work is “not quite there.” Again, too, María took up moral responsibility for this by claiming that she had to practice more. This was the interpretation that her mother picked up on, as she revoiced “practice, practice:”

Ms Salinger: This is her accuracy in reading English. OK, um, the two on here, María. You know that you got a 2 on accuracy with your, with your reading English. And that’s just because you’re working towards that. You’re not quite there with the English, but you’re doing a great job, you’re working towards it... Can you tell her that?

María: Dice que allí me dió 2 porque, um, cuando estoy leyendo que, estoy practicando más y más, tengo que practicar más. Porque a veces hay unas cosas que no me sé? Y tengo que, asina, what did you say? Tengo que=

She says that there she gave me 2 because, um, when I am reading, that I am practicing more and more, I have to practice more. Because sometimes there are things that I don’t know? And I have to, you know, what did she say? I have to=

Sra. Gutiérrez: =Practicar, practicar.

Practice, practice.

In the next segment of the transcript, María faithfully assumed her translator position and translated her mother’s words back to the teacher, but introduced them as a question, marked by upward inflection. In doing this, she seemed to be checking with the teacher the accuracy of her *own* interpretation, as well as the one that her mother has taken up. This may reveal her awareness that she is the one who had introduced the idea of practicing more, and her further awareness, at some level, that her teacher held a different theory of how to make academic progress. Indeed, Ms Salinger again tried to re-frame this within a developmental discourse in which María’s English abilities would unfold naturally over time and *not* as abilities that must be developed through practice.

María: To like, practice more?

Ms Salinger: No, no, no, not practice more. This would be, how the difference between your reading in Spanish and in English. You know, you’re learning to read English better. So you’re not at the same level as a lot of the other kids in the class because you’re still, you’re still learning your English too.

In response, María struggled to explain this particular worldview back to her



mother, falling back on the more familiar notion of “practicing:” “Dice que um, que yo no estoy en el:: en el grado como los otros niños porque yo apenas estoy aprend-, em, um, practic=” (*She says that um, that I am not in the:: on grade (level) like the other kids because I am barely learn-, em, um, practic=*)

Sra. Gutiérrez had been tracking the conversation, however, as indeed most of the parents we observed did; they did *not* rely solely on their child’s translation to make meaning, and they often co-constructed translations with them.² Sra. Gutiérrez made evident that she was tracking the conversation when she cut María off with a gentle correction: “Empezando, hija.” (“*Beginning, my child*”), which did seem to take up the teacher’s developmental framing. María’s revoicing of this (“Uhuh, empezando a leer asina en inglés”) (“*Uhuh, beginning to read like in English*”) provided additional contextual information for her mother by explaining to her that she was different from the other students because she was still learning English.

The distinction that Ms Salinger seemed to be trying to make between abilities that are developed through practice and those that naturally unfold by engaging in the work itself (without assuming personal responsibility for practicing) is not an easy one to put into words, even in the original English. It reflects a particular cultural perspective, and beliefs about learning and development that may not have been familiar to Sra. Gutiérrez. In several further attempts to elaborate her theory, Ms Salinger used the present participle forms of the verbs “to learn” and “to work” (“You’re learning more English grammar, so you’re working on that”) to signify this as an ongoing process, but María continued to convert this into an active first person verb: “Necesito practicar” (“*I need to practice.*”)

The conference continued in this same vein. Ms Salinger bestowed great praise upon María; María downgraded the praise and took up responsibility for improvement. María also continued to manage a complex exchange in which she was sometimes engaged in a dyadic exchange with either her teacher or her mother and sometimes positioned as the message-bearer between speakers. She distinguished between information that she was expected to translate, as message-bearer, from information that she provided, of her own accord, to each party. For example, she provided her mother with contextual information to understand the work they were doing in class, and she told her teacher about talking with a classmate for 23 minutes on the phone one night to complete a project. [When her teacher responded, “You were on the phone for 23 minutes?” María did not translate her teacher’s words to her back to her mother; instead she told her teacher, “She (her mother) doesn’t know that, I was in my room.”]

At the end of the conference, Ms Salinger and I engaged in our own dyadic exchange *about* María, with María positioned as a third party and further object of evaluation, albeit, as throughout the conference, a distinctly positive one. Ms Salinger wrapped up her conversation with me with: “She’s just really, she’s just a wonderful little girl.”

² Sra. Gutiérrez confirmed this after the conference, when she explained to me that she understood a little of what the teacher said, and she attended to non-verbal cues in the interaction as well.



Parent-Teacher Conference II

The next conference involves María, her mother and teacher again, later the same year. But in this there was an additional player, an interim administrator, Mr. Jonas, who took over María's position as translator when he walked into the conference at a midway point.

The same pattern is evident here as in the first conference: Ms Salinger spoke glowingly about María's schoolwork, using the current academic jargon of "standards" and judging her performance by the cultural value of "consistency." María downgraded this to a mere "doing well" and emphasized the problem that her teacher named, that she doesn't do as well on tests as she does on classwork, which had resulted in her receiving the grade of "I" for "inconsistent (consistency in performance being a school value). In doing this, María explained the *meaning* of "inconsistent," but she didn't try a verbatim translation of the term.

Ms Salinger: María's report card is really good. She, she's really doing a great job in fifth grade. All of her marks are meeting grade level standards. She's done much better on most of her tests this, this quarter. Social Studies tests. The only reason that I put an inconsistent, is sometimes María's math tests aren't, they don't show me as much as what I know that she knows. Can you translate that for me?

María: Dice que voy bien en las clases, que estoy bien, hago bien. En las tests, um, what did you say on this one?

Ms Salinger: Um, this "I" Inconsistent means that=

María: =Dice que cuando tomo las, tengo una "I" porque cuando tomo las, las tests, no hago bien como le hago en, cuando, cuando tengo tests, como cuando hago en Social Studies? Le hago más bien que en el test.

She says that I am doing well in my classes, that I am well, I do well. On the tests, um, what did you say on this one?

She says that when I take the, I have an "I" because when I take the, the tests, I don't do well as when I do, when, when I have tests, as when I do in Social Studies? I do better than on the test.

At about this point in time Mr. Jonas entered the room. Ms Salinger and I acknowledged his presence by explaining that María had been translating, and that we had been recording the conference for research. Mr. Jonas was familiar with the project and had approved the research at the school. For some reason that was not articulated by any of the participants, Mr. Jonas stepped into the translator position. This offers an interesting comparative frame for understanding María's work as translator in these transcultural situations.

As it turned out, Mr. Jonas did something similar to what María had done throughout these conferences – he downgraded the praise, and emphasized María's responsibility for improvement. Arguably, however, he did so for different reasons, and certainly, given his position, with different effect. In the transcript, most of the boldened superlatives that Ms Salinger used (marvelous, wonderful), and much specific detail was glossed by the Mr. Jonas as simply "doing well."

Ms Salinger: In every other way, María has been, doing marvelous. Her writing is, is just wonderful. I mean, she uses a lot of detail. And she's got really good vocabulary. Um, she's doing great on her spelling. And, um, her reading. And she's keeping up with all her homework, so I'm really, really pleased with her progress.

Mr. Jonas: Ella está haciendo muy bien, está um, escribiendo, y tiene muchas ideas, y puede expresarse y ella está satisfecha con su progreso. Anything else that I missed, that you want me to tell her?

She is doing very well, she is, um, writing, and she has a lot of ideas, and she can express herself, and she is very satisfied with her progress.

The specific details that the administrator *did* translate were "she has a lot of ideas and can express herself" – important school values, but ones that may not have the same meaning to Mrs. Gutiérrez, or that might easily get lost in translation. Possibly, this emphasis could have reinvigorated a concern that Ms. Gutiérrez has had, that her daughter may talk too much in school.

In the next move, Mr. Jonas elaborated, taking considerable license. He moved well beyond a "verbatim" translation and stated her own views of what María needed to do. Just as María did, Mr. Jonas added on in a way that exaggerated María's responsibility.



Ella está haciendo muy bien, está, um, escribiendo, y tiene muchas ideas, y puede expresarse, y ella está satisfecha con su progreso. Depende de si, de si trabaja mucho y estudia mucho? Entonces sale bien, pero cuando no pone atención a lo que estudia, no sale bien. Es evidente que para sacar buenas notas en el examen tiene que estudiar.

She is doing very well, she is, um, writing, and she has a lot of ideas, and she can express herself, and she is very satisfied with her progress. It depends on if, she works a lot and studies a lot? Then she does well, but when she doesn't pay attention to what she has to study, she doesn't do well. It's evident that to get good grades on the exams, she has to study.

This became the message - that María had to study – that was picked up and echoed by Sra. Gutiérrez (“Tiene que estudiar.”) (“*She has to study.*”)

In the next turn, Ms Salinger attempted to take back control and re-authorized María to speak as the translator. Once again, María translated the gist of the message faithfully but reduced and glossed over the precise praise.

Ms Salinger: And the other thing is, María is just, you know, she's just really a wonderful classmate, um, student in class. She's very *very* helpful with the other students. She's always enthusiastic. She asks a lot of questions, um, you know, she's just very delightful to have in class. It's been really enjoyable to, have her as part of our, our group. *You want to try this one, María?*

María: Dice que voy bien en todo? Y que participo y decir preguntas a los niños y ayudarles. Y, that's all.

She says that I'm doing well in everything? And that I participate and ask questions to the kids and help them. And, that's all.

And once again Mr. Jonas stepped in to add his own interpretation. Here he introduced a whole new concern – that María had to do her homework:

Mr. Jonas: Que ella está haciendo muy bien. Estamos satisfechos, bastante satisfechos con el progreso de ella. Y que, tiene que estudiar. Tiene que trabajar. Tiene que estudiar en la casa, trabajar, y Ud. Puede asegurar que haga su tarea y todo. Eso sí estaría bueno.

That she is doing very well. We are satisfied, very satisfied with her progress. And that, she has to study. She has to work. She has to study at home, work, and you can make sure she does her homework and everything. Yes, that would be good.



In doing this, Mr. Jonas effectively ascribed moral responsibility to Sra. Gutiérrez for making sure that María does her homework. He was apparently unaware that Sra. Gutiérrez had worked out an effective arrangement for María to attend an afterschool program that provided homework assistance. Ms Salinger was aware of this arrangement, and had stated both in this conference and in the earlier one that María always did a wonderful job on her homework.

We might ask what drove Mr. Jonas to gloss over the positive detail and to add on in these ways. Could assumptions about María's family in particular, or about immigrant families in general have framed this thinking? It is by considering such implicit framings that we can begin to grasp the complexities of the transcultural work that kids like María do every day, because they must translate not just ideas, but underlying ideologies, and world views that include the interlocutors' assumptions about them and about their families.

Parent-Teacher Conference III

The final transcript excerpts involve 11-year-old Estela, who, like María, was positioned in multiple ways in this transcultural exchange, which involved her teacher, Mr. Vick, and her mother, Sra. Balderas, in the middle of her fourth grade year. I'll pick up the transcript in the middle, when Sra. Balderas raised a concern of her own about Estela's homework. Sra. Balderas' concern was that Estela gets desperate sometimes when she has an assignment that she can't complete in time. She specifically identified these problems as arising from a problem of material resources – lack of access to computers and books:

Cuando tú tienes una tarea, y no la pudiste hacer por cuestión de que, la computadora no te funcionó, que te tienes que escribir, o porque no encontraste el libro o algo en la biblioteca, y tienes que entregarla para el otro día la tarea? Tú te me pones, este, a llorar, desesperada. "Mami pero tengo que entregar esta tarea." Hija, pero si no se pudo, 'ira le explicas al maestro. Eso no es para que tú llores hija. Yo te lo digo. No hagas eso, no te pongas así, hija. Tú explícale al maestro porque no la llevaste.

When you have homework, and you couldn't do it because the computer didn't work, and you have to write, or because you didn't find the book or something in the library, and you have to turn the homework in the next day? You start to, um, cry, you get desperate. "Mami, but I have to turn the homework in tomorrow." My daughter, but if you can't, look, you explain it to your teacher. That's not a reason to cry, daughter. I tell you. Don't do that, don't get like that. Explain to your teacher why you didn't bring it.

In her rendition, Estela did *not* translate this detail. She merely stated, with repeated upward inflection, "She says that sometimes? When like, you give us homework? And it's due the next day? I, I'm disappointed and I cry." This contrasts with most of Estela's translations; generally she always attempted very close or "verbatim," line by line translations. She may have glossed the information here



because of the way her mother chunked the information in a long stretch of speech; but her approach may also have been influenced by the position Estela was put into in this transcultural space, as the object of evaluation of both parent and teacher. In her words, Estela did not transmit *the reasons* for her upset at home; she simply took up responsibility for her behavior (being disappointed, and crying). And indeed, her voice trembled when she said this, suggesting that she was on the verge of tears here as well.

Without the information that Sra. Balderas had offered for *why* Estela sometimes wasn't able to do her homework on time, Mr. Vick responded to this concern based on his own beliefs about why Estela might not be able to complete assignments. In doing this, he framed it as a *problem* that Estela *had*, and that other (Latino) kids have had too - a problem of language - that their parents don't speak English (his language) - and that they don't have help at home.

I am, tell Mom I understand, and you and I, when we've had, when we've had projects, you've come to me and said, like with that country report when you had to hold it up, you said you couldn't do it at home, because Mom or Dad couldn't bring you to the library? if you didn't have the Internet? and I understand, you know what? Flora's had the same problem, if you don't know this. Uh, Mario has the same problem. Their parents don't speak, *my* language. Ok. And if they can't get that done, do I ever get angry or upset with you? No never, ok? If you can't get things done because you don't have the help at home? I'm okay with that, I understand it.

Here, as in other interactions, the teacher presented himself as a kind and caring teacher who doesn't get angry or upset, and his response to Estela's "problem" clearly stemmed from his concern over her well-being. But he unwittingly set himself up in contrast with Estela's mother, who appeared upset at this point in the conference, and who continued to become more agitated as the conference went on. This may have further complicated Estela's sense of being "in the middle" of two authority figures who were quite differently aligned. If she accepted her teacher's sympathetic outreach to her, was she somehow being disloyal to her own mother? And to what extent did she feel implicated, as translator, in her mother's growing sense of frustration?

As the conference progressed, Estela was placed more deeply into this awkward position between her mother and her teacher. In the next segment, Mr. Vick directed Estela to direct her mother to speak to *her* in particular ways. He did so with the same gentle voice that he used throughout the conference, but effectively placed Estela in the position of having to tell her mother how she should parent. Interestingly, here Estela's translation was almost exactly a verbatim one (again, like most of her translations); it was tempered only by signaling this as reported speech by using the words "he says."

Mr. Vick: And tell Mom she needs to remind you that, she needs to say "Estela relax!"

Estela: Y dice que tú me tienes que

And he says that you have to remind me,



acordar, de que me tienes que decir “Estela *that you have to say*, “*Estela, relax.*” relájate.”

Following this, Sra. Balderas went on to express her frustrations with Estela directly to her, using the first person, in a long series of dyadic exchanges. Mr. Vick seemed to try to spare Estela the task of translating this to him, by telling her that he understood everything Sra. Balderas had said. He continued to try to frame the conference in a positive light, as Sra. Balderas continued to express her own frustrations with how Estela approaches her homework assignments. Sra. Balderas spoke louder than usual, and with an agitated voice, with raised pitch and rising intonation. In doing this, she took up the position that Mr. Vick had given to her, as a parent who “couldn’t help” her daughter, in contrast with a teacher who could, when she says:

Sra. Balderas: ¿Que cuando tengas ese problema? ¿Que no te podamos ayudar nosotros, tus padres? ¿Y al otra día tienes que entregar la tarea? ¿Y no lo puedes hacer por cuestión de que no pudimos nosotros, o equis cosa? Tú vengas y le explicas al maestro y él te va a entender. ¿Ok?

When you have that problem? And we, your parents, can’t help you? And you have to turn in the homework the next day? And you can’t do it because we couldn’t help you, or some such thing? You come and explain to the teacher and he will understand. Ok?

In a final set of turns, a mistranslation of a single word further exacerbated the position Estela had been put in as the bearer of her teacher’s directives to her mother, and in her mother’s seeming infantilization. Here, Mr. Vick had told Estela to tell her mother that she “has a lot to be proud of.” Estela translated this as “You have to be grateful for me.”

Mr. Vick: Tell mom again she’s got a lot to be proud of.

Estela: Dice que tú tienes que estar muy, um, agradecida por mí.

He says that you have to be very, um, grateful for me.

In response, Sra. Balderas accepted the teacher’s supposed mandate, but in a voice that signaled disgruntlement, even as she clearly tried to end the conference on a positive note:

Sra. Balderas: OK, estoy agradecida. No más que, me desespero que tú? Te pongas así. no quiero verte ya así, yo te lo he dicho. Yo quiero que tú te relajes en tus cosas, en tu tarea, te concentres. Eso es lo

OK, I am grateful. It’s just that, I get desperate when you? You get like that, I don’t want to see you like that, I have told you. I want you to relax with things, with your homework, and concentrate. That’s



único que yo quiero de ti.

the only thing I want of you.

Estela and Mr. Vick similarly seemed to try to conclude this complex transcultural encounter on a positive note; Estela translated her mother's words simply as "She says that? she just wants me to concentrate and that she *is* proud of me." And Mr. Vick concluded with "Good. Wonderful."

Transcultural Skills.

These transactions reveal that translation is not a process of passively conducting information from one speaker to the other – what Haviland (2003) refers to as the "verbatim" theory," and that in fact attempts to provide literal or verbatim translations can be especially problematic due to the cultural nuances of utterances and their ideological framings. And there is always the danger of mistranslations that further skew the intended messages.

Estela and María each engaged a variety of strategies to deal with the challenges of transculturations – and the awkward positions in which they were placed. They do this by including contextualizing information, eliminating specific details, and paraphrasing terms rather than attempting to find matching words in Spanish. As translators and as interlocutors, Estela, María, the teachers *and* Mr. Jonas each seemed to shape their message for the audience they presumed themselves to be speaking to. They struggled, in different ways, and to different degrees, with the cultural nuances of these messages, and they differed especially in the degree to which they attempted to remain faithful to the original words and with the kinds of license they took for expansion or for eliminating detail. The ways they skewed the messages – what they said, how they said it, and what they left out - reveal much about their own positions in these encounters, and their assumptions about who their audiences were.

The words of the adult authority figures are particularly revealing of their assumptions about who these children and their families are, and what they "need" or what "problems" they have. Sometimes, these seem to be the same sorts of assumptions that led teachers at Regan to find Mexican youth lacking in comparison with Polish immigrants. Sometimes, such assumptions are declared openly, as when another Engleville teacher proclaimed: "The fact is that they (Mexican students) don't read, and the reason their families don't read is because they don't know it's important or because they can't read very well." As many researchers have documented (e.g. Valenzuela, 1999; Valdés, 1996) this kind of deficit thinking about Mexican immigrants is widespread, and may influence communicative exchanges in many ways. This comes through in the information that speakers highlighted, elaborated, contextualized, or left out; but especially in what they added on or what they assumed when they did not have direct access to the other party's words. This is important to contemplate, because child language brokers come face to face with assumptions like these every day.

When children are expected to relay these messages from institutional authority figures to their parents, they effectively act as agents of the institution. They are not neutral brokers in such contexts, nor may they be able to serve their families as "family interpreters," representing their interests, as they sometimes do in other contexts. Like the medical interpreters that Davidson (2000) studied, or the court interpreters studied



by Jacquemet (2006), they can become gatekeepers for the institutions in acts of surveillance or critique against their families.

The parent-teacher conferences I examined here involved adults who care deeply about promoting these students' learning and development. Both Ms Salinger and Mr. Vick are highly dedicated teachers who take their role as professional educators very seriously. Ms Jonas's emphasis on the importance of studying, and of doing homework, most certainly come from a similar place of good intention. Ms Jonas is aware that immigrant youth have odds against them, particularly in this mixed-income suburb in which upper-middle class youth have the benefits of social and cultural capital. Her "translations" are likely influenced by her ideas about what children like María need to compete on an unequal playing field. Interestingly, while she seemed to think that she must emphasize to this family that it's important *to work* and *to practice* to get ahead, in fact this is a perspective that accords with that of María (and perhaps also her mother). It was not, however, the message that the teacher wanted to convey.

Even when well-intentioned, positively-framed, and respectful, interlocutors' underlying assumptions about the children and their families complicate youths' transcultural work. If youth translators recognize the assumptions encoded in talk in both large and subtle ways, they may not challenge them, because they are children speaking to adults, and the children of immigrants operating in white, English-speaking public space. They are more likely to render the messages faithfully, or even to further emphasize any problems the teachers named, and downplay their own strengths, as we saw in these conferences. As children, self-effacement is an appropriate stance to take in front of adult authority figures, and they are not likely to challenge inaccurate portrayals of themselves or their families.

Children are also likely aware of the multiple ways in which they are always being evaluated by adults, especially in situations like parent-teacher conferences. When Estela reported on another parent-teacher conference in a journal entry, she highlighted the emotions she felt not around her work as a translator per se, but about being judged as a student. At the same time, she revealed her awareness that we, the researchers, might judge her performance as well:

Today of mi conferencia me senti muy nerviosa pense que lo iba a agara malos grados pero cuando mi papi avlo con mi maestro el le dijo que llo estaba asiendo mui bien entonses me deje de precupar proque supe que se estaba asiendo mui bien. Es pero que agree todo mui bien y que si tengo unos problemas le digan a mi papa pero queo que lo agare casi todo muy muy bien ustedes piensan lo mismo si "o" no?

Today of my conference I felt very nervous I thought that I was going to get bad grades but when my father spoke with the teacher he told him that I was doing very well and then I stopped worrying because I knew that I was doing very well. I hope that I get everything very well and if I have some problems that they tell my father but I believe I got everything almost all very very well do you think the same yes "or" no?



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