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Language Brokering

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Overview

In the recent literature on adolescents from immigrant families, there is an increasing interest among researchers to study language brokering and its consequences for youth development. Many of these researchers believe that youth language brokering plays a significant role not only on the youth's language and knowledge development, relationship with parents, and psychological well-being (just to name a few); they also play a significant role in the social and economic well-being of their immigrant families (e.g., Buriel et al. 1998; Chao 2006; Dorner et al. 2008; Hall and Sham 2007). Language brokering is a term that refers to the act of interpreting and translating between culturally and linguistically different people and mediating interactions in a variety of situations (McQuillan and Tse 1995). According to McQuillan and Tse (1995), youths from immigrant families who take on the role in their families as designated translators and interpreters are known as language or cultural brokers. These two terms, language broker and cultural broker, are often used interchangeably. Here, the term "language broker" is used to represent both terms for simplicity.

For many immigrants, their arrival in the USA gives them hope for a new beginning and a brighter future. However, as much as some immigrants want to thrive quickly in the host country, they can face many challenges. For those with limited English proficiency, simply communicating in and understanding the new language and culture may be one of the greatest of these challenges. Encounters in the educational, administrative, economic, social, and many other aspects of life in the USA may require immigrants to have interactions with others who do not speak or write their heritage languages. These situations can occur in places where immigrants go to apply for legal documentations (e.g., social security card), register children to attend school, obtain health insurance and receive health care, apply for government assistance, look for employment, or to shop. Immigrants can also face language and cultural challenges in their homes when letters, notices, and documents are sent to them written in English. With over 31 million foreign-born immigrants living in the USA in the year 2000, and only less than a fifth of the 31 million speaking English "very well" (U.S. Census Bureau 2000), the survival and success of the rest of the immigrants depend on having someone who they can trust to help them with translation and interpretation as they try to rebuild their lives in the USA.

Not surprisingly, research on immigrant families showed that many adults in these families (usually the parents) involve their children to assist with translation and interpretation (Hall and Sham 2007; Orellana et al. 2003). Youths in immigrant families are usually the first in their families to gain exposure to the English language. This often happens in school, where these youths are also immersed in the US culture. As such, many youths of immigrants find themselves performing language and cultural brokering tasks for their families even as they themselves are learning the new language and culture (e.g., Dorner et al. 2008; Hall and Sham 2007). In addition to helping their family members and relatives accomplish simple everyday tasks, youths of immigrants become an important bridge between their families' heritage cultural identity and the US culture and institutions. These youths use their newly acquired bilingual and bicultural knowledge to help their families gain access to opportunities, resources, and information (Orellana 2003). They negotiate between two cultural environments: one

within their families where their heritage languages are spoken as well as the world outside the family where the dominant language is English.

In this sense, language brokering is a common characteristic that many youths from immigrant families share. That is, these youths, in one or more occasions, are being asked to perform language brokering tasks. Yet, in the language brokering literature, only youths of Latino/a background have been extensively studied, followed by Asian-Americans (Morales and Hanson 2005). Researchers have shown interests in these two groups for a number of reasons (e.g., Latino/a and Asian immigrants are two of the largest immigrant groups in the USA (U.S. Census Bureau 2004), and their cultures and languages are very distinct from the USA). For this reason, the majority of research and findings on youth language brokers are based on samples of Latino/a and Asian-American youths and their families. It is advisable to use caution when generalizing the findings to youths of immigrants from different groups, although some characteristics of language brokers and processes of language brokering can be applied to other immigrant youths because many immigrant families share similar experiences as they begin their new lives in the USA.

General Findings in the Language Brokering Literature

Adolescents from immigrant families who are language brokers share some similar characteristics. First, they have acquired some knowledge of the English language and the US culture. Second, they have familiarity with their heritage language and culture. Third, their bilingual and bicultural skills are recognized by others, and consequently they are being called on to language brokering for others. In the following sections, the discussion begins with the prevalence of language brokering in many Latino/a and Asian immigrant families; then, common places where language brokering occurs; who the adolescents typically language broker for; and finally, the types of language brokering tasks these adolescents perform.

Prevalence

Language brokering is very common among many adolescents in Latino/a and Asian immigrant families. McQuillan and Tse's retrospective study with young adults from Chinese, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Spanish backgrounds found that all of their participants took on the roles as language brokers in their families (McQuillan 1995). In another study with Latino/a adolescents, Tse (1995) found that all of the participants engaged in language brokering events. Similarly, Trickett and Jones's study with adolescent participants from Vietnamese background found that 97% took on the role as language brokers (Trickett and Jones 2007). Although not all of the participants in Jones and Trickett's study reported having to language broker, the percentage was still about 90% (Jones and Trickett 2005). Tse (1996) also found that nearly 90% of her adolescent Chinese and Vietnamese participants reported engaging in language brokering activities. Chao (2006) and Sy (2006) also reported a high percentage of their participants taking on language brokering tasks, with percentages of 70 and 74 respectively.

Across different racial/ethnic groups, researchers are finding that most adolescents from immigrant families are taking on the roles as language brokers, regardless of their age of arrival or their length of residency in the USA. For instance, Tse (1995) found that 29% of the foreign-born participants began language brokering within 1 year of arrival in the USA, 57% within 2 years, and 100% within 4 years; 60% of the US-born participants began brokering by the age of 10 and all of them brokered by 12. In another of Tse's study (1996), she found that 52% of the participants began brokering within 1 year of their arrival in the USA and 62% began brokering within 2 years of arrival. In many cases, these adolescents have begun to perform language brokering tasks in the early grade-school years (Dorner et al. 2008).

Common Places Where Language Brokering Events Occur

At home and in school are the environments where language brokering events frequently occur. McQuillan and Tse (1995) reported that 80% of their participants brokered at home and 65% brokered at school. Their participants frequently filled out school forms and wrote notes, and translated school letters and notices for their parents at home. Many participants also recalled having to perform language brokering tasks among parents, teachers, and school staff. Language brokering is not limited to the home and school contexts. It can also occur at government offices,

hospitals/clinics, banks, grocery stores, restaurants, on the street, and post offices (e.g., Dorner et al. 2008; Orellana et al. 2003).

Who Do the Adolescents Language Broker For? What Do They Do?

Adolescent language brokers primarily perform language brokering tasks for their parents, siblings, relatives, and friends. Other people involved in language brokering events can be neighbors, teachers, school officials, peers in school, clerks, and parents' friends and acquaintances. Participants have reported having to perform language brokering tasks both in the written and oral form. One study found that the most frequent language brokering tasks performed by language brokers were translating for their parents (86%) and answering the phone (85%), followed by answering the door (78%) and scheduling or accompanying parents on appointments (73%) (Trickett and Jones 2007). In the same study, participants also reported having frequent interactions with institutional and government officials (46%) (Trickett and Jones 2007).

The Language Brokering Process

What Happens When a Youth Is Language Brokering?

Language brokering is a complex phenomenon that entails more than simply the act of translation and interpretation on the part of the language broker. In a typical language brokering event where a youth is involved, the young language broker has to actively engage one or more people (often adults) to convey messages and meanings between two different languages. During this process, the youth assumes the role of a mediator to facilitate communication and linguistic translation and interpretation for other participants who are also involved in the language brokering event. Hall and Sham (2007) stated that young language brokers usually have to interact with adults in many different settings, and therefore, it is common for the language broker to find him or herself in situations where complex social relationships are involved. McQuillan and Tse (1995) believe that language brokers have to acquire sophisticated vocabulary and knowledge to perform language brokering tasks; they must also understand complex aspects of the adult world in order to competently and accurately convey messages and meanings between the parties involved.

In order to become more competent at performing language brokering tasks, many young language brokers are motivated to seek knowledge and information to help provide assistance for their families. Hall and Sham (2007) and McQuillan and Tse (1995) documented that many of their participants have reported using dictionaries, searching for information in the library or on the Internet, involving their parents and siblings, and developing wide personal networks when performing language and cultural brokering tasks. Far from being passive translators, researchers have found that many young language brokers are active in acquiring the skills, information and connections necessary to enable them to successfully perform language brokering tasks for those who come upon them for assistance.

The Benefits and Challenges of Language Brokering

The existing research on youth language brokering has reported inconsistent findings on how these youths are being affected by language brokering. For instance, many of the participants in Tse's study (1996) believed that having to perform language brokering tasks has helped them to learn more about their heritage languages and cultures and to increase their English proficiency. Some have also felt proud being language brokers. In another study, McQuillian and Tse (1995) have reported that a majority of the participants have enjoyed and benefited from language brokering. The participants recounted that language brokering has given them the opportunities to learn, to become more independent, and to broaden their knowledge of both their heritage and host cultures. By taking advantage of the learning opportunities that come along with performing language brokering tasks, many participants have reported that language brokering has enhanced their cognitive skills, increased their comprehension of adult-level texts, helped them gain the trust of their parents, and helped them become more bicultural. As a result of performing language brokering tasks for their parents, many young language brokers have also become more aware of their parents' life experiences in the host country. Moreover, language brokering has helped many to increase their sense of maturity and self-esteem.

However, McQuillan and Tse (1995) have also reported that some participants in the same study disliked performing language brokering tasks. Those participants stated that they felt a sense of stress, burden, frustration, and embarrassment when performing brokering tasks. In addition, some participants believed that assuming the role of language broker required them to take on too many responsibilities, and that taking on such responsibilities has interfered with their schoolwork and left them little time to socialize with peers (e.g., Dorner et al. 2008; Sy 2006). Other studies have also reported detrimental consequences for youths of immigrants who perform language brokering tasks. For example, Trickett and Jones (2007) have found that the Vietnamese language brokers in their study have reported high levels of emotional distresses and disagreements with parents. In another study, Chinese and Korean adolescent language brokers have reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, and withdrawal (Chao 2006). The Korean participants have also exhibited more aggressive and delinquency behaviors as the number of language brokering tasks they performed for parents increased. Moreover, Martinez et al. (2009) have found that adolescents who had to frequently perform language brokering tasks have reported poorer adjustment in terms of academic functioning, socioemotional health, and substance use. As these studies have shown, for some youths of immigrants, the negative psychological experiences associated with language brokering can put them in a vulnerable position for a host of risky health and social problems.

Hall and Sham's study (2007) provides some insights into why language brokering poses an immense burden on some youths of immigrants. Many of the youths in the study often had to assume responsibilities on behalf of their parents that could affect the welfare and safety of the whole family. For instance, participants have reported that they had to translate and interpret legal letters (i.e., contracts), fill out business and administrative forms, write legal letters and notes, accompany their parents to doctors' offices to interpret medical information, and interact with government officials and others (i.e., lawyers, doctors) who were in authority and power. Taking on such important responsibilities may have positioned these youths in states of fear and uncertainty. Hall and Sham (2007) believed that in circumstances where youth language brokers have limited knowledge to deal with complex adult matters, they might find themselves experiencing high levels of stress.

Language Brokering and the Parent–Child Relationship

Another debate in the language brokering literature is whether child language brokering undermines parents' authority and power or fosters more closeness between parents and their children. In many Latino/a and Asian American families, parents wield great authority and power (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001; Uba 2003), and children are expected to defer to their parents. However, in many instances when youths in these families have to perform language brokering tasks for their parents, their roles and responsibilities require them to adopt adult roles in the family, and their parents are seen as being dependent on their children. Some researchers term this generational shift of roles in families as "role reversal" or "parentification" (Oznobishin and Kurman 2009; Walsh et al. 2006). Under such circumstance, some researchers believe that youths may feel uncomfortable when their parents have to depend on the youth to language broker and where the youth must make decisions on behalf of the parents. For this reason, in some immigrant families, language brokering might threaten the traditional power relationship between parents and their children. Other researchers believe that language brokering helps to cultivate stronger parent–child relationships. For example, Chao (2006) has found that children who language broker more frequently also show more respect to their parents, net of other adolescent and family characteristics. As another example, Love and Buriel (2007) found that language brokering provides a special opportunity for language brokers and their parents to interact and make decisions together, which strengths the parent–child bond. Moreover, Dorner et al. (2008) found that many of the participants in their study rarely view language brokering as a reversal of roles, but that language brokering, for many of those youths, is an everyday, normal activity whereby they help their families.

Adolescents' Perceptions of the Language Brokering Experience as Sense of Burden and Sense of Efficacy

The accumulated evidence in the language brokering literature suggested that there are both positive and

negative consequences for youths of immigrants who are language brokers. What remains unanswered in the literature is why the psychological meaning of language brokering differs so greatly for these youths. In addition, the potential mechanisms and processes that may be responsible for the variations in their perceptions of the language brokering experience, such as perceiving a sense of burden and/or efficacy, is relatively unknown. In order to understand how and why some youths of immigrants become *negatively affected* as language brokers, while others *benefit*, Wu and Kim (2009) tested potential mechanisms that lead to a sense of efficacy and a sense of burden in youths' psychological experiences as language brokers. Using data from two waves of a prospective longitudinal study of Chinese American adolescents, they examined the role of the adolescents' orientation toward the Chinese culture and family mediators (sense of family obligation and the quality of perceived relationships with parents) both in middle school and high school as potential mechanisms that might help to understand the variations in the adolescents' perceptions of the language brokering experience while in high school.

Data from over 200 Chinese American adolescents have demonstrated that adolescents were more likely to feel a sense of efficacy in their experiences as language brokers when language brokering for their parents if they were more Chinese oriented, and that these relations were partially explained by the importance they placed on family obligation and the perceptions that they mattered to their parents. On the other hand, adolescents were more likely to feel a sense of burden as language brokers if they had a weak sense of family obligation and felt alienated from their parents. It appears that the adolescents' Chinese orientation sets in motion a family process that helps to understand the variations in the perceptions of their language brokering experience.

The results of this study provided supporting evidence that categorizing Chinese American adolescents' perceptions of the language brokering experience into two types (one to capture the positive feelings, and the other the negative) is a useful way to capture the psychological meaning of language brokering in this sample of adolescents and to use it as a future tool for understanding their language brokering experiences. Such finding is important for school psychologists and clinical practitioners who work directly with children of Asian immigrants who are language brokers. Children of Asian immigrants' language brokering is an experience that can have psychological consequences for these children which in turn, can affect their general well-being and daily functioning, both at home and in school.

Measurement Issues and Limitations in the Language Brokering Literature

Although the language brokering scale is being widely used with youths of different ethnic backgrounds, little or no information is available on the factor structure and construct validity of the language brokering scales used (Morales and Hanson 2005). As more researchers are becoming interested in studying the psychological experiences of language brokering among youths in immigrant families, it is important that researchers establish measures that are valid for use with young language brokers of diverse backgrounds. Reliable and valid measures of language brokering could better direct school psychologists and clinical practitioners to more culturally appropriate methods of intervention when working with youths of immigrants who are language brokers.

A review of previous research on language brokering show that much of what has been done on this topic has used and/or adopted language brokering measures/items developed by Buriel et al. (1998), Tse (1996), and Weisskirch and Alva (2002). Most of these language brokering items fall into four subscales: *child-focused* (e.g., I feel good about myself when I translate for others), *parent-focused* (e.g., I think translating has helped me to care more for my parents), *child efficacy* (e.g., I feel useful when I translate), and *child independence* (e.g., language brokering makes me feel more independent and mature). There is a need to include new language brokering items because (1) while Tse's existing scale (Tse 1996) did examine the young language broker's positive and negative experiences of language brokering, other psychological dimensions of the language brokering experience that are relevant to the study of adolescent language brokering are not included and (2) neither does Tse's scale (Tse 1996) nor does Buriel et al.'s (1998) nor does Weisskirch and Alva's (2002) language brokering measures include assessment of parents' reports of their experiences of having a child as language broker. At the same time, ample evidence exists documenting that children of immigrants frequently perform language brokering

tasks for their parents (e.g., Chao 2006; Orellana et al. 2003). How the young language broker's parents perceive having their child to language broker for them is likely to affect the child's language brokering experience as well which, in turn, is likely to affect the child's psychological well-being, and the perceived quality of relationship with his or her parents. In order to better capture children of immigrants' language brokering experiences, and in what ways these young people are being affected by this experience, inclusion of the parents' experiences in studies of language brokering is warranted. Inclusion of the parents' reports in future studies may provide researchers with some insights of why adolescent language brokers' language brokering experiences vary greatly. Moreover, the inclusion of parent reports could allow researchers to do cross-informant test between the child's and parents' reports.

A Future Outlook

As the influx of immigrants continues, many more children of immigrants will inevitably have to become their families' designated language brokers. As language brokers, these youths will be placed in positions and situations where they perform tasks and take on responsibilities that are beyond their cognitive and language abilities. These youths may not have the skills, knowledge, or sense of maturity to carry out their responsibilities. A number of these youths may take the initiatives to seek out and acquire the resources, knowledge, and skills necessary to help themselves become more competent as language brokers in order to contribute to the success of their families in the host country. In the process of doing so, these youths will likely acquire valuable skills and knowledge that can become beneficial and useful to them in other areas (e.g., school achievement and competence in social and cognitive areas of development). At the same time, the demanding and challenging aspects of language brokering might also place some youths at risk for a host of health, personal, and psychological problems. Based on the research by Wu and Kim (2009), it may be that focusing on the role of heritage cultural orientation and family-related variables as modifiable mediators for intervention may be particularly useful for school psychologists and practitioners who work with youths of immigrants. Future research should look into additional potential mechanisms and processes that help to understand why some youths of immigrants are being negatively affected by the language brokering experience, while others benefit, as such research will lead to finer intervention programs.

Cross-References

- ▶ Assimilation
- ▶ Bicultural Stress
- ▶ Immigration

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Language Development and Literacy

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Introduction

This overview considers the linguistic knowledge and language use of high-school adolescents, as a turning point in later, school-age language development (Berman 2007), reflected by the ability to deploy a rich repertoire of lexical and syntactic devices skillfully and flexibly in different communicative contexts, en route to the achievement of "linguistic literacy" (Ravid and Tolchinsky 2002) and becoming a literate member of a given speech community. The term "adolescence" is used here with reference to the period corresponding to the upper grades of high school in English-speaking and European countries, between 15 or 16 and 18 or 19 years of age. Some scholars identify students in the preceding, middle-school years as adolescents (e.g., Heller 1999), but for present purposes, the age-range of 11–14 is defined as "pre-adolescence," representing a transitional stage between grade-school middle childhood and high-school adolescence. The age-schooling level considered below is recognized as a period of significant changes in social, cognitive, and moral development and in a range of abilities that emerge in middle childhood and flourish in adolescence (e.g., Case 1985; Flavell et al. 1993; Kohlberg 1984; Moshman 1998; Selman 1980). Current research in developmental psychology and neuroscience highlights adolescence as a time of major transition in "the shift from a caregiver-dependent child to a fully autonomous adult" (Paus 2005, p. 60), one that reflects developments attributed to increased higher-order cognitive capacities (Proverbio and Zani 2005), greater executive control (Kluwe and Logan 2000), and the assembly of an advanced "executive suite" of abilities (Steinberg 2005). The key theme of the discussion that follows is that such general processes both underlie and enhance linguistic knowledge and language use during the period in question, and that they are crucial to developing literacy.

This overview derives from investigation of later language development – growth in knowledge of linguistic forms and how to use them across the school-years – as a burgeoning domain of contemporary inquiry (Berman 2004; Nippold 2007). Research in different languages highlights adolescence as a major turning point in developing sophisticated command of linguistic expression in both speech and writing (Berman and Ravid 2009), in mastery of text construction abilities (Berman 2008), and in processing and comprehension of different genres of discourse (Kaplan 2008). Adolescence is also a critical period in the consolidation of *literacy*, going beyond the "emergent literacy" of early childhood and acquisition of writing as a notational system (Pontecorvo 1994; Tolchinsky 2003), on the one hand, and the role of "functional literacy" in different sociocultural contexts (Verhoeven 1994), on the other. Rather, concern here is