

LANGUAGE BROKERING IN PRACTICE:  
*Linguistic Power, Biliteracy Events, and Family Life*

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This article reports the day-to-day instances of language brokering at an after-school mentoring program composed largely of Mexican immigrant families. I analyze two instances of language brokering from my fieldwork at this program, paying particular attention to the self-conscious rhetorical strategies language brokers used as they navigated between audiences, languages, and literacies. The social values of non-standard, minority languages and literacy practices will demonstrate how two youths used their bilingualism as power in their families.

My research draws on sociolinguistic theory regarding how bilingual literacy and language brokering reconfigure the social and generational relations and educational outcomes in a small sample of New York's Mexican-origin population. The concept of language brokering is fundamental to understanding the engagement of social relations in bilingual and bicultural experiences of families in immigrant language-minority communities. Language brokering is the enactment of distinct activities and strategies between specific agents in local contexts with significances beyond the messages conveyed. As a theoretical model it considers both the social structures which necessitate brokering for marginalized agents, as well as the agency of brokers to move between structures.

Research in language brokering has examined the complex strategies of youth language brokers who navigate between audiences, languages, and literacies (Orellana, 2009; Orellana and Reynolds, 2008; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003). This article adds to that line of ethnographic research into language brokering as saturated with conflicting authorities and social bridges between languages and cultures (Orellana, 2009; Reyes and Halcón, 2001; Roca and Colombi, 2003). As in previous research portraying children as social actors living in their existential present and not as “adults in the making” (Corsaro, 2005; Orellana, 2009, p. 5), I will draw on youths’ language brokering to consider how their understandings of their families, their educations, and their languages and how they actively contributed to each.

All language use has rhetorical potential to structure situations between interlocutors, audiences, conceptions of the existent, and signification (Berlin, 2003, p. 87). Becoming a mentor for the Mexican American Network of Students, or MANOS, the pseudonym for the after-school program studied here and being welcomed into families struggling with language of academic institutions, I observed the rhetorical dimension of persuasion practiced by agents in conjunction with literacy development (p. 89). As documented later in this chapter, the individuals at the after-school program used rhetorical power in different ways. In this chapter I argue that the rhetoric of translation came to the fore when two second-generation Mexican-origin youths negotiated between minority home languages and English as inculcated by schooling and contact with the English speakers. MANOS mentors, mentees, and parents actively utilized culturally valuable literacy skills of translation and language brokering. Dominant models of school literacy practices undervalue these day-to-day literacy practices of multilingual families. Day-to-day translations between languages for the children participants at MANOS meant involving and engaging monolingual family members in their schooling lives, which were largely conducted in a second language. This collaboration in immigrant families, though, produced conflicts from linguistic inequalities which re-distributed authority in family linguistic exchanges. MANOS’s mentors mediated such shared power contexts, allowing language minority parents access to collaboration in their children’s educations in English, while also encouraging language brokering skills among young bilinguals.

### Brokering Languages and Literacies: Literature Review

At the heart of my theoretical apparatus in this chapter is the economic term “language brokering.” I employ the term to offer further nuance to a specific activity involved during translation. I understand language brokering as designating an exchange activity between three or more parties as informed by thoughtful triad configurations examined by Georg Simmel in *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Levine, 1972). Pierre Bourdieu’s metaphor of the linguistic marketplace helps explain the power reversals occasionally experienced between children and their parents when triads of translations are involved. When LM parents entered triads with their children and MANOS mentors, their subordinated positions when speaking with teachers at school were re-arranged. Power relations inscribed within the teacher-parent dyad, which typically exaggerate the linguistic capital of educated teachers, can strain collegial relationships between the standard language of educators and LM parents. In contrast, in the MANOS triads, the voices of LM parents were heard and respected, translated and interpreted. As language brokers, the MANOS youth were included in the configurations, and their thoughtful input and translations were elicited from monolingual parents, mentors, and other adult and youth volunteers. They became the axes of triads between monolinguals and learned how to deal with audiences in two languages. With modeling from bilingual mentors, mentees also learned how to teach parents, mentors, and volunteers alike, while parents, mentors, and volunteers also learned from and helped one another.

At MANOS, mentees were in the position of students receiving guidance from adults more proficient in the dominant English language. Yet when brokering more administrative written materials on their own, report cards for instance, mentees not only had to “grow up” by taking direct responsibility for what the text said, but also had to be adult enough to understand the consequences of what their teachers intended to communicate (and in two languages at that). And because English in the United States is the cultural dominant, or, as Richard Rodriguez in *The Hunger for Memory* (1982) puts it, the “public” language, language brokering youth have access to developing their skills in this linguistic asset while their LM parents do not. Nevertheless, translation presupposes a multilinguistic setting in which participants do not control all the linguistic forms. It is the forming of linguistic bridges between networks of learning inside and outside institutional settings. The

triad shape of social relations offers fruitful data related to social power distributions because it “exhibits in its simplest form the sociological drama that informs all social life: the dialectic of freedom and constraint, of autonomy and heteronomy” (Coser, 1977, p. 187). Triads and the shape of power distributions produce a pair and “other” tertiary, which alters power relations circulating among communicants. Analyzing the discourse triad calls dynamic “attention to certain characteristics of the three-person situation” and an analysis of how “the position of the third person impinge[s] upon the other two, whether this position be as mediator, as holder of the balance of power, or as constant disturber of the solidarity enjoyed by the other two” (Mills, 1959, p. 351). At the heart is the power broker, the mediating participant linking or destabilizing the link of communication among disconnected communicants.

The linguistic activities of brokering and being brokers color all the exchanges of languages analyzed in this study. To “language broker” is to serve as liaison with influence in exchanges between individuals, to partake in an exchange as an active audience assuming creative or independent agency (Orellana, 2009). According to Lucy Tse, language brokers “influence the content and nature of the message they convey, and ultimately affect the perceptions and decisions of the agents for whom they act” (1995, p. 180; see also Buriel et al., 2012; Jones and Trickett, 2005; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; McQuillan and Tse, 1995; Weisskirch and Alva, 2002). Language brokers do not always change messages to suit their own advantage, though they certainly reserve that right, especially the right not to translate material threatening to their own views.

I use the term “broker” as a designated position within the triadic social activity. Youth language brokers studied in this dissertation who mediated adult-to-adult conversations at MANOS often voiced their concerns about the translated contents of both oral and written texts, “para-phrasing” texts between different monolinguals (Orellana, 2009, p. 26). The children in this study brokered for parents at the center, but also in such tense circumstances as admission to emergency rooms, consultations in law offices, and interviews with child psychologists and school counselors. In one case, Sarita, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Guadalupe, brokered between her Spanish-speaking thirty-eight-year-old mother and the English-speaking teachers of her younger siblings, offering her mother more than mere translations;

she provided analyses of situations and assumed the function of adviser. Especially in matters academic, her bilingual control of English and Spanish had increased her family stature in the eyes of Guadalupe, resulting in a role reversal of sorts where the child guides, counsels, or socializes the parent. As Orellana rightly contends, second-generation language brokers in families don't always see themselves as parents to their parents. Rather, language broker youth consider their translations as contributions to the good of the family. Sarita, incidentally, was initially a mentee in the program but later became involved as a mentor.

My observations at MANOS indicated that children and adolescents language brokered mostly for their parents and other family members, and that language brokering influenced family dynamics. Studies of language brokering by Robert Weisskirch (2007) argue that during language brokering, "the authority position of the parent may be suppressed as the child or adolescent acts as the spokesperson for the family" (p. 546). During such cases, children of immigrants become "parentified." (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001, pp. 74-75). When the MANOS mentees at the center assisted their parents with English language literacy, there sometimes was a family role reversal where children socialized parents (Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith, 1982). At the same time, however, when I asked different MANOS mentees about translating for their parents, they saw it as something they owed their parents, on a level with keeping spaces clean and doing homework. Without doubt, there were instances when language brokering disrupted power relations among parents and children, but these re-positionings were not stable as no child wields consistent power over parents. How the relations fluctuate is only a matter of contexts and situations. Power reversals are both positive and negative effects of language brokering, but linguistic skills develop here as well in the movement between languages in communication. Studies by Dorner, Orellana, and Li-Grining find that "higher levels of language brokering were significantly linked to better scores on fifth- and sixth-grade standardized reading tests" (2007, p. 451). This suggests that language brokering could be emphasized in schools with bilingual students as an untapped potential.

Marjorie Faulstich Orellana's research has been on the cusp of understanding how broker-mediated social events affect the children of immigrants and their schooling potential. She argues in her ethnographic

fieldwork in Chicago and Los Angeles that “children take on a wide variety of translating tasks and that these require considerable linguistic, arithmetic, and social-cultural dexterity” (Dorner, Orellana, and Li-Grinning, 2007, p. 452). The researchers provide examples of bilingual youth who “explain their own or siblings’ report cards to their parents, translate at doctor’s offices and banks, make purchases at local drug stores, fill out credit card applications, screen phone calls from telemarketers, and translate movies and television shows for family and friends” (p. 452). Added to this dimension of the social-cultural practices of brokering is the extension into the social-cultural practices of textual interpretation and literacy. Acts of textual interpretation (typically of the children’s homework, but sometimes over teacher comments and report cards) are literacy events, as theorized by Shirley Brice Heath (1982; 1983; 1988), where a text of some kind is integral to verbal exchanges between community members through which they deploy collaborative interpretation. Heath finds that individuals with limited schooling turn to their communities for mutual aid in making sense of official documents received from authorities. She records how nonstandard English speakers use collaborative efforts to understand standard English texts. Such literacy events mediated by texts are further complicated when second-language translation is involved. Over the years, my research interests in languages and my mentoring experience at MANOS introduced me to what New Literacy Studies (NLS) scholars must deem as biliteracy events happening in and between families. The NLS reframed literacy as social practice, highly-contextualized, culturally-situated communication.

The brokering Heath describes among families and communities using nonstandard dialects also takes place at MANOS but with the additional layer of translation. The mentees’ skills of translation developed through family interactions within the bilingual community of MANOS. These skills affected their outlooks on learning and dealing with social situations. Jocelyn Solís (2002) argues that bilingual children develop a sense of linguistic power, which in turn has the ability to “affect their relationships in other spheres, or how they place contradictory demands on their lives. For instance [. . .] children may [. . .] acquire [. . .] skills that can cause tension later when they question parental authority” (p. 155; also Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001, pp. 74-75). On more than one occasion, I observed emergent English-dominant bilingual children at MANOS correct their parents impatiently in

English when their monolingual Spanish parents tried to assist with English-only homework, saying to their LM parents in English such things as “you’re dumb” and “you can’t read.” At such moments, some MANOS parents defended themselves in Spanish and some did not. Some parents quietly submitted to their children’s rude remarks and continued trying to assist using their Spanish literacy skills and heavily-accented spoken English. This disrespect of children for parents and the tolerance of such rudeness by the parents contradicted the normally strict parent-child protocols in immigrant families (Smith, 2006, p. 8; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 75).

These intra-family conflicts regarding competence in English showed some signs of resolution. For example, the timid use of English among monolingual mothers could lead to them becoming more confident in trying to speak English, though “with an accent” (Lippi-Green, 1997). As the parents struggle to speak English, some children became more forgiving and even encouraging. At the same time, other students harbored shame and embarrassment for their mothers when they tried “sounding like they know how to talk English”—as one mentee put it to me. Acquisition by some family members of high-value cultural capital thus secured an asset which occasionally re-wrote traditional family relations.

### **Study Background**

The data and analysis in this chapter draw from a larger research project into how English language acquisition and literacy transformed family relations and structured educational ambitions within the MANOS community. Ten MANOS families and ten mentors participated in my research study. I focus as well on the everyday language and literacy practices at MANOS, a grassroots organization offering free after-school tutoring services while also promoting active family involvement in schooling and positive views toward ethnic and linguistic identities. MANOS helped to mediate and bridge the linguistic miscommunications between schools and language minority parents. In addition, MANOS cultivated a sense of community and academic participation closely allied to ethnic identity, encouraging a sense of value for bilingualism as a political tool for—and the everyday reality of—immigrant children. Finally, MANOS also sponsored and reinforced the notion of Standard English acquisition as valuable for academic success, while offering a space where languages and literacies freely mixed and where bilingual

exchanges between individuals openly nurtured, critiqued, and, ultimately, defended the distinctive, monolingual spoken and written Standard English language of schooling.

Through ethnographic observation and analysis of oral and written language at the MANOS center, my research examines the rhetoric of “brokered” social relations in the bilingual exchanges among the organization’s volunteer staff of college and high school student mentors and its numerous youth and adult members, paying particular attention to documenting the various linguistic skills developed by bilingual youth, mentors, and parents. I have found in participant observations that the notions of culturally valuable literacy skills of translation and language brokering, undervalued and existing outside the dominant models of school culture and literacy practices, were actively utilized at MANOS. Day-to-day translations between languages for the children participating in this mentoring program meant involving and engaging monolingual family members in their schooling lives, which were largely conducted in a second language. This collaboration, though, produced conflicts from linguistic inequalities that had re-distributed authority in family transactions. The program’s mentors mediated such shared power contexts, allowing language minority parents access to collaboration in their children’s educations in English.

In the two following sections, I give extended instances of language brokering I encountered during my fieldwork at MANOS. In each case, youths used their bilingual abilities for different reasons in different social contexts. One youth, Dieguito, used his bilingual power as a way to dodge responsibility, taking liberties with his translation of an event. In the second example, Gina uses her bilingualism to aid her mother’s attempts at learning to write in English and Spanish, in addition to helping her younger siblings with their homework. Gina’s language brokering distributed power relations among agents, while Dieguito’s language brokering sought to maintain a power hierarchy which left his monolingual interlocutors alienated. In both examples, rhetorical elements of translation come to the fore.

### **English and Authority: Language Brokering for Advantage**

During a one-on-one tutoring session with fourth-grade MANOS mentee Dieguito in preparation for his approaching English Language Arts (ELA) exam, I asked him to complete an abridged practice test. Since he would have

rather than spending his Saturday afternoon with his friends playing in the park than taking an exam, he was reasonably upset with the additional burden placed upon him—especially since it was in addition to all the test prep he was receiving at school, both during class and at his after-school program. Pilar, another MANOS mentor, was helping another group of three mentees with the same exam, but Dieguito needed more individualized attention. When he was working with the rest of the group, he was doing everything he possibly could to distract the other students from taking the practice exam seriously. I decided to move him to another table hoping he would focus.

His mother Elisabeth had stepped out to buy some snacks for the studying mentees, and also because Dieguito didn't like being tutored with his mother next to him. "She nags too much," he had told me several times. She gave him his space, and he used this to his advantage because her direct supervision would have left no question about focusing on the practice test.

The exam was timed, to simulate test conditions, though certainly not entirely. Dieguito had completed the majority of the exam, all of the multiple choice questions. He slowed down at the short written response questions, and he made small effort on the last two longer writing portions. When he arrived at the first of his short essay prompts, he tapped his pencil on his test and fixatedly stared deep ahead.

"What are you looking at?"

I startled him. He rolled his eyes.

"This is stupid. I'm not going to write anything."

"You have to write something, this is the test," I said. "This is for you to practice, but if you don't want to do it, that just means I'll have to mark those questions wrong when I grade it."

Dieguito still had fifteen minutes to complete the exam—plenty of time to finish each of the two short writing questions and to review his answers.

"It's not a real grade," he said.

"I'm going to give you a grade."

"I know how to do them, I just don't want to. It's easy."

"Then do them. What's the problem? This is to help you when you take the real test."

"This is a stupid test, it's not even hard."

Dieguito was clearly bored with the exam, but I also knew from his previous scores on exams that he didn't care much for writing. He wrote a one

sentence answer for one reading response question which asked for a paragraph. For another writing question, he wrote three quick sentences. He left plenty of blank lines, even though he wrote his letters extra large. He used up as much time as possible doing this.

I graded Dieguito a generous 55% for the exam.

“I don’t care,” he said. “It’s not a real test anyway. Now I can go with my friends in the park.”

That being the case, I tried to reason with Dieguito about the importance of taking the practice exam seriously, and also how important the rapidly approaching test would be for him in order to determine if he would advance to fifth grade or repeat the fourth. I also held over his head the looming prospects of summer school.

“I know, I know, I know,” he said.

Elisabeth returned from the grocery store and had finished distributing small paper plates of cookies and cups of water for the children who had finished their tests. Pilar told her in Spanish about why Dieguito was sitting by himself, and she shot him a firm glance. When she finally made her way to her son, he eagerly took a few cookies.

She looked over the exam, first the score, then from page to page, surveying the readings and multiple-choice questions, and she nodded. He had only missed a few of the questions on the multiple-choice portion, despite quickly skimming the passages. He was able to begin by closely reading the questions and performing scans of the readings in order to approximate what he thought would be the best multiple choice answer. Sometimes this worked, but usually it backfired. However, he was deducted the most points for not completing the writing portion of the practice exam.

Elisabeth turned the exam over page by page looking to see which problems Dieguito missed. When she arrived at the writing section, I could see the disappointment in her face. She asked Dieguito, “¿Y por qué no escribistes?” (And why didn’t you write anything?)

Here it comes, I thought. I quickly caught Pilar’s attention. I motioned for her to listen in on the conversation between Elisabeth and Dieguito. Spanish was Pilar’s first language.

Dieguito explained to his mother in Spanish, “porque el examen es difícil—y no había tiempo para terminar—” (Because the exam is difficult—and I didn’t have time to finish—)

“No,” Pilar interrupted, “tell her the truth. Tell her how you refused to do the test.” Elisabeth looked at Pilar, and then at me. I nodded.

“You said you knew how to write them, and that it was easy,” I said to Dieguito and Pilar.

“Él le dijo a Steve que los exámenes son fáciles y sabe hacerlos,” Pilar said to Elisabeth. (He said to Steve that the exams are easy and he knows how to do them.)

“¿Y entonces, por qué no escribistes nada? ¿No quieres a pasar a quinto?” Elisabeth asked Dieguito. (Then why didn’t you write anything? You don’t want to pass to fifth grade?)

Dieguito didn’t respond. His mother continued to ask him for a reason for not completing the exam, and for not wanting to pass the fourth grade. Finally he responded to her in English, interrupting her, “because it’s not a real test anyway, who cares? I already went to school all week!”

There was a brief silence from everyone.

Then Elisabeth said, “Entonces, si tu no quieres estudiar, no quieres terminar tu examen, no quieres a jugar con tus amigos, ¿verda?” (Then if you don’t want to study or finish your exam, you don’t want to play with your friends, right?)

“No!” he said. “It’s Saturday and I already went to school every day!”

I stepped into the conversation and spoke to Dieguito, again explaining to him—in English—how important it was to practice writing, and how important his writing would be for him later. And for the time being, he really had to focus on his ELA exam because he was on the verge of not passing.

He didn’t want to hear that in any language it seemed. He and his mother exchanged phrases with one another in Spanish, too fast for me to catch most. Pilar also added to the exchange in Spanish, alas, also too fast for me. I heard the word “traducciones” (translations) and I knew they were talking about how Dieguito tried to pull a rhetorical fast one with his mother about not completing his practice test.

Working with Dieguito and children like him at MANOS allowed me to participate in experiences of first-hand bilingual encounters like this. My emerging bilingualism at the community center and that of other largely monolingual adults demonstrated how authority as symbolic power behind languages fluctuates in translations between words and deeds, and between rhetorics communicating seemingly objective information without

subjective “takes,” and the exchanges of symbolic capital between languages circulating in the linguistic marketplace (Bourdieu, 1991; Zentella, 2005). As in this single instance, nine-year-old Dieguito used his bilingualism tactically in a strategy to dodge authority, as he assumed he had the advantage over his mother and me because of our monolingualism.

Thankfully bilingual Pilar was there to re-translate things. I had the good enough sense (and just enough Spanish) to catch her attention before the whole event happened, because some bilingual MANOS mentees (Dieguito included) had previously used my monolingualism to their advantages in dodging homework. Sometimes I wasn't lucky enough to have a language broker I could trust near me, and I had to use mangled bits of Spanish to try to figure out or express what I thought. Initially, when I first started working with Spanish-dominant parents, I think I made matters worse by trying to speak a form of infantile English further alienating them—they sometimes did the same to me in the equivalent in Spanish. I realized that using a language broker kept more of the sincerity behind my statement than trying to meet where I considered halfway, which was over the bounds of my own language limitations and frustrations as I began my own journey toward emerging bilingualism.

Pilar's bilingual capacity allowed her to communicate freely with Elisabeth, which I was unable to do, and—in this instance—to check Dieguito's attempts at deceiving his mother. From my perspective as monolingual, English-dominant mentor, her language brokering was much appreciated, as she served as a more accurate mediator between the events as they happened and individual interests in miscommunication. She redistributed the power relations among agents involved. She also held Dieguito accountable for his mistranslation of events.

What was interesting to me in the encounter was when Dieguito was caught in his act of mistranslation and held accountable for his deception, when disciplined by his mother in Spanish, he reverted to English and yelled his true reasons for not completing his exam: his schooling life ended yesterday, Friday. Today was *his* day to enjoy because he worked hard all week. Saturday was his day off from school, and thusly he refused to allow school to encroach on what he perceived as his time. When he exclaimed this to his mother, Pilar, and me, he, in effect, silenced us all. I couldn't say if it was the tone or the coupling of it with English which made it more pronounced. Pilar

didn't translate Dieguito's counter-argument to Elisabeth, there was no need. His tone said it all, and also stated his position with authority. When his mother finally responded, she did so with a reasoned punishment in Spanish: no playing in the park that afternoon.

The story continued, though. Dieguito wouldn't accept defeat, as he continued arguing with his mother in Spanish, reasoning and compromising with her that he would read for an hour if she would let him go to the park for an hour. When he was on the verge of tears, she finally consented, because, as she told Pilar—and me via translation from Pilar—she felt *compasión* for Dieguito's academic struggles, and she wanted him to have a little bit of fun after all the extra studying he'd been doing at MANOS and at the after-school program at his school, a public school a few blocks away from his home. His tactics proved successful for him. His tears looked genuine, and—for my ears—his Spanish sounded convincingly sad.

Dieguito's fluid movement between languages, audiences, and rhetorics at MANOS never ceased to amaze me. On numerous occasions he brokered communication between Elisabeth and me, without intentionally mistranslating certain elements. He also helped me communicate with small children who hadn't started school yet and who spoke little or no English. This was the case with his younger brother, six-year-old Frankie, whom I had watched become increasingly bilingual as he started attending school a few years earlier. Frankie, though, was not the family's language broker, as Dieguito held that responsibility. At different times, Dieguito admitted, this made him proud, and sometimes embarrassed. When his mother had to communicate with English speakers whom he felt showed no respect to his mother's linguistic abilities, he said he felt frustrated because “it makes me mad when they look at her like she don't understand, because really she knows a bunch of stuff but she don't say. [. . .] But she can't talk very good” (3 Jun. 2010). His rhetorical schemes responded to what he perceived as his own bilingual power over his mother, as well as other adult monolinguals with whom he came into contact.

Cultural practices such as Dieguito's rhetorical tactics when brokering languages—while useful for intellectual as well as practical use in everyday life—do not get cultivated in schooling, and therefore were not part of his ELA exam. These skills are of course learned, but not deemed “educational.” I agree with Jaclyn Solís (2002) that, “being ‘educated’ goes beyond formal schooling and includes exposure and participation in institutions [. . .] where

expressing knowledge different from that permissible in 'official' spaces and predominant discourse is possible" (p. 155). Becoming educated extends beyond learning various subjects or disciplines into the socializing of subjects through discipline (Graff, 1995), and it also happens outside of institutions in reactions to institutions' spheres of influences (Berlin, 2003; Compton-Lily, 2007; Martínez, 2006). I describe biliteracy events as instances such reactions, and I examine language brokering exchanges in their socio-cultural contexts, with a goal "toward understanding cross-cultural patterns of oral and written language uses and paths of development of communicative competence" (Heath, 1983, p. 75). The patterns that emerge demonstrate how the stratification of different languages within families looks like in cultural practice. The stratification of languages within families is the product of social differentiation and social evaluation of minority languages in relation to the dominant language. Children schooled in the dominant language cross sociolinguistic barriers culturally constructed around monolingualism and social isolation. Dieguito used Spanish to isolate my monolingualism, and at the same time, he used English to isolate his mother. As an educator, I felt I had an obligation to communicate with Elisabeth about her son's performance on the practice exam, but as a monolingual, I was obliged to have Dieguito translate for me. Simplistic as it seems, this everyday occurrence of language difference offered two models of language brokering. First there was the model of Dieguito's intentional miscommunication which forwarded his agenda—to get the burdensome tutoring session out of the way so he could go play. Then there was Pilar's language brokering, which rectified Dieguito's intended deception, and which held him accountable for his mistranslation of events. Dieguito used his language brokering to block his mother from his studies, while Pilar used hers to re-open that path, and to offer mentorship for both youth and parents.

In a sense, I ground my theoretical understandings in my larger research study with Elisabeth and myself as bases into understanding how communication between monolinguals and bilinguals in discourse communities affects the power relations between people. We were two monolinguals, one in the dominant language with high social prestige, one in the minority language with low social prestige, and we each dealt with bilingual youth in order to interpret homework and school-related issues. The language brokers' rhetorical interpretations of the subject matter constructed messages which

traveled through bicultural brokers between monolingual parties, brokered as a form of social contact and enacting a triadic relation of power between interlocutors. These brokered linguistic exchanges were enacted as distinct language activities between specific agents in a local context with social significance beyond the messages conveyed, as rhetorical exercises in *ethos* during public situations.

Heath's use of the term "literacy events" (1982; 1983) designates the actual social practices people enact when communicating linguistically. Heath's literacy events are heuristic tools for examining the forms and functions of language in both written in oral forms. For Heath, literacy events are the most important encounters to examine because these productive contexts of language use have been less systematically studied than decoding skills favored by schooling. She argues along with other New Literacy Studies (NLS) theorists that home, family, and community language practices vary by social class, ethnicity, and region; these diverse practices use grammars, lexicons, and rhetorics which can differ markedly from standard usage and the more they differ the greater they affect student literacy and language performance in formal schooling. The competing authority of Dieguito and Pilar, for example, set the stage to attach the connotative rhetoric behind Dieguito's direct deception of his audience. His intentions became clear for his monolingual interlocutors, and Pilar's *ethos* of trustworthy bilingual was thereby reinforced because her language brokering defended the deceived interlocutors

### A Biliteracy Event: Homework and Home Work

Increasingly, my fieldwork revealed to me how immigrant parents who attended the MANOS after-school mentoring program gave great weight to their language brokering children's advice in normatively parental domains of family life, as seen here in the example of Gina and her mother. This is when situations as Dieguito's deception—built largely from his authority in the family in dealing with English—become both moments for learning and also for questioning the influence of children in immigrant families, both as a situation for power disruption and also for language skills.

Beginning with the premise that social situations concretely express and enact power relations, studying literacy as an everyday practice can reveal how cultural contexts shape relationships and discourses of power, and how they get perpetuated and reproduced through official schooling

(Purcell-Gates et al., 2007, p. viii). Literacy in such a scheme is not an “autonomous” (Street, 1984) or generalized skill set, but rather is embedded and framed within complex ideological, social, and cultural conflicts. According to Victoria Purcell-Gates’s research in *The Cultural Practices of Literacy Study*, this “more complex” view presents literacy as a socially structured meaning activity. Purcell-Gates’s collection of field studies of literacy as “cultural practice” examined “literacy as practiced by different sociocultural groups in a globalized world” and the “nature(s) of the relationships between literacy as practiced outside of formal instructional contexts and literacy learning acquired within contexts of formal schooling” (p. 10). Audiences and contexts offer a range of contexts for literacy, bilingualism, and monolingualism in this regard, especially in conjunction with the parents at MANOS who did not have fluency in English, or, in the next example, Spanish. This next section briefly presents a piece of writing that mediated by a language broker youth for her mother.

One of my goals in my research at MANOS was to understand when and how agents selected among languages and frames of expression. Consistently I noted at the center how this bilingual setting created power distinctions during tutoring sessions involving triads of parents, children, and mentors (including myself, an English monolingual with limited Spanish). I also noted linguistic power conflicts in families, such as when children assumed the authority in their use of English, to discipline their parents, as when Dieguito boldly exclaimed his evasive intentions in English to his mother, Pilar, and me at MANOS that afternoon narrated in the previous section. In the following biliteracy event, I detail the debate over the strengths and faults of language brokering in immigrant, language minority family contexts, as well as a less generalized analysis of what gets deemed as “parentification” in language brokering studies.

Below in Figure 8.1, I offer the text at the center of a “biliteracy event” which I observed at MANOS in the late summer-early fall of 2010. The social relations mediated by the text and its interpretation were further complicated with the rhetorical act of translation. While language-minority parents gained enormously by having bilingual children for translation services, they found themselves in weak positions to cultivate bilingualism for themselves or for their children without assistance outside of school hours. Language constraints, cultural unfamiliarity, and work commitments limited their

meeting their children's teachers' expectations (Menard-Warwick, 2009, p. 120).

Fifteen-year-old Gina was the oldest child in her family, and because of this she was language broker for her family. She became a mentor for her younger siblings and her mother. Figure 8.1 is a piece of writing she brokered for her mother.

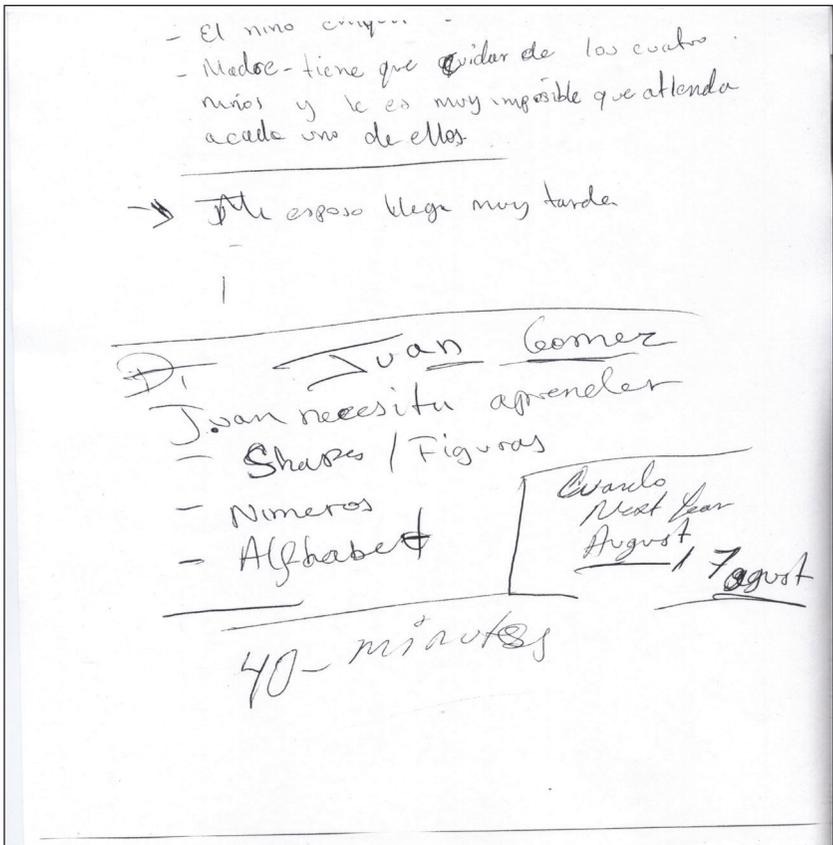


Figure 8.1. Notes taken by 15-year-old Gina for her mother María. Gina language brokered for María as she helped her youngest son Juan with his homework, as well as practicing writing sentences in Spanish. Identifiers have been omitted.

Figure 8.1 served as a record for the brokering literacies of Gina as she translated from English into Spanish while mentoring her mother and her younger brother Juan. At the top of the page, her mother practiced writing sentences in Spanish, “Madre—tiene que c[g]uidar de los cuatro niños y lo es muy imposible que atienda a cada uno de ellos” and “Mi esposo llega muy tarde.” (Mother—has to guide the four children and it’s impossible to give time to each one of them; My husband arrives very late”). The sentences were for a Spanish writing class her mother was currently enrolled in at another community program just down the block from MANOS. Gina wrote the sentences with her mother as she copied them onto her own page. Her mother first thought of the sentences in Spanish with Gina’s assistance, and composed them verbally. With this, Gina modeled the sentences in writing on her piece of paper alongside her mother. It was a technique she had learned from working with some of the MANOS mentors when receiving help for her vocabulary sentences in English.

Below the line she drew on the page, Gina re-wrote in bullet-point form a note from Juan’s kindergarten teacher to María. Toward the bottom of the page, she included in condensed form a Spanglish translation of suggestions from Juan’s teacher: “necesita aprender [needs to learn] –Shapes/figuras; -Numeros [Numbers]; -Alphabet” and a note to work to practice these everyday for 40 minutes.” In the corner is the date when MANOS would re-open for the fall semester. The question of “when” was written in Spanish and the answer “next year” was offered. Also, August was written in both Spanish and English.

María mentioned during an interview—brokered by Gina—that she had never attended school as a child (23 May 2010). Born in the central state of Morelos, she began working with her mother picking tomatoes as a migrant farm worker in the northern Mexican state of Sinaloa at the age of six. Her first language, the language spoken in her family, was Mixtec, an indigenous language in southern and central Mexico. She never learned to read, and she learned Spanish through selling items in public places. Only two years before our interview in 2010, she had begun learning how to speak, read, and write English, and read and write Spanish at the same time. I conducted a few interviews with María with Gina and without her. I should admit that without a language broker, the majority of our interviews were in Spanglish—I would ask questions in English or broken Spanish and she would answer in Spanish, with a few English phrases here and there.

Gina was a large help for her mother's increasing biliteracy, as in the example of this document she produced, which not only served a pedagogical function, but also as a guide for parenting in the guise of academic tutoring for a younger sibling and reminders for community commitments. The voice of her writing here took the tone of teacher, or family pedagogue. This fit her role in her family, as María noted that her daughter accompanied her to all parent-child conferences at schools because she was her translator and also advisor. Gina always translated bills, report cards, and generally speaking, anything written in English deemed important. "Because I have to help her, because for some of the stuff in English she don't have anyone to help her. And she helps me too," Gina said during an interview (29 May 2010). Gina said she was proud to help her mother, and that she also wanted to learn to read and write Mixtec so she could communicate with her grandmother if she went to Mexico.

When MANOS mentees like Gina assisted their parents in coping with written and spoken English, they considered it as nothing more than helping out around the home or—if outside the home—as helping with home matters. Research by Orellana likewise recognizes the power behind language brokering as housework contributing to the overall well-being of home life in language minority families (2009, p. 5). Gina's language brokering for her mother permitted her not only to extend her biliteracy and bilingualism to her, but also to understand the practicality of language uses in her family and her special place as facilitator. She gained responsibility in her family because she used her bilingualism as a service to her household. Orellana's extensive longitudinal investigations of language brokering in families speaks to similar strengths immigrant youth face as they overcome moving between languages and helping their families.

Gina by all measures exemplified the multi-dimensional model of child involvement with brokering. Her brokering, she admitted during an interview, was like "helping with home stuff" (21 July 2010) or a duty for her household, or housework. It was one of her contributions to the family's household, and she went about it with pride and also a certain assurance of her own responsibility. She helped her siblings with their homework, and she also helped her mother with her homework in English and Spanish. Through all of this, she also found time to do her own homework. Her brokering skills gave her tremendous importance connecting her family to the

English-speaking world. When brokering for her mother, she claimed she did her best to help her understand implications of what she translated, thus extending her translation services from denotative rhetoric to connotative rhetoric, where she pushed meanings from literal translation to connotative sense. María continually praised her daughter to MANOS mentors for being such a great help to her mother and her siblings.

### Conclusion

Language brokering as a means of circumscribing monolingual constraint points to one avenue of understanding how language both excludes but also includes agents within discourses and communities (Gee, 2008; Hymes, 1974). Brokering language for monolinguals produces language tactics through rhetoric, such as demonstrated by the attempt of Dieguito in this article. His movements between languages reflect the unique and creative combinations of linguistic tactics and strategies in his learning to deal with monolingual audiences (Heath and Street, 2008). Dieguito used the constraints of his monolingual mother and me to his advantage as a way to dodge an exam that he concluded was not worth his time. Seemingly a skill used for the wrong purposes, he nevertheless nearly achieved his aimed intention. He had used this tactic with success on different occasions, and for this, I was aware of what he planned on doing, and this was why I requested Pilar's attention to check Dieguito's translation to his mother. His tactic did work, after all, on unsuspecting monolingual audiences. I should admit, however, that Elisabeth mentioned to Pilar later that she knew when to verify her son's translations—schoolwork was the most typical time for her to do because she knew how he liked to get out of doing his homework.

Gina's rhetoric, however, was instructive, and in certain ways took on the face of authority, or *ethos*, of a teacher. Her language brokering between the power of English and Spanish literacies helped her mother to extend her oversight of her younger children. Unlike Dieguito who used his language brokering for self-interest, Gina used hers selflessly to assist her mother with what she considered her chores within her home. Nevertheless, both youths modeled two ways language brokering rewrote traditional power relations within immigrant families.

Linguistic constraint happens through contact between languages and discourses, contact between dominant, institutionalized languages and

discourses and marginalized languages and discourses. The rhetorical setting for language brokering at MANOS involved bilingual youth mediating institutional and family communication in a constellation of texts, which in turn produced constellations of effects in their daily lives. The rhetorics of language brokering in the case of the bilingual youth at MANOS were between what I classify as bilingual contacts between institutional and familial languages. In facilitating this communication, the youth were rhetors who gained authority—or *ethos*—in their families. Broker children might turn to the dominant language and internalize a perceived “lack” in the home language, imposing a type of self-censorship and relying less and less on the home language as a form of everyday communication. Future research into language brokering should probe deeper into how transitions between language dominance in immigrant families fluctuate over extended periods and within diverse social contexts.

Finally, more focused research on the gender dynamics of literacy and family engagement would reveal incredible data for research. A team of female and male ethnographers collaborating in fieldwork of gendered rhetorics and literacies in the immigrant generation would uncover valuable layers of language brokering and how the social dynamics of gender function in LM families. The roles of mother and daughter as power brokers in families, as I briefly touched on in this chapter, have central importance to the educational well-being of Mexican families. More research into language brokering and gender dynamics will uncover deeper layers into the roles of fathers and sons as well.

## Notes

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