



Orellana, Marjorie Faulstich. (2009). *Translating Childhoods: Immigrant Youth, Language, and Culture*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

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Anyone who heard Rep. Joe Wilson yell at President Barack Obama addressing whether or not illegal immigrants merited health care knows the negative view many Americans have of immigrants, especially those without documentation. Others, meanwhile, point to the essential contributions that immigrants provide in terms of labor and consumption, and to the active role many immigrants have historically taken in the nation's democratic institutions. Few, however, engage this discourse from the perspective of immigrant children, either in terms of their contributions to the functioning of American society or to their experiences and development straddling two languages and cultures. In *Translating Childhoods*, Marjorie Faulstich Orellana tracks immigrant children in Los Angeles, Chicago, and a Chicago suburb labeled "Engleville" to explore the work children do translating for others. Through these

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observations and interactions, Orellana demonstrates the strength, agency, and dexterity that children show as they streamline contact between members of different cultures, as well as the impacts this has on the children themselves and the society they must navigate.

In the two opening chapters, Orellana presents the various frames through which child language brokering can be considered by deconstructing how the acts of translation and the concept of childhood are defined. To some, the thought of children doing work and interacting with adults in adult-dominated domains such as commercial interactions in stores, credit applications, or parent-teacher communications presents a lamentable inversion of age-power boundaries, an unfair responsibility put on children too soon bearing burdens meant for their parents. To the very children doing the translating, however, these same acts accord well with their cultural norms of helping family and contributing to the household, and can even be a source of pride and self-confidence, while parents see it as a way to maintain connections to the language and culture of the homeland left behind. As children age, however, their views regarding language brokering become more ambivalent as they become more aware of the stereotypes surrounding immigrants or what constitutes “normal” childhood roles in American society. Through these frames, one can appreciate that children are not merely passive conduits of information between adults, but conscious actors negotiating two cultural paradigms and their own place between them. Indeed, Orellana’s own term “para-phrasing” captures the dichotomies well, referencing not only the interpreter-mediated interactions, but also the fact that this language brokering is done *for* others and is valued disparately from the work done by trained interpreters (as with the role of “para-professionals”). With a critical childhood framework that considers the motivations, opinions, and sentiments of children as agents, Orellana sets out to show the various spheres in which children work and the impacts of said work.



The third chapter, “Home Work”, describes the many instances and multiple levels of language brokering that occur in the home. Drawing on a survey distributed to 280 5th and 6th graders at a Chicago public school, Orellana concludes that in the domestic sphere, translation holds a status very similar to conventional “housework” such as cooking and cleaning in that it is central to the functioning of the household but receives little recognition and no remuneration. She finds that the oldest child in the household typically handles the translation duties, especially girls. These include helping parents interpret mail that ranges from simple advertising to complex official notices such as jury summons and credit card applications, facilitating younger siblings’ understanding of homework assignments, answering the door or the phone, and translating sources of entertainment such as music on the radio or the plot and dialogue of television shows. While children report some annoyance in being interrupted to translate or in dealing with younger siblings, by and large this language brokering is well-received and seen as part of a mutual interdependence between children and parents pursuant to a cultural perception of family in which each member contributes to the collective good. It is when translation enters the public sphere that conflicts between cultures and values create tensions.

Chapter 4, “Public *Para*-Phrasing” and Chapter 5, “Transculturations”, explore children’s language brokering in public spheres. In settings such as stores, banks, and school, children not only contend with the need to interpret language, but also to navigate contrasting expectations for children and immigrants in broader society. Further, it is in the public sphere that Orellana notes children’s work is most instrumental. It enables connections with school, civic engagement by facilitating interactions in libraries and among public servants (as when a child translates for a parent to police after she witnessed a fight in the community or when a young boy translated a note of gratitude to firefighters from his mother following September 11, 2001), and enabling consumption

through credit applications and interactions with retail staff. As valuable as this work is, however, it is also the most stressful for children. It requires not only the linguistic wherewithal to convey one speaker's meaning to another, but a degree of emotion management when youth must buffer implicit or overt racism and xenophobia. In these spheres, children become aware of their racialized identities when, for example, school administrators tell parents how to run a household or when store clerks raise doubt regarding the family's ability to pay for merchandise. Children become self-aware of their family's consumption and of the signals that particular tastes send to those of higher class and greater social capital with which they must broker language. This stress is magnified in situations of soliciting services such as welfare and other public assistance, itself a position of low power and glaring indicator of class to which many stereotypes are attached, and in the procurement of medical services which can call into question the family's ability to take care of its members.

Besides the stress of serving these important functions while realizing status as the "other", translating in the public sphere particularly exemplifies the paradoxes of power faced by child language brokers. On the one hand, they are performing work that is essential to the family and, indeed, to the society of which their family is a contributing element. On the other hand, the roles that the society has delineated for children often constrict the power associated with said work, such as when a child was disallowed from signing any paperwork at the hospital for his younger sibling despite being the provider of the family's proof of insurance, social security information, and medical information in discussions with hospital staff.

These formal restrictions along with informal attitudes that children should be "seen not heard" are best exemplified in the parent-teacher conferences detailed in chapter 5, when children are at once participants in the evaluation of their development and learning as well as objects of adult judgment and subordinates to parents and teachers. In this domain,

children show a high level of cognitive ability as they filter teachers' evaluations of school (and in effect, dominant society) values such as creativity and participation into terms that align with household values of discipline, respect, and studiousness. Further, children manage disparate perceptions of their own family, seen by school officials as deficient and overburdened caretakers.

The following chapter, "Transformations", reconnects the researcher and the children several years later to see how their roles as language brokers have changed and how they themselves have changed vis-à-vis this work and the society in which it is performed. In general, language brokering increases for the youth as they get older given their increased access to adult-dominated spheres. Simultaneously, however, their growing social spheres outside the home draw even greater attention to the differences between their childhoods and those of non-immigrant children, especially for those in "Engleville", which is a predominantly middle class, white suburb. In these cases, learning occurs not just through the high level cognitive processes involved in making meaning from words and conveying that meaning into another language (often in non-literal translations) and from the non-verbal cues that language brokers receive from speakers, but also from what Orellana refers to as an alteration of the apprenticeship system, whereby adults scaffold the task of translating by providing particular words or questions, but children teach adults as well. This interwoven developmental pathway for children and adults contradicts conventional models of adults as purveyors of learning. By acting as experts in translation-based learning experiences, children not only report positive feelings in general, but Orellana's research also found that bilingual students who translated for their families tended to outperform those who did not on academic tests. Thus, translation helps immigrant youths develop as contributing members of a family and society as well as cognitively.

The final chapter, "Translating Childhoods," summarizes and emphasizes the key messages of the book. Orellana reminds the reader that translating has

both positive and negative effects on children's development and pathways to the future by empowering them and letting them contribute, but also making them particularly aware of their differences relative to the dominant culture. She stresses how translation work not only helps the family, but also serves to maintain institutions (such as schools, hospitals, and stores) or change them by facilitating their function or freeing up others to engage other activities. Ultimately, the author argues convincingly, children's work as language brokers is an unrecognized and undervalued service crucial to immigrant families and the society dependent on said immigrants. To deny the value of this work and to deny children the agency and power they wield in performing the work does a disservice to the understanding of immigrant cultures and the societies they inhabit.

Orellana closes with a remarkably introspective appendix in which she describes at length the methods of the research and the measures undertaken to help the researchers see the world through the eyes of the children being observed. The inclusion of this last section not only provides the reader with a better understanding of the breadth of data sources for the study (surveys, interviews, taped conversations, children's journal entries), but also of the mindset that allows a critical social science of childhood. Combining the author's introspection with the children's input discussed in the appendix, one once more appreciates that immigrant children are not the burden they are often portrayed.

About the Reviewer

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