



# 'UNSTATED' MEDIATION

On the ethical aspects of non-professional interpreting and translation

Edited by

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'Unstated' mediation: On the ethical aspects of non-professional interpreting and translation  
1<sup>st</sup> Edition

ISBN: 978-9925-553-63-1

Edited by Georgios Floros, Konstantinos Kritsis, & Rafaella Athanasiadi  
Cover design, book layout, & typesetting by Georgios Floros  
Cover image by



NPIT<sup>6</sup>

This volume contains a selection of papers presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Non-Professional Interpreting and Translation (NPIT6), which was organized by the Department of English Studies at the University of Cyprus between 25 and 27 May 2023 in Nicosia.

The event was sponsored by



'Unstated' mediation:  
On the ethical aspects of non-professional  
interpreting and translation

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# CHAPTER 1

## Media and fictional narratives of Child Language Brokering and how they may contribute to the normalization of this practice

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### Abstract

The use of two or more languages on screen and on the printed page implies that, from a narrative and communicative standpoint and in order to allow the viewers/readers to partake in what is said, the characters/interlocutors must find a means to communicate with one another. In both fictional and real interactions understanding is facilitated either by a professional or untrained interpreter who speaks the language(s) used in the film, novel or TV program. In some of these television, literary and screen products, the role of the linguistic mediator is taken on by children. Child Language Brokering (CLB) is defined as any form of formal and informal language and cultural (inter)mediation performed by bilingual children and adolescents to facilitate communication between their family, peers and other involved parties with members of the host society. Until very recently, this practice was an unacknowledged aspect of how bi-/multicultural children experience migration. However, CLB has also gained increased visibility thanks to an increasing number of filmic, literary and television productions. Following an overview of past and current studies, this paper sets out to examine how CLB is portrayed in films and novels and will compare these depictions to children's narratives of real experiences of CLB drawn from extant academic literature. Moreover, this paper argues that these media and fictional representations may contribute to shape a biased public perception of CLB of the real impact that this practice has on the lives of the children who perform it and on their and their families' inclusion in society.

### Keywords

child language brokering; fictional representation; identity issues; family dynamics; feelings

### 1. Introduction

This article takes an innovative approach to the study of Child Language Brokering (CLB) by exploring whether the depiction of CLB in TV programs and fictional filmic and literary products are a faithful rendition of this practice. To this end, it attempts to respond to two main research questions:

1. Are these fictional representations of CLB normalizing in a trivialized, unrealistic way to the general public a practice that is already 'the norm' in many immigrant and minority language communities?
2. What are the implications of this normalization?

The visibility gained by the practice and profession of translation and interpreting has led to a growing number of fictional representations of interpreters and translators on the screen and in literary works (De Bonis, 2014; Kaindl & Spitzl, 2014; Antonini & Bucaria, 2016; Chiaro, 2016). The emergence in literature and film of translators and interpreters as protagonists can be considered a consequence of the fact that, as Kaindl (2014, p. 4) argues:

[L]iterature and film are never detached from society, but rather react to its developments, changes and upheavals with their own methods and devices. [Therefore] it seems natural for authors and directors to use the expressive, symbolic, and representative potential of translation and interpreting to address themes of movement, such as migration, flight, displacement, wandering, restlessness, or uprooting in literature and film.

According to McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou (2021), in 2020 there were approximately 281 million international migrants in the world (3.6% of the world population). According to the same report, the estimated proportion of children who are international migrants is 14.6%. People willingly or unwillingly relocate to other countries for a variety of reasons, but mainly because they are fleeing from, inter alia, climate change, poverty, social unrest, violence, and war (IDAC, 2023). In parallel with what is happening in the world, the theme of translation and the figure of the interpreter/translator have become more prominent in filmic products and works of literature because their role is deemed indispensable in facilitating intercultural and interlinguistic communication in a world that is increasingly characterized by the movement of people, goods, and knowledge (Kaindl & Spitzl, 2014; Woodsworth, 2018). The topic of translation and interpreting, as well as fictional translators and interpreters, can be found in poetry, prose, and drama, and in all genres spanning from historical novels and films to TV series, short stories, poems, and musicals, but also in non-fictional products such as TV shows, documentaries, biographies and memoirs (Kaindl, 2014).

In both real life and in films and literature, the presence of two or more languages implies that, from a narrative and communicative perspective, real people and fictional characters need to find a way to communicate with one another. This communication is facilitated either by professional or untrained interpreters who speak both the dominant language adopted in the work of fiction and the secondary language(s). In some of these literary and screen products, the role of the linguistic mediator is taken on by children, who are portrayed as performing a very common but widely unacknowledged practice known as CLB. The following section will provide a review of the literature on CLB focused on the themes that emerged from the analysis of the films and novels.

## 2. Child Language Brokering

CLB is the label used to denote language and cultural (inter)mediation activities carried out by bilingual children and adolescents to facilitate communication between their family, peers, and other individuals involved, aiding interaction with members of the host society across diverse formal and informal contexts and domains (Antonini, 2022).

It is generally associated with the children of immigrant groups, however it is a practice that takes place within all linguistic minority groups (including, for instance, signing communities and heritage linguistic minorities).

CLB has only recently become a visible form of linguistic and cultural mediation, both in academia and among the public. The lives and experiences of child language brokers throughout history have been scarcely documented. The little knowledge that we have about interpreters and translators in the past was reconstructed through historical chronicles, ancient legal documents, and travel accounts that report the involvement of bi/multilingual speakers as language and cultural mediators (Takeda & Baigorri-Jalón, 2016). Children too are known to have taken on the same role (Alonso Araguás, 2022). Recorded examples of CLB in the past include the compelling story of Pocahontas, who acted as an emissary for her father, the chief in the region, and the trading of English adolescents between settlers and the native Powhatan tribes to have them learn one another's language and culture and to act as language and cultural mediators between colonial and native leaders. Another example is that of the young Lady Elizabeth, the future Queen Elizabeth I of England, who started translating from French when she was 11 and "continued to translate for pleasure and to improve her knowledge of the languages involved throughout her life" (Antonini, 2022b, p. 81; see also Philo, 2020).

CLB is still an extremely common practice nowadays, for which there are no available statistics and numbers that quantify its frequency of occurrence across ethnic and linguistic communities or its socio-economic impact. However, given the statistics on international immigration mentioned above, we can safely assume that millions of children are likely to be involved as language brokers on a daily basis. There are several factors that influence if and when a child/adolescent becomes a language broker, which, in turn, influence how children and young interpreters experience this practice. These factors are determined by their and their families' pre-migration situations, the nature of the journey, and their post-migration experiences (cf. Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002). The use of CLB ensues from geopolitical, socio-economic and/or socio-professional factors, as well as undeveloped language services and/or negative or hostile institutional attitudes (cf. Boéri, 2012; Pérez-González & Susam-Saraeva, 2012; Antonini, 2021). Once immigrant families arrive in their new country of residence, they will need to resort to the services of professional interpreters and translators, if they do not speak the language. However, it is often the case that, due to the lack of or insufficient provision of professional interpreting and translation services, "non-speakers of the majority language must provide their own solutions to communication" (Ozolins, 2014, p. 32), which, in many cases, leads to the involvement of children and young bilingual speakers.

It is very difficult to determine prevalence rates of CLB. Across studies, they have been estimated to be between 57% and 100% (Straits, 2010). However, while there seems to be agreement on the fact that language brokering is a common experience and that it occurs in all linguistic and ethnic communities that were purposely studied to assess CLB occurrence and patterns, the methodological approaches and criteria are too diverse to be able to consider the results as representative for all language communities and minorities in different countries (Straits, 2010). Over the last fifty years, CLB studies have described the sociolinguistics of this practice, the settings in which it is likely to occur, the people for whom children may language broker, the strategies used to language broker, the impact it has on the cognitive and social



development of these children, on their emotional and psychological wellbeing, and on family dynamics.

CLB can occur in various formal and informal settings of a child's life, which include, *inter alia*, the family domain, the community domain, healthcare, public institutions, the school, and the legal domain. In all these domains, children and adolescents may take on the role of the interpreter/translator for their parents, other family members, members of their linguistic community, and other people (e.g., friends, peers, and other adults), and the language brokering activities in which they may be involved in can range from "the relatively trivial, maybe just writing out a note for the milkman, to the massively complex, like helping a father fill out a tax form" (Hall & Guery, 2010, p. 41). In the family domain, children may act as language brokers for their parents or other family members by acting as literacy brokers and facilitating many instrumental literacy tasks that include a wide range of activities such as, for instance, reading and dealing with mail and letters (from banks, institutions, utility companies), filling out forms, or translating school notes and reports (Orellana et al., 2003). In formal and institutional settings, children may interpret or translate in medical settings such as at the doctor's, in hospitals, and with paramedics (Antonini & Torresi, 2021). In the school domain, children may serve as language brokers for their parents in interactions with teachers, school administrators, or other school staff (Antonini, 2022b; Crafter & Prokopiou, 2022). In the legal domain, CLB may occur in legal settings such as court proceedings, interactions with lawyers, or law enforcement (Tse, 1996; Valdés, 2003).

Research on the emotional impact of CLB has produced mixed or contradictory results (see Corona et al., 2012). Overall, the emotional impact of CLB can depend on a variety of factors such as age, gender and personality of the child, the frequency and duration of interpreting, the type of interactions involved, the complexity of the language used, and the nature of the relationship between the child and the person for whom they interpret. Some studies have found that CLB can have a negative emotional impact on children, due to stress, anxiety, and a sense of responsibility beyond their years. Such negative emotions can be caused by various factors, e.g., the complexity of the language being translated, the content of the message, or the pressure to perform well. In some cases, child language brokers may also feel a sense of responsibility for the outcomes of the communication, which can further exacerbate their negative emotions (cf. Weisskirch, 2007; Kam & Lazarevic, 2014; Tomasi & Narhcal, 2021). On the other hand, other studies have found that CLB can also have positive emotional effects, which are associated with higher self-esteem, a sense of pride in being able to help their family members, and an increased sense of self-efficacy and competence, improved cognitive and metalinguistic abilities, and academic performance. In some cases, child language brokers may also develop a stronger bond with their family members as a result of their role as a translator (cf. Acoach & Webb, 2004; Dorner et al., 2007; Hall & Guéry, 2010).

When CLB is analyzed in terms of the impact it has on family dynamics and roles, it is often associated with role-reversal and the concepts of adultification and parentification. Adultification occurs when children who act as language brokers are placed in roles that are traditionally associated with adults and have to take on responsibilities and expectations that require them to navigate complex social, cultural, and linguistic circumstances (Umaña-Taylor, 2003; Titzmann, 2012). Parentification, on the other hand, refers to the process of children assuming parentified roles and responsibilities within the family, such as providing emotional and practical support to

their parents, caring for younger siblings, and managing household finances. Both adultification and parentification may be experienced as challenging and emotionally taxing and may have a negative impact on the language brokers' well-being. Being exposed to situations and topics from which children are usually shielded may cause increased stress and result in decreased educational and life opportunities, as they may have to miss school days or sacrifice their own learning experiences to serve as language brokers (cf. Weisskirch, 2010; Cline et al., 2017; Crafter & Iqbal, 2022).

Because of the role that child language brokers take within the family, which implies providing care and support to their parents and other family members, CLB has recently been conceptualized as a care giving practice. This care can take many forms, including interpreting and translating, providing emotional support, and helping with everyday tasks (cf. García-Sánchez, 2018; Crafter & Iqbal 2022). The study of CLB as an empathetic practice is an important advancement in the study of CLB. Care is defined as "the provision of practical or emotional support" (Milligan & Wiles 2010, p. 737) that is practiced through "interdependency, reciprocity and multidirectionality" (ibid.). By conceptualizing child language brokers as social actors (García-Sánchez, 2018; Bauer, 2016) it is possible to place CLB "along a 'caregiving continuum'" (Bauer, 2016, p. 34), which puts children and adolescents in the position of learning about and understanding the hardships that their parents experience and the sacrifices they make, thus developing empathy for them, and showing appreciation (i.e., reciprocate care) (cf. De Ment et al., 2005; Love & Buriel, 2007).

### 3. Method and corpus

This article compares depictions of CLB in two films and two novels (see Table 1 below) to studies of children's experiences of CLB drawn from extant literature.

Title	Category	Year, country, director/author
<i>Spanglish</i>	Film	2004, USA, James L. Brooks
<i>La Famille Bélier</i>	Film	2014, France, Éric Lartigau
<i>Unpolished Gem</i>	Book	2006, Australia, Alice Pung
<i>Girl in Translation</i>	Book	2010, USA, Jean Kwok

**Table 1:** The corpus

The filmic and literary fictional products that are the object of this study were chosen because they depict the practice of CLB within the wider framework of the language brokers' migration experience, thus providing a more comprehensive representation of the lives of child language brokers and their families in different countries and life circumstances and the difficulties that they may face when navigating linguistic and cultural differences.

CLB is one of the central themes of *Spanglish* (SPA), as also made explicit by the subtitle of the poster that reads "Every family could use a little translation". Though light-hearted and fictional, the story presented in the film is a good rendition of how Mexican families settle in the US, how their children, by attending school, tend to learn English before their parents, and how they end up brokering for them. In the film, Flor, a Mexican mother, and her daughter, Cristina, move to the United States, where the mother gets a job as a maid for a family of five (chef John Clasky, his wife Deborah, their two children, and Deborah's mother). Flor does not speak or understand English, and

when she has to live with the family over the summer, she takes her daughter Cristina to act as a translator. Flor is dependent on her daughter to bridge the communication gap but decides to learn English in order to disrupt the dynamics that threaten her relationship with Cristina and her connection to her family and ethnic identity. The film was released in theatres in 2004 but was not a box office success. It also received mixed critical reviews.

*La Famille Bélier* (LFB) portrays a less known and researched form of CLB, i.e., children of deaf adults acting as language brokers for their parents. It was released in 2014 and was a huge box-office success both in France and worldwide. It won several awards and received positive reviews. The film tells the story of a family of four where the only hearing person is sixteen-year-old Paula, the daughter, who plays the role of the interpreter for her deaf parents and brother on a daily basis and conducts most of the family's business. When Paula starts another school year, she decides to join the school choir, where, through the encouragement of the music teacher, she discovers her talent for singing. The teacher encourages Paula to audition to join the prestigious Maîtrise de Radio France music college in Paris, and Paula must make a difficult choice: to leave her family to secure a good career and a college degree, or to stay to help her family out on their farm.

CLB is a common theme in contemporary literature, particularly in novels that explore the experiences of immigrants and their families. *Girl in Translation* and *Unpolished Gem* are the two chosen literary works. In them, the child language brokers deal with the pressure and responsibility of serving as interpreters or translators for their non-English speaking parents in a predominantly English-speaking society. The two selected novels describe how the child language brokers must navigate the cultural and linguistic differences between their parents and the wider community and come to terms with the challenges of shaping their identity as they find themselves caught between two cultures and two languages.

The first novel, *Girl in Translation* (GiT), by Jean Kwok, narrates the story of Kimberly (Kim) Chang's and her mother's migration from Hong Kong to New York. The book describes the hardships that they have to endure in their new life in America: living in a vermin-ridden apartment with no heating and in a tough neighborhood, working in a sweatshop to repay their debt to Aunt Paula, who paid for their travel and for Kimberly's mother's medications; struggling to adjust to a new school because of her limited literacy in the English language. Kim's voice helps the readers understand how they both struggle to adjust to a new language and culture and how, in order to succeed, she must translate not only her language but also herself.

*Unpolished Gem* (UG) is Alice Pung's debut novel and memoir and tells the story of how she and her Chinese-Cambodian family pursue the Australian Dream. The story follows both the lives of Alice's parents and grandparents in Cambodia and their adjustment to and settlement in Australia. The book narrates Alice's personal journey to the age of 19 and details her experience of being caught between different and at times conflicting cultures, East and West, and the small world she inhabits in her infancy and adolescence, her neighborhood, and the rest of Melbourne and Australia. Alice Pung writes about the difficulty of acculturation, assimilation, and cultural misunderstanding, as well as about the psychological impact this process had on her and her mother's mental health. Alice's experience will help her achieve acceptance and find healing.

The selected scenes and passages from the films and the novels contain examples of CLB in different settings and portray the impact that this practice may have

on children and the adults involved in the interactions. The clips and passages from the filmic and literary works selected for this study can be grouped into three main categories: a) contexts and settings of CLB, b) the impact of CLB on family dynamics, and c) identity issues. The first category covers some of the contexts and settings where CLB is likely to occur that are represented in the films and books. The second category exemplifies how CLB can impact family dynamics and, more specifically, the mother-daughter relationship portrayed in the corpus. The third set focuses on identity issues that are either directly or indirectly expressed by the characters in the films and books, which include how they experience and react to being caught in the middle of different cultures, communities, and loyalties, and how they are able to achieve acceptance and healing. The fourth category comprises instances of CLB used for humorous purposes.

#### 4. Results and discussion

The films and books analyzed for the purposes of this paper offer representations of CLB from different narrative perspectives. While *Spanglish*, *Girl in Translation*, and *Unpolished Gem* are told from the perspective of the now-adult language broker reflecting on their migration experience, *La Famille Bélier* is from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator. The narrative arc of the stories in the works that comprise the fictional corpus reflects the migration transition and experience that is often described in the literature on CLB. In the corpus, the families are: i) newly arrived first generation immigrants (SPA, UG and GiT); ii) first and second-generation families who live and socialize with friends and other family members who have a common linguistic and cultural background (UG); or iii) members of a linguistic minority (LFB). In all these scenarios, there is no need for a translator to communicate with members of the same linguistic community, but when the families need to interact with members of the target culture and society, they rely on the bilingual child or adolescent characters to act as their conduit between the private and public spheres.

In all stories, we see how the child language brokers learn the language of their new country of residence or of the majority before their parents and are then involved in a variety of formal and informal interactions in different contexts and settings. In the fictional corpus, occurrences of CLB are never narrated in a manner that is devoid of emotions. On the contrary, given the situations that determine them or develop from them, they always cause an emotional reaction in the language brokers, as well as in the other people involved in the mediated interaction. Hence, the analysis of the categories will also focus on how the emotional impact of CLB is featured in the selected scenes and passages.

##### 4.1 Contexts and settings of CLB

In the following scenes and passages from SPA, LFB and GiT we find examples of CLB occurring in different formal and informal contexts and situations. One of the settings that we find in all the analyzed works is linked to shopping. GiT features passages (see Example 1, Kwok, 2010, p. 16) where Kim translates labels and helps her mother interact with the shop owners and purchase goods.

**Example 1:**

“What does it say?” Ma asked me, nodding at one of the cartons. I could make out a picture of strawberries and the words “Made with real fruit” and another word, beginning with a “yo,” that I didn’t know.

This is a typical example of the kind of translating activities that child language brokers may perform. Moreover, since the situation in this passage takes place at the beginning of the story, which is right after Kim and her mother have arrived in New York from Hong Kong, it is an example of the difficulty that children may experience when they are required to start language brokering while still not proficient in the new language. Kim describes how she continues to translate for her mother through the years and how, as in Example 2, she also has to act as a culture broker (Kwok, 2010, pp. 155-156):

**Example 2:**

If Ma needed to buy something at a store or to make a complaint or a return, I had to do it for her. The worst was when Ma wanted to bargain, the way she had in Hong Kong, and I had to translate for her.

"Tell me we'll only pay two dollars," Ma said to me at the American fish store near our apartment. "Ma you can't do this here!" "Just say it!" I gave the fishmonger an apologetic smile. I was only thirteen. [...] Later, Ma scolded me for not having the right attitude.

Child mediation entails not only translating or interpreting words, texts, or conversations but also involves "explanation, transmission, and negotiation of culturally responsive messages or information" (Guo, 2014, p. 37). Moreover, the many tasks carried out by child language brokers can be configured as both a direct and indirect economic contribution to their families. Indeed, in describing the language brokering activities performed by Chinese adolescents in their family's restaurants, Hall and Sham (2007, p. 28) argue that

[...] in doing something normally carried out by an adult, a child is saving an adult's time, and thus releasing the adult to carry out other activities, and [...] this constitutes an economic contribution to the family. Thus on both low level and high level activities, language brokering [...] is work with considerable economic value.

In LFB<sup>1</sup>, one of Paula's many tasks as the only speaking member of her deaf family is to help her parents at their market stall. Example 3 features the girl helping her parents sell the cheeses they produce at their farm and deal with customers:

**Example 3:**

Customer (to Gigi): What's that cheese like? Is it very fresh?

Gigi: (smiles and does not answer)

[...]

Customer (with an annoyed tone): That cheese.

Paula: Yes, hi, how can I help you?

Customer: I would like two pieces, small. [Referring to Gigi] What's wrong with this woman?

Paula: It's called job sharing. She smiles, I speak.

Customer: Okay.

Paula: And he (the brother) takes care of the money!

Customer: Do you have fun?

Paula: Well, we're a family!

In this scene, we see how Paula shields her mother from the customer's inquiry about her and why she does not speak, to which she replies in a dismissive way that they work

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<sup>1</sup> Since LFB is a French film, all examples have been translated into English.

as a team, thus cutting the conversation short. In Example 3, we bear witness to how Paula tries to shield her mother from negative behaviors, but also to the tensions that emerge, particularly when the children "attempt to eliminate differences between the private and public spheres but at the same time accentuate these differences" (Svensson, 2010, p. 38) when they act as buffers between their parents and the host society. In another scene, Paula sign language brokers for her parents, Rodolphe and Gigi, at the doctor's office, where she has to translate to her parents that they cannot have sex for three weeks to allow her mother's infection to heal. When the conversation becomes too embarrassing for her, she stops her parents and decides not to translate for the doctor.

**Example 4:**

Doctor: So, it's not getting better.

(Mother, S.L.) I don't understand. I apply the cream every night in my... vagina.

Doctor (to Paula): Your mother's thrush has spread. Did your father use the cream I gave him?

Paula (voicing and signing): Dad, do you apply the cream the doctor gave you? Hoo, hoo! The cream? Do you use it? Yes or no?

Doctor: Why not?

Rodolphe (S.L.): When I applied it, my thing became... lumpy.

Gigi (S.L.): I have a vagina on fire! Like mushrooms everywhere! Don't you care?

Rodolphe: I'll take them and I'll make you some good fried mushrooms.

Paula: Oh! Stop! (To the doctor) I'm sorry.

Doctor: It's OK. He must apply the cream, or the problem will not go away.

Paula: You have to put the cream. It's very important.

Doctor: And no more sex for a while.

Rodolphe: For how long?

Doctor: Three weeks.

One salient element in this example is related to the way in which this language brokered event is managed by Paula. While showing embarrassment regarding the content of the conversation taking place at the doctor's, she also looks perfectly in charge of the exchange and the situation. This, however, contrasts results reported by studies focusing on adults' and children's perceptions of CLB in healthcare settings, which highlight the striking difference between how general practitioners perceive the (positive) emotional impact of CLB on the child versus the negative feelings expressed by child language brokers (Antonini, 2015).

In SPA, the depiction of the child language broker as seemingly in control and at ease with managing the interaction (and rendering a faithful translation) is featured in all the scenes where Cristina mediates. This is particularly evident in how she faithfully renders the illocutionary force of the speakers for whom she translates. At the restaurant, where Cristina and Flor go to celebrate Flor's new job, Cristina translates some of the interactions with the waitress. The brokered interaction runs smoothly until Cristina must translate for her mother when she is offered a drink by two men, which she sternly refuses:

**Example 5:**

Waitress: Excuse me. Those men would like to buy you a drink.

Flor: ¿Qué?

Cristina: Nos quieren comprar algo de tomar (they would like to buy us a drink).

[...]

Flor: No, gracias. (No, thank you)

Waitress: OK.

Flor: No, no, no, no, un momento, espere. Diga a esos señores que... (No, no, no, no, wait a second. Tell those gentlemen that...)

Waitress: Sorry.

Flor (to Cristina): Dile que le diga... por Dios santo che le pasa, ¿qué non ven que estoy con mi hija? ¡Dile Cristina! (Tell her to tell them... for God's sake what's wrong with you, don't you see that I am with my daughter? Tell her, Cristina).

(Cristina shakes her head because she does not want to translate. Flor signals her with non-verbal communication).

Cristina: This is so embarrassing. My mother said to tell them, "Who do you think you are? Can't you see I'm with my daughter, for God's sake?"

Waitress: Good.

Later on in the film, Cristina is assigned the task of language brokering between her mother and the family members for whom she works. On one occasion, she has to language broker a long and emotionally charged exchange between her mother and John, her employer's husband, where she is also the object of the conversation. Flor is angry because John gave Cristina a huge sum of money for glass pebbles she had asked his children and her to collect from the beach. Cristina takes the task seriously and collects many pebbles. Flor challenges John and gives him back the money, and the ensuing conversation is charged with emotions. Cristina translates everything by faithfully relaying the same illocutionary force expressed by the two adults. While this scene is illustrative of the power dynamics with which children/adolescents may have to contend when language brokering adult-to-adult interactions, the way in which the exchange in this scene was scripted reflects an adult point of view regarding how a child language broker would act in a real-life interaction.

These scenes are interesting for two main reasons: Firstly, because, in both cases, Cristina delivers a rendering that is too emphatic and mirrors too closely the adults' illocutionary force. Secondly, because it shows how language brokers can be exposed to difficult and uncomfortable situations in any context, even those that one would consider conflict-neutral.

## 4.2 Impact of CLB on family dynamics

In all selected films and novels, the mother-daughter relationship is a complex and dynamic one, shaped by the challenges of immigration, cultural differences, and personal expectations and ambitions. In particular, UG, GiT, and LFB feature how family dynamics are impacted by the adultification and parentification of the children/adolescents who, in the narrated stories, have to take on burdensome responsibilities and play the role of the adult in the family.

Example 6 (Kwok, 2010, p. 16) is an extract from GiT about what happens after the situation described in Example 1. Kim realizes that the shop owner is not only rude but is also taking advantage of them by overcharging them for some of their purchases. However, she does not know how to act and react, and in the end, she does not do or say anything but is also aware of the frustration and discomfort that her mother feels for not being able to speak English and interact with the shop owner.

**Example 6:**

The man behind the counter said in English, "I ask got all day. You gonna buy something or not?" his tone was aggressive enough that Ma understood what he meant without translation.

"That," I said, pointing to the strawberry cartons. "Two."

"About time," he said. When he rang up the price, it was three times more than it said on the carton. I saw Ma glance at the price tag, but she averted her gaze quickly. I didn't know if I should speak up or how you complained about prices in English, so I kept silent as well. Ma paid without looking at the man or me, and we left.

This passage exemplifies how child language brokers "may find themselves in a very public interaction in a potentially hostile context, with an outcome that is dependent on a dialogue between themselves, their families, and another adult who is usually in a position of power and authority" (Crafter and Iqbal, 2022, p. 3). This may expose them to microaggressions, and hostile or unjust behaviors directed at their parents or at them as members of a specific ethnic group (Nash, 2017; Gustafsson et al., 2019).

In GiT, the relationship between Kimberley and her mother is complex and multifaceted, marked by the hardships they face in adapting to their new life in New York, including a new culture, language, and Kim's difficult adjustment to her new school, while she works long hours alongside her mother in a Chinatown factory. In order to avoid involving her mother, Kim takes charge of dealings and communications with the school she attends and the one to which she applied for a scholarship. Similarly, in UG, we see Alice Pung, the narrator and protagonist of the memoir, taking on the role of caregiver by caring for her younger siblings and the household, but growing increasingly angry at the burden of this responsibility and how it is taken for granted by her parents (Pung, 2006, p. 161):

**Example 7:**

I didn't know what was happening. Suddenly the control I had seemed to evaporate, leaving behind a raw vision of myself – I was seventeen again, and the responsibility was not mine. It was to be taken away! NO! But the house was clean, the sisters were happy, my brother had learned to bake and the schoolwork was still being done. What more was there to do?

As the eldest child, Alice takes on a lot of responsibility for the household, including cooking, cleaning, and looking after her younger siblings. Alice's caregiving responsibilities are not always easy, and they are indicative of the level of adultification that requires her to take on responsibilities that normally pertain to adults.

In Example 8 (from LFB), Paula starts questioning her role as language broker and caretaker of the family and the burden of responsibility that has been placed on her as the only hearing member of her family. In this scene, Paula's father, Rodolphe, is running for Mayor of their small town. He is being interviewed by a group of journalists, but because they are not fluent in sign language, Paula is there to translate for him. During the interview, Paula translates Rodolphe's lengthy answers with just a few words: Rodolphe and her mother ask her what the matter is, and in the end, she is dismissed by her father, who takes charge of the situation and asks her to translate the following signed instructions to the journalists, which are translated by Paula:



**Example 8:**

Rodolphe: [in sign language]: Translate. We will proceed differently. You will subtitle my answers. You will find someone to translate what I say. If you speak slowly, I can read your lips. If we do not understand each other, you'll write.

Journalist: Okay.

Rodolphe: [in sign language to Paula] Thank you. You can go now.

The feeling of frustration at having her mother depend on her is described in poignant terms by Kim (*Gi7*) in Examples 9 (Kwok, 2010, p. 137) and 10 (Kwok, 2010, p. 155):

**Example 9:**

I wanted desperately for her to be able to ask someone for me, to take charge as I was sure Annette's mother would have.

**Example 10:**

I grew into the space that Ma's foreignness left vacant. She hadn't learnt any more English, so I took over everything that required any kind of interaction with the world outside of Chinatown. I pored over our income tax forms every year, using the documents the factory provided for us. I read the fine print repeatedly, hoping I was doing it right.

The frustration of having one's parents depend on them for interactions that take place outside their linguistic community has been reported in various narratives of CLB. In Bucaria's study (2014) with former language brokers, similar feelings are expressed by interviewees who describe the frustration at having their parents depend on them to communicate with members of the public institutional sphere and the wish for their parents to become independent by learning the language. However, this is not always the case, and children who language broker for their parents are likely to do so even as adults (cf. Del Torto, 2008).

**4.3 Identity issues**

Throughout the stories in the films and novels, we see the child language broker characters grappling with their own identity and their place in the world. The characters express the feeling of being caught between languages and cultures, as well as the realization of the shifting biculturalism and bilingualism they are experiencing.

In UG, Alice's mother is a hard-working, determined woman who sacrifices a lot to provide for her family and ensure their success. However, she can also be overbearing and critical, especially when it comes to Alice's academic and career choices. When Alice's mother complains that despite all her education and her competence in the English language, her daughter is unable to explain a bank statement, Alice explains that (Pung, 2006, p. 142):

**Example 11:**

It was true, I couldn't. It wasn't that I couldn't understand the English, it was that I didn't have the Chinese terms in me to be able to explain. I was running out of words.

In the corpus there are also several instances of tensions between the language brokers and their parents (mostly their mothers) who try to monitor the mediated events by demanding or checking with their children that they translate faithfully as in the following Examples 12 and 13 (Pung, 2006, p. 143) from, respectively, SPA and UG:

**Example 12:**

Flor: Tienes que traducir exactamente lo que te digo y nada mas, ¿intendiste?  
(You've got to translate exactly what I tell you and nothing more, is that clear?)

Cristina; Si. (Yes)

Flor: ¡Andale! (Go on!)

Cristina: My mother wishes for me to represent exactly what she says... nothing else.

**Example 13:**

The quieter I became at school, the louder my mother became at home. She was loud because she could not read or speak the secret talk we knew. She could not read because she had been housebound for two decades. And now, over the dinner table, she would watch as my father and his children littered their language with English terms, until every second word was in the foreign tongue. [...] she sat there staring at us, trying to make sense of these aliens at her table.

Morales et al. observed this behavior in their study of parents' attitudes towards CLB in the Mexican community in the United States. Their findings indicate how the complexities of language brokering for their families often create tension and conflict in the family (Morales et al., 2012, p. 542), as

[...] child brokers may experience frustration, anger, and even rebellion as they confront situations within the meso- and exosystem, which task them beyond their own developmental level. With their parents' demand for accuracy, on the one hand, and the challenge of translating or interpreting information in very complex situations, on the other hand, brokers can feel ill-equipped to manage this added responsibility.

Moreover, these feelings are also exacerbated by the shifting linguistic competences that are the result of the acculturation process that these children undergo, whereby language brokering can be seen "as a marker of differential acculturation within families" (Martinez et al., 2009, p. 13). This language shift has been observed in the literature among different linguistic communities. For example, Birman & Trickett (2001) studied the impact of the acculturation process on first-generation Jewish adolescents and parents from the former Soviet Union settling in the United States. They confirmed how children and parents often experience a two-tier acculturation process that is often characterized by a growing gap between them and their parents, "with parents retaining their traditional culture and children acculturating to the host culture" (Birman & Trickett, 2001, p. 456).

**5. Concluding remarks**

This article discussed the implications of the findings for understanding CLB and its representations. The results of the analysis of the representations of CLB showed that this practice is depicted as a challenging experience for the child, with themes related to the contexts and settings in which it is portrayed, the impact it has on family dynamics, and the identity of the characters.

CLB is an important topic in contemporary literature and films as it highlights the experiences of immigrants and the ways in which language and culture can impact their daily lives. Through these films and novels, the authors and filmmakers shed light on the challenges that child language brokers face and raise important questions about the role of language and cultural competence in a rapidly globalizing world. The films and

novels examined in this contribution offer insights into the experiences and challenges of child language brokers, as well as a powerful reminder of the complexities of cross-cultural communication and the resilience of immigrant families. However, there are some differences in the way in which the films and literary works represent CLB. The films tend to present a less accurate and realistic portrayal of CLB, thus providing a simplistic and sometimes distorted image of the real impact that this practice has on the lives of the children who perform it, as well as all the other people involved in interactions that are language brokered.

One of the most evident differences between how CLB is portrayed in films and novels is the rendition of the language-brokered event and of the actions of the language broker, particularly in terms of the emotions performed and described and the way in which the children/adolescents manage the brokered interactions. In the two films, they appear to be perfectly in control of the situation; they have few hesitations when it comes to finding the right translation; and they are able to easily manage turn-taking in the conversation. However, CLB is a complex phenomenon that can be quite challenging for children because, as Hall and Sham (2007, p. 18) observe,

a language brokering event often involves a child handling complex social relationships. When a young person is mediating between two adults, both of whom may have different agendas and different power relationships, then handling the social relationships and issues is as important and as complex as handling the language issues.

By portraying child language brokers that seem to be perfectly in charge and completely at ease in their role as linguistic mediators, the films seem to provide a simplified rendition of the nature and impact of CLB. Moreover, the way in which CLB occurs in the situations and settings that are described in the selected scenes and passages conveys to the readers and viewers a perception of CLB as a practice that engenders a negative emotional reaction. Characters are seen or described as feeling angry, embarrassed, ill at ease, and overwhelmed. In general, no positive feelings are associated with their role as language brokers, except at the end of the stories when the characters come to terms with their bilingualism and biculturalism and accept their role and identity.

The depiction of CLB offers a valuable perspective on the experiences of immigrant families and the challenges they face in adapting to a new cultural and linguistic environment. Indeed, fictional representations of CLB can serve as a powerful lens through which to explore issues of identity, cultural conflict, and the challenges faced by immigrant families. However, while it is understandable that the constraints of the medium may have influenced how the story is narrated (films only have a set amount of time to develop the plot, whereas books can rely on hundreds of pages), it is also true that they can have a different impact because of their distribution. The films examined here were distributed nationally and internationally in theatres and on streaming platforms (subtitled and dubbed in many languages), allowing them to reach a larger audience than the books. The risk is thus to give the public an interpretation of CLB that trivializes a practice that pervades all domains of the lives of these children and their families and downplays its impact.

Before concluding this study, it is useful to also point to its limitations and possibilities for further research. Firstly, this study offered an analysis of the representation of CLB in a small corpus of filmic and literary works that feature this practice in their plots or subplots. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized, as the analysis would need to rely on a more extensive sample of films and books. Secondly,

the corpus is based on stories that take place in English-speaking countries; hence, it should be integrated with works focusing on a wider range of linguistic and ethnic minorities in different countries as well.

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ISBN: 978-9925-553-63-1