New Immigrant Youth Interpreting in White Public Space

ABSTRACT Bilingual children are frequently called on to use their linguistic and communicative virtuosity to interpret for monolingual speakers. In this article, we theorize child interpreters’ positionalities within the interstices of several borderlands: as children; as interpreters and translators interpreting different languages, registers, and discourses; and as immigrants seeking services within white public space. We analyze how youths are positioned to provide service and surveillance within overdetermined interpreter-mediated practices. In examining these practices, we raise to consciousness some of the social and ideological conditions that circumscribe working-class Latino/a and new Mexican immigrant children within inherently unequal subject positions. [Keywords: interpreter-mediated interactions, childhood, Mexican new immigrants, racialization, white public space]

FIGURE 1. Amanda’s journal entry: Daughter of "new immigrants."

I N THE ABOVE journal entry (see Figure 1), 12-year-old Amanda revealed one of the many ways in which she used her linguistic and communicative virtuosity to interpret the world for monolinguals. Such interpreter-mediated practices are illuminated by Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of “dialogism”: the notion that words carry histories and ideologies that frame subsequent interactions as they unfold ontologically. On a different scale, these histories regiment languages, and by extension their speakers, within an increasingly unequal international division of labor according to the logic of late capitalist time-space compression (Harvey 1989) that "calls forth new kinds of social
organization that require intercultural communication and are deterritorialized, flexible, and highly mobile” (Nonini and Ong 1997:10). Bonnie Urciuoli (1998) notes that these transnational social forms are extensions of centuries-long globalizing processes. She writes, “When people migrate, become political minorities, or become colonized, they find their lives structured in ways that force them to work across languages and place on them the burden of understanding and responding correctly” (Urciuoli 1998:4). Within late-capitalist transnational circuits (De Genova 2005; Rouse 1991) and quotidian, microinteractional exchanges, the children of immigrants are often pivotal participants in emergent intercultural forms of communication (cf. Vásquez et al. 1994). Practices of interpretation and translation are one important example of these flexible discursive practices.

To argue that such discursive practices are deterritorialized is to suggest that the speakers who engage in them simultaneously embody several borders, as children and adolescents, bilingual interpreters, and immigrants operating in both the “inner sphere” of kin and neighborhood relations and the “outer sphere” of institutional and commercial contexts (Urciuoli 1998). To suggest that multiple borders intersect in these interactions is to invoke the trope of “borderlands,” metaphorical sites defined by binary categories of difference. These borderlands constitute a particular social and political economic history of U.S.–Mexico geopolitical relations; as Chicana poet and theoretician Gloria Anzaldúa wrote: “The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (Anzaldúa 1987:3). The hemorrhage defines a culture of people caught betwixt and between multiple ideologies of normalcy (cf. Calderón and Saldívar 1991; Farr 2005; González 2001; Urciuoli 1995). In the case of young language brokers, these categories include childhood–adulthood, Mexican–American, noncitizen–citizen, “Spanish”–“English,” brown–white, and working class–middle class.

Children stand at the intersection both literally and figuratively as they serve as linguistic and cultural mediators within particular spaces of multilingualism (Blommaert et al. 2005), speaking languages and language varieties accorded distinct symbolic capital. They are expected to understand and interpret different linguistic registers and to convey referential, ideological, and pragmatic dimensions of meaning in both languages within participant structures and frameworks that do not usually accommodate multiparty formats. In these interactions, youth are subjected to adult coparticipants’ evaluations of their linguistic, communicative, and social performances as well as to the surveillance of ethnicizing and racializing discourses predominant in white public space (Hill 1999). Drawing on empirical data gathered in the global city that Nicholas De Genova (2005) called “Mexican Chicago,” we examine how the emergence of the phenomena of “child interpreters” follows a logic of neoliberal governance, and we reveal the ethnomlinguistic profiling that takes place when “language” is variously ethnicized and racialized.

**THEORIZING OUTER-Sphere BORDERLANDS ENCOUNTERS**

On May 13, 2005, the president of Mexico, Vicente Fox, weighed in on the U.S.–Mexico immigration debate to an audience of Texas businessmen. In Spanish he said, “There’s no doubt that Mexicans, filled with dignity, willingness and ability to work, are doing jobs that not even blacks want to do there in the United States” (CNN 2005).2 Fox’s statement tapped into histories of ethnicizing and racializing discourses that delimit representations of (im)migrants within the United States (Chock 1991; De Genova 2005; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Lippi-Green 1997; Milroy 2001; Santa Ana 2002; Urciuoli 1998), elevating Mexicans to the status of “good ethnics” in contrast with racialized African Americans.

This “ethnicizing” discourse (Urciuoli 1991, 1998), in the form of immigrant success stories, construes immigrants as an essentialized group that contributes positively to the ethnic diversity of an imaginary melting pot (Chock 1989, 1995). Urciuoli (1998) contrasts this with racializing discourses that presuppose a generative system of binary social categories that strip the referent (a person or social group) of dignity and common humanity. In Urciuoli’s work, these two discourses shaped how Nuyoricans (New York Puerto Rican or NYPR) community members oriented differently to what Urciuoli identified as inner and outer contextual spheres of language use, which distinguish within-community interactions, especially between kin and close friends, from interactions with strangers and representatives of mainstream institutions. Although English and Spanish (and different varieties thereof) were employed in both spheres, their respective regimentation shifted. There was variation in how and why each code was valued in inner spheres of interaction, but in all outer-sphere interactions Standard English was valued above both NYPR English and varieties of NYPR Spanish. Nuyoricans, moreover, were subjected to evaluations on how they spoke English. Some subjects reported feeling so self-conscious that at times felt unable to speak in either language. De Genova likewise found that Mexican migrants in Chicago workplaces “experienced racialization of their language as a palpable feature of the discrimination against them” (2005:45).3

Jane Hill (1999) demonstrated another way in which hegemonic language ideologies enforce the compartmentalization of linguistic practices. She noted that although Spanish speakers are sanctioned for speaking Spanish or nonstandard varieties of English in white public space, predominantly monolingual English speakers are not similarly sanctioned when they utter mock Spanish. Instead of being held accountable for their disorderly speech, they are viewed as executing clever verbal performances, ones that
index cosmopolitan or “cool” social identities. Hill suggested that the direct indexical messages of these verbal acts construct the speaker as a “congenial person,” even as the indirect indexical message denigrates Spanish speakers by racializing them as stupid, lazy, dirty, and uncouth (Hill 1999:455).

Both Urciuoli and Hill focus on borderland spaces of interaction. Urciuoli’s framework adopts NYPR community members’ points of view, highlighting degrees of membership within different social networks that pattern according to domains of situated language use. Hill’s framework underscores the societal, hegemonic point of view where all spaces are potentially informed by a dominant, racializing language ideology. In Hill’s terms, Urciuoli’s “outer spheres” are stripped of their unmarked status to reveal how they are de facto monoglot Standard English (Silverstein 1996) and racially coded white. These works moreover reflect shifts within scaling processes inherent in U.S. multilingual spaces, many of which are shaped by institutionally specific ideologies and procedures. The criteria for evaluating communicative competency changes depending on how particular polycentric interactional spaces orient to different orders of indexicality, which in turn presuppose different scales of social structure (Blommaert et al. 2005). We will elaborate this point in our analysis of ambiguous, outer-sphere, interpreter-mediated encounters, wherein racialization took the form of misrecognition of language as autonomous code, rather than register in translation. In other instances, linguistic profiling was more clearly the case.

THEORIZING NEW IMMIGRANT CHILD INTERPRETERS’ SUBJECT POSITIONS

The logic of late capitalism, especially as it has been examined in the critical scholarship on transnationalism (Kearney 1995; Nonini and Ong 1997; Stephen 2007), presumably marks an era historically and qualitatively different from that out of which borderlands writing initially grew. Increasingly, children play an important role within the global political economy, with its disjunctive transnational flows of capital, media, and labor. Immigrant children’s legal status as nonfree citizens—as children as well as sometimes undocumented ones—and the work of translation and interpretation are multiply marked. When children speak to and for adults, they overstep the bounds of U.S. mainstream notions of childhood, becoming liminal subjects who have responsibility but lack authority. They speak on behalf of a heterogeneous group of new immigrants who occupy subaltern positions within a racially coded system of class distinction. In U.S. labor markets, for example, many immigrants classified as “Latino/a” (working-class Mexicans, in particular) are segmented into subcontracted, deskilled, low-wage jobs—“mobility traps” (Davis 1999)—that compete with out-sourced industries overseas.

Historically, the children of immigrants likely played a role as language and culture brokers for their families, but there is scant mention of this work in immigrant memoirs and other explorations of child immigrants in history (Orellana 2009). For example, Selma Cantor Berrol’s 1995 classic, Growing Up American: Immigrant Children in America Then and Now, offers many fascinating details about the work, school, and play experiences of the children of immigrants to the United States in the early 1900s. She considers intergenerational conflict and other aspects of parent–child relationships but makes no mention of children’s activities as linguistic or cultural brokers. The absence of attention to language brokering in historical reports and literature suggests both the invisibility of the practice and of children as actors and agents.

Brian Harris (2008) notes that focused disciplinary attention to the study of translation services in the United States and Britain only emerged in the 1980s, coinciding with large-scale immigration. He suggests that individual- and minority-rights discourses called attention to the need for expanded services in “community” or “public service interpreting.” A logic of neoliberal governance informs these discourses: the individual as consumer-subject, often stripped of historical and social positioning, is afforded certain “rights” and “responsibilities.” How different institutions and commercial enterprises view individual rights versus responsibilities shapes the degree to which ethnolinguistic minorities are provided translation and interpretation services. From a monolingual immigrant parent’s perspective, the use of a family member to provide translation services when not rendered by institutions is a strategic response—an assertion of a competent self.

How adults hear what children say is also filtered through racializing and ethicizing discourses, indexically presupposing ideologies that differentially value kinds of language(s) and new immigrants. Child interpreters have been portrayed in episodes of the popular U.S. TV shows ER and Law and Order; in the Hollywood film Spanglish; and in various newspaper reports (e.g., Flores 1993; Gold 1999). But the voices in these portraits are framed by adults and ideologically interpolated through authoritative discourses (Bakhtin 1981), which present the children’s work as deviant and potentially dangerous to themselves and to others, without critically examining the power relations that shape the experiences.

Social-scientific labels often obscure power differentials. In the literature, these children have been referred to as Natural Translators (Harris and Sherwood 1978), language brokers (Shannon 1987; Tse 1996), immigrant children mediators (Chu 1999), and informal interpreters (Cohen with Moran-Ellis and Smaje 1999). These terms provide no sense of the inherent power differentials that children are expected to mediate, and some suggest that children are somehow neutral rather than aligned with their families. Guadalupe Valdés’s (2002) term, family interpreters,
is an exception, and Valdés makes clear that she sees children working with their parents as part of a performance team, presenting a public face for the family (cf. Katz 2007).

In our own work (Orellana et al. 2003b), we coined the term *para-phrasing* to refer to these interstitial social practices. This term deliberately invokes a play on the Spanish preposition *para* and its English translation (for, in order to) to name what children do when they phrase things *for* others and *in order to* accomplish social goals. The term *para-phraser* may be critiqued in the same way as the other terms; it suggests political neutrality that is of course not the case when children *speak to* and *for* adult authority figures. At the same time, the prefix *para-*, as in *paralegal* or *paramedic*, does index a disparity of power between what these children do and what is seen as “real” translating. Like other paraprofessionals, *para-phrasers* may act in capacities for which they have no formal preparation and in which their qualifications are open to question and critique.

**FIELD SITES AND METHODS**

The U.S. Census Bureau lists Illinois as one of six gateway states, or ports of entry, for many new immigrants to the United States (Perry and Schachter 2003). In 2000, Illinois was ranked the top fifth Latino/a state with an estimated population of 1,527,573. Chicago was the top third Latino/a city with 26 percent of the total population self-identifying as “Hispanic or Latino” (approximately 752,964 residents). Finally, Cook County was deemed the top third Latino/a county in the country (approximately 1,071,740 residents), following Dade County, Florida, and Los Angeles County, California.

In “Chicagoland” neighborhoods, class-based patterns of ethnoracial segregation shape Latino/a migrants’ access to quality goods and services. We locate our own work within two of these communities, one urban and one suburban. The urban context was a predominantly Latino/a neighborhood, with a small Polish immigrant population. The families in our study had been there for 15 years or more and maintained close ties to their Mexican states of origin (Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, and Durango). Many families owned their homes and rented out floors to extended family, friends, or other new immigrants. The second site for our research was a bifurcated mixed-ethnic, mixed-income, suburban community near Chicago that is home to a small but growing number of immigrants from Mexico. The families we worked with hailed from the Mexican state of Guanajuato within the last five to ten years. In both communities, the majority of these working-class families segmented into the service sector and agribusiness.

Fieldwork focused on documenting the *para-phrasing* experiences of 18 young people (12 girls and six boys) living in these two sites. Some of these youth had immigrated to the United States with their families, whereas others were born here to immigrant parents. Thus, the youth are all members of a borderland space not really from here but not really from there either: what Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut (2001) call the 1.5 generation. Participants were between ten and 12 years old at the time we began working with them.

Data include thousands of pages of field notes based on participant-observations of these children in their homes and classrooms; transcripts of interviews with the children, their teachers, parents, and administrators; transcripts of more than 80 audio-taped *para-phrasing* encounters; and 132 journal entries about youth’s translation situations. Written informed consent was obtained for all active participants in this study; we also secured consent from the people for whom children translated regularly, following Internal Review Board protocol. Identifying information was removed or changed to ensure confidentiality.

For this manuscript, we drew on observations recorded in field notes, youths’ journal accounts, and interviews. We coded all audio-taped examples with an eye to children’s positions within these encounters and the discourse strategies that indexed or potentially made salient participants’ ethnicized, racialized, or class-based identities. In the following sections, we sketch the social processes that shaped children’s subject-positions in these public interactions and engage in focused analyses of events reported in journals, interviews, and two live interpreter-mediated events to unpack each of the three named dimensions. Our discussion of these cases is also informed by our analyses of the larger body of data (Dorner et al. 2007; García Sánchez and Orellana 2006; Orellana with Dorner and Pulido 2003a; Orellana and Reynolds 2008; Orellana et al. 2003b).

**THE BORDERLands OF U.S.-IMMIGRANT CHILDHOODS WITHIN THE BORDERLands OF INTERPRETER-MEDIATED EVENTS**

Mrs. Aguilera, an immigrant parent from Guanajuato, Mexico, described a situation in which she relied on her son, whom she described on other occasions as her “little man around the house,” to speak to the police when she felt incapable of speaking.

Ahora tuvimos un percance aquí en el lago con unas personas que nos agredieron, él habló con la policía. Él tuvo que hablar con la policía porque nos estaban molestando. Nosotros estábamos allí bien, y yo le digo, porque yo como estaba, ya, este, yo tenía miedo de ver a esa gente yo ya ni podía ni hablar. Entonces le dije: ‘Míjito ven y ustedes diganle, ustedes diganle lo que está pasando.’ Y ellos empezaron a decirle. Como Nova, empezó a decirle a la policía.

Now we had an incident here at the lake with some people who were bothering us, and he spoke with the police. He had to speak with the police because they were bothering us. We were fine there, and I, I tell you, because I was like, like, I was afraid because of seeing those people and I couldn’t even speak. So I said to him, ‘Come my son, and you (plural) tell, you tell what is happening.’ And they began to tell. Like Nova, he began to tell the police.
In another immigrant household, Mrs. Gutiérrez asked her daughter, María, to handle a phone call from the doctor’s office regarding the results of a tuberculosis test. When María faced difficulties with the register (correctly identifying the type of test using the medical term) and the procedure (coordinating talk over the phone with a stranger while managing a synchronous, multiparty interaction with incomplete visual cues), she asked whether there were any Spanish-speaking staff that could speak with her mother. In this case, such a person was available. After the call, Mrs. Gutiérrez spoke disapprovingly of María to the researcher, accusing her of “not wanting to help” (“no me quiere ayudar”). María countered that she lacked contextual knowledge about the reason for the call and the specialized lexicon (i.e., how to say tuberculosis in English). Mrs. Gutiérrez dismissed her reasoning, arguing that María knew English and therefore was more qualified than she to handle the call.

These incidents reveal the anxieties that immigrant parents feel in outer-sphere encounters and their sense that their bilingual children are more capable of managing these situations than they are. They also suggest some of the challenges that children must grapple with when they are placed in these complex positions. The situations themselves can be anxiety provoking (for children and for adults), as Amanda’s journal testimony, quoted in the introduction reveals. An older youth, Luz, pinpointed one source of anxiety: the realization that her words could be used against her disabled mother when she translated for social service providers.

I just remembered that it wasn’t “how much do you need this time?” but instead they would always ask, “Have you had any changes in your income or situation? Are you receiving any other sources of income? Do you have a job now?” They would always insist on asking these questions in an interrogating way that was meant to put pressure on my mom, as if they were seeking her to confess or something. It was really bad, especially because I would sense it and I would have to be the one to respond to these sorts of accusations. [Interview, October 17, 1999]

In spite of these pressures, these young people assumed the head position of a performance team (Goffman 1959; Valdés 2002), representing their families’ interests to the world.

There are structural and ideological reasons why children emerge at the forefront of these interpreter-mediated interactions. The U.S. compulsory system of education grants children access to English language and literacy instruction (Vásquez et al. 1994). Most children in our study were the oldest siblings and, because of their years in U.S schools, had more familiarity with English and U.S. institutional and cultural practices than did their siblings. Older siblings were more likely than younger siblings to retain high levels of Spanish, in part because of a school-cultivated shift in dominance toward English, which influenced the linguistic milieu of the household. Sometimes parents viewed a child who was not the eldest as possessing a natural proclivity and willingness to take on the role but, more often than not, the oldest was considered the most talented and prepared for the tasks in terms of bilingual competency.

Second, there is indirect evidence that the child’s role as mediator served to shelter parents from directly experiencing racializing valuations through ethnolinguistic profiling. Sammy, aged 15 at the time, remarked in a journal entry how his mother, an apartment manager, would ask him to interpret for her when she collected rent from her tenants because she spoke with a “huge accent.” His observation suggests the possibility that his mother was wary of speaking English even in an outer-sphere encounter in which she occupied a relative position of power. Although the policing of Standard English proficiency is certainly an issue, many of the observed cases reveal the situation to be more complex. Immigrant parents (like Mrs. Gutiérrez, cited above) and participants representing outer-sphere public and private organizations and businesses often misrecognized language as autonomous code, rather than contextually specific instances of language as register (Agha 2006). Thus, the type of racialization may have had to do with how well one performed register-specific demands. Demands included knowledge of a specialized lexicon (e.g., tuberculosis) and grammar, procedural knowledge of how to effectively make an inquiry or request a service, constraints within routine institutional participant structures and frameworks that rendered multiparty formats problematic, and tacit institutional practices constraining participation in speech acts and activities.7 To consider another case, Marina’s musings on this last point are instructive. She wondered if her parents’ reliance on her might have led to them being infantilized: “I felt embarrassed, because there I was, a child translating for adults. I felt that people would think bad of my parents because they did not know the language. I did not want them to be stereotyped. At times I felt that they would be looked at like little kids. I did not want that” (interview, September 30, 2001).

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the emergence of child interpreters as social phenomena may be viewed as a creative response to the current neoliberal order that holds the individual immigrant (and, by extension, individual families) responsible for self-representations within civil and state social institutions. Take, for example, the case of a friend of Fernando’s extended family who enlisted his help in inquiring about a legal matter over a domestic dispute (see Figure 2). Fernando wrote in his journal:
This seems to be the case even in medical spheres where hospitals are required by law to provide interpreter services; children are still called to interpret when no one else can. In a live, audiorecorded encounter, Sammy provided a nurse receptionist with his family's proof of insurance, social security information, and informed consent. Sammy knew all of the information by heart, a reflection of his accumulated expertise in navigating these encounters. When it came time to sign the paperwork, the nurse receptionist told him, “No, you don’t sign. You’re not old enough to sign anything” (excerpt from an audio recording of an interpreter-mediated event, October 17, 2001). It is ironic that the sole person capable of providing this service is considered legally incapable of representing himself or his family because of requirements delimiting authorized participation in this particular type of legal speech act. This case, like Marina’s experiences, reveals how a neoliberal logic of flexible but unauthorized subjectivity materializes in routine institutional discourse practices within particular spheres of communicability (Briggs 2005).

Finally, indifferent and negligent institutional policies and practices also necessitate the creation of child interpreters. Consider the following statement made by a researcher who was examining the haphazard ways in which judicial settings provided immigrants with translation services:

I once testified as expert witness in a case in which Oregon and federal police arrested a man after serving a warrant later reading the accused his rights using the man’s own 13-year old daughter—the only person present during the search and seizure raid who spoke both Spanish and English—as “translator.” [Haviland 2003:774]

In this high-stakes encounter, representatives of the U.S. system of law are responsible for positioning the child as “translator” (with the quotation marks as used here serving to discredit the child’s competencies). Haviland’s reaction suggests that this act contradicts dominant views of what children should be allowed or expected to do (Schep-Hughes and Sargent 1998; Stephens 1995). But beyond stepping outside of the presumed “protected” space of childhood, this Mexican immigrant girl has been made an extension of state practices of surveillance, expected to police the actions of her own kin. In the following sections, we examine two institutional contexts where children adopt dual roles, providing service and surveillance for different parties represented in the exchanges (Wadensjö 1998). Even in the most mundane circumstances, racializing discourses are palpably experienced, sometimes based on overt acts of
racial and linguistic stigmatization and sometimes based on more covert or ambiguous actions.

**Educational Interpreter-Mediated Encounters**

Research on parent–teacher conferences within the ethnomethodological tradition reveals that adults treat these events as a problem-solving activity (Pillet-Shore 2003). In cases where children serve as interpreters, they become extensions of institutional surveillance over their own social and intellectual development, and racializing discourses may play a role in shaping interactional dynamics. For example, in the public schools we observed, new immigrant “Hispanic” students were often compared either to working-class African American or middle-class white students. Assessments of parental involvement in school were an outlet for racializing discourses (Delgado-Gaitan 1990). Deficit perspectives informed presuppositions about home-language and literacy practices (Spindler 2000; Zentella 2005). In some of the parent–teacher conferences, ethnicization and racialization occurred simultaneously. Children were ethnicized for successfully interpreting in English just as their parents were racialized; they were presumed to “lack” English and thus considered incapable of supporting children’s academic achievement, especially in the practice of enforcing the dominant storybook to chapterbook progression of literacy development (Bialostok 2002; Heath 1986). Valdés’s (2002) work with young interpreters has sought to challenge this bias by expanding notions of “giftedness” to include bilingual child interpreters. However, in practice, bilingual immigrant children generally are not viewed through this lens.

**Excerpt 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L#</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Utterance/Action</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teacher:</td>
<td>do you want to translate for your mother?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nova:</td>
<td>okay, okay [??] and I don’t know how to say like cool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>cool is cool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>(laughter from teacher and Nova)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>N:</td>
<td>uhm él es un buen amigo y</td>
<td>He’s a very good friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>inteligente bueno (.) y</td>
<td>intelligent, nice and funny,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>simpático, cool inte- interesante y</td>
<td>cool, interesting and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>inteligente</td>
<td>smart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>N:</td>
<td>inteligente,</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>buen- bueno</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>ene ene- energético</td>
<td>energetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>muy gracioso</td>
<td>very funny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>y dibuja muy bien</td>
<td>and he draws very well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>muy- fel-es es gracioso</td>
<td>very happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td>muy feliz porque él le gusta dibujar</td>
<td>because he likes to draw.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>uhm huh, now Nova that was interesting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td>I was noticing what you were translating for your mother,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td>that you do the same thing in Spanish that you do</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>when you are reading aloud in English.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>que a veces a veces no</td>
<td>that- that- when he reads out loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>que cuando lee en voz alta</td>
<td>in literature class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>en la clase de literatura</td>
<td>for example he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
<td>por ejemplo él</td>
<td>it’s he- reads- e- e- reads like- this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td>es lee e- e- lee así ((staccato voice))</td>
<td>like with with break(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td>que con con quebra.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other cases, the procedural orientation of the speech event itself contributes to the racialization of the child interpreter. The following interaction took place in a progressive suburban school. It illustrates how the student’s performance as translator is transformed into surveillance. The teacher, Ms. Johnson, was unusual among the suburban teachers in that she was able to speak some Spanish. Throughout the conference, she focused on Nova’s weaknesses, following the problem-focused orientation that was common to the teachers’ narratives (García Sánchez and Orellana 2006). At one point, she invited a positive evaluation of Nova and asked him to translate some classmates’ written comments. The text described Nova as a good friend and an intelligent, kind, energetic, clever, and funny person who enjoys drawing and making everyone around him laugh.

**Excerpt 1. Nova's parent–teacher conference (February 28, 2002).** In lines 16–24, the teacher theorized that what she had previously thought to be Nova’s problem with English was also a problem with Spanish. At this conversational turning point, Nova’s mother suggested a contextually sensitive and more plausible conclusion: that perhaps the “problem” had to do with stage fright. Ms. Johnson rejected this possibility. Instead, she declared that Nova had a reading problem. She assured Nova that she would be able to help him improve his reading skills while noting “que tiene un problema en español también” (lit., he has a problem in Spanish as well). Ms. Johnson thus rendered Nova’s competency inadequate in both Spanish and English.

There was no real empirical basis to support that he had a “problem.” Nova simply engaged in self-initiated repair, something that most interpreters routinely do as they...
attempt equivalent translations (e.g., line 14). This interaction suggests how the problem-seeking nature of this speech event, combined with overdetermined racializing discourses, can shape on-the-spot teacher evaluations.

**Commercial Interpreter-Mediated Encounters**

Commercial encounters are governed by the laws of the marketplace. In financial transactions, perceived social-class positions—inferred through symbols of social distinction (Bourdieu 1984), including clothing, linguistic style, phenotype, and general comportment—may impact social interaction through judgments that store personnel make about families’ ability to purchase commodities. Unlike high-stakes legal and medical encounters that not all children experience, commercial contexts of translation were common to all our participants.

Beatriz recalled a commercial transaction that seems humorous, but the humor is predicated on Beatriz’s heightened awareness that her race–ethnicity was open to scrutiny when she was sent by her mother to purchase cheese:

> I was about seven years old. My mother and I were at XXX [a grocery store]. My mother told me to stand in line and order a pound of American cheese from the deli while she shopped for other items. After about 15 minutes of waiting my turn, the woman behind the counter asked for my order and I told her that I wanted a pound of cheese. The woman then asked, “American, Italian, Swiss . . .” I thought she was asking for my nationality. I responded by saying, “Mexican.” In a frustrated tone of voice, she told me that they did not have any Mexican cheese.

Beatriz was a young adult at the time we interviewed her, and she recounted this memory from that vantage point. Although we do not know how Beatriz thought as a seven-year-old, nor what exactly transpired, we do know that she felt that her ethnicity was being interrogated.

Eleven-year-old Miguel recounted an incident in a journal entry (see Figure 3) that also intimates his sense of racialized discrimination in another commercial transaction. The circumstances surrounding this encounter are ambiguous. It is not clear what the service representative intended by this comment, nor what inspired it. This event may be unusual; families in our study were usually able to secure the services and products they needed without being subjected to evaluations of their mental capacities, as seems to have transpired in this transaction. But this episode reveals how Miguel experienced an arguably racialized discourse that was not explicitly marked. Children were positioned to mediate tacit messages that were denigrating to their families.

Josh (age 16) recounted his experience at a car dealership. Josh felt that the sales representative did not even want to try and sell his family a car; he reported an overheard conversation: “that guy (was) talking about how Mexicans can’t buy a car” (interview, February 17, 2005). He reflected, “That’s not right, though. I mean, they would not want to be the customers, you know, and be made fun of like that. I don’t think they’d like it. I mean, I don’t know why they do it. It’s just wrong” (interview, February 17, 2005). In this case, we do not know how the sales representative treated Josh and his family, but we can imagine how Josh would have experienced the transaction after overhearing this commentary.

Next we detail another encounter involving what Daniel Solórzano and colleagues call “microaggressions of race” (2000). In this episode, Estela (age ten) and her father, Mr. Balderas, tried to rent a musical instrument. Estela’s father played in a band with other men from his hometown, and another band member had rented from this music store. The store also served families who rented instruments for school lessons, and thus the personnel could be assumed to have experience dealing with children, although perhaps not in the capacity of interpreters. This transcript illustrates particularly well how original texts can be as imperfect and as fraught with ambiguities, contradictions, and silences as the translations that seek to re-present them (see Excerpt 2a).

**Excerpt 2a. Estela and father at the music store (December 1, 2001).** The exchange began with the salesclerk providing information about each instrument (lines 2–5). Mr. Balderas indicated that he was tracking the information when he responded, “Yeah” (line 6). When Estela began to translate, the clerk stopped providing information about the products—information that might be useful for the informed consumer. Instead, he reframed his role to provide information only about the cost of items. This may have been in part because of the fact that he had to wait for Estela to translate. To wit, his powers of persuasion were filtered through the voice of a child. But we wonder if the salesclerk had judged the family to be not well-informed about music or not able to afford the pricey instruments. As we show, this is suggested by the clerk’s response when Estela asked about payment options.

These exchanges, which involve stating and translating prices, continued for a few more turns until the clerk excused himself to check on a price. Estela and her father

![FIGURE 3. Miguel’s journal entry: Commercial encounter.](image-url)
discussed the payment options and posed questions when the clerk returned. Mr. Balderas asked Estela to explain to the clerk that he and others (inclusive we) had rented from this store before, implying that he was an experienced consumer and a musician.

Excerpt 2b. Estela and father at the music store (cont.) (December 1, 2001). Beginning at line 28, Estela translated faithfully, maintaining parallel syntactic and lexical forms in English with that her father had used in Spanish as well as making explicit the implicit referents when she rendered line 33, “hemos sacado muchos instrumentos aquí,” as “his band has taken out a lot of instruments from here” in line 34. Her gloss recovered the implied referent of the original utterance, making clear that her father played in a band. She transformed the first-person plural and inclusive conjugation of nosotros (we) to simply “his band,” but the clerk could infer that the referent “his band” would also include Mr. Balderas.

The salesclerk, however, did not pick up on the substance of the comment. Instead of providing information about payment options, he focused only on Estela’s preservation of the nonspecific term; in English as in the original Spanish, the verb left ambiguous just how the instruments were “taken out.” He emphasized the fact that the instruments were paid for in line 35, “They’ve paid for them.”

Up until and including this moment, Estela’s father had provided information that presented himself as a good, reliable, and return customer. When they identified a person they knew in common (José Rodríguez), instead of aligning with Mr. Balderas’s stance of affiliation with a reliable customer, the clerk’s stance as assessment (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987) framed his customer as one who might not pay for the instrument. Specifically, the clerk said of Mr. Rodríguez in line 45, “um he still pays it, um.” “Still” may serve pragmatically, like disjunctive “but,” to juxtapose two different points of view: one who pays versus one who does not. Who customers were assumed to be—in particular, their perceived social-class status, as marked especially through imputed ethnicity and language—shape the translation, especially in terms of what wasuptaken and ignored.

Excerpt 2b:

28 Estela: he says he wants credit
29 like =
30 Salesclerk: a payment plan?
31 E: yeah
32 S: ok, uh::
33 Mr. Balderas: dile que hemos sacado muchos instrumentos aquí
34 E: he says that his band has taken out a lot of instruments from here?
35 S: they’ve paid for them.
36 E: mhm
37 S: who, who’s uh?
38 E: recuerdo?
39 S: is that uh, José Rodríguez or, who’s? =
40 Mr. B: = yeah, José Rodríguez.
41 S: José? Yeah.
42 Mr. B: (that one) tuba
43 S: tubas and stuff. yeah,
44 E: um he still pays it, um =
45 E: dice que todavía lo paga (?)

Tell him that we have taken out many instruments from here.

Remember?

He says that he still pays for it (?)
even when para-phraser stayed very close to the original wording. Racialization in this instance became linguistic profiling. Although this business did not adopt the explicit practice of posting signs “No English, No Service,” as other Chicagoland businesses did (cf. De Genova 2005:45–46), the result was identical.

Interpreter-mediated interactions are similar to interethnic crosstalk encounters where participants operate with different systems for contextualizing conversational meanings (Bailey 1997; Gumperz 1982, 1992; Jupp et al. 1982). Within today’s politicized climate around Mexican immigration, para-phrasing encounters, however, are unique because outer-sphere representatives may engage in linguistic profiling; the very fact that families “need” translation in these quotidian encounters functions as a metacommunicative cue, drawing undue attention to their citizenship status. Further, coparticipants do not simply negotiate their own interethnic crosstalk; rather, children shoulder the responsibility of mediating these exchanges for others while lacking the institutional authority to do so.

Although at times children expressed ambivalent feelings about their work “in the middle,” noting the uncomfortable nature of encounters like the ones we have detailed, at other times children wrote in their journals and talked with us about powerful feelings of accomplishment and self-worth when other participants positively acknowledged their services. This included times when the child volunteered his or her services to mediate between strangers in outer-sphere commercial encounters. These encounters were still simultaneously about service and surveillance; however, the child interpreter did not necessarily become the object of racializing discourses. Sammy wrote about his interpretation of an ambiguous service encounter between different adult coparticipants, generalizing from a specific, situated instance in his reflection (see Figure 4). In this interaction, he went out of his way to help a Spanish-speaking stranger, even when the service representative would not, and he felt that the service he provided was “all worth while.”

**CONCLUSION: RACIALIZED INTERPRETER-MEDIATED INTERACTIONS**

Children who occupy the subject position of para-phraser are pivotal participants. They stand, literally and figuratively, “in the middle” between speakers, mediating conversation between their kin and others. They engage in real-world activities alongside adults, commanding a powerful position through which they shape the flow of interaction while developing register-specific competencies. They also enable things to happen in the world more than is often possible, given that young people are usually not authorized to participate in these activities because of their social status as children. Thus, Latino/a and Mexican immigrant child interpreters experienced the libraray potential of borderland experiences as they forged new roles and identities for themselves (Anzaldúa 1987). When we interviewed Es-tela at age 15, she told us of recently having called the manager at Burger King to protest the treatment her mother had received as an employee. “So I just left messages and I was like if we have to go to court, you know, cause I had to say something, so I was like if we have to go to court we’ll go to court because I don’t like people like mistreating the people working there and stuff” (interview, June 14, 2006).

But hegemonic discourses circulating within white public space circumscribed child translators’ power, as well as did their parents’ cultural and generational perspectives.

FIGURE 4. Sammy’s journal entry: Commercial encounter.
The very work of service opened them to ethnicized and racialized surveillance. As well, because they were children, they easily became the objects of adults’ evaluations of their competencies. Ironically, the very act of speaking for adults exposed children to adults’ critiques of their linguistic, cognitive, social, and behavioral competencies. The fact that their translations were evaluated and judged by adults who were incapable of translating underscores that irony. Judgments were especially searing when they were infused by racialized assumptions about the youth and their families; in some cases, children were left feeling responsible for their families’ maltreatment, despite the fact that they had no real institutional authority to manage the events. Hence, Estela backed her threat by indexing the power of law through mention of practices of litigation. This is the type of flexible, neoliberal positionality that emerges when outer-sphere spaces refuse to offer translation and interpretation services.

Immigrant children were not merely the objects of surveillance in these encounters, nor were they merely exposed to adults’ racialized judgments about them and their families. As subjects who can and do speak, and who spoke for institutions of power as well as to them, they unwittingly became extensions of institutional practices of surveillance over their families. Even as they represented their parents to others, they interpreted institutional registers, representing the voices of teachers, doctors, lawyers, store personnel, and others to their families. Sometimes these voices were infused with discourses that constructed their families, and themselves, as deviant.

In commercial white public space, racialization takes the form of differential delivery of customer service. Employees may adopt unwilling or impatient stances, make untoward comments, and simply not interpret the substance of a child interpreter’s translation, leaving families to question their intentions. And children are not able to fully conceal racializing effects from their family members. Marina worried that her parents had been infantilized just as Miguel wrote how he had to translate “all these things,” including the salesperson’s rude remark, which angered his father. In the interaction at the music store, Estela initially did not translate the salesclerk’s emphatic comment in line 35 that the other band members paid for the instrument. She merely acknowledged his stance with a “mmh” (line 36) and thereby avoided revealing the commentary’s implicit message to her father. However, eventually she had to translate the salesclerk’s position (line 46). She retained the disjunctive “still” within her gloss. This afforded her father the chance to infer that this comment had been stated already and that the salesperson was sustaining an intractable position. In parent–teacher conferences, children were sometimes expected to explain their teachers’ evaluations of their academic competencies through naturalized discourses that presumed their language or home life to be a problem. In these cases, children were often ethnicized “good ethnics” learning English, whereas their parents remained racialized subjects, those who required the service of interpretation.

Finally, children’s social positions in an age-graded world mean that the power they acquired as translators was not one, generally speaking, that they got to choose for themselves. Many children told us how they “had to” translate or were “put to do so” by others because there was no one else who could. In this sense, the power they achieve is one that they were often powerless to refuse. They occupied a borderland subject position—one in which they had to speak for others in voices that sometimes reproduced authoritative discourses, with both symbolic and material effects.

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NOTES
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1. All names are pseudonyms, selected by participants.
2. The CNN article did not provide the original utterance in Spanish.
3. For example, De Genova (2005) noted that the implementation of ESL workplace courses, instead of promoting empowerment, served to discipline and stigmatize the workers who participated.
4. Throughout the entire article, we italicize and hyphenate these terms.
5. In the entire Cook County area, Latinos and Hispanics of any self-declared race who self-identified on the 2003 American Community Survey U.S. Bureau as Mexican numbered 875,580, as Puerto Rican 139,698, as Cuban 10,270, and as “Other” 120,270 for an estimated total of 1,145,585.
7. Celia Wadensjö (1998) examined how the discourse practices used during police interrogation and medical examinations presumed dyadic formats.
8. The transcription conventions used here are loosely adapted from those used in conversation analysis. A period indicates a downward utterance final contour, a question mark indicates an upward contour, and a comma indicates an up–down contour. Colons inserted within an utterance indicate sound stretches, and underlined words indicate increased volume. A hyphen indicates a self-interruption or cut-off speech and a tilde indicates rapid or compressed speech. Overlapping talk is indicated by brackets at the point where overlap occurs, and latched speech across turns of talk is indicated by the equals sign. Other paralinguistic, facial expressions, and gestures are included in double parentheses. Our
translations are offset into a column parallel to the utterance. Lines are generally hard returned at in-breath points. Significant pauses are indicated in tenths of a second within parentheses. Quotation marks indicate that the speaker is directly quoting reported speech.

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FOR FURTHER READING
(These selections were made by the American Anthropologist Editorial Interns as examples of research related in some way to this article. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the authors.)

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