

# **Bridging a Gap: Language Brokering within Three-generational Italian-English Bilingual Families<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper explores patterns of non-professional interpreting in three-generational conversations within Italian-English bilingual families. Second-generation participants interpret from Italian to English or English to Italian during intergenerational family meal-time conversations, using interpreting as a resource for conversational management. I examine these patterns as part of a larger language and cultural brokering practice. As it is used in this paper, language brokering refers to ‘interpretation and translation performed in everyday situations by bilinguals who have had no special training’ (Tse 1996: 486).

Many recent studies approach non-professional interpreting as a complex language brokering activity in which bilinguals (often children) interpret for non-bilinguals (usually adults) in institutional settings (Shannon, 1990; Tse, 1995, 1996; Valdés, 2003). Most language brokering research focuses on bilingual children or adolescents brokering between language minority group ‘insiders’ and majority group ‘outsiders’, finding that child language brokers have more power and responsibility than children are traditionally believed to have, and that brokers become bicultural to adapt to ‘competing demands of two cultural worlds’ (Weisskirch & Alva, 2002: 2). Acoach & Webb (2004) assert that brokering practices simultaneously promote assimilation to the host culture and maintenance of the native culture through frequent contact with and negotiation between the two. However, non-professional interpreting is still poorly understood, and Acoach & Webb (2004) and Weisskirch & Alva (2002) call for an exploration of the impact of language brokering on family language use.

Unlike previous research, this paper focuses on adults who broker within bilingual family interaction. Second-generation family members have served as interpreters for first-generation relatives in institutional contexts since they migrated as children nearly fifty years ago. They extend this practice to the family context, brokering between first- and

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third-generation family members just as they do between family members and outsiders. Research within families is important in understanding the implications of language brokering because such roles and practices may serve as an acculturation agent for children and not for parents. Most studies of language brokering focus on children in recent migrant families, however, this paper demonstrates how the practice of mediating between minority-language insiders and majority-language outsiders relates to family interactions, particularly in families that have been settled in North America for a longer period, and are further along in the language shift process.

I argue here that ideologies of family and ethnic identity are locally constituted in family interaction and extend interpreting practices in public contexts to the private family context, where they are used as a significant source of conversational management. Additionally, language brokering research often focuses on situations in which brokers interpret out of necessity because of differences in language repertoires and communicative competence. This paper, however, demonstrates a situation in which non-professional interpreting is used as a conversational resource without such necessity.

## 2. Data and Participants

This study is based on fieldwork conducted with two three-generational Italian-English bilingual families, one currently living in Stamford, Connecticut, and the other in Border City,<sup>2</sup> Ontario.<sup>3</sup> Both families are from a small town in the Lazio region of Italy, and speak a non-standard Italian variety. They migrated to North America in the 1950s with no intent of returning to Italy. Both families (and the larger Italian-American and Italian-Canadian communities in which they place themselves) are currently in the process of rapid language shift. Table (1) below lists the participants in this study.<sup>4</sup>

### (1) Individuals and families

Family	Generation	Participant Label	Age at time of recording	Age at time of migration
Stamford	1	TINA(1)	86	40
	2	IDA(2)	56	10
		MONA(2)	54	8
	3	SARA(3)	24	American-born
Border City	1	ADA(1)	81	28
	2	NINA(2)	56	4
	3	LAURA(3)	28	Canadian-born

First-generation (1<sup>st</sup> Gen) family members migrated to North America as adults with children, second-generation (2<sup>nd</sup> Gen) participants migrated as young children, and third-generation (3<sup>rd</sup> Gen) participants are North American-born. Second- and third-generation speakers report that they perceive the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gen and younger to have assimilated to their North American surroundings, and that they have broader social networks than their 1<sup>st</sup>-Gen relatives. First-generation members' closest and most frequent contacts are with other

<sup>2</sup> Border City is a pseudonym

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note my role as the ethnographer. The Stamford family is my own family; I am a member of the third generation. I have been able to position myself as an insider-outsider ethnographer with the Border City family.

<sup>4</sup> All names are pseudonyms, with generation markers in parentheses.

Italians. They speak Italian and English but use Italian more frequently in their daily interactions. Second-generation participants have broader networks, and report to use English in most of their interactions. They have native control of Italian and primarily use Italian with 1<sup>st</sup>-Gen relatives. Third-generation participants have contact with other Italians mainly through family relationships, have passive knowledge of Italian, and use English almost exclusively in all interactions. Family members believe that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Gen have assimilated completely into mainstream US/Canadian linguistic and cultural practice. While not a primary focus of this paper, these network relationships and general language use patterns demonstrate noteworthy intergenerational differences in social behavior.

Three data sources are used for this study. Conversational data come from six audio-recorded three-generational meal-time conversations. Informal interviews with 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen participants provide information about speakers' ideologies of language, ethnicity, and family interaction as well as sociohistorical accounts of the families and communities. Ethnographic field notes from participant observation are used in conjunction with ethnographic interviews to understand retrospective accounts of language brokering experiences.<sup>5</sup> Following the ethnomethodological approach to bilingual conversation set forth by Auer (1984), I use methods of Conversation Analysis to locate recurrent patterns in family interpreting. I also examine ideologies of language, ethnic identity, and family structure to assess social motivations and meanings of interpreting.

### **3. Analysis and Discussion**

#### *3.1. Ideology and Interpreting*

This first section of the analysis relies primarily on metacommentary and reports of language brokering as expressed by 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen participants, with a goal of illuminating language ideologies. Language ideology refers to speakers' shared belief systems of linguistic use and structure (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Silverstein, 1979; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). While speakers' articulations of ideology and judgments of their own language use are often fragmentary and difficult to elicit, using metalinguistic data in conjunction with interactional data provides further information on social motivations of the conversational practices under investigation here. This approach complements a sequential approach in that it is not only speakers' identities that figure into language choice patterns, but also the beliefs that they have about their relationships with one another and the beliefs they have about their own and others' roles within a social aggregate. Thus, it is necessary to examine speakers' ideologies about these issues to gain a more robust understanding of their linguistic and social practices. I argue that ideologies revealed here are manifested and reconstructed locally in interpreting in family interaction.

Second-generation participants discuss feeling responsible for and performing a role mediating between flanking generations to maintain family cohesion. Quotation (2) below is a commentary on this mediating and unifying role.

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of data collection, none of the participants was aware of the subject of the research. I did not collect this data with questions of language brokering or interpreting in mind. Rather, discussions of language brokering and interpreting in interviews and examples of interpreting in family conversations emerged spontaneously. Thus, it is unlikely that participants had heightened awareness of language brokering during this research.

- (2) *the children and the grandparents have worked it out pretty good / I translate sometimes but not that often / we translate for you [3<sup>rd</sup> Gen] and we translate for them [1<sup>st</sup> Gen] so if it's not in English we translate for you and if it's not in Italian we translate for them / I don't know why because you understand and they do too / most of it anyway / but we do / I don't know we try to help it along maybe (Ida, Stamford)*

While 1<sup>st</sup>- and 3<sup>rd</sup>-Gen family members have negotiated their interactions on their own, 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen members still feel that they provide a service in tying the family together, demonstrating that they perceive each generation as linguistically and culturally distinct.

Participants also discuss a certain value of linguistic and cultural assimilation after migration. In Quotation (3), Ida remembers speaking English within a few months of migration, demonstrating language as a major index of assimilation.

- (3) *we thought it was really good that we could speak English we loved it ((laughs)) / and we didn't even have an accent like our parents or aunts uncles or some of the older cousins did and that was even better [...] within probably a couple of months we were speaking English / and we really were very proud of ourselves because we th- we felt like um that we were getting closer to being like all the other um like everybody else / oh and I can remember too that Grandpa my father really thought it was just like oh wo:w that we knew English and spoke so well me and Mona / and that it was so quick (Ida, Stamford)*

First-generation parents and second-generation children recognized these linguistic and cultural distinctions soon after migration, making them early resources for the second generation that the first generation did not have. Second-generation participants also comment that their parents never assimilated to their North American surroundings to the same extent as they did, as is demonstrated in Quotation (4).

- (4) *they [first generation] got by without assimilating because well first of all there was a big Italian community here / and they had their children who would translate for them / they would go with them to the doctor to the dentist the drugstore the cleaners the grocery store / they never went alone anywhere / and the children would translate for them / and we still do that now (Ida, Stamford)*

Children dealt with language issues for parents, essentially brokering for them outside the home. These practices continue today. Similarly, Nina recalls brokering for her older family members in Quotation (5) below.

- (5) *us being the oldest of the family / myself and my two cousins/ our parents would take us to wherever they had to do business so that we speak for them [...] oh and my mother would loan me out the the ((laughs)) [...] my mother would say oh you go with Vera because you know she can't speak to the doctor / and here you are in the doctor's office with an older lady that's gonna be examined you know ((laughs)) [...] that's some of the things that that we did because you know we could (Nina, Border City)*

As children soon after migration, second-generation family members assumed a role of brokering communication between their Italian-dominant older relatives and English speakers with whom they had to interact on a regular basis. Additionally, Nina expresses in Quotation (6) below that her mother can read and understand English but that she *just*

feels more comfortable with her children interpreting or translating for her, also noting the responsibility that 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen participants have taken on.

- (6) *oh my mom like you know we do everything for her ((laughs)) / oh there's a letter from the government you know ((laughs)) / what is it and you know she can read it / but it's just um I think she just feels more comfortable / it's either my brother or I you know uh [...] and I think all older children you know have had that role you know / they heaped a lot of responsibility on us very early you know (Nina, Border City)*

Nina's discussion in Quotation (7) below suggests that while participants brokered because of linguistic and cultural distinctions, they also attribute this practice to wanting to help their parents.

- (7) *I always thought oh if I could do something for them I want to and I still do because I think I can never repay them for what they what they did for me [...] but you just feel that way when somebody's been good to you that you want to do for them so um it was always that / and we were given a lot of responsibility (Nina, Border City)*

These comments suggest that multiple discourses come into play in language brokering. Brokering practices and roles can be related to orientations to language and cultural competence as well as an orientation to helping family, particularly older parents.

Additionally, in Quotation (8), Nina compares the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gen's brokering responsibilities with an idea that 3<sup>rd</sup>-Gen family members do not have similar obligations.

- (8) *at a certain age you know we had a lot of responsibilities whereas you know our kids don't have that you know / they don't have to / and I think that's one of the big differences between the generations (Nina, Border City)*

Overall, these commentaries refer to perceived linguistic and cultural distinctions within the family, which seems to be distinguished by generational membership. Orientations to perceived responsibility and brokering practices in public contexts impact family interaction, which is particularly visible in the interpreting patterns discussed below.

### 3.2. *Conversational Dimensions of Family Interpreting*<sup>6</sup>

In several sequences throughout the corpus, 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen family members interpret for either 1<sup>st</sup>-Gen or 3<sup>rd</sup>-Gen speakers. Interpretations are bi-directional; speakers may

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<sup>6</sup> Transcription conventions:

/	marks a tone group boundary within an utterance
(.)	micropause
(1)	pause or gap given in full seconds
((laughs))	non-linguistic information and contextual notes
?	indicates a rising intonation contour
[	simultaneous speech (overlap)
<b>Bold</b>	utterances in Italian
<i>Italics</i>	English translation below Italian utterance
<b><u>Bold &amp; Underline</u></b>	indeterminates

interpret from Italian to English or English to Italian, depending on the intended beneficiary. Three patterns of interpretation emerge, which are grouped into two categories. *Triggered interpretation* includes sequences in which speakers make direct verbal requests for clarification, or 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen participants perceive problems in the conversational sequence (e.g. gap). *Non-triggered interpretation* consists of excerpts in which a 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen participant interprets when interpretation is neither directly requested nor triggered by apparent turn-sequence problems.

### 3.2.1. Triggered Interpretation

In instances of triggered interpretation, second-generation family members pick up a request, neglected turn, or dispreferred turn shape by providing what they perceive to be a necessary translation. Excerpt (9) below illustrates one of very few examples in the corpus that seems to be a request for translation based on a comprehension problem.

(9) “Forest ranger”

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 1. Tina (1)  | <b>sempre miniva <u>Zio Michele</u> in campagna</b><br><i>Uncle Michele always came to the farm</i>                                       |
| 2. Mona (2)  | yeah  |
| 3. Sara (3)  | oh / mhm  |
| 4. Tina (1)  | <b>andava a cavallo / isse faceva guardia forestale / guarda bosco</b><br><i>he rode a horse / he was a forest ranger / forest ranger</i> |
| 5. Mona (2)  | <b>forestale / yeah</b><br><i>forest</i>  |
| 6. Sara (3)  | what did he do? what was it?  |
| 7. Ida (2)   | forest ra- like a forest ranger   |
| 8. Sara (3)  | oh yeah?  |
| 9. Ida (2)   | [mhm yeah   |
| 10. Mona (2) | [yeah he was a forest ranger  |
| 11. Sara (3) | oh ok   |

After a primarily Italian exchange in lines 1-5, Sara asks in line 6, *what did he do? what was it?* In line 7, Ida, a second-generation family member takes up this request and interprets the Italian terms for *forest ranger* into English. Notice that it is Ida in line 7 who responds to Sara’s question and that Mona, also a second-generation participant, repeats the English interpretation of this term in line 10. It is difficult to determine whether the question was actually directed to Ida or Mona, or if they are taking up by perceiving that the question was directed at them. Nonetheless, it is significant to the argument of the entire family’s perception of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gen’s negotiating role that it was a 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen speaker who assumed responsibility for providing the requested translation.

Having very few instances of directly requested interpretation in the corpus suggests that, despite potential perceptions otherwise, there are very few language comprehension problems among 1<sup>st</sup>-, 2<sup>nd</sup>-, or 3<sup>rd</sup>-Gen speakers. Nonetheless, certain interpretation patterns indicate a negotiation that often assumes the interpretation is necessary (perhaps as perceived by the second generation). This second type of triggered interpreting demonstrates this negotiation in instances in which a 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen participant provides translation because of a perceived problem in the conversational sequence. Excerpt (10) below demonstrates this pattern.

(10) “Which daughter?”

1. Ada (1) and this guy you know he married C’s daughter he was uh
2. come from America he didn’t grow to uh
3. Lisa which who did he marry? which daughter?
4. (1)
5. Nina (2) **quale delle figlie?**  
*which of the daughters?*
6. Ada (1) I don’t remember the whole thing you know

In line 3, I ask Ada a question, for which she does not provide a second pair part. A pause of one second follows, and Nina interprets trouble in the sequential organization of the interaction. Nina attempts to resolve this trouble spot by re-asking the question in Italian. After this reformulation, Ada provides the answer to my original question. I cannot reasonably claim that Ada did not answer the question due to a language comprehension problem as both of her turns in this exchange (lines 1 and 6) are uttered in English with no indication of trouble. Nonetheless, Nina’s attempt to resolve the turn sequence problem by using her interpreting resources indicates that she treats the pause as indicative of a language problem. Rather than perhaps allowing the first- and third-generation speakers to work out the problems on their own, the second-generation speaker steps in and attempts to bridge or broker a perceived gap between the first- and third-generation family members. Excerpt (11) below demonstrates a similar pattern, but the direction of interpretation is Italian to English, apparently for the benefit of a third-generation member.

(11) “On top of the mountain”

1. Ada (1) you see all the house here on top?
2. Lisa mhm
3. Ada (1) they rebuild all this one here
4. Nina (2) and that’s the house where I was born
5. Lisa oh yeah?
6. Nina (2) mhm that’s it
7. Ada (1) **Settefrati sta iech ncima la montagna / le vide?**  
*Settefrati is here on top of the mountain / do you see it?*
8. (1)
9. Nina (2) that’s Settefrati on top of the mountain there
10. Lisa yeah no I recognize it
11. Nina (2) yeah do you recognize it?
12. Lisa yeah

This pattern is also noteworthy in relation to its monolingual counterpart. If this were a monolingual conversation, that is, an interaction among speakers who do not share some multilingual resources, interpreting would not be an available conversational resource and Nina would most likely form a different idea of the source of trouble, in addition to having to take a different approach at resolution. Here, however, interpretation is a significant conversational resource used to resolve trouble spots and broker communication.

It is also important to note that in interpretations triggered by trouble in the sequential ordering of conversation, 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen members provide the translation. Since 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Gen interactants are conversational participants, it is assumed that they would also perceive sequential trouble. In spite of this, 1<sup>st</sup>- and 3<sup>rd</sup>-Gen speakers do not make the same attempts to resolve these turn-sequence issues in this way.

Despite the lack of apparent language comprehension problems in interpreting sequences, 2<sup>nd</sup>-Gen family members continue to treat language as a source of trouble in multi-generational interaction. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Gen's perception that turn allocation irregularities are language problems that they can solve through interpreting suggests an attitude that it is their responsibility more than anyone else's to move between the Italian and North American worlds, brokering communication to maintain the continuity and regularity of family conversation, and, by extension, to maintain cohesion among family members.

### 3.2.2. Non-triggered Interpretation

*Non-triggered interpretations* are sequences in which second-generation members interpret even though there are no apparent direct requests for interpretation and no apparent turn-sequence problems to be resolved. Excerpt (12) provides an example.

(12) "Molto Mario"

1. Ada (1) **Molto Mario e chiu fat d'isse**  
*Molto Mario is fatter than him*
2. Laura (3) [((laughs))
- Nina (2) [((laughs))
3. Ada (1) he look like me
4. Laura (3) you like to watch [Molto Mario don't you?
5. Nina (2) **[ti piace?**  
*do you like him/it?*
6. Ada (1) no I don't look nothing / I know that it's going on but I don't look

In line 4, Laura asks a question of her grandmother. In line 5, Nina interprets Laura's English question into Italian. There is no indication here that Ada did not understand the question or that interpretation was necessary due to turn-sequence problems. Additionally, Ada's immediately previous turn (line 3) and her turn immediately following the question and interpretation sequence (line 6) are both uttered in English. Nonetheless, Nina provides an English-to-Italian interpretation for her first-generation mother.

Excerpt (13) also demonstrates a non-triggered interpretation, in which a second-generation family member interprets a question from English to Italian without any indication that it is necessary based on miscomprehension or turn-sequence trouble.

(13) "Did they take pictures?"

1. Tina (1) I go on Dina house with all the kids
2. Sara (3) did you take a- did they take pictures?
3. Ida (2) **hanno fatt le pice?**  
*did they take pictures?*
4. Tina (1) yeah they have **le pice co tutte ste vaglione**  
*a picture with all of the kids*
5. Sara (3) oh that's nice
6. Lisa that's cute / yeah
7. Tina (1) all of my kids / yeah / grandchildren uh great-grandchildren

Excerpt (14) illustrates similar patterns of non-triggered interpretation with an Italian-to-English interpretation sequence.

(14) “Old shoes”

1. Nina (2) it was so cute because they used to joke with each other /
2. you know / **Tatone Filippo** and **Tatone?**  
Grandfather Filippo Grandfather
3. Laura (3) yeah
4. Ada (1) he say **eh Fili che te ne pare de chella? mm ma ve come te le**  
*hey Fili what do you think of her? well look at how she has*
5. **scarpe vecchie** (((laughs))  
*old shoes*
6. Laura (3), Lisa (((laughs
7. Nina (2) (((laughs)) they talked about there was a
8. woman across the street and they’d say hey what do you think of
9. her / and he’d say hey look at her old shoes
10. Ada (1), Lisa ((laughs))
11. Nina (2) he didn’t want old shoes he says ((laughs))
12. Ada (1) ((laughs)) they so funny when they was all together / yeah

There is no indication in Excerpts 12, 13, or 14 that interpretation is required through either direct verbal request or patterns in the conversational sequence. Second-generation participants still interpret without such triggering; thus I argue that interpretation of this type can be related to ideologies of language, ethnic identity, and family structure, particularly to the second-generation’s perceived role as brokers between culturally and linguistically distinct interactants.

#### 4. Conclusions

Second-generation family members have been providing interpreting services between their first-generation relatives and the Canadian/US English-speaking outside world since their post-migration childhoods. Thus, they were socialized soon after migration into roles as language brokers. As evidenced by participants’ commentary and the interpretation patterns presented here, the second-generation’s mediating role has extended throughout their lives and into different types of interactions. Interpreting has become a significant source of conversational management that is tied to a very local family context. Second-generation participants perceive that their first-generation family members have not assimilated and that the third generation is the furthest along in the assimilation process. This orientation suggests that just as second-generation family members feel responsible for mediating between culturally and linguistically distinct parties in public interactions, they also see first- and third-generation family members as linguistically and culturally distinct parties, and they feel responsible for mediating between them in family interactions. The tendency for non-triggered interpretation to go unquestioned also suggests that first- and third-generation participants orient to similar ideologies of their second-generation relatives’ roles in interaction, as does the tendency of first- and third-generation family members not to provide such translations.

Linguistic and cultural shifts of the type discussed here are a necessary response to the realities of migration in North America, particularly to the inflexibility of the pragmatic necessity of English. Explorations of language brokering demonstrate a way in which bilingual children of immigrant families acculturate and exist biculturally. Language

brokering has been shown to be fairly common among immigrant families (Tse, 1996; Weisskirch, 2005; Weisskirch & Alva, 2002), but little is known about how brokering experiences and ideologies mutually impact one another and how adults who brokered as children carry these experiences and ideologies into adulthood and into family contexts. This study demonstrates a situation in which the practice of language brokering and the ideologies surrounding it impact multigenerational family interaction in that second-generation family members act as interpreters even when it is not directly requested or indicated as necessary. Much research on interpreting practices demonstrates that language brokering arises out of a functional need due to difference in language competence between speakers. The data presented here, however, show that non-professional interpreting can be used as a strategy and resource for conversational management which helps achieve family cohesion. This paper also shows that second-generation family members extend interpreting practices and roles in public contexts to the private family context and illustrates that ideologies of family and ethnicity are rooted in local practices of family interaction.

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