

The gift of language: An anthropological approach to child language brokering in Barcelona

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Abstract

The phenomenon of child language brokering (CLB), that is, translation and interpreting tasks children take on to facilitate communication for their parents and other adults, is often invisible or neglected. The present article seeks to study CLB in the province of Barcelona (Spain) through the theoretical lens of Marcel Mauss's anthropological concept of the 'gift'. The authors employ interviews with child language brokers, young mediators and parents to show that children's language competences circulate as a gendered gift that produces and reproduces social ties of different kinds—family, extended family, community, the public—and with different levels of reciprocity.

KEYWORDS

CLB, gendered practice, gift, reciprocity

INTRODUCTION

Migration often involves language barriers that need to be overcome to adapt to the host society and enjoy basic rights. However, learning a new language as adults with few resources is not easy, and many parents face the reality that their children learn the host language faster than they do. Therefore, they start trusting their children for small—and not so small—translation and interpreting tasks.

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This is a reality in many places of our globalized world. However, the phenomenon of child language brokering (CLB) is very often invisible or neglected. This is the case in Catalonia where CLB has only been approached by Rubio Rico et al. (2014) and partially mentioned in more general anthropological studies, such as Beltrán Antolín and Sáiz López's (2001) description of the Chinese community in Catalonia, or Arrasate's (2018) thesis on Pakistani women in Barcelona, where CLB is just mentioned as a common practice in these communities.

Rubio-Rico et al. (2014), specifically, focused on CLB in healthcare settings by conducting interviews and focus groups with Maghrebi adults. Among the main results, the authors found out that CLB was mostly resorted to due to the lack of public service interpreting provision (Rubio-Rico et al., 2014, p. 5). Maghrebi adults in this study preferred relying on children to interpret—as also noted by Beltrán Antolín and Sáiz López (2001) who referred to the Chinese community—even though they were aware that not everything was rendered accurately and that this sometimes implied that children had to miss school (2014, p. 8).

The present article contributes to filling this research gap while also suggesting a new theoretical framework to discuss CLB as a generative structure of social relations. More specifically, we argue that children's linguistic competence can be conceptualized as a 'gift' using Marcel Mauss's (2009) analytical framework, first published in 1923 and which became a core anthropological concept in the study of reciprocity and exchange. To demonstrate this, we first define CLB through an overview of previous research on the subject; we then present the concept of gift in social anthropology and its potential use in the analysis of this practice. Next, we describe the method used in the research. In the fifth section, we present the analysis with extracts from the interviews; and finally, in the conclusions, we summarize our findings.

WHAT IS CHILD LANGUAGE BROKERING?

'Language brokering' is a term coined by Tse (1995), who used it to refer to the translation and interpreting tasks children take on to facilitate communication for their parents or other adults. The use of 'language brokering' instead of 'translation and interpreting' reflects children's agency while performing this task—as opposed to professional translators and interpreters' need for impartiality, see also Antonini (2015).

CLB has recently attracted increased scholarly attention—see, for instance, Weisskirch (2017) or Antonini et al. (2017)—but, as Faulstich Orellana (2017, p. 65) points out, 'it was virtually invisible in both the public eye and the research world' until the late 1980s, when the first studies were conducted.

Despite its recency, research in CLB has been quite fruitful and especially characterized by multidisciplinary, with studies conducted in diverse fields. For more complete reviews of the state of the art on CLB, see Angelelli (2017), Antonini (2010, 2015); Cline et al. (2010) or Faulstich Orellana (2017). In the field of anthropology, Orellana (2009), García-Sánchez (2014) and Guo (2014) are some of the most noteworthy contributions. Orellana's (2009) research spread for 10 years, which gave her a holistic understanding of what CLB implied for the children she worked with. In this sense, Orellana (2009) discusses the impact of CLB in these children, in their families but also outside the household, because CLB was ubiquitous, and enabled communication in all kinds of settings (commerce, banks, schools, healthcare, etc.). Nonetheless, CLB was so internalized that it had virtually become invisible even for the children themselves. García-Sánchez (2014), on the other hand, focused on the Moroccan immigrant community in a small village in the central southwest of Spain and she participated

‘as fully as possible in the daily lives of the children and the community’ for 16 months (Ibid., p. 64). She described children’s roles as language and culture brokers, but also analysed aspects regarding identity and ideology. Guo (2014) also focused on a specific community—Chinese families in Britain—and analysed how young children became intercultural mediators, not only by translating for their families, but also when learning from them how to behave in certain social encounters.

While we also use an anthropological approach to study CLB, our fieldwork has been more limited in terms of time, but wider and more varied in terms of the number of informants approached. We have not focused on specific communities, as was the case in García-Sánchez (2014) and Guo (2014). This has allowed us to identify common tropes of CLB as a social phenomenon in themselves. Finally, while these previous studies have tried to understand the role of children as language and culture brokers in their everyday familiar lives, we have focused in a broader way on examples of CLB that take place in public services—healthcare, schools, social services, etc.

THE GIFT IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Although everyday words like *gift*, *offering*, *grace* have long attracted the interest of philosophers and artists (Vidal, 2014), it was the incipient anthropological discipline of the mid-20th century which put the scientific analysis of these concepts on the table. In particular, the *Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, Marcel Mauss (1923/2009), laid the foundations for what is now a canonical perspective in sociocultural anthropology.

To summarize, on studying the different practices of the so-called ‘archaic societies’—stateless preindustrial societies with limited specialization in fields—Mauss believed that he had found the universality of the social tie which generates the act of giving, gifting or offering without expecting—at least in appearance—something in return. The *potlatch* ceremony, practised at the time by the Kwakiutl and Haida tribes from the western coast of the North American continent, would be the paradigm of this form of socialization which the French anthropologist called *gift economies*. They were great feasts organized by the members of one of the tribes with the aim of entertaining rivals with gifts and banquets. These ceremonies increased the symbolic prestige of the organizing tribe—showing that it was capable of squandering food and goods, even on its rival—and at the same time placed the opponent at risk of losing honour and confidence on not returning the favour. It is in this specific sense that the *gift* should be understood from the perspective of three fundamental obligations or moments: 1) the obligation to give, 2) the obligation to receive and 3) the obligation to return.

Mauss’s astuteness was to see that there was something extremely mundane behind the exoticism of these rituals of economic waste. Even in capitalist societies, governed by the precision of commercial exchange, the logic of the gift continues to be important on the level of everyday socialization: celebrations of birthdays, festivities, wedding ceremonies, feasts, etc. Prosaic rituals based on spontaneous generosity which, in fact, always bear the burden of reciprocity. Concepts such as *mianzi* and *guanxi* in China (Hwang, 1987), *izzet* in India and Pakistan (Arrasate, 2018) or *sadaqa* and *hassanat* in numerous Islamic cultures (Moufahim, 2013), show the multiple forms that the logic of the gift can adopt in different contemporary societies.

In short, the *gift economy* is opposed to the *market economy* since its ultimate function is not to obtain new goods through an equivalent exchange. On the contrary, the exchange of goods and services is just an excuse for the production and reproduction of social relationships through debt (Graeber, 2011). In these situations the importance of the social tie always prevails over the

specific, material reward which could be attributed, for example, to a job such as that analysed in this paper: child language brokering.

THE GIFT AND CLB

We therefore aim to tackle the phenomenon of CLB from the perspective of the circulation of gifts and favours. Our interest in this practice is the specific field of social relations that this activity tends to produce and reproduce.

Although, to date, no one has studied the subject from the specific perspective of the gift, there are numerous anthropological works on the issue of CLB. As mentioned before, these tend to focus on the balance between autonomy and heteronomy—identified as parentification or adultification—which the child experiences on being involved, through their actions as a broker, in family decision-making and responsibilities (Alvarez, 2012; Crafter & Iqbal, 2021; Heath, 1983; Orellana, 2009; Said & Zhu, 2019). These works endeavour to question the hegemonic petty-bourgeois view of the child as an ‘adult under construction’, positioning them as one more agent in the process of creating their own practical reality, that is, through decision-making, advice for their parents, care work and other tasks that they perform in the family environment.

Steven Alvarez (2012) is perhaps the author who has come the closest to the Maussian approach that we propose, insofar as his study describes CLB as a form of socialization affected by different power relations. Using the typical vocabulary of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2000)—Marcel Mauss's theoretical heir—Alvarez analyses the bilingualism of his informants as a form of *cultural capital*, that is as a resource which the children unconsciously mobilize to improve their position within the family and educational network.

In essence in his work with brokers of Hispanic origin in New York, Alvarez witnesses a sort of ‘language market’ (p. 153), in which bilingualism circulates as a social value which the agents (CLBs) use advantageously to transform their frameworks of practical possibility, that is, deceiving their tutors to avoid being reprimanded, gaining their favour, helping school-mates, etc. Here it is important to understand that the use of bilingualism as a useful resource or value occurs on a symbolic plane, beyond the individual conscience of the agents involved in the brokering. In the same way as the obligation to return the gift occurs in a non-explicit, alluded manner, the ‘advantage’ of CLB necessarily takes on an embedded, invisible form in the dynamics of everyday language interaction. On the contrary, when these advantages become explicit—that is, when one of those involved realizes that the broker has personal interests in their own interpreting—the ‘magic’ of the act of brokering, apparently altruistic and disinterested, disappears.

Markets such as that described in the language field by Alvarez or in the field of ritual exchange by Mauss are, fundamentally, *symbolic markets* insofar as they surpass their immediate functionality—that of translating such and such a message, or of exchanging certain goods—becoming a reflection—symbol—which informs and reproduces the general state of the relationship at a given moment: its power struggles, its inequalities and solidarities, and the commitment or lack of commitment to continue maintaining this relationship. This perspective endeavours to complement the ‘materialist’ view—likewise necessary—of CLB as a form of unpaid, invisible work (Antonini, 2015; Hall & Sham, 1998, 2007), highlighting its symbolic and relational dimension.

METHOD

The present study is based on information obtained from three main sources:¹

- a. 19 interviews with young adults who, as children, performed language brokering tasks within the school, medical, bureaucratic and, in general, public environment of Barcelona province;
- b. 10 interviews with immigrant parents who, at the time of the interviews, continued to require language brokering by their children to be able to communicate in the Catalan context;
- c. a focus group with six informants aged between 14 and 15 years old, immigrants or descendants from immigrant families, in a Barcelonès region public secondary school. The interviewees were all CLBs.

The individual informants were selected through a ‘snowball sampling’ technique. Members of the research group contacted potential participants—previously made acquaintances—that, in turn, recruited new participants for the study. The focus group in a public school of Barcelona, by contrast, was organized through official channels. The secondary school director was first contacted by the responsible of Plurilingualism of the Catalan Department of Education and, after they agreed to participate, the PI met with her and with the president of the Association of Parents of Students presenting the project to them. The director was then asked to identify potential participants from different cultural backgrounds.

From among the 19 young adults, 17 were women and two men. From the 10 parents, eight were women and two men. The focus group consisted of three men and three women. It is difficult to talk about the cultural or national origin of the respondents as the ethno-linguistic identities of the informants often tend to overlap in a sum of Arabic and Amazigh features (for Moroccans), Urdu and Punjabi (for Pakistanis), Hindi and Punjabi (for Indians), or Qingtian and ‘standard identity’ (for Chinese), to name just the most recurrent. In addition to this linguistic and cultural amalgam we need to add, as the interviewees themselves do, the local identities of the host society, in this case Catalan and Spanish.

The conversations with young adults (ex-CLBs) were initially performed face-to-face in various locations of Barcelona province: in university classrooms, bars, public spaces, etc. However, due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19, face-to-face conversations had to be replaced with online meetings. Subsequently, it was possible to resume the interviews with parents—mostly at their homes and workplaces—and the focus group—at a public school of Barcelona—presentially following all the health precautions established at the time.

One of the authors of this paper conducted all the interviews with ex-CLBs either in Catalan or Spanish. The focus group was led simultaneously by the two researchers, authors of this article, mixing Catalan and Spanish depending on the language used by the respondents. The interviews with parents, on the contrary, due to their limited competency in the local languages, were conducted in one of their mother tongues—Amazigh, Arabic, Urdu or Standard Chinese—by external collaborators of the project.

We followed a script of semi-structured open-ended questions that developed into informal conversations; we mostly talk about concrete experiences and anecdotes that, as CLBs, the informants had. Therefore, the general narrative trend was to indiscriminately mix the past and present verb tenses. In this respect, we are aware of the epistemological limits imposed by the ‘biographical illusion’, namely, the tendency that both, interviewers and interviewees, have to seek

for coherence in the narrative, despite the fact that practical experience is usually fragmentary and contradictory (Bourdieu, 1989).

To save these limits our solution was to trace, through the triangulation of different viewpoints, and logical inference in relation to other scientific works on the subject, the set of objective—objectified—relations generated by CLB as an autonomous *social field* (Bourdieu, 2000). Thus, although the informants indicate contrasting differences of national, ethnic and linguistic origin, the sociologic condition that they share as immigrants—or the children of immigrants—from ‘orientalized’ countries (Said, 2003), and their objective condition of need inherent in the migration process, allows us to analyse CLB from a comparative and structural perspective.

For the analysis, we employed a qualitative software (Atlas.ti) that helped us to inductively identify the recurrent topics of the interviews. We developed, then, a series of analytical categories to classify and tag these topics from which we obtained the different extracts. The entire research method of the CLB project was supervised and approved by the Ethical committee of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Comissió d'Ètica en l'Experimentació Animal i Humana). The informants gave their explicit consent for the conversations to be recorded, transcribed and utilized under anonymization.

RESULTS

This section discusses the analysis of the interviews according to three main topics identified: the contextualization of CLB according to the rationale behind this practice, the description of CLB as a gift as reflected in the examples shared by the interviewees, CLB and the language gift as gendered practices.

Why and when does CLB occur?

In Spain our informants generally show an escalated pattern of migration, with one of the family members migrating first, ensuring a job position in the country, followed by the rest of the family unit through an application for the Spanish Family Reunification policy. Once settled in Catalonia, the younger generations join the school system where they immediately receive a focus course in the Catalan language, the so-called ‘welcome classroom’ or *Aula d'Acollida*. When children acquire sufficient competence in Catalan, they begin the regular programme of schooling and, consequently, their interaction with native classmates. Adults, on the other hand, depend much more on their own personal circumstances, namely, their job, economic capacity, social network, cultural level, personal skills and so on, to learn the rules of the local social game. It is important, then, to insert the CLB phenomenon into this broader context of migration.

CLB often becomes a ubiquitous practice in migrated families, involving situations in both private life and public settings (cf. Crafter & Iqbal, 2021; Orellana, 2009; Tse, 1995); this was no exception in our study. Children help their parents by answering the phone, filling in online forms for all kinds of applications, translating letters, interpreting at doctors’ consultations and school meetings, liaising between their parents and neighbours, etc., as many other authors have also pointed out (cf. Orellana, 2009; García-Sánchez, 2014 or Guo, 2014).

Most parents interviewed insist that their children mostly interpret outside school hours—they arrange meetings and appointments after school—because they do not want this task to interfere with their children’s school performance. In Liwei’s (Chinese father) words: ‘Making

him miss class to interpret is not OK'. Nonetheless, five parents admit that their children have sometimes missed class to mediate for them, as also found Rubio-Rico et al. (2014). This is especially the case of Nadima (Moroccan mother), who very much relies on her daughter when she has medical appointments: 'For example, if I have an appointment at twelve, I go [to the secondary school] and take her with me'.

Other parents also seem to be well aware of the burden of CLB and try to limit this task. Simarleen (Pakistani mother) explains that her daughter feels 'overwhelmed' when performing certain tasks because she is already very busy with her school duties, and thus she tries not to bother her too much. Amira (Moroccan ex-CLB) even explains that she refused to miss class to interpret for her parents and explicitly mentions that she did not prioritize language brokering tasks while having other things to do.

According to ex-CLBs' narratives, they had to handle their parents' requests as well as teachers' interpreting solicitations. Many ex-CLBs recall having to miss class to interpret for other schoolmates' parents, which is something they complain about, as Xue explains in the following extract.

Extract 1. Xue,² Chinese ex-CLB

X: Because they took me out of a class or whatever and took me to that person, and so... of course, I remember that once we were in the second year of compulsory secondary education, and we were having a class of... relaxation. They knocked on the door and said they had to take me to do something and pffff...

I: *And you say that you've missed many classes doing this brokering. Do you think it's been a problem for the classes?*

X: Erm... I think so, but in general the translations tend to be fast. They last less than an hour, so I don't miss the whole class. But of course, when they take me out of the class, I was in a class! [stresses], so they disturb the classes, but now I wouldn't mind, because I know that it'd be for a short period of time, so... I don't know.

Most informants explain that their experience as brokers started at the ages of 10–11 years old, although this depends on the age they had when they arrived in Catalonia and on their progress in learning the local languages. There is one extreme case explained by Nadima (Moroccan mother), where she admits that her daughter started liaising between her and the doctor at the very early age of 5 or 6 years old.

Extract 2. Nadima, Moroccan mother

(...) I took her when she was five or six years old and the girl already spoke before I spoke with the doctor. She asked him before I explained. She talked with the doctor. [...] She went in with the doctor, I was stuck and she could manage. And when she was 12, she spoke with the doctor when I took her for a check-up or to do something to her. She explained to the doctor and him to her.

In the case of Suhaila, her family only arrived in Spain 18 months before the focus group took place. She explains that she is the only one in her family (composed of her two parents and three siblings) who can speak some Spanish, which is why they all rely on her for almost everything when

they encounter language barriers. She even had to interpret for the extended family after her uncle, aunt and cousins arrived in Spain 4 months before the focus group took place. She had to go to the Schooling Office, where they had to apply for school admission, and helped them throughout the procedure, although she laughingly admits that she often misses information that she cannot understand.

All this information helps us contextualize, for the first time, the situation of CLB in the province of Barcelona, which is certainly not too different from CLB as described in other regions of Spain (e.g. García-Sánchez, 2014) or worldwide. The lack of institutional support stresses the use of CLB.

CLB as a gift: The circulation of linguistic gifts in the family environment

The first environment for the circulation of language brokering as a *gift* is undoubtedly the direct family. Informants repeatedly emphasize the strong commitment they feel to their parents, explaining it in terms of ‘duty’, ‘obligation’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘guilt’. Expressions such as ‘and that’s it’ or ‘that’s what it’s like’ are repeated, reflecting the strength of a tie which is experienced as an inevitable destiny.

Extract 3. Interview with Li Hua, Chinese ex-CLB

Also I didn’t want to help them [laughs]. I don’t know... they have to become a bit more independent, because many Chinese families from here always depend on their children to help them, I don’t know, for the language, customer service... because my parents don’t speak Spanish. Well I don’t... after learning Spanish a bit I left their shop “get your act together because I won’t be there!” [laughs]. It’s a good thing my parents understand me...

Extract 4. Interview with Yue, Chinese ex-CLB

But maybe... because of my character, if I don’t understand, I’m not direct enough to say “oh, I don’t understand, you’d better ask someone else,” but rather I felt that if I didn’t do it then... I felt guilty. I don’t know... that it was my duty to do it... an obligation. And my parents’ reaction was also that “you have to study more,” “you have to do this, you have to do that.” Well, now I don’t have any problem with this, but now they’re pressurizing my brother.

We see this very clearly in the interview with Li Hua—extract 3—when she proudly announces her desire to distance herself from her fate as a broker: ‘get your act together because I won’t be there!’, although she immediately feels compelled to add: ‘It’s a good thing my parents understand me...’, returning to the unquestionableness of the debt to the family.

Lévi-Strauss (1969) and Sahlins (1972) added to Mauss’s definition of the gift a second level of distinction between gift as *generalized reciprocity*, that is as a favour between close relatives, characterized by undefined—asynchronous, without a stipulated time—expectations of return, and gift as *balanced reciprocity*, where the favour is less personal and greater immediacy is expected in terms of its return. However, our interviews denote that, with CLB, this distinction is never very clear.

Once in the host society, immigrant children grow up in an environment of simultaneous and continuous dependency and responsibility. They depend on the material, emotional and care support that their parents provide. However, at the same time, they return these favours from a very young age through their involvement in domestic work and language brokering tasks. The reciprocity is thus *generalized* insofar as it occurs, first and most recurrently, with the biological family, love and respect therefore impregnating the entire brokering task. It is, however, also *balanced* insofar as the terms of return tend to be fairly clear and immediate, the brokers being well aware of the condition of ‘favour’ that this task represents and, therefore, of the limits that they establish in a more or less immediate manner, as we see in the words of Amira (Arabic ex-CLB): ‘Yes, yes, that’s what it’s like, I’m doing you a favour, you’re not even paying me, or rewarding me, or anything, no, no... but my condition was in free time’. In the discussion group, one of the informants did not hesitate to describe their relationship with CLB in the most instrumental form possible:

Extract 5. Focus group.

Interviewer 1: *Are you closer to your parents because you act as translators?*

Rizwan: If I help my mother then she buys me what I want.

Int. 1: *(laughs) Oh, well that’s good, isn’t it?*

Rizwan: That’s why I accompany her. And if I go with my uncles they also give me two euros to accompany them. They tell me “buy what you like.”

Int. 2: *Well, translating and interpreting is a job; there are people who are paid.*

Rizwan: Of course.

Adnan: Oh, it’s paid?

Although the sense of duty and filial respect—the moral link—are a constant on describing their position as brokers, at the same time all the informants agree on the dependency that this position—of power—generates in relation to the adults. Precisely this level of subordination that the parents continuously declare has led several authors to question, from the phenomenon of CLB, the very notion of ‘adulthood’, the adult as an independent and self-sufficient being (Dorner, 2017; Orellana, 2009; Prokopiou et al., 2012). Despite the different age ranges, to a large extent the autonomy of each person is indeed determined by the social and material conditions of their environment, and by a specific series of ‘cultural images (that is values, attributes and rites specifically associated with youth)’ (Feixa, 1999, p. 18).

In this idiosyncratic sense, immigrant families in Catalonia are very heterogeneous. This means that, depending on the economic and cultural level and sociological framework of the region of origin, their understanding of what it means to be a ‘child’ or ‘youth’ will vary. Nevertheless, the linguistic need of the new geographic context imposes shared practical dynamics on all immigrant families, leading the younger generations to become involved in the activities of adults from the early time of arrival in the new country:

Extract 6. Focus group

Int.1: *Do you think that, having been involved from a young age with councils, doctors and all that, your parents trust you more?*

Rizwan: Yes, I do.

Chaima: Yes.

Adnan: Well, yes.

Int.2: *Yes? Do they ask your advice on things, etc.?*

Rizwan: Well, as we're going to move now, my mother asked me "shall we buy that house or not?" and I told her "yes, let's buy it". And she still says how are we going to take the things and all that. She shares all her opinions with me and I tell her whether or not it's good.

The interviews confirm the sociogenesis of two dichotomies related to CLB, at the same time as questioning them: that of *adult/child* and that of *independent/dependent*, demonstrating the dialogic circulation of the linguistic gift within the family unit where these borders become blurred in a framework of generalized interdependence. The linguistic need means that the language itself, as a skill or 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 2000) that the young children hold, is socialized as a collective resource within this family context. However, we will now see that this two-way flow between parent and offspring can actually be extended to other spheres beyond blood relatives.

The extension of the gift of language: family-community-the public

Migrated parents often claim to prefer the help of their own children before asking or, as they say 'bothering', other people outside the inner circle of the family (cf. Beltrán Antolín & Sáiz López, 2001). If we think again through the logic of the gift, this is consistent with the fact that, generally, favours are bound to be returned, and that *quid pro quo* is easier among the closest of kin. However, very often after settling in the new society, other non-professional acquaintances intervene in the language mediation process. Suhaila (current CLB) talks about a neighbour helping her parents before she acquired the competences to understand Spanish or Catalan. The aid of friends and distant relatives is also repeatedly mentioned by various parents, like Surinder, a Pakistani mother who acknowledges the importance of her friend's support: 'very often my friend Prita accompanies me, [...] she is from India and she is a very good person. Whenever I needed her, she was there to assist me'; or Inaam (Amazigh mother) who sees her own experience as generalizable to everyone in the same circumstances: 'Anyway, when we arrived, my husband or some friend or Amazigh neighbour that was here before us helped us communicate with people. After the first months, my kids could already help me a lot. Well [laughs], this is what happens to everyone'.

The other side of the language gift can be seen through the eyes of the young language brokers. They also mediate for aunts, cousins and friends of the family. This is the case of Amira who claims to have assisted many of her mother's friends since she was a child; or of Zhousi, who tells a very similar story: "yes, with my parents' friends. In hospitals, often for them. When they go to see the doctor and all that. There, they always asked me 'is this your grandfather? Is he your father?' and I have to answer 'no... it's just an acquaintance.'"

In this process of extension of the language gift, from direct family to distant relatives and acquaintances, it is generally parents who offer other people their children's services, as if they were their own. Their daughters and sons' language capacities are understood to be shared by the whole family unit as a value that in the specific social milieu can be used to repay previous debts and, of course, generate new ones.

Extract 7. Interview with Dounia, Amazigh ex-CLB

Dounia: Personally, being a child, sometimes I got very angry when my mother said to other women: “look, she’ll be there at that time,” at five o’clock and... then “the kid will go with you.” And no... it wasn’t like my schedule was super full [laughs], because that wasn’t the case... but it was something I didn’t enjoy, to be honest.

Interviewer: *It wasn’t a question. She just told you: “you are going”*

Dounia: Yes, yes. My mother always said to me “today she’s the one who needs the help, the other person in need, but you never know if tomorrow that person will be you.”

This is how broader social ties are generated. Through CLB the family becomes strategically extended, first by including distant relatives and non-kin associates, and later by developing new ties within the linguistic and cultural community. Huang explains how now, as an adult, after years of being a CLB, she sees her linguistic mediation task as an activity aimed to help other people in the same situation as her parents: ‘I translate, basically, to help people. Because I can see that there are many people who go through the same experiences, that have the same problems, and I try to help’. Hana talks retrospectively about her dual experience as a child in need of mediation and as a CLB within the Moroccan community:

Extract 8. Interview with Hana, bicultural Amazigh & Arabic ex-CLB

Sometimes children who just arrived from Morocco, if the kid didn’t speak Spanish and neither did his parents... well, then you could certainly help him a little... explain how things work... accompany him and his parents. Well, put it this way, this is the point of support that they have in the community.

Karim, another ex-CLB, points out his current role within the Amazigh community: “Inside the community... for some, I’m a reference, I have to admit it, they always call me to go anywhere... ‘what do you think of this and that,’ but only the ones with whom I have the most trust.”

We argue that the gift of language is a great example of how ‘communities’ are constructed in the first place. The small everyday interactions, like the ones CLB fosters, expand the definition of ‘the familiar’ through the network of gifts and counter-gifts beyond the abstract, and sometimes too rigid, notions of ‘identity’ (ethnic, linguistic, cultural, etc.), crystalizing in specific mutual support groups. In this scenario, language brokers become an important piece of the larger social puzzle, as already seen, defined by the family, the extended family and the community. However, language brokers also interact with another fundamental sphere of modern state societies: the public.

Translation and interpreting situations are always two-sided. When a child brokers for a family or community member in a hospital, council or school, they are also brokering for the state. ‘The public’ is the last frontier for the gift of language; it is something language brokers feel impelled to do as a natural extension of their obligation or ‘debt’ towards others. Like many of our informants, Meiling (Chinese ex-CLB) explains how teachers at her school used to ask her to help communicate with the newly arrived kids and their parents: ‘when they needed someone to help, they asked me to mediate between them [teachers – students], but mostly it was between teachers and parents. But those kids didn’t seem to like it very much...’. Leizi points out her first instinct when going to the doctor and finding an anonymous person in need of mediation:

Extract 9. Interview with Leizi, Chinese ex-CLB

There are old women that I see in hospitals and that kind of places who, like my mother, don't speak the language very well. Then, sometimes, I think to myself that I should help them, but if I help them, I lose my own time and I can't help everyone.

In the case of Hana, she cannot help taking the perspective of the “professional” and empathizing with her position as a public worker:

Extract 10. Interview with Hana, bicultural Amazigh & Arabic ex-CLB

I believe it is also very frustrating [for the public professional], having something to explain to that person, but not being able to... I've always received gratitude from... the other side, they always tell me “this is what is happening, and I can't explain to her correctly, so try to come with her more often”.

Here we see the real reasons why the typical distinction between generalized reciprocity and symmetric reciprocity cannot be strictly applied to the language gift. Language brokers are constantly navigating between different layers of proximity—from family members and acquaintances to anonymous public workers—blurring the distinction. Withal, once the gift reaches the public sphere it is mostly invisible, naturalized as part of the private realm—in which the state has little or nothing to say.

CLB as a gendered gift

CLB is a gift and, as such, it implies multilaterality. Nonetheless, our research also reveals that the gift of language is a gendered gift related to care and reproductive work. It is very illustrative that most of our informants are women (17 of 19 ex-CLB, 8 of 10 parents), although we tried to look for greater parity when contacting informants. Many research group acquaintances who are themselves members of migrated communities confirmed that women (mothers) were the ones who regularly asked their children to language broker, and it was especially difficult to find male parents who also had this experience.

This is coherent with the migration patterns described in section 5.1: the man is the first to arrive and then, once he has already settled in Spain, his family is reunited. As Adnan (Pakistani current CLB) explains: “I always liaise for my mother [...], because my father has been here for twenty-four or twenty-three years, but he has to work and, because of that... I have to translate for my mother.” In this brief quote we can already foresee the gender division of labour: men arrive earlier, work outside the household, and somehow achieve autonomy in the host languages; women, however, arrive later, do not usually work outside the household, and mostly depend on the help of others (their husband, children, relatives or friends) to communicate within the host society. Hana expands eloquently on this idea in the following extract:

Extract 11. Hana, bicultural Amazigh-Arabic Moroccan ex- CLB

I: *Do you think women need brokering more than men?*

H: It also happens... because of our culture... that men go out more, work more and so on. I think they have a need and survive more in this respect; they obtain more capacities. Of course,

women... some of them work, others don't, many work in the home and don't need so much contact with people. Some are housewives and have always depended on the man for doing things and contact with the outside world. I think women need this type of brokering more than men, especially as regards the children... to understand their formative process, education... because they don't have the capacities in this respect.

I: *In your specific case would you say you've done more brokering for women than men?*

H: I've never done brokering for men.

This idea is also reflected in the interviews with parents themselves; the dependency of women is explicitly shared by Dassin, an Amazigh mother: "I have five children and my husband, there's always somebody who's free and can help me [language brokering]." There are two exceptions to this general trend in the data collected. The first one is revealed by Karim, who very much related his experience to the acquaintances he met at the mosque:

Extract 12. Interview with Karim, Amazigh ex-CLB

When I was a teenager, when I was little, it's true there were more men, because being a boy they contacted you more from the mosque, you accompany him, the man. Sometimes you accompany the whole family for some formality or whatever. But it's true that it's more men than women.

The other exception is Jiaming (Chinese current CLB), who affirmed that he mostly helped his father because he had more things to deal with in the public realm. However, Jiaming was reluctant to give more details of his experience, therefore, it is difficult to provide a better contextualization of his particular case.

Regardless of their family's cultural context, most of our informants explicitly share this idea that CLB is mostly needed by women. Dounia (Amazigh ex-CLB) emphasizes that 'most times, 99.9999% of times, [I language brokered] for women. Relatives and my mother's acquaintances'. When asked if CLB was also mostly performed by women, both Dounia and her friend Salima, who were interviewed together, agreed with this assumption, as reflected in the following extract.

Extract 13. Interview with Dounia and Salima, Amazigh ex-CLB

D: Yes, the difference between girls and boys... they were usually girls; my brother who was almost the same age as me went very rarely. My mother had something, so I went.

S: Because of course it was accompanying women, so...

D: No, but even if it wasn't for the hospital or gynaecologist, it was more girls than the boy who went.

S: Because girls are more... more responsible. More reliable than boys...

Int: But you've also acted as translators for men.

D: Not at the doctor's...

As stated by Dounia and Salima, there seem to be two main reasons why CLB is mostly taken on by women: first, because it is mostly requested by other women; second, because they feel that girls are more responsible than boys at young ages—once again, revealing the gendered division of labour. We can state that CLB is part of the unpaid reproductive work traditionally

assumed by women. Ferrant et al. (2014) point out that '[a]round the world, women spend two to ten times more time on unpaid care work than men' and that '[t]his unequal distribution of caring responsibilities is linked to discriminatory social institutions and stereotypes on gender roles'.

Here we find a final crucial insight of the gift of language, namely, the distinction between reciprocity and equity (or equilibrium). The former does not necessarily imply the latter. As a gift CLB entails interdependency, but as a gendered gift it is also unevenly distributed and valued. As Comas-d'Argemir (2017) argues, it is now necessary 'to identify the dimensions of inequality that can hide behind the moral basis of the gift and reciprocity' (p. 28), especially when referring to the responsibility the state has to assume as one of the recipients of this gift exchange.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have argued that the analysis of the child language brokering phenomenon gains in depth when taken as a social relation, rather than as an isolated, subjective, experience. We have conceptualized children's language competences as a gift—the language gift—that circulates within the family, the extended family, the community and, finally, the public, in a continuum that often blurs clear-cut categories such as *adult/child*, *independent/dependent* and *familiar/non-familiar*.

In our case study, we have seen that CLB takes place both at home and in public settings, at the request of family members (nuclear or extended), teachers or other public workers. Parents seem to prioritize children's school performance over CLB needs, although some acknowledge asking their children to interpret during school time, as also mentioned in Rubio-Rico (2014). Most of our ex-CLB informants started language brokering for their families aged 10–11, after spending around a year in Spain. Such an early start is a necessity rather than a choice: families cannot always resort to other friends or acquaintances and need to rely on their children's language capacities.

On a second level, the gendered division of labour and the symbolic division of cultural roles also affect CLB. The gendered division of labour gives men more chances to learn the host language, because they are usually the first to arrive and due to their access to the public sphere—through their work outside the household. Women, however, arrive later and work mainly inside the household. Consequently, women tend to rely on CLB much more than men.

We could likewise say that women might have more chances to become CLBs: first, because of the nature of CLB, closely related to unpaid reproductive work, and, second, because due to the symbolic division of roles mothers tend to prefer having their daughters interpret for them instead of their sons, especially as they grow older. This is why the present study has a clear bias towards women, in the interviews with both parents and ex-CLBs.

Finally, because of this gendered dimension of the language gift, reciprocity does not necessarily imply equity. As reproductive work CLB is mostly seen from a moral perspective, as part of the 'free care' that children provide to their families and communities. This can be especially problematic when the language gift reaches the public sphere, and the task of language brokering is naturalized as a private matter. This occurs when the logic of the gift breaks due to the lack of reciprocation from the state.

While, as demonstrated in this paper, families and communities have their own non-material ways of returning the gift of language—*affective, emotional, spiritual, etc.*—the state mainly has the material form. We therefore argue that an improvement in public translation and

interpretation services—involving greater investment—could be a form of recognition and reciprocity from the state to CLBs and their families, a necessary link in the chain of gifts and counter-gifts.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

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² All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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