Chapter One: Translating Frames


Estela

At ten years old Estela was considered by her mother to be “the right hand” of the family. Estela used her knowledge of English to make and answer phone calls, schedule appointments, sort and decipher the daily mail, fill out forms, apply for credit, help her younger sister with homework, and read stories-in-translation to her youngest siblings. She also helped with general household tasks: washing dishes, vacuuming, and making purchases at the corner store. Like Jessica, the girl whose map of daily life translations appears in the introduction to this book, this seemed for the most part “just normal” to Estela, as it did for many of the other young translators with whom I talked.

As Estela grew older, her responsibilities grew as well. These changes were propelled by her family’s changing circumstances: three younger siblings were born; her parents purchased a house; her father worked at three jobs; and her mother began working the night shift at Burger King in order to pay the mortgage. Estela’s parents needed her help even more than they had when she was younger, and Estela was charged with caring for her sisters during after school hours: monitoring their homework, feeding them the dinners that her mother prepared before leaving for work, cleaning up, and getting the girls ready for bed. Estela continued to contribute her English skills to the household by running errands and translating interchanges at stores, restaurants, and other public places, as well as reading written information and making phone calls. Translation tasks were not separable from her other forms of household work. And as
Estela’s spheres of movement grew, she used her bilingual skills to negotiate meaning for a wider array of people, including her cousins, teachers, public service personnel, and strangers in public spaces. A challenge for Estela as she grew older, however, was that school also increased its demands on her time, and most of her teachers did not know about her responsibilities at home. Tension grew between Estela and her mother – fueled by the pressures that her family faced, in their struggles to “salir adelante” (“to come out ahead”), or even just to survive.

Meanwhile, most of Estela’s peers in this mixed-income suburb – especially those in the middle school college preparation classes in which she was placed – were concentrating on activities intended to open pathways to college. Their parents were born in this country (Estela and her parents were born in Guanajuato, Mexico), and most had college degrees. These young people had homework support from their parents. Some had private tutors. They were not expected to provide such support to others. After school, they played on sports teams or in the orchestra, joined school clubs, or enrolled in the myriad of private program offerings available to young people in this community. Estela loved singing and acting, and wanted to perform in the school musical, but she wasn’t able to make the play rehearsals because of her responsibilities at home. The drama teacher understood this, and invited Estela to serve with her as an assistant director, allowing her to assist whenever she was available.

Nova

Like Estela’s status as the “right hand” of her family, Nova’s position in his family was an honored one; at twelve his mother referred to him as “el hombrecito” or “the little man.” Nova spoke for his parents at home, at school, and in stores, restaurants, and
clinics; he negotiated the sale of a computer (at his insistence, and largely for his own use); he assisted his father in applying for unemployment benefits; and helped his parents to secure a mortgage when they bought their first home. Nova’s mother delineated how her son spoke for her at a Fourth of July celebration in a public park, when she felt too nervous to speak:

Ahora tuvimos un percance aquí en el lago con unas personas que nos agredieron, y él habló con la policía. El tuvo que hablar con la policía por que 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, “Mijo, ven y ustedes diganle, ustedes diganle lo que está pasando.” Y ellos empezaron a decirle. Como Nova, empezó a decirle a la policía.[1]

Cindy

Cindy,[2] who was fourteen at the time she was interviewed, was another girl whose translation work shaped her childhood. Cindy named many reasons why she liked her role as the family translator: she learned more about other people in her family, and about herself (she got access to things she might not otherwise see, such as school and medical records, and household bills); it made her feel smart; she learned more words in her two languages, English and Chinese; it
cheered her up when she was in a bad mood, or felt badly about herself; and it gave her time to communicate with her mother, who would sit and listen to her each evening after they went through the mail together. What she didn’t like was being treated “like a kid,” especially when she made phone calls. In many ways, she said she didn’t feel like a kid; she felt that she was “on a higher level;” and she distinguished herself from other kids’ experiences when she reflected:

Sometimes I think I invaded people’s privacy, like, they have to tell me over the phone, like deposit statements and stuff like that. I know exactly the house’s wages and stuff like that, and I tell my parents, and they don’t really care. I just know, and I translate it. While like other kids, they ask for things. I’m not trodding down people of my own age, but some people they just ask for things, like ‘Can I have a bike, can I go swimming, can I go to summer camp, can I have a new pair of Nikes?”…Their parents keep saying, ‘Do you know how hard I work for the money to pay the bills?” They don’t know exactly how much is in their bank deposits, the bills and stuff. But I know personally because I write the bills. I write the checks.

Luz

Luz was eighteen years old when I talked with her about her household responsibilities. She was enrolled, on scholarship, in a prestigious private university twenty miles from her home, which she would never have known existed if one high school teacher had not urged her to apply.

As a child and continuing through college, Luz, like Estela, served as “la mano derecha” for her parents, who had immigrated from San Luis Potosí, Mexico, to Chicago shortly before she was born. Luz was a middle child, the one of three daughters that her
family knew they could count on, and Luz had always played a central role as family translator, as well as mentor for her younger sister and supporter/counselor for her mother, who suffered from an advanced case of diabetes. During college Luz struggled to live within a meager budget – stretching her income from a work-study job to cover her own books and supplies as well as to contribute to her parents’ rent, food, and medical expenses – and to keep up with the demands of her coursework. She went home frequently to take her mother to the doctor, where she also served as her translator, and to deal with mail, bills, and the myriad of other English language and literacy tasks that are part of life in the modern age. During her senior year, Luz began commuting the long distance to and from school, first in her family’s fifteen-year-old Chevrolet, and then, when it broke down, on a three-hour series of train rides. After four and a half challenging years, Luz graduated from college and began a career as a high school social studies teacher. She continued to care for her mother and began saving money to buy her family their first house.

Framing Translations

When I talk about the experiences of people like Estela, Cindy, Nova and Luz, most adults who are outsiders to immigrant communities react with concern, pity, or dismay. They ask about the burdens translating places on children and the pressures children feel. Many people assume that translating gives young people more responsibility than they should ever have. This sense that children are somehow “out of place” when they take on family responsibilities like these is reflected in the terms “adultification” and “parentification”[3] that psychologists use to label this as a form of “role reversal” that is detrimental to children’s proper development and to normal,
healthy family relationships. This presumed deviance is based on the assumptions that when children speak, read, and write for their parents, parental authority is weakened, and that children should not be exposed to “adult” medical, legal, and financial information, nor saddled with serious responsibilities at too young an age.

This perspective has roots in Family Systems theory in Clinical Psychology. However, the father of this school of thought, Salvador Minuchin, prefaced his discussion of the “parentified child”[4] with these words:

The allocation of parental power to a child is a natural arrangement in large families, in single-parent families, or in families where both parents work. The system can function well. The younger children are cared for and the parental child can develop responsibility, competence, and autonomy beyond his years.

Following Minuchin’s reasoning, taking on household responsibilities does not necessarily involve reversals of parent-child relations or a corresponding abdication of parental responsibility, and households that function according to norms that are different from current, dominant, or “mainstream” norms should not be assumed dysfunctional. This is important to keep in mind when evaluating cross-cultural variations in child development and declaring what counts as deviant or normal, a point that I will explore throughout this book, and return to especially in Chapter Six.

The families that I worked with, in contrast with dominant understandings, generally treated children’s translation work as unremarkable. Children were expected to help their families; people were expected to use their skills for the benefit of others; and family members were morally bound to work together for the collective good. It was not
uncommon for children in Mexico and Central America to read and write things for their parents, when parents had had little opportunity to develop literacy skills through formal schooling. With life in their home countries as a point of comparison, translating became an extension of appropriate intergenerational relations into new circumstances.

The main complaint that I heard voiced by immigrant parents was about their children’s resistance to translating; parents seemed to interpret such resistance as evidence that their children were not developing properly as obedient, helpful, and cooperative children who understood the importance of contributing to the family good. Sra. Gutiérrez, the mother of María, whom I will introduce at the end of this chapter, pointed out on several occasions: “¿Ya ves, que ella no me quiere ayudar?” (“Now do you see, that she doesn’t want to help me?”) Estela’s mother made this complaint on more than one occasion. But these same parents also expressed pride in their children’s skills and appreciation for their contributions. Nothing that parents said suggested that they thought it inappropriate to solicit their children’s assistance. One day I rather overtly pressed Nova’s mother to consider shifts in intergenerational power relations based on families’ movement across cultural borders; but still Sra. Aguilera resisted my interpretation, in the following exchange:

Marjorie: Y ¿Usted cree que cambia la forma de ser madre, estando aquí, con el inglés como idioma nacional, en comparación con como sería en México?  
Do you believe that your way of mothering changes, being here, with English as the national language, in comparison with what it would be like in Mexico?
Sra. Aguilera: Mexico no. Marjorie: No. Yo no cambiaría, yo todo es igual. Nada mas que, pues=
Sra. Aguilera: No es que él toma más responsabilidad Marjorie: No es que él toma más responsabilidad Y no es que se siente uno más menos poderoso.
Sra. Aguilera: Sí, más responsabilidad, y más que le da gusto más, tú sabes que tienes un hijo que habla bien el inglés, que habla dos idiomas, o tal vez un día hable tres. Marjorie: Y no es que se siente uno más, menos poderoso. Sra. Aguilera: No. Marjorie: No. Sra. Aguilera: Yo me siento igual. Cuando a él lo veo que él está, me llena tanto como que me siento bien orgullosa de él. No tiene por que cambiar la manera de uno.
ser con ellos, ni ellos con uno. Yes, they change, but he, I haven’t
Sí, ellos cambian, pero él, yo seen that he has changed, such that
no lo veo que ha cambiado así he thinks he’s more important.
que se cree más importante.

I similarly urged Junior’s mother to contemplate whether she felt uncomfortable
when her son spoke for her. She responded:

Fíjate casi no. ¿Será por la Look, not really. Might it be
confianza? Sí, será por la confianza because of the trust we have? Yes,
que hay entre nosotros. Yo no it’s because of the trust that exists
siento, no, o sea, que pues, claro, between us. I don’t feel, or rather,
sería muchísimo mejor que yo sure, it would be much better if I
supiera [inglés], verdad, que yo spoke [English], that’s true; if I
supiera [inglés] y que yo por mí spoke [English] and I could take
misma me valiera y todo, pero care of myself and all, but as I tell
como yo digo, pues con él no me you, well, with him I don’t feel bad.
siento mal.

Jasmine’s mother recognized differences in the demands on children in the United
States and in Mexico, but also commonalities, as she highlighted the proper role of a
child – to help one’s parents: “Me pusiera en su lugar, o sea que eso me quiso dar a
entender, digo, pues como allá no. Pero si me hubiera tocado así pues, a lo mejor sí, le
tendría que ayudar a mi mamá.” (“I put myself in her place, or rather, this helped me to
understand, I tell you, that over there no. But if I had had to do it, well, sure, I would have
to help my mother.”)
The upper elementary and middle-school children that I got to know through my research into the daily lives of children in Los Angeles and Engleville also viewed their translating work quite nonchalantly. Nova put it this way: “It’s just something you do to help your family.” Jessica wrote in a journal about a specific encounter: “I didn’t feel anything because I am so used to it that sometimes I forget what I said for a couple of minutes.” Jasmine similarly noted: “I’m getting used to translating. Sometimes I don’t even notice or forget.” It was not something kids thought much about. They seemed surprised to learn that anyone studied this practice.

When asked how they felt about translating more often than not they said they liked it, and sometimes volunteered this perspective without prompting as well. In one journal entry, Katrina talked about translating in the context of other fun things she had done at an amusement park: “I was translating and helping people (and) it was fun.” Most indicated that they felt needed and valued, not burdened, and not particularly powerful. They said they felt brave, good, helpful, and happy.

Children did feel annoyed when a request to translate interrupted an activity they were engaged in, or when they had to break their own concentration to explain what was happening to others, such as while watching a movie. In some cases, as with Estela’s family, conflicts in the household partly were expressed around translating tasks, but language brokering did not seem to be the cause of the tensions. Children did talk about feeling anxious, nervous, or worried when they interpreted for others, especially in certain circumstances, such as talking on the phone, in public, in emotionally heightened situations, or when dealing with matters of importance to their families. They worried about the effects their words could have. For example, Monique mentioned being “kind
of worried because I thought I would make a mistake about a bill.” Jasmine talked of being “so, so nervous” when she spoke at the hospital for her brother. Adriana complained of a stomachache when she had to call the Social Security office for her mother. These more emotionally burdensome sorts of translation situations need consideration. But they were not the dominant kinds of translation experiences.

As children grew older, however, I found that sometimes their perspectives on translation shifted. This shift was also evident when I compared the viewpoints offered by younger children (those who were just beginning to take on active roles as family translators), and those of older youth and adult children of immigrants, like Luz, when they reflected on their past and present work as translators. The views of the older youth usually lay somewhat in between the perspectives held by most “American” audiences and immigrant parents. These young people still seemed to view translating as a normal part of their lives. But over time they had come to realize that their childhoods had been quite different from those of “mainstream” Americans, and they were more aware that some people might view their experiences as unusual (including, perhaps, researchers). They seemed to be re-evaluating their own experiences through what Karen Pyke terms a “normal American family” monolithic cultural frame – one that constructed their own experiences as deficient[5]. They may also have been re-evaluating their lives in the manner that many of us do as we grow older, acknowledging both positive and negative aspects of our own upbringing[6]. These young adults seemed a little more unsettled by their own experiences, and talked about them in more ambivalent terms.

These different takes on children’s translation work lend insight into normative constructions of childhood and of relations between adults and children. They suggest the
The importance of understanding varied and shifting vantage points on childhoods. We may see things differently when we contemplate childhoods in retrospect rather than as they unfold. We may judge others’ experiences differently than our own. Conversely, we may assume that others feel what we have felt, or what we imagine we might feel in their situations. Views may change as circumstances change, and as awareness of alternatives grow.

The same facts can take on very different meanings depending on how they are framed and on points of comparison. In the case of child language brokers, it matters if their childhoods are compared with those of youth from dominant groups, non-translator immigrant youth, the childhoods the brokers experienced in their home countries, observers’ childhoods, or those of the children’s parents. Further, one can ask: in understanding our own and others’ stories, what do we foreground, background, emphasize, and leave out? What is most salient to us, and what misses our attention completely?

I remember talking with a colleague about my grandmother. I told her how my grandmother used to cut napkins in half to avoid waste. I attributed this to “culture” – to the fact that my grandmother was German, and Catholic, which I associated with being thrifty and averse to self-indulgence. “Waste not, want not.” “Don’t take more than you need.” And possibly an underlying message: “You don’t deserve any more.” My colleague resonated with my story, and told me about her own grandmother, who also cut napkins in half to use sparingly. She attributed this not to her grandmother’s “culture,” however, but to the social context in which she lived – the era of the Great Depression in the United States – and to her social class positioning within that context. Through our
conversation I came to realize that my grandmother also lived during the Depression, and that I had no way of knowing to what extent her daily life habits were the product of “cultural” beliefs, and to what extent they were shaped by economic circumstances. There was really no way to disentangle culture from the contexts in which cultural practices took form. What one may ascribe to values and beliefs is at least partly shaped by circumstances; and practices developed in particular circumstances may get rationalized in a set of beliefs and then reified as “cultural.”

Social science frameworks may seem rather different than the everyday, informal theories that informed these contemplations on the thriftiness of grandparents, but they are interpretive frames that work in the same way – to give coherence to particular understandings of the social world. And just as different everyday theories can lend distinct meaning to the same set of events, so too can different social science frames alter interpretations of social phenomena. Theoretical frameworks influence both what is attended to and how these things are understood. They are cultural tools that both facilitate and constrain meaning-making.

Framing children

For many years children were framed in limited ways in the social sciences. They were studied mostly in the domains of families and schools, and treated as objects of adults’ actions, in particular their efforts to socialize and teach them. Treated as persons in-the-making more than actors and agents in their own right, they were “becomings” rather than “beings.” In institutions other than homes and schools, they were largely invisible.[7]

In research on immigration, children continue to be mostly invisible outside of
families[8] and schools[9]. They are often addressed as baggage: “brought along,” “sent for,” or “left behind” by sojourning parents. Their participation in decisions to migrate and in processes of settlement has been little considered. Attention has gone to English language acquisition,[10] school achievement, educational attainment, assimilation, acculturation and identity formation, and other measures of development along pathways to adult success.[11] Children’s actions, perceptions, feelings and experiences, especially outside of homes and schools, have been less explored.[12] When language issues are considered, the focus is usually on how rapidly or well immigrant children are acquiring English[13]. Language brokering remains largely unseen.[14]

But over the last few decades a body of literature has been evolving as a corrective to these ways of seeing children (or not seeing them). Historians, anthropologists, sociologists and cultural geographers have explicitly challenged the teleological or future-oriented developmental bent of much research with children. Variously called the “new sociology (or anthropology) of childhoods,” “critical studies of childhood” and the “critical social science of childhood,”[15] this framework calls for explorations of children’s actions, contributions, social relationships and cultures, and for seeing these as worthy of study in their own right, not only in relation to adult concerns. In this line of theorizing and empirical research, importance is given to what children say, think and feel, and what they are, as full participants in social processes, not just what they are becoming. Estela, for example, was at ten not just a pre-teenager (i.e. a girl moving toward adolescence); she was “la mano derecha” (“the right hand”) of her family. Even as she was developing her own language skills, she was using language as a tool to do things in the social world.[16]
The critical social science of childhoods also highlights the socially-constructed nature of the category of childhood itself. Childhood is an interpretive frame for understanding the early years of human life, and its meanings have varied over time and across cultures. Just as feminists distinguished between gender (as a social construct) and biological sex, critical childhoods scholars distinguish the social phenomenon of childhood from the fact of biological immaturity. Childhood is treated as a unit of social analysis, rather than as a “natural” and universalized stage, or a given of biological age.

In this chapter I consider what this interpretive frame offers for the study of immigrant childhoods in general, and the experiences of child language brokers in particular. I also explore what the study of immigrant child language brokering offers for theorizing about childhoods. The critical social science of childhoods is the first of two major social science frameworks that facilitated my sense-making about children’s experiences, and that guides my representations of their work in this book; the second, that of sociocultural theory, will be presented in Chapter Six.

Childhood as a social construction

Phillippe Aries[17] was the first scholar to document the social construction of childhood in historical time. He posited that the very concept of childhood, as a time distinct from adulthood, emerged at the end of the Middle Ages in Europe, tied to the formation of bourgeois notions of family. Childhood was in a sense a luxury that only the upper classes could afford to indulge. Viviana A. Zelizer[18] followed in this manner to examine changing views of and attitudes toward children in the twentieth century United States. She traced the shift from viewing children as “useful” – active contributors to household economies – to economically “useless” but sentimentally “priceless.” There is
now a growing historical literature documenting variations in the meanings and understandings of childhood over time.[19]

Paula Fass’ substantive contributions to this literature have brought attention to the place of immigrant childhoods within the larger project of nation-building and “American” cultural identity formation.[20] Fass has examined struggles to define what counts as a proper childhood, especially as these took form between immigrant parents and schools in the early part of the twentieth century. Carrying this forward to the end of the century, she has also brought children into view in contemporary studies of globalization, as the growing movement of people around the world raises new questions about the meanings and values assigned to childhood.

Similar to historical research, studies of children’s experiences in varied cultural contexts have illuminated the socially constructed nature of childhoods, and challenged presumptions of normative child development in the West.[21] Immigrant childhoods are particularly useful for illuminating the socially constructed nature of childhoods, because changes are often speeded up through families’ movement across cultural and geopolitical borders as well as through their interface with institutions like schools. Immigrants’ beliefs and practices can also help to denaturalize what is taken for granted in the dominant culture.

Partly based on the juxtapositions of discrepant beliefs and practices that are made visible by the movement of people around the world, some theorists argue that we are entering a new historical period in which the meaning of childhood is again being reconstituted, much as it was at the turn of the century in the United States. Barrie Thorne[22] points to changes in the political economies that shape childhoods: global
economic restructuring, the speedup of changes in household compositions and divisions of labor within households, widening social class divides, the decline of the public sector, and the expansion of market forces that structure children’s lives. Safe spaces for children to play in have been considerably eroded in many communities, as support for the public sector (schools, playgrounds, parks and recreation) has been cut back in the United States. (However, as we’ll see in the next chapter, this also varies across communities, with some cities and states impacted much more than others due to differential tax bases.) Free time for children to play has seemingly diminished, due both to increased work-like demands of schooling, and the increased consumption of extracurricular “work.” Other changes are evident, such as more explicit sexualization of children in advertisements and on television, the Internet and in new technologies such as music videos.

But the juxtapositions of diverse forms of childhood make clear that changes are not homogenous and unifying; childhood experiences are not undergoing transformation in the same way for all children.[23] Rather, what childhood means for different kinds of children and families may be under contestation in different ways. Now, as within any given historical period or cultural context, there are many types of children: girls and boys, two-year-olds and twelve-year-olds, rich and poor, documented and undocumented, to name a few dimensions that matter for experiences and perceptions of daily life as well as access to resources and pathways to the future. But some differences – such as those based on family income – may be more consequential now than they were a few decades ago, as the gap between the rich and the poor grows and public sector supports erode, wreaking particular effects on children. (In California, for example, child poverty has increased by ten per cent since 1979, while government supports for children and families
Immigrant childhoods

Immigrant families differ from those who have resided in the United States for generations on dimensions that certainly matter for children’s experiences of growing up. For one, these families operate with an overt point of comparison – what life was like “back home.” This may be an explicit reference point for children, and an ongoing one for families who are able to travel back and forth between the two countries; but even if children do not visit their homeland, these places can hold an important space in their imaginations, and “home” is often represented in talk to which children are exposed. Differences between childhoods “here” and “there” may be quite marked to families, and immigrant parents are often keenly aware of the trade-offs involved in their moves. Alma Martínez was the mother of a seven-year-old boy who was left in Guatemala with his grandmother when Alma came to Los Angeles, where her daughter was born the following year. Although she wanted to bring her son with her, she worried, because he was accustomed to “freedom” in the countryside in Guatemala. In Los Angeles, he would be “shut up inside with me, nothing more. He might get sick, or not be able to stand being here.” She compared the situations of her two children:

Él allá goza un poquito más de lo que ella no goza aquí. Y ella goza un poquito más de lo que él no puede tener aquí. Los que están allá no tienen lo material, pero tienen la libertad. Por el contrario, ella aquí goza un poquito más de lo que él no puede tener allá. Y allá no tienen lo material, pero tienen la libertad. Por lo tanto, ésta es una situación muy desequilibrada. He enjoys a little of what she doesn’t enjoy here. And she enjoys a little more of what he can’t have over there. The ones that are over there don’t have material things, but they have freedom.
ejemplo el mío, el niño goza de que

For example, my son enjoys having his
tiene a sus abuelos, sus primos, sus tíos,

grandparents, his cousins, his uncles
todo. Y mi niña aquí sola encerrada en

and aunts and all. And my daughter has
el apartamento lleno de juguetes se

to be here alone, closed up in an
tiene que estar. Aunque tiene un closet

apartment filled with toys. Even if she
lleno de juguetes, se tiene que estar

has a closet overflowing with toys, she
encerrada.

has to be stuck inside.

Immigrant families also bring distinct cultural practices and traditions to their
lives here, ones that may not be recognized or acknowledged by the larger society.
Children have to negotiate their families’ ways along with dominant culture norms, and
these beliefs shape their childhoods. This includes beliefs about the proper relationship of
children and adults, the place of children in society, appropriate domains for their
activities, and what counts as successful pathways through childhood.

And of course, many immigrants speak a language other than English, making the
home language environment distinct from “mainstream” English-speaking households,
with the language milieu and subsequent demand for language brokering constituting a
major difference between childhood experiences in families’ communities of origin and
childhoods in a new land. Language brokering is a cultural practice, and like all practices,
it is shaped by beliefs about intergenerational relations. But it is a cultural practice that is
shared across groups from different national, ethnic/racial, and cultural origins; it is not
specific to the experiences of people from any given nation or cultural origin. My own
work was centered on immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, and most of the
children represented in this book were of Mexican or Central American origin, but
language brokering is not a “Mexican” cultural tradition; it is shaped by the needs and circumstances of being an immigrant. Cindy, the fourteen-year-old in the opening vignette, immigrated with her family from Hong Kong, and I included her here to remind readers that there are many young people like her, from countries all around the world—and in countries all around the world—doing this same kind of work. This is especially true today given how global economic restructuring has created massive flows of migration around the planet; but it has been true throughout history as well.

Childhoods in “contact zones”

Much research on children and childhoods has been situated within a single central cultural context, and often in a single domain (such as home or school). It is aimed at understanding how children become members of a given social group, or how childhoods are constructed in that setting. But immigrant children live in what Mary Pratt calls “contact zones”—social spaces where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.”[26] And the act of language brokering brings speakers of different languages into direct contact, with language brokers standing literally and figuratively “in the middle” between cultural worlds. When María negotiated between her mother and her teacher (as will be described in Chapter Five), she had to manage these adults’ divergent expectations for her own socialization, including their beliefs about how she should speak and act such parent conferences. When Briana talked with a doctor and her mother about her sister’s cold symptoms (presented in Chapter Four), she similarly navigated between potentially variant perspectives on how to promote children’s health and well-being. In cross-cultural encounters, differences in beliefs, values and practices may become more visible and heightened to participants as well as to onlookers. It is the juxtaposition of
distinct beliefs about how children should behave and how adults should interact with them that makes immigrant childhoods particularly useful for theorizing about historical and cultural change.

At the same time, just as immigrant childhoods differ in important ways from native childhoods (either in the home or host country), there are differences in childhood experiences within and across immigrant families. Household composition, the age of arrival of different family members, and the nature and extent of prior schooling matter. Some nuclear families may be split across national borders, as Alma Martínez’s was. In the same family some children may have citizenship rights (those born in the United States) while others may have different kinds of legal status, differences that are more consequential than ever now, given increased surveillance over immigrants and changing laws stipulating access to public services. And older and younger children may grow in very different contexts, including their language milieu, because more English enters the household once older siblings are in school and as adults acquire English over time. Indeed, contact zones exist within families as well as between families and the outside world.

Children as actors and agents

As translators, children make things happen for themselves and their families; they forge connections and open up lines of communication. They make it possible for adults to do things that they could not otherwise accomplish. I will show many examples of children’s direct actions - answering phone calls, setting up appointments, making purchases, soliciting services, and more – in the next few chapters. Schools and homes are not surprisingly the site for many of children’s actions (because in modern Western
society children’s participation in other spheres is curtailed), but language brokering also takes youth out into public spaces. But even within the home, children act in relation to an array of institutions, taking on financial, political, medical, legal and other matters – areas where children’s actions have been little studied. And language brokering takes place in public spaces that include a wide array of institutional domains. [See Appendix C for a summary of all reported and observed language brokering activities by the children in this study, organized by domains.]

Children’s actions also open up space and time for other people in less direct ways. When Junior read to his younger siblings, his mother’s time was freed for housework. When Luz helped her sister fill out college applications, the college counselor was spared that task. When Nova spoke for his father at the hospital, the hospital was released from finding a suitable translator – or as more often happens – the paraprofessionals and custodians who doubled as informal interpreters in many such settings were able to concentrate on the work that they were paid to do, and not the informal translation work for which they are rarely compensated.

The indirect nature of some of children’s contributions to family processes is especially important for considerations of immigrants’ contributions to society. In many ways, the children of immigrants support and sustain their parents as workers in the United States, making it possible for them to engage in productive work. But children’s labor – like that of housewives – is largely invisible and often not counted as part of the labor cost equation, except by critical childhoods scholars.[27] The critical social science of childhood thus helps us to think about children’s contributions to household economies within a much larger structural frame, and see the relationship between everyday life and
larger institutions and social structures. In any given household, children’s actions may be small, but when they are added up across households they may represent a significant contribution to society. And children’s efforts go well beyond the household, as we will see in Chapter Four.

Children also assert agency by resisting adults’ efforts to socialize them, as María’s mother perceived her to do when she complained that María didn’t want to help her. And they are subjects as well as objects, taking the lead in other practices and modeling expertise for adults, their siblings, and other children. When Cindy’s mother fretted that she didn’t know how to get to a location, saying, “We don't know how to get there, we haven't been there before.” Cindy replied: “But that doesn’t mean we can’t.”

**Agents of social transformation.** Children’s actions as translators may also shape social structures by pushing at and sometimes transforming intergenerational social boundaries. By looking at intergenerational relationships on the ground, in the context of specific activities such as translation, one can then contemplate historical changes in the constructions of childhoods, identifying the contributions of children’s work to either reproducing or changing the status quo. This may include what children do directly through their own activities, as well as what children’s presence and agency allow others to do.

Children’s translation work is a discursive practice, but it has material outcomes for families; children use language to access concrete opportunities and material resources for their families. In turn through this practice childhood itself may be transformed. Translation work is shaped by the generational structuring of social processes (e.g. the presumed “natural” role for children in social interactions); in turn, it may change those
structures.[28] Beliefs about children’s rights, needs, and responsibilities give form to this practice (e.g., that children should be deferent to adults, not interrupt, or challenge adults’ viewpoints), even as the practice may influence those beliefs. Translation work is implicated in the translation of childhood itself – in what comes to be seen as “normal” or appropriate for children.

Constraints on children’s actions. There are, of course, constrains on children’s actions in any society. In the modern United States this includes include laws that are designed to protect children, but that may restrict them as well, including currently-proposed laws that prohibit children from translating in public hospitals and clinics;[29] institutional regulations; local practices; and cultural, moral, religious and ethical strictures that delimit children’s actions. Physical or biological limitations may also pertain, due to height, weight, strength, brain or bodily development. On average, children are smaller and shorter than adults, and this may pose limitations for them in particular activities, just as it may make possible their engagement in other practices. (Limitations always go both ways.) Further, any such constraints do not cut cleanly by age, which is why categorical labels are so problematic. Some adults are shorter than some children; some children are stronger than some adults; some children have a capacity for abstract thinking that some adults lack; etc. But even with these limits on their actions, children always exercise agency; they act within and sometimes against constraints.

Seeing Children’s Actions. Children’s actions may be noticed most when they step outside the bounds of what is considered appropriate for children, based on moral, cultural, or legal guidelines. Reactions to such moments of rupture to the status quo can
reveal a great deal about a social group’s beliefs and normative practices. And child
language brokering practices may involve many such disruptions, which is what makes
this work unsettling to some people, and studying the practice particularly useful for
understanding the socially constructed nature of childhoods. The strong emotions that are
sometimes evoked, either in participants or in those viewing the practice – feelings of
discomfort, elation, pride, embarrassment or fear – are useful lenses into changing
notions of childhood, because intense feelings may indicate the transgression of
entrenched social norms. It was in recognition of this that I continually asked children
how they felt about their work as language brokers in different settings, contexts, tasks
and relationships – asking what felt to them as “just normal” and what did not.

Naming and Framing

Naming and Framing Children

In naming children’s work as translators, the question arises of what to call this
labor, and how to label the people who do it. Are these immigrant child language brokers
or just language brokers? When participants are not given labels based on their
membership in particular social groups (e.g. those based on race/ethnicity, gender, social
class, or age), there is a risk of misrepresenting them. There are unmarked assumptions,
for example, that doctors are male, secretaries are female, and people are white unless
they are identified as people of color. Similarly, “translators” may be presumed to be
adults unless they are specifically named “child translators.”

But age-based categories can also trivialize the work. The youth I introduce you to
in this book are translators – they engage in more translation work than do many
bilingual adults. In modifying the term translator with an age-based adjective (“child”)

34
my aim is to expose common assumptions about who is generally authorized to speak for whom – much as the terms “child soldier” and “teen mother” reveal beliefs about who should or should not go to war, or have children. Marking the term child translator (like child soldier) reveals an assumption that this isn’t normal—translators and soldiers should be adults. And doing this may also diminish children’s authority, power, and skills in the eyes of the reader. I want you to see what children do rather than to see them only as children doing these things.

Naming based on age categories is in some ways more troublesome than naming based on other somewhat more stable social groupings (such as gender and race/ethnicity), because the boundaries between age categories are blurred, and their content is continuously shifting. The eight to eighteen-year-olds that I worked with are located in the borderlands between what is considered childhood and adulthood in modern Western society, and may be variously labeled, viewed, and treated as children, adolescents, pre-adolescents, teens, pre-teens, “tweens,” or young adults. In this book, I mostly refer to these people as “children,” but sometimes use the term “youth.” Across the years in which I worked with these young people, I found my own descriptions shift; when María was ten I was comfortable calling her a child, but less so when she was fifteen. Whether these people are viewed (and view themselves) as children, youth, teens, or young adults may well matter for how they engage in these activities, or how others engage them. It may matter as well for what they take away from the experiences. And how I label them also certainly shapes how readers will understand their experiences.

Names define both by inclusion and exclusion. Taking lessons from feminists, critical childhoods scholars note that childhood, like gender, is a relational category,
constituted through opposition. A child is a child because she is not an adult, or a toddler, or a teen. And one is always a child in relation to one’s parents no matter how old one may be. Relationships between adults and children, particularly between parents and kids, are especially pertinent to language brokering, because the children of immigrants, like Luz, may remain “child translators” long into adulthood. The needs and competencies of different family members may shift over time, and the nature of parent-child relationships may also transmogrify, but brokering activities will still be embraced in some form of parent-child relations.

Who counts in a particular version of “child” also varies across situations, tasks, and activities. Sometimes it may appear to be based on seemingly arbitrary distinctions, as every parent who has sought discount fees at museums and amusement parks knows. And sometimes these distinctions seem contradictory, as is the case for eighteen-year-old U.S. citizens who can join the army, but not purchase beer. They may be seen as capable of translating in some situations, and for some tasks, but not others. Mary Bucholtz[29] makes the point that these age-defining terms shift meaning when used in different sociopolitical circumstances; for example, children might be classified as adults in the U.S. legal system, yet older young adults might be called children in child labor discussions. I call on readers to question your own such assumptions – to notice your own reactions to my reports on children’s activities.

Naming and Framing Translation

The labels given to the work of translating and interpreting also bear consideration. The various terms that have been used each capture aspects of the practice even as they misrepresent other dimensions, and each should be considered for the
assumptions it embeds both about language and about the practice of children speaking to and for adults.

**Language brokering.** “Language brokering,” the most utilized term, captures the mediational work that children do as they advocate for their families and negotiate between monolingual speakers.[30] Children use language as a tool of negotiation; they do not passively transmit words from one person to another in the manner that the dictionary definition of the word “translation” (“to bear, convey, or remove from one person, place or condition to another; to transfer, transport”[31]) might suggest. Sara Chu uses a similar term: “immigrant child mediators”[ ]. However, these labels obscure the power imbalances between participants in most translation events; after all, children are not neutral or powerful “brokers” when they speak to and for adults, and represent their immigrant families to institutions of the dominant society.

**Family interpreting.** “Family interpreting,” a term introduced by Guadalupe Valdés in her study of translation work as a form of giftedness,[32], extends the notion of “informal interpreting”[ ] by emphasizing the collaborations among family members that we will see in Chapter Three. This term captures the ways in which children align with their families in this work, as they represent their families to the larger social world. Valdés follows the commonly endorsed stance that “interpreting” refers to oral transactions, whereas “translation” involves the transposition of written text. Indeed, in informal conversations, many people have pointed out that they see this work as interpretation, not translation.

**Natural translation.** But a distinction between orality and literacy is not made by the authors of the earliest term used to reference this phenomenon, that of “Natural
Translation,”[33] nor does the dictionary definition of the word “translation” suggest that
translation pertains only to the movement of words from written texts. I have elected to
use the terms “translate” and “interpret” interchangeably because I follow sociocultural
theorists who work with an all encompassing notion of text and who argue that the
oral/written divide is more illusory than real.[34] (At the same time, adding “natural” in
front of the word translation to describe the work that bilingual children do seems to
presume that bilinguals “naturally” acquire a capacity to move between languages.
Although many bilinguals do seem to offer many spontaneous, “natural” translations,
other translation situations that immigrant youth find themselves in are more contrived;
this term may misrepresent the challenges they present.) Toury suggests referring to the
work of “native translators” rather than the act of “natural translation.”[ ]

Para-phrasing. To capture aspects of this phenomenon that may be obscured by
other labels, I’ve sometimes used another term, para-phrasing, to refer to both interpreter-
mediated-encounters and text-mediated interactions.[35] This coined term invokes a play
on the Spanish word “para,” to emphasize how translation work is used for real purposes,
and in order to accomplish social goals. (This label, like all others, does not do justice to
the full complexity of the practice.) Children do not simply move words and ideas or
explicate concepts; they take action in the world. The prefix “para” also indexes the
disparity of power between what these children do and what is seen as “real” translating.
Like other kinds of “para-professionals,” child “para-phrasers” act in capacities for which
they have little or no formal training and in which their qualifications are open to
question and critique. Indeed, largely because they are children, they are subjected to
adult co-participants’ evaluations of their linguistic, communicative, and social performances. I’ll address this explicitly in Chapter Five.

Transcultural and intergenerational work. Children are particularly vulnerable to such critique when they speak for adults in public spaces, as I will examine in Chapter Four. Public paraphrasing activities have received considerable attention in the media – while everyday home translations go largely unrecognized – precisely because in these situations children appear “out of place.” When children speak for the adults in public spaces that are normally the domain of adults, they overstep generational boundaries in U.S. mainstream notions of childhood, and their actions become marked and visible. Indeed, to be “out in the world” is to be an adult; Cindy commented on this explicitly: “I’ve been out in the world more. I feel I’m an adult as much as anybody.”

Adult public space in the United States is also white public space,[37] a place where immigrants, like children, are expected to be “seen but not heard,” and where alternatives to English and to white, middle class interactional styles appear as deviant from the unmarked norm. Thus language brokering is also transcultural work, and the children of immigrants stand at the borders of both intergenerational and cultural/social class borders when they speak to and for adults in most public spaces, and those borders are imbricated with power relations. Spanish and English are accorded different symbolic capital in public interactions, and children’s words – as well as the families they represent – may be interpreted through the lens of racializing discourses[38] as well as discourses about what is appropriate for children of different ages to do.

The presumed dangers of overstepping generational and cultural borders are evinced in popular representations of child language brokering. In an episode of the
popular TV show E.R., a Spanish-speaking mother died because her child mis-translated the dosage of medicine that was prescribed to her. The instructions read “Take once a day;” the child read “once” as the Spanish word “once” (eleven), and so the mother overdosed on the medicine. Leaving aside the ways in which this account stretches reason (that “take once a day” would be misread and interpreted as “take eleven a day” rather than the more logical “take one a day,” that a child would presume a Spanish word to be embedded in an English sentence – something that never happened in any of the translations we recorded – or that mothers would comply without questioning such a dosage, especially when dispensed from a small vial), this popular representation of translation work strikes a chord of danger: children should not be entrusted to provide information to adults. Adult community translators have been shown to make many medical mis-translations,[39] but such mistakes are not attributed to the age or social competencies of the translator; indeed they may go unnoticed, and to my knowledge, no popular television show has dramatized translation mistakes made by adults.

The Value of Multiple Frames

The critical childhoods framework focuses attention on children’s perspectives on their translation experiences, and illuminates how their activities are shaped by their own and others’ beliefs about what children should or should not do, as well as the generational dimensions of institutional structures. It foregrounds how children’s work as translators matters for their households, schools, and communities, and for larger social processes. This framework guides my representations of children’s activities as work, and my explorations of how this work shapes children’s experiences of childhood. This is one meaning of the term “translating immigrant childhoods,” in which I address childhoods
as a social phenomenon, not a property of individual children.

But even as I focus on children as actors and agents who contribute to social processes, I also recognize that children are continuously growing and changing – as indeed we all are, across our life spans. We all learn from the practices we engage in and the experiences that we garner, and our participation in those practices changes over time. The complex social, cognitive, and linguistic nature of language brokering suggests this to be a particularly powerful vehicle for learning and development. Not to consider the role that language brokering plays in children’s learning and development would be to overlook an important dimension of these experiences. And so, in Chapter Six, I sketch a second theoretical framework that has been important for my analyses, that of sociocultural theory. This developmental framework offers ways of understanding what children learn and how they develop from their work as translators and interpreters. It provides a lens for zooming in on the growth processes of children who engage actively in practices of translation.

Junior, María, Nova and Estela

With these thoughts on how to name, frame, and report on children’s experiences in mind, I will present three more child translators to you, and provide more background on Estela and Nova, two of the young people I introduced at the opening of this chapter. Estela, Junior, Nova, and María are the four children whose translation experiences I documented most closely, in thousands of pages of transcripts and fieldnotes gathered over a period of many years (from 2001 to 2007), and whose experiences figure prominently in this book. The portraits I sketch here are based principally on my earliest fieldnotes, when these children were ten-twelve years old. I’ll offer a second portrait of
these youth when they were fifteen-seventeen years old in Chapter Six.

In representing these young people, I face the same sorts of challenges that youth
translators face when they take complex ideas and concepts, or “whole” realities, and
summarize them in words to audiences that do not have access to the original material. I
wish that I could spark the same sense of each person that I feel when I reach into my
memory to construct these representations. Junior, Nova, María, and Estela are so much
more than “participants” in my studies, or “subjects” of my research; each has a very
special place in my heart, and they cannot be fully represented in two-dimensional
portraits through words on paper.

Junior

Junior immigrated with his parents from a small farming community in
Guanajuato, Mexico when he was two. The family went first to Phoenix, Arizona, and
then to Chicago a few years later. When Junior was four, the family moved out of the city
to the suburb of Engleville, Illinois, as Junior says, “because there were too many
‘gangas’ in Chicago.” Junior’s sister, Natalia, was born when he was six, and his brother,
Roberto, when he was seven.

When I met Junior he lived with his family in a one-bedroom apartment on the
second floor of an apartment row house on a main street in town, a block from my own
home. When I returned to visit them two years later they lived on the first floor of a
house on a tree-lined street in what seemed like a quiet, suburban neighborhood. The
upstairs neighbors included twin girls that were Natalia’s age, and on the hot summer day
that I visited them the children had created a doll’s house out of scraps of cardboard in a
backyard that boasted dozens of tall, lush tomato plants cultivated by their parents.
For his first four years of school, Junior was bussed to a school that housed the district’s bilingual program on the far end of town. In the fourth grade, Junior officially “exited” from this program, which meant that he was no longer eligible to attend the school. He was sent back to his neighborhood school, a transition that he and his mother both found difficult. Sra. Flores mother regretted that she could no longer easily communicate with teachers and office personnel. This placed Junior squarely in the role of home-school language broker, interpreting for his own parent-teacher conferences, deciphering information that was sent home from school (because no official translations were provided), and sending messages back and forth between his mother and his teacher.

Junior’s father worked six days a week during the spring, summer, and fall doing yard work. Sometimes Junior accompanied him, which could involve him in brokering language between the clients and his father. Sra. Fernández did occasional house cleaning and childcare outside the home, and later took in a neighbor’s child to care for in her own home while the child’s mother worked. Junior spent most of his out-of-school time in the company of his mother and his younger siblings, and utilized his English skills with them in many ways, including reading stories, reading, and deciphering the mail, speaking for his mother in shops, the public library, and medical appointments, and on the phone. He consistently wrote that he “felt good” about helping his family by translating.

When Junior was in sixth grade, his mother complained to me that her son sometimes mumbled too much. She claimed his teachers said the same. Sometimes I found it hard to understand Junior, both in person and on tape, as he blended his words together and inserted the word “asina” into his talk. (This literally means “in this way.”) It
is an archaic version of the word “asi” that is used by Mexican rancheros more or less the way young people use “you know” in English.[41]) But other times I heard a lilting voice on tape, as when Junior read to his younger brother and sister, his Midwest-nasal-Spanish-inflected vowels rising and falling with marked expressiveness as he read the English text and then rendered his own translation. In one such reading, he paused only slightly in his search for the words for ribbons and bows (opting for a reasonable translation: bows and more bows), and self-correcting his English transliteration of “Cinderella’s friends” as “Sinderela’s amigos” into the proper Spanish grammatical form (“los amigos de Cinderella”):

But Cinderella’s friends, Jack and Gus, and the birds sewed ribbons and bows to one of her dresses. Oh! said Cinderella.

It looks so priiiitty. Thank you, mah liddle frinds.

Pero Sinderela’s amigos, los amigos de Sinderela, Jack y Gus, y los pájaros, cosieron, cosieron moños y, más moños, en su vestido. ¡O! dijo Sinderela. Se mira bien:: maravilloso. Gracias, mis amigos chiquitos.

Nova

Nova was born in a small farming town in Guanajuato, Mexico, that is just a mile or so from Junior’s hometown. He moved to Chicago with his family when he in the fifth
grade; his sister, six years younger, began her school career here. He described the move in a school essay written in eighth grade:

The first time I came to America was in a Greyhound-like bus called “El Conejo” (the rabbit), and it took us two nights and one day to arrive in Engleville. I think it was spring in the U.S.A. on May 13. It was kind of cold. The things that impressed me about the U.S.A. were: the big city that Engleville was, the restaurants the buildings, and the people because they were white, with “gold” hair. The familiar things from the U.S.A. and Mexico were all the Mexican people I met, and my uncles.

Whereas Junior exited from their school district’s bilingual program in fourth grade, having begun in kindergarten, Nova continued to receive bilingual supports through middle school. In the same school essay, he claimed he had “problems” with English: I used to mix some English words with Spanish words. I used to make up some words that I didn’t even know.” But even as Nova was learning English, he was expected to help his parents in translation tasks. Nova used the tape recorder that we gave him to voice-record commentaries on his translation activities, and his hesitation with English vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation was evident on these tapes he made when he was in sixth grade, even as he carefully self-corrected:

Friday, July Twenty-Seven. Two Thousand and One. Today we were at the restaurant, and then::, my dad wanted to get some ag-, some more water. And he told me to tell the guy ‘cause there wasn’t no, almost nobody who speak Spanish on there. IN there. So I asked the guy. He was, uh, American.
And my dad told me to tell him, and I did. I told him. And then my dad, he said thanks. For telling the guy. And I felt proud of it.

When I first met them, Nova’s family lived in a two-flat next door to Junior. A few years later they moved to freshly-painted duplex on a quiet residential street, sharing the house and the mortgage with extended family (Sr. Aguilera’s brother, wife and three children). Nova had his own room, and the computer that he helped his family to purchase was located there. The family managed to purchase this home and computer despite their limited incomes from unstable, low-wage jobs. They did this in part by forgoing trips home to Mexico, although they continued sending money to family living there. Nova’s father worked in landscaping, supplemented by snow removal in the winter. Nova’s mother also contributed to the mortgage with income from her job as a maid in the guesthouse of the nearby university. Her work hours varied, depending on guesthouse bookings; her work hours decreased dramatically right after September 11, 2001, which created considerable hardship for the family.

María

María was ten years old when I met her, but had a feisty spirit that made me think she was so much older. In our project focus groups, or what we came to call “Junior Ethnographer Meetings,” María always held back at first, watching from afar with eyes politely, but not shyly, averted, her mouth pulling up slightly into a smile, quietly attending. But given an opening there she was, in the center of the action, commanding attention, holding the stage. “Don’t you see you can’t just stand there? You’ve got to act!” she told Nova and Tony, boys from another school that she barely knew, two years
and a head taller than she. “Her mom thinks she’s going to jail, and I think she’s going to
Yale,” reported her teacher. “It’s cause I talk a lot,” María conceded.

María, who selected this pseudonym in an apparent display of identification with
a fieldworker on this project (María Meza), was born in Engleville, a few years after her
parents had moved from the same small farming community in the state of Guanajuato,
Mexico, where Junior was born. (Indeed, Sra. Gutiérrez and Sra. Flores are cousins). Her
parents spent a year in Chicago before moving to Engleville just before María was born.
Her mother maintained active ties with family in Mexico; María and her brothers spent
several summers there with their mother.[43]

When I first met them, the Gutiérrez family lived in a basement apartment on a
main street in Engleville. María was in the fourth grade at Jefferson Elementary School,
walking distance from her home. A few years later, her parents purchased a home in a
section of town that had historically been an African American neighborhood; now it was
populated with a mix of Mexican families and African Americans. The small three-
bedroom house had a large backyard complete with a swing-set and jungle gym. It was a
few blocks from the high school that María attended. María’s mother was proud of their
new home, though meeting the mortgage payments demanded sacrifices of the family,
one of which was to forego trips back to Guanajuato; and in the year 2003 the family
struggled because employment was cut back and their car needed significant repairs. Sra.
Gutiérrez also took on part-time work as a lunchroom aide at Jefferson.

María’s work at home included extensive translating; in her journal entries she
reported on translating letters, phone calls, school information, television shows, as well
as interactions in stores, doctors’ offices, and at school. María used her English skills to
provide homework help to many people: to her siblings, her neighbors, and even to her mother, who was studying English at night. She translated mostly for her mother; her father could usually get his boss to help him with translating complex texts, but María helped him with smaller day-to-day things. But María’s life was not all work by any means. She enjoyed riding her bike, reading, watching Disney movies, listening to Mexican ranchera music, and playing computer games.

In general, María was very aware of and attentive to her family’s financial status. She frequently asked questions about how much various things cost – from movies to sodas to computers to college. She asked to see our receipts when we mentioned having bought something at a local store. Once when her mother said something about wearing a coat, because they couldn’t afford to see the doctor if she were to get sick, María responded, “Yeah, I know, the money, the money.” She also displayed an awareness of the intersection of race/ethnicity and social class when she commented: “Casi todos los mexicanos no tienen mucho dinero.” (“Most Mexicans don’t have much money.”) And she took much interest in the topic of ethnic labels. When we gave her the consent forms to participate in this research, she asked what the word “Latino” meant in our title (“Latino children as family translators”). María Meza, a fieldworker on the project, explained that the term referred to people from Latin America. María replied, “Then I can’t be Latino because I’m from here.” María Meza explained that because her parents were from Mexico, she could call herself Latina. María responded with, “Can’t I just be Mexican?”
Estela

Estela came to the U.S. with her parents from a small town located just outside the ranchos where Junior, María, and Nova’s families lived in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. Here are Estela’s own words, unedited, in a fourth grade essay entitled “All About Me:”

I am going to tell you about myself. I have two sisters one is fore and the other one is one month old and I am the only one ho can cary her except for my mom and dad she eats a lot and my mom lets me bERP her some taems she thos up on me.

I was borne in Mexico in Mexico is so fun but hear is more in Mexico you can go out in the night and no one will rob you. There is no cars in Mexico well there is some but not were I live there is a lot of stores ofer hear and in December there is a fest and you can go on lot of raeds. That is all about me for raet naw.

When I first met them, Estela’s family rented a small apartment on the second floor of a house on a busy street, two doors down from the house that Maria’s parents had just recently purchased. When I visited after my move to Los Angeles in 2001, the family had purchased a home, located on a quiet, residential street with a huge park that extended from their back yard. And as described in the opening vignette, Estela’s work increased as she took care of her younger sisters while her mother worked the night shift at Burger King. Her father worked several jobs and also played in a band made of fellow migrants from this town (and indeed, they had played together back home).
Of all the children with whom I worked, Estela was perhaps the most prototypical child translator, one whose experiences may give support to the idea that children can be burdened by this work. But like María, she also spent many hours in play activities. She liked to dress up, dance, play with Barbie dolls, and sing. Her childhood was shaped by all of these experiences and more.

***

Each of the portraits I have painted here is, of course, a partial one. Families, like the communities described in the next chapter, are dynamic; they can be photographed from many angles and in many shades of light, rendering different effects. Portraits fix dynamic and continuously changing situations into the ethnographic present. They freeze the frame, douse the image in fixative, and then sear it into our consciousness, while life in each family and community moves on. (I have, however, tried to avoid this by using the past tense, rather than the “ethnographic present,” to make clear that I am depicting the family and children at specific points in time.[44] I do the same when I detail specific translation events in the upcoming chapters.) I face this same problem when I present three of the communities in which I worked, in the next chapter, especially because I worked in each during different points of historical time. I’ll try to give some sense of these changes that communities, individuals, and families go through, especially in Chapter Six, but these cannot fully capture the experiences any family has in the process of raising children and of growing up. This is one of the many challenges of “translating” these children’s experiences in this book.