Participation roles of a language broker and the discourse of brokering: an analysis of English-Macedonian interactions

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Research on language brokers – younger family members who perform lay interpreting and advocacy for older family members – has been undertaken mostly by educational ethnographers and psychologists who examine how protagonists take on and accomplish specific tasks, usually normally outside their role as younger family members. There have been few studies that examine the linguistic attributes of brokers’ renditions of others’ speech and ‘talk-in–interaction’ with family members. This paper employs Goffman’s (1981) terms ‘animator’, ‘author’ and ‘principal’ to refer to the participant roles assumed by brokers, and uses CA as a tool to describe the local organisation of interactional episodes.

Data is based on two samples. The first sample consists of real-life, audio-taped interactions between a Macedonian-English broker and his mother in three different interactions. Analysis is foregrounded by sociolinguistic information on the 48-year-old broker and his 76-year-old mother and information on the situations in which the broker interprets for his mother and his style of brokering.

A CA analysis of the brokered interactions shows that the broker facilitates collaborative, face-saving interactions between himself as the ‘re-teller’ of information and the mother as the recipient in which the mother not only can contextualise spoken content in her own world view, but contest, disagree with and even reject relayed content. Recasting three English speakers’ speech into Macedonian, the broker assumes the role of animator and author, and at times also that of principal, although the brokered episodes do not become dissociative from ‘source speech’. The paper will include a presentation of real-life taped data and a segment from the second sample of comparative data based on responses from 10 professional Macedonian-English interpreters, including a simulated repeat exercise that trials the mother’s reception of the same content in (higher-register) standard Macedonian.

Keywords: Brokering, Lay Interpreting, Conversational Analysis.