

Young Immigrants Acting as Interpreters and Communication Facilitators

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Abstract

This investigation delves into the position of youthful migrants who step up as interpreters in their linguistically eclectic surroundings to help their parents navigate life. The focus is on the Gypsy minority located in Jordan, known for being disregarded by authorities in their response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research seeks to gather information through a qualitative examination that institutes an ethnographic approach. The interviewees were 63 youngsters aged between 11-17 years old who provided profound insights during the semi-structured interviews. Gypsies, who live in tents on the outskirts of Zarqa, were the participants of the study. The study aims to show that Gypsies possess an oral tradition and face challenges in communicating with authorities. Additionally, the study aims to highlight the critical role that young immigrants play in improving the lives of their elders. Amidst the results, it surfaced that the Jordanian Gypsies were often disregarded. This is primarily due to the fact that their language, Domari, is not one that the country's translation services accommodate. Furthermore, the community's lack of education and high rates of adult illiteracy meant that the younger generation, who have received mandatory schooling, had to step in as intermediaries between the Gypsies and authority figures.

Keywords: young immigrants, interpreting, communication, language brokering, Jordanian Gypsies

1. Introduction

Rendering communication and coordination more complex than before, a crisis refers to a non-routine event that poses a threat and warrants a response to mitigate its damaging effects (Hunt, O'Brien, Cadwell, & O'Mathúna, 2019). Communication proves vital in managing crises, particularly when dealing with national or global issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, effectively communicating is the primary way to generate a response to a crisis or catastrophe, especially in diverse cultures where multiple languages are spoken (David & Pescaroli, 2020). Building trust between decision-makers and the public is aided by communication - which facilitates executing a plan during times of crisis (Arokiasamy, Kwaider, & Balaraman, 2019). Therefore, crisis management relies heavily on communication, including interpretation (oral translation), in multilingual regions, to impact the results of the crisis (Coombs, 2010). The use of different communication methods, such as interpretation, can help reduce the chances of vulnerable populations being negatively affected by the crisis. When in a crisis, it is important to provide linguistic diversity with timely information, just like any other basic need. However, if there are no professional translators, those who speak the majority language(s) tend to be more stable than minority linguistic communities. To address this, we need qualified translators and interpreters who are familiar with the language and culture of minority groups.

Translation Studies (TS) has recently coined the term 'crisis translation' to depict the act of transferring cultural expressions and meanings from one language and cultural setting to another, either in written, spoken, or signed form, both prior to or during a crisis. It is also described as any manner of conveying cultural and linguistic content that eases the conveyance of information throughout crises or emergencies, regardless of the platform. Crisis translation, or translation for emergencies, is an emerging topic within TS. This is evident from the explanations given by Hunt et al. (2019) and Federici, O'Hagan, O'Brien, & Cadwell (2019). This article brings attention to the linguistic difficulties faced by vulnerable sub-communities during crises. Within culturally diverse groups, access to information is essential. However, these struggles are often overlooked. Federici (2016) notes the significance of this issue and its correlation with different communities.

Children from linguistically minority communities can play a crucial part in aiding their families' transition to a new host country, especially when trained interpreters are scarce. Some of the ways they can help include interpreting during parent-teacher conferences, assisting siblings with their school assignments, and translating notes from school. These young language facilitators also play a vital role in accompanying their parents to doctor's appointments and filling out

job applications, or assisting with citizenship issues. As language brokers for the family, older female children are often chosen to liaise with landlords or neighbors and serve as interpreters during bank transactions (Pezdek, Doliński, & Zygmunt, 2022). Trustworthy individuals who can handle negotiations with discretion and maintain confidentiality are preferred when professional interpreters are unavailable. In fact, parents tend to value maturity over age (Weisskirch's, 2010).

For migrating families, it is a common occurrence that the children acclimate to the local language more quickly than their parents do. Weisskirch notes that this is often due to the fact that children tend to learn languages at a swifter pace (2010). Curiously enough, this phenomenon is frequently observed yet seldom discussed. While translating can impart a sense of self-worth and confidence in children, it can simultaneously cause stress. The agency and influence that children and young people have over the messages they convey is commonly referred to as 'Child Language Brokering' in Translation Studies (TS) (Jutorán & Vargas-Urpí, 2022). This differs from the word-for-word translation and interpretation that professionals often provide. Kids may act as cultural mediators between their family and adults in positions of authority, giving rise to a type of interpretation where they can modify the original meaning.

Language brokering, as evidenced, can furnish benefits. It is related to elevated levels of self-efficacy, empowerment, academic performance, prosocial behavior, and empathy (Dorner, Christine & Marjorie 2007). Research has also established that caretakers of language brokers experience closer relationships with their family, thereby preserving their heritage language and culture, although dependency on their offspring decreases as they improve their language proficiency (Orellana, 2009). Between migrants who interpret and those who do not, young interpreters display greater understanding of both their home and host cultures by being the cultural go-betweens. For some, like an intermediary hailing from Cyprus, the act of interpreting is just an extension of the care they provide for their loved ones. They believe in the importance of familial support, stating "That is how it is in our culture, you need to be there for your family" (Bauer, 2016).

Situational crises, such as car accidents or natural disasters, are traumatic events that can inflict a great deal of suffering on those affected. These crises come out of nowhere and can take various forms. The Corona Pandemic is the most recent crisis to impact Jordan, but thankfully, crises in the country are few and far between. The world has been in a race to control and mitigate the spread and impact of the Covid-19 virus since it was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. In addition to economic, health, and social measures, a linguistic approach through translation was also employed to tackle the crisis. Translation plays a crucial role during a public health crisis, especially in contexts where health service providers and linguistically diverse populations lack language proficiency, increasing health vulnerability (Kreisberg, et al., 2016).

Recorded on 2nd March, 2020, Jordan saw its first Covid-19 case and a strict lockdown followed on 21st March, 2020, which was partially eased for certain sectors. Overlooked during this time were the Nawar¹, locally known as Gypsies, who faced a language barrier not taken into account by the country's decision makers in their crisis communication. To remedy this oversight, the study involves the children of immigrant families bridging the communication gap between Jordanian Gypsy immigrants and the authorities. Highlighting a frequently ignored community, this paper delves into Jordanian Gypsies and their prevalent use of the Domari dialect, which hinders their access to Arabic-based government services and local community. Unpacking this linguistic barrier, the study unveils a broader societal issue that impedes integration. Furthermore, it sheds light on the significant influence of young Gypsies acting as communication channels between their community and Jordanian bureaucrats. Acting as essential bridges, youth interpreters help to overcome communication barriers and foster understanding between governmental authorities and the Gypsy community. The study focuses on the linguistic hurdles that Jordanian Gypsies experience and highlights the positive impact of youth involvement in bridging these gaps. The ultimate goal is greater comprehension and communication.

2. The Study

2.1 Background

The diverse nation of Jordan boasts a range of migrant minorities, among them being Armenians, Chechens, and Circassians. Each community has their own distinct language and converses in Arabic, the state's official language, in their daily interactions and learning. Their shared proficiency is in their mother tongue, with emphasis on speaking and

¹The minority communities referred to as 'Nawar' are mistakenly conflated by the major population in Jordan. These communities may have some common traits, such as being nomadic, residing in campsites, and having a traditional income of begging and selling; but they differ greatly in regards to their language and origins. While the first community, also called Kawash, are native Arabic speakers, adhere to Bedouin customs and traditions, and are traced back to the famous Arab group Bani Murah; the second group, which this analysis focuses on, is recognized as Ghajar, or Gypsies. The minority community I am referring to in this paper is commonly known as 'Gypsies.' Originally hailing from northern India, their native tongue is Domari.

listening comprehension, as well as in all the necessary Arabic skills. However, the Gypsy minority has command over Domari, their native language, but their use of Arabic is noticeably deficient, primarily reserved for practical purposes such as earning a living (Heacock, 2022).

Dubious as to their origin, the Gypsies, also known as Romanies or Domaries, present a controversial topic. While the false belief persists that they emerged from Egypt and hence are called 'Egyptians' (Al-Khatib and Al-Ali, 2005; Nord, 2006; Lecouteux, 2018), other scholars assert that they came from Northern India and subsequently ventured to Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa (Heald, 2012; Weckman, 1998). Providing evidence to this idea are philologists' studies that assert the Gypsy language's vocabulary holds similarities with the language of Hindustani in India (Nord, 2006). Romani and Domari are the adjectives used to refer to the Gypsies, also known as Roms (plural noun) and Doms (plural noun) respectively (Peterson, 2012). Those who live in Europe and speak the Romani dialect are called Roms, while those in the Middle East and North Africa who speak the Domari dialect are called Doms. Interestingly, every Gypsy group has developed its own distinct dialect, which is incomprehensible to other groups (Weckman, 1998).

Jordanian Gypsies are similar to their counterparts around the globe. Gypsies have been believed to have been in Jordan before the country was established in 1921, but there is no way to confirm when they arrived (Al-Khatib and Al-Ali, 2005). Jordan does not keep an official count of Gypsies, which makes it difficult to pinpoint an exact population, particularly the majority of nomadic people (Al-Absi and Al-Absiová, 2014). It is estimated that around 25,000 Gypsies reside in the country (Al-Khatib and Al-Ali, 2005).

2.2 Objective

In this study, the utilization of Arabic language and cultural practices by bilingual youth to communicate with their Gypsy immigrant parents is explored. The offspring of these immigrants have resided in Jordan for a significant amount of time, thus becoming fluent in Arabic due to the compulsory education system for all children. In contrast, their parents remain primarily unfamiliar with the language. Although these children possess the skills of listening and speaking, they do not place importance on their education. In a distinct fashion, we highlight how the labor of immigrant youths as interpreters and translators facilitates their families' accessibility to various areas of information and resources such as medical, financial, commercial, legal, residential, and cultural. Furthermore, we investigate the impact of their youth and immigrant backgrounds on their capacity to engage with authoritative communication during the pandemic while also showing their influential role in family decision-making both within and beyond their household.

2.3 Hypotheses

1. The Gypsies' primary language, Domari, takes precedence over Arabic as they have an oral culture. Unfortunately, their lack of proficiency in Arabic, especially amongst adults, poses difficulties in communicating with officials.
2. Accessing resources and facing daily life challenges in a new country, children of immigrants rely on their bicultural and bilingual talents to support their families.

2.4 Methodology

Gathering data from a diverse range of methods, a research program examined the lifestyles and familial situations of a specific community, situated in Zarqa, Jordan. The program analyzed the responses from 63 Domari-speaking youngsters as well as conducting comprehensive interviews, utilizing participant observation, and audio recordings. Recently completed, the qualitative investigation gleaned insightful information from semi-structured interviews with youngsters between the ages of 11-17. Ensuring candidature for the investigation involved more than just an ethnic requirement, as their existing way of life was also taken into account. On the fringes of Zarqa city in Jordan, the study intentionally sought out nomadic Gypsies who reside in camps and tents. To participate in a brief interview, interested individuals were directly contacted. These interviews took place in the participants' camps, as well as on roads near traffic lights, where begging and the sale of inexpensive sunglasses and chewing gum was common. The sampling distribution can be found in Tables 1-3, as all participants were Gypsies who lived a nomadic lifestyle. Before the oral interviews, the participants provided verbal informed consent to take part as they were not able to write. These interviews were the only viable way of gathering data.

Table 1. Age

Age	Number
11-12	11
12-13	14
13-14	15
14-15	9
15-16	8
16-17	6
Total	63

Table 2. Educational background

Education	No. Participants
illiterate	63
literate	0

Table 3. Mother tongue of the participants

Languages	No. Participants
Arabic	0
Domari	63
Other	0

Auto-recording sessions that lasted around seven minutes were conducted in Zarqa City, Jordan. Concise answers were sought, and therefore, the questions were short and straightforward. To prevent misinterpretation, open-ended questions were limited. The interviewees were asked predetermined questions that aimed to validate study hypotheses. Furthermore, the interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes. The goal was to acquire brief answers.

2.5 Analysis

The Gypsy participants had limited Arabic knowledge, mainly focusing on speaking and listening. While their reading and writing in their mother tongue, Domari, were lacking, they had impressive speaking and listening comprehension skills. Clearly, the Gypsy community values oral communications, which is shown by everyone in the sample stating their fluency in Domari. Due to their constant traveling, however, their kid’s education was often interrupted, which was why they struggled to integrate into the Arabic-speaking society despite government efforts to settle them. On the edges of cities, some Gypsies settle despite the lack of nearby schools. Children who were peddling basic products and attending school sporadically had early exposure to native Arabic speakers, which developed their knowledge of the language. Not to mention, the younger the participant, the higher their proficiency in Arabic. According to Table 4, participants had varying degrees of proficiency in Arabic and Domari, depending on their age. Those who spoke their mother tongue of Domari were able to understand and communicate with ease, while their grasp of Arabic was limited to formal situations or work-related activities. It was clear that regularly speaking and using a language in daily life made a significant difference in one’s fluency and understanding.

The dominant language among the Gypsy community is Domari, which validates the initial hypothesis that they possess an oral culture. The study also found that their mastery of Arabic is relatively limited, which poses communication challenges in their interactions with authorities. Therefore, communication with authorities is impacted due to the Gypsies’ reliance on Domari as their sole means of communication.

Table 4. Arabic and Domari proficiency (speaking-listening)²

Age	Number	Arabic		Domari	
		Fluency	No Fluency	Fluency	No Fluency
11-12	9	18%	82%	100%	0%
12-13	11	28.5%	71.5%	100%	0%
13-14	12	43%	57%	100%	0%
14-15	10	50%	50%	100%	0%
15-16	11	64%	36%	100%	0%
16-17	10	63%	37%	100%	0%

The second hypothesis of the study was put to the test once it was determined that the participants utilized Domari exclusively for their everyday communication.

In light of the virus outbreak, Jordan aimed to communicate with its citizens through multiple mediums including websites, apps, TV, radio, and social media. The significance of receiving reliable information cannot be overstated since false information can facilitate the disease's progression. Additionally, obtaining trustworthy information directly from the government was crucial in mitigating any widespread panic. The right to access information, as stated by Jordanian law Article 7 and international law Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, is a fundamental right for every individual. This right includes members of minority language communities, such as the Gypsies. Despite this, the authorities have failed to include nomadic Gypsies due to language barriers, creating a major gap in information dissemination. Looking at Table 5, we can see the percentage of responses to questions regarding the language used and communication method.

² The assessment of Arabic and Domari proficiency was based on the participants’ own judgment.

Table 5. The linguistic and the communication medium.

Question	Yes	No	A little
Did you receive information about coronavirus/Covid-19 in Domari?	0%	100%	0%
Did you know anything about the disease?	87.8%	8.9%	3.1%
Have the Epidemiological Survey Teams tested you?	1.6%	98.4%	0%

Table 5 presents impressive proof that none of the participants were informed by official sources about the pandemic in Domari. Furthermore, they were completely oblivious about the authorities' implementation of a lockdown, which they discovered exclusively through their friends and acquaintances. It is clear that because of the linguistic barrier, the Jordanian authorities refused to collaborate with the Gypsies to tackle the pandemic, leaving them without any support or communication.

Moving forward, children of immigrants play an integral role in connecting their families with external organizations. In order to facilitate this process, one of the methods children utilize is interpretation. Harris and Sherwood (1978) coined the term "Natural Translation" to describe non-professional interpretation carried out by those without specialized training in the field. Examining a phenomena detailed by Guadalupe, we explore the concept of "family interpreters" (Valdés, 2002). This term emphasizes the relationships that exist between those for whom a translator speaks and the translator themselves. It also captures an important aspect of the work done by immigrant children, who often function as language brokers mediating between monolingual speakers, advocating for or supporting their families in some way. The term further highlights the purposeful action taken by these children as they work in the world, rather than merely engaging in the process of conveying ideas and concepts.

Inquiring about the language uses, interpreting experiences and daily activities of young bilinguals in a unique way, a survey was crafted. The intention was to understand how communication with authorities played a role during times of crisis, such as when Epidemiological Survey Teams would be sent by the Ministry of Health to investigate areas for coronavirus cases. Among the surveyed respondents, all could speak the Domari language proficiently, and while doing street work like peddling or begging, all utilized Arabic. In order to maintain consistency, we solely delved into the survey data obtained from the 63 Domari-speaking youths from Zarqa. This allowed us to paint a clear picture of how these young individuals navigated their interpreting experiences in the community using the ethnographic techniques we had at our disposal.

Based on our ethnographic research, we focused on preadolescents as this is the age when bilingual children take on more interpreting responsibilities. Our survey asked participants to share their experiences interpreting during the Corona Pandemic with authorities, including who was involved, how they felt about their performance, and any challenges they faced. To gather more information, we had children recount specific instances of interpreting and probed for additional details. Their positions and problem-solving approaches were probed when we inquired about their feelings as interpreters. To even the playing field between interviewer and interviewee, most of the conversations were conducted in small clusters. In their interpretations, youngsters contribute to the shaping of their parents' relationships with those in positions of power. It is apparent that kids are actively involved in household dynamics and engaged in discourse with the authorities. Their expertise in accessing information within their communities makes these children important socializing agents, acting as conduits of information for families' health, survival, and social advancement (Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003).

Do not think for a moment that just because children are important members of their homes means they possess an excessive amount of sway over familial or societal realms. Our conversations showed that much of what we witnessed and noted was happening within the context of typical, everyday routines, leading young ones to consider them "nothing out of the ordinary." Yes, youngsters in the age range we monitored might weigh in on familial deliberations, but usually don't bear the responsibility of making any definitive choices. As we observed, adults usually maintain the influence to involve children in translation pursuits, as seen from the numerous diary entries where kids noted that they were compelled to translate. There were instances when we noticed resistance, indicating that not every child was willing. Parents emphasized how translations served as a crucial platform to help their children acquire bilingualism and biculturalism.

3. Conclusion

In times of turmoil, it is imperative that each person be granted the human right of having access to information, regardless of the circumstances. Spontaneous decisions are often necessary when faced with a community of diverse languages, especially in a crisis. The Jordanian Gypsies, an ostracized minority with a unique tongue, endure various kinds of marginalization, including linguistic disparities. Moving regularly, the nomadic way of life can lead to a dearth of formal education, and together with the effort to maintain their Domari language, impacts the acquisition of Arabic. The predominance of superstitions and myths among this community can be attributed to their illiteracy. The Gypsies have

adopted a Domari culture, mainly conveyed through spoken language due to their lack of education. It is unfortunate that their neglect of Arabic, the country's sole official language, is a consequence of their illiteracy.

Communication is key in establishing connections with all communities during a crisis. Translation serves as a management tool to reduce risk and build trust. Timely and accurate communication is vital for crisis response. Unfortunately, the Jordanian Gypsies have been excluded from this communication chain due to the lack of professional translation services for the Arabic-Domari language pair. Neither the public nor private sector has provided this service, leaving the community vulnerable during the current coronavirus pandemic. In order to combat the detrimental spread of misinformation, a crucial service must be implemented during this dire crisis. Accurate information delivery is imperative, as misinformation could prove just as disastrous as the disease itself. The health policy of Jordanian authorities requires a revision capable of catering to the vulnerable community of Gypsies. Healthcare language services must be provided, as failure of communication between decision-makers and this community results in ineffective measures taken to combat Covid-19.

In a situation of multilingual crisis, the absence of interpreters can lead to a chaotic journey in relaying vital information from the crisis manager to stakeholders. Therefore, language brokers come into play as the sole solution to achieve the desired objective. These brokers are an important part of risk reduction and contingency planning, and their role in information exchange is pivotal. For them, translation is an integral part of their everyday experience. It is crucial for authorities to consider ways to settle and provide Gypsies access to their legal privileges. By instituting a mission to support and adopt language brokers, government officials can actively promote these individuals. To accomplish this, it is important for authorities to take the initiative in planning programs that gain support from locals and the government. Through these efforts, language brokers become more self-sufficient in their roles, reducing dependence on external translation services. Within diverse communities, communication and understanding can be improved by empowering language brokers. The valuable skills of these intermediaries should be recognized and effectively utilized for the benefit of society as a whole - which is where government support becomes pivotal.

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