



## Sign language brokering: A survey of hearing and deaf Cudas

# SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS<sup>1</sup>

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### Background

Ninety percent of children born to deaf couples can hear, that is, they are 'hearing' (Buchino, 1993). These children who have at least one signing deaf parent are referred to as Children of Deaf Adults (Cudas) (Bull, 1998). The acronym CODA typically is used to refer to the organisation, which was initially established in the USA in 1986 to provide support and networks for Cudas. CODA seeks to educate the wider community about the experiences and culture of Cudas (Bishop, 2008). Since that time, affiliate CODA organisations have been established in other countries, which form an international membership of the organization CODA International. The term 'Coda' typically refers to individual adults who have grown up with a signing deaf parent or parents (Bishop, 2008). Cudas often grow up using a signed language as their first language in the home, and therefore are bilingual and bicultural.

Many Cudas act as interpreters for their parents. Interpreting can be a shaping aspect of the Coda experience that can impact on Cudas for the rest of their lives (Preston, 1996), although the Coda experience may be very different for different people (Napier, 2008). In spite of this, very little research has been conducted specifically on the interpreting experiences of Cudas. Adams (2008) considers that the experiences she describes are "unique to the Coda situation" (p.289). However, this may not be the case. The Coda experience seems to mirror those of other children growing up speaking a minority language at home. It is widely recognised that some children act as interpreters for their parents in a 'language brokering' role where "in first and second generation immigrant families, parents may have little or no competency in the majority language. Therefore, their children act as interpreters in a variety of contexts" (Baker, 2003, p.104). In a review of the literature on language brokering, Hall and Guery (2010) note that children act as oral and literacy communication brokers, and that research on child language brokering makes an important contribution to our understanding of children and families. Children have been found to broker in various contexts, including schools, banks, government

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<sup>1</sup> This brief report presents a summary of findings from the international online survey, which was funded through a Macquarie University Safety Net Fund Grant (2011-2012)

offices, stores and restaurants, and doctors offices (McQuillan & Tse, 1995). These are also the experiences of Codas, who broker between their signing deaf parents and the hearing majority who use a spoken language. To date, no research has been conducted to explore Coda language brokering experiences.

### **Aims of the project**

The primary aim of this applied research project was to investigate the phenomena of language brokering and interpreting among people (adults and young people over the age of 13) who have deaf parents from the perspective of the language brokers.

Although the term Coda is usually specifically applied to hearing people who have deaf parents, for the purposes of this survey, deaf people who have deaf parents and may also have language brokering experiences were also encouraged to respond.

The objectives of the project were to consider the following research questions:

- When, where and why do Codas act as language brokers for their parents or other family members?
- What are Coda attitudes towards their role?
- How do Codas feel about their linguistic and cultural identity and status?
- How do Codas feel their language brokering experiences have impacted on their linguistic and social competence?
- How many Codas have chosen to become professional interpreters as a result of their language brokering experience?

### **Survey**

An online survey was administered to adults (aged 18+) and young people (13-17 years old) who have deaf parents to ascertain their attitudes towards language brokering for their parents. The survey was adapted from surveys administered by Tse (1996) and Weiskirch and Alva (2002) with language brokers of spoken languages.

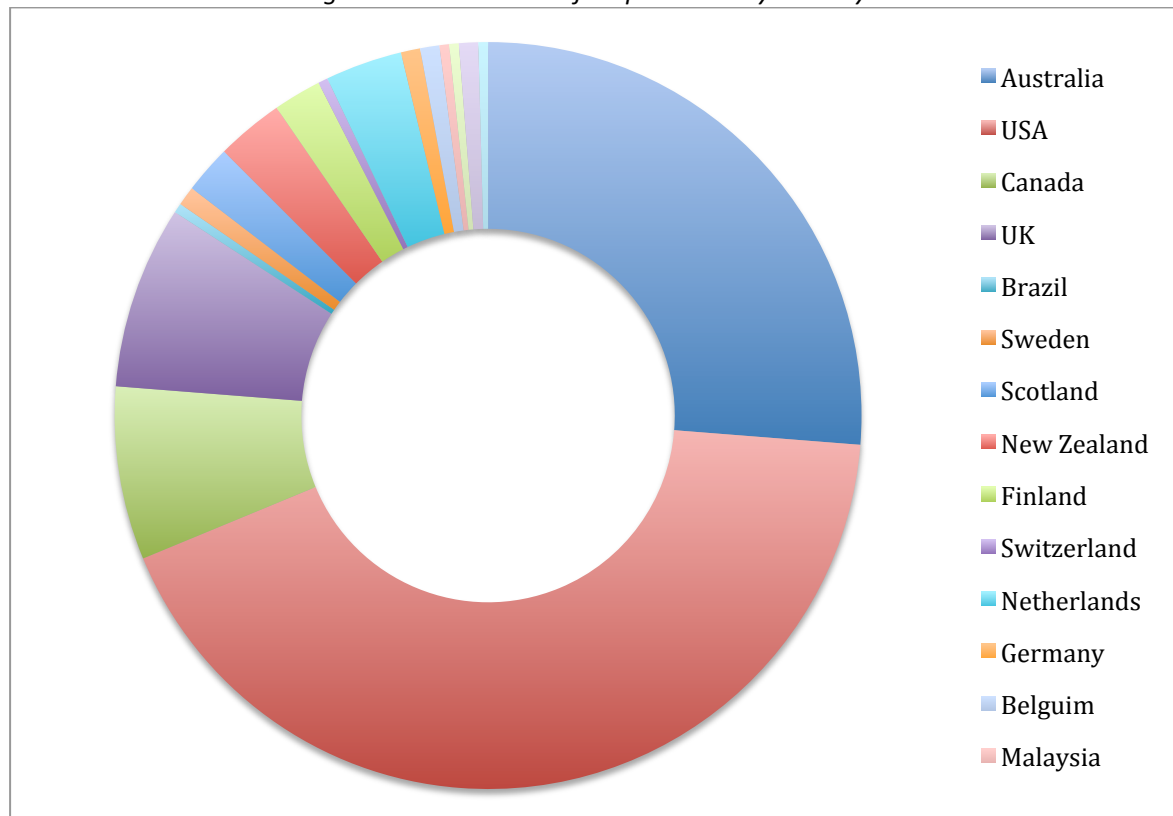
The survey sought biographical and language proficiency data, and asked respondents whether they had ever functioned as a language broker, and if so, for whom and under what circumstances. In total, Codas were asked to respond to 40 questions, including a combination of open, closed, and multiple choice questions, and Likert scale agreements with attitudinal statements.

This brief report presents a summary of the preliminary findings of some of the most interesting results.

## Preliminary findings

In total, 240 people responded to the survey, from 14 different countries, as seen in Figure 1. The majority of respondents were over 18 years of age, although 5 were aged between 13-15 years of age. The majority of people that responded were female (77.5%) and hearing (89.2%).

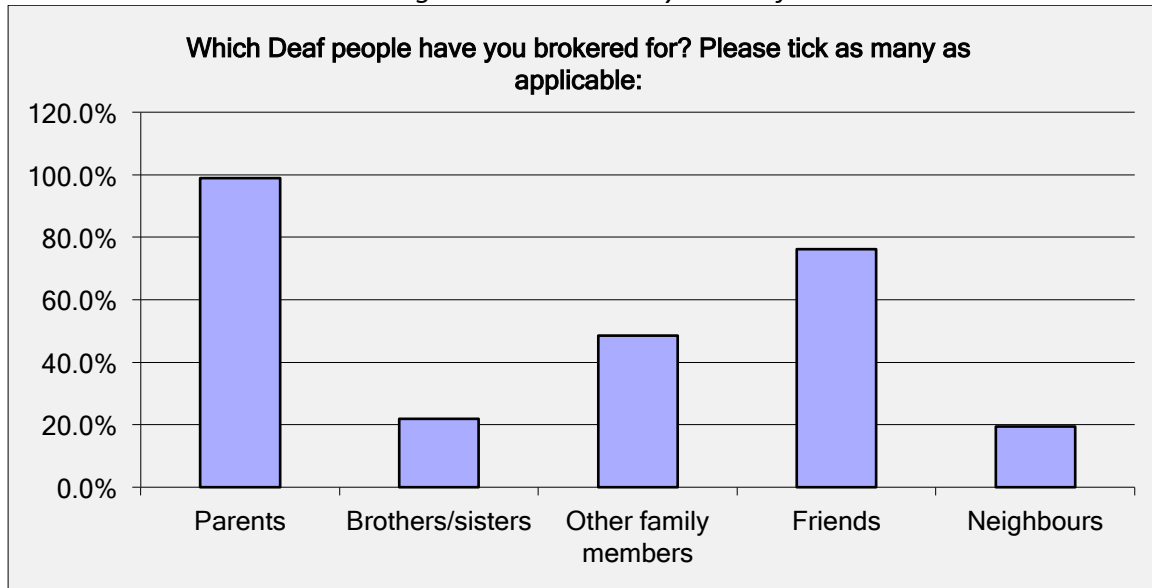
Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by country



Almost half the respondents (49.6%) consider themselves to be balanced bilinguals (i.e., do not feel that either the spoken or signed language is their first language), and the majority stated that they **do** language brokering (80.8%), or they used to do language brokering before their parents or family members moved away or passed away (died) (41%).

The majority of respondents brokered for their parents, although many also brokered for other members of the family or friends, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Who do they broker for?



The Codas who responded to the survey can be seen to broker in a range of different places (see Table 1), but the most common are medical situations, at the store/shop or at home.

Table 1: Where do they broker?

Places of brokering	%	Response Count
Government Departments (e.g, welfare/pensions)	72.9%	153
Utility companies (e.g., electricity, telephone, gas)	75.7%	159
Educational institutions	76.2%	160
Doctors, specialists or hospitals	93.3%	196
Church/Religious events	56.7%	119
Justice systems (e.g., police, courts, tribunals)	46.7%	98
Financial institutions (e.g., bank, tax agent)	82.9%	174
Employment	50.0%	105
Store/shop	90.0%	189
Post Office	65.7%	138
Home (e.g., telephone, hawkers, visitors)	94.8%	199
Other (please specify)		33

Overall, respondents reported that they had generally positive attitudes towards their brokering experiences, but some did report not liking it, or doing it reluctantly, as seen in Table 2.

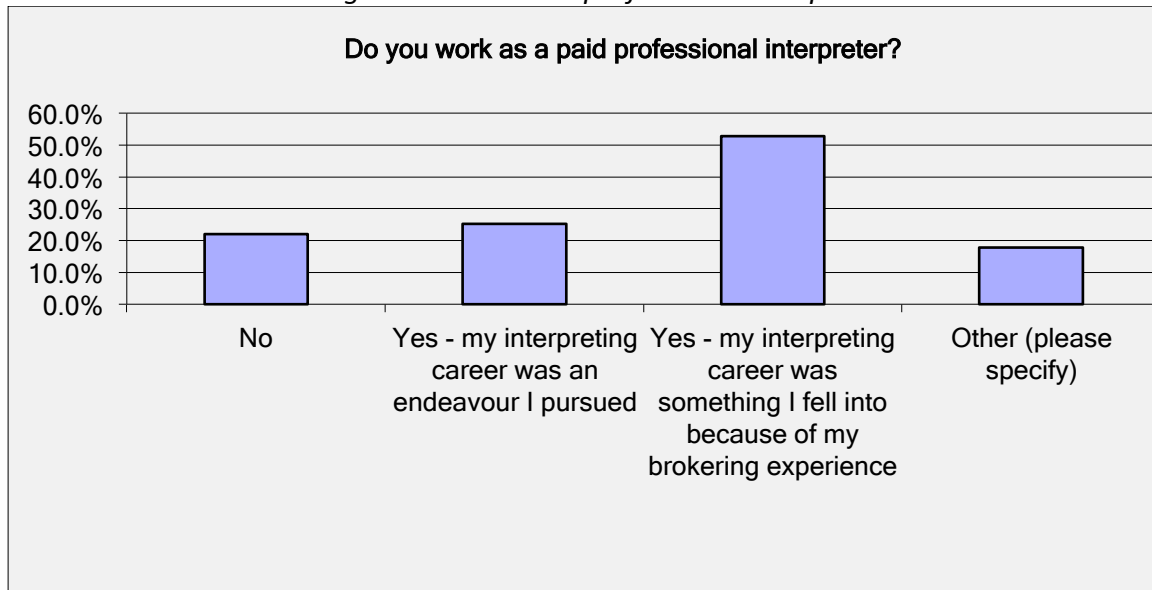
One of the most surprising results from the survey was the insight into how young people were when they began to broker. Some reported that they were as young as 3, and some were older at 10, 12 or 18; but by far the majority stated that they began to broker at the age of 4 or 5.

Table 2: Attitudes towards their language brokering experience

Attitudinal statements	%	Response Count
"I'm proud to be a broker."	67.6%	142
"I'm embarrassed to broker."	11.0%	23
"Brokering is a burden."	28.6%	60
"Brokering helped me learn English/spoken language of my country."	29.0%	61
"Brokering helped me learn more of my sign language."	50.5%	106
"Brokering didn't affect my spoken or sign language learning."	26.2%	55
"Brokering made/makes me more independent and mature."	65.2%	137
"I like to broker."	37.6%	79
"I know my Deaf culture better because I brokered."	61.4%	129
"I know hearing culture better because I brokered."	43.8%	92
"I feel good about myself when I broker for others".	48.6%	102
"I think my parents learned the spoken/written language of my country better because I brokered for them".	31.4%	66
"I think my parents know less about hearing people/culture because I brokered for them".	3.3%	7
"I think my parents know more about hearing people/culture because I interpreted for them".	45.2%	95
"I feel nervous when I broker for others".	11.0%	23
"I have to broker for others even when I don't want to".	38.1%	80
"I think brokering has helped me to better understand people who are from other cultures".	48.1%	101
"I don't like to broker."	6.7%	14
"Brokering for others makes me feel more grown up".	27.1%	57
"I think brokering has helped me to understand my parents better".	51.0%	107
"I think brokering has helped me to care more for my parents".	50.0%	105
Other		40

When asked if they worked professionally as paid interpreters, over half of the respondents confirmed that interpreting was a career that they had fallen into because of their brokering experience – as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Brokers as professional interpreters



*Additional comments*

Respondents were given the opportunity to give additional comments at the end of the survey, and many of these comments are very revealing about the attitudes that deaf and hearing Codas have towards their sign language brokering experiences. A few examples can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Comments about brokering experiences

Brokering also meant that others did not think they could go directly to my parents to get the information they needed. Others became dependant on me to relay, broker, interpret, what ever you wish to call it. My parents also became more dependent on me because it was just easier to do it that way. I think acting as a broker is a positive thing, but it does have a negative impact for some. At times this 'role' has left me feeling burdened with additional responsibilities. These responsibilities have been with me since I was of pre school age and I am not so sure that one should have such responsibilities at a very young age and what that does to a person as they mature.
Sometimes I believe there is a sense of comfort when brokering for family members, especially in uncomfortable situations. Although I have had experience having to broker for a situation pertaining to myself personally while in hospitals, which was hard to relay in this particular situation. I also find that a lot of the time family members depend on me to broker for them just for ease.
I do believe it is a catch 22. Sometimes it is uncomfortable to interpret for my parents, but I do also feel that it has moulded me into the person I am today. I also do feel like my parents are dependent on me, but I have been working with them to be more independent.
My experiences as a child interpreter was not good. I resented my parents & was ashamed to have had deaf parents. Even though I interpret now in a school setting I do not wish to interpret outside the school.
As a Coda it is something that is kind of expected in my youth but then mum and dad wanted to do it themselves when the [video relay service] came about more but now that i am older dad relies on me more again.
My parents never put me in situations where I was out of my depth, e.g. banks, government depts. They would organise interpreters. I don't mind doing it all. If I see Deaf people struggling to communicate with someone in public, I'll help them.

In presenting the preliminary findings from this survey, it can be seen that the attitudes and experiences of Codas mirror the language brokering experiences of other children who have had brokering experiences with their parents, for example in Italy (Antonini & Toressi, 2012), in that they begin brokering from a young age, broker regularly into their adult lives in a range of settings, and feel proud of their brokering role.

One quote, which is obviously from a deaf Coda respondent, reveals that language brokering is also prevalent among deaf people who have deaf parents: *“Just wanted to point out that language brokering was more frequent when younger at school rather than at home - with my deaf peers in classes or outside classrooms. As my parents got older - I did language brokering more in official situations such as specialist medical appts, [welfare], utilities, mobile phone companies etc.”*. This type of brokering role has also been documented in relation to deaf people who support other deaf people in their community (not necessarily their parents), and has been referred to as ‘ghostwriting’ (Adam, Carty & Stone, 2011).

### **What next?**

The next stage of the project will involve conducting more in-depth interviews with survey respondents who have indicated willingness to be contacted. The purpose of the interviews will be to explore the preliminary survey findings in more depth, to get a clear picture of the sign language brokering experiences of deaf and hearing Codas.

### **Research team**

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