Mother Tongue

Amy Tan

I AM NOT a scholar of English or literature. I cannot give you much more than personal opinions on the English language and its variations in this country or others. I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language—the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea. Simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—the Englishes I grew up with.

I have always been keenly aware of the different Englishes I do use. I was giving a talk to a large group of people, the same talk I had already given to half a dozen other groups. The nature of the talk was about my writing, my life, and my book, The Joy Luck Club. The talk was going along well enough, until I remembered one major difference that made the whole talk sound wrong. My mother was in the room. And it was the first time she had heard me give a lengthy speech—using the kind of English I have never used with her. I was saying things like, "The intersection of memory upon imagination" and "There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to this and that."—a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, and the forms of standard English that I had learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother.

Just last week, I was walking down the street with my mother, and I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, the English I was not using. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying: "Not waste money that way." My husband was with us as well, and he didn't notice any switch in my English. And then I realized why. It's because over the twenty years we've been together I've often used that same kind of English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with.

So you'll have some idea of what this family talk I heard sounds like, I'll quote what my mother said during a recent conversation which I videotaped and then transcribed. During this conversation, my mother was talking about a political gangster in Shanghai who had the same last name as her family's, Du, and how the gangster in his early years wanted to be adopted by her family which was rich by comparison. Later, the gangster became more powerful, far richer than my mother's family, and one day showed up at my mother's wedding to pay his respects. Here's what she said in parts:

"Mr. Yuong having business like fruit stand. Like off the street kind. He is Du like Du Zong—but not Tsung-ming island people. The local people call punishment, the river had to get on the other side... local people that man. That want to ask Du Zong father take him in like become own family. Du Zong father wasn't work down on him, but didn't take seriously, until that man big like become a mafia. Now important person, very hard to inviting him. Chinese way, came only to show respect, don't stay for dinner. Respect for making big celebration, he shows up. Mean gives lots of respect. Chinese custom Chinese social life that way. If too important won't have to stay long. He come to my wedding. I didn't see, I heard it. I gone to boy's side, they have YMCA dinner. Chinese age, '94.

Yet I must show that my mother's expressive command of English belies how much she actually understands. She reads the Forbes reports, listens to Wall Street Week, converses daily with her stockbroker, reads all of Shirley Maclaine's books with ease—all kinds of things I can't begin to understand. Yet my mother can understand fifty percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand eighty to ninety percent. Some say they understand none at all, as if they were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It's my mother's tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.

Lately, I've been giving more and more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as "broken" or "foreign" English. But I also believe I can say that it has always bothered me that I can no think of way to describe it other than "broken," as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I've heard other terms used, "limited English," for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people's perception of the limited English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother's "British English" limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. I believed that even when she had to say something important, she would not be able to express it as well as she might have wanted to. And I had plenty of evidence to support my belief. The fact that she rarely opened her mouth to bank tellers or waiters or the government receptionist is enough to show how seriously she did not give her service, pretended not to understand her, or openly act as if she were not so afraid of being misunderstood. As a consequence of her speaking English. She was afraid of being misunderstood. As a consequence of her speaking English. If she had wanted to, I believe she could have become as skilled in using the language as she was in the language of her native country by the time she had finished school, I did moderately well, getting perhaps Bs, sometimes B+ in English, and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on math and science tests. But those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science, because in those areas I achieved As and scores in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whether or not my mother's English was "good" was matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed to explore and test for a single kind of perfect knowledge—a blank sentence completion, such as "Even though Tom was... Mary thought he was..." And the correct answers were always specified, so that most bland combinations of thoughts, for example, "Even though Tom was shy... Mary thought he was..." with the grammatical structure "even though..." and the same kind of perfect knowledge, such as "sunset is to nightfall as..." and here, you would be presented with a list of four possible pairs, one of which was the correct kind of relationship: "red" is to "stop-light," "bus" is to "arrival," "chills" is to "fever," "yawn" is to "boring.

Well, I did learn about the tests, and I knew what the tests were asking, but I could not block out of my mind the images already created by the first pair, "sunset is to nightfall as..." I would see a burst of colors against a darkening sky, the moon rising, the lowering of a curtain of stars. And all the other pairs of words—red, bus, stoplight, boring—just threw up a mass of confusing images, making it impossible for me to sort out something as logical as saying: "A sunset precedes nightfall" is the same as "a chill precedes a fever." The only way I would have gotten that answer right would have been to imagine an image in my mind of sunset and moon, my being disobedient and staying out past sunset, catching a chill at night, which turns into feverish pneumonia as punishment, which indeed did happen to me.

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother's English, about achievement tests. Because lately I've been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian-Americans represented in American literature. Why are there not more Asian-Americans in creative writing programs? Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering? Well, these are broad sociological questions and sociologists and linguists probably will tell you that a person's developing language skills are more influenced by peers. But I do think that the test scores of children in the family pattern is a serious concern in immigrant families which are more insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that that is so very much the case. The achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree. I had to study for my achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be studied to the same degree.

Fortunately, I am still able to rebel in nature, and enjoy the challenge of disproving assumptions made about...
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me. I became an English major my first year in college after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing non-fiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management.

But it wasn’t until 1985 that I finally began to write fiction. And at first I wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language. Here’s an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into The Joy Luck Club, but without this line: “That was my mental quandary in its nascent state.” A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce.

Fortunately, for reasons I won’t get into today, I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact, she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term, might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but not either an English or a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.

Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book, and gave me her verdict: “So easy to read.”

Separation Of The Waters

"When God commanded, 'Let the waters be gathered together, unto one place, and let the dry land appear,' certain parts refused to obey. They embraced each other all the more closely."
—Jewish Legend

In his voice I hear the first day of the waters, before the spirit moved, brooding, over the face of them, before the firmament appearing in the wake of His Word divided upper water from lower water, heaven from earth, on the second day. Here in his voice the first day once again refused the command to be the second, vowel and phoneme all awash, inchoate in a jubilant babble I lean over the crib to watch, that goes on after he sees me, after I say the name he hears as nonsense the way the waters heard, so entangled in the waters, welmed in the jubilant eddy of such complete embracing they couldn't have known themselves as water, when the Lord said, "Let the waters part." See how, lonely for him, as on the shore of speech I call and call. See how the syllables begin to dampen, blur and dissolve back, close as they can now, toward the far surf they were torn from the shore of the sixth day calling back to the first.

—Alan Shapiro

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I didn't see it coming (Coming) But I never really had much faith In the universe's magic (Magic), oh, no Till it pulled us to that time and place And I'll never forget When the floodgates opened, we, we cried an ocean It still has me choking; it's hard to explain I know you know, me, you don't have to show me I, I feel you're lonely, no need to explain. [Chorus] So don't say you love me; fala, "amo" Just let your heart speak up, and I'll know No amount of mother tongue (plural mother tongues). The language one first learned; the language one grew up with; one's native language. Synonyms: first language, mother language, native language, native tongue, L1.