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 evince an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea out of a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—the Englishes I grew up with.

Recently, I was made 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 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 perhaps the first time she had heard me speak

I have never used with her. I was saying things like, “The intersection of memory upon imagination” and “There is an aspect of imagination that relates to...”—a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, 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.

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 always used when I was with her. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: “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 only 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 talk I heard sounds like, I’ll quote what my mother and I were having the next conversation I videotaped and then transcribed. During this conversation, my mother was talking about a political gangster in Shanghai who had this way of speaking English. Her English was so direct, so full of observations and imagery. That was the language that helped him shape the way I saw things, expressed things, and made things clear.

Lately, I’ve been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as “broken” English.

I say that it has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than “broken,” as if it was 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 “limited 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, and I thereby expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that after dinner and Sunday dinner, she would stand in line at the bank, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or服务 pretended not to understand her, or service pretended not to understand her, or service pretended not to understand her.

My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When she was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. One time it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed in a small portfolio and it just so happened we were going to New York the next week, our first visit outside of San Francisco. She had to get on the line and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, “This is Mrs. Tan.” And my mother was standing in the back of the room loudly, “Why don’t you send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing money money.” And then I performed perfect English, “Well, the brokerage called me and said you agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hadn’t arrived.”

Then she began to talk much more loudly, “What do you mean? I came to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?” And I was trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, “I can’t understand her, more excuses. If I don’t receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I’m in New York next week.” And so I waited. A few days later the following week we were in front of this astonished stockbroker, and I was sitting there red-faced and angrily taking the call, and my mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her impeccable broken English. We used a similar routine just five days ago, for a situation that was far less anxious. My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT scan had revealed a month ago. She said she had the greatest confidence, that it was a very good sign, that she had no regrets. She had said she did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis since her husband and her daughter, who had died of brain cancer, had said they would not give her any more information until the next time and she would have to make another appointment.

I thought about my English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities of work. Sociologists and linguists would probably will tell you that a person’s developing language skills are more influenced by peers. But I do think that she had been in the family so long and in immigrant families which are more insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be scored. In one of my English classes in high school, I did moderately well, getting perhaps B+, sometimes B+ in English, and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on my other 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 scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whether or not anyone had ever taken English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed in order to test some blank sentence completion, such as “Even though Tom was , my mother thought he was ,” and the correct answer was, no matter what the most blander combinations of thoughts, for example, “Even though Tom was shy, my mother thought he was charming,” or I could think that he had thought “Even though Tom was shy, my mother thought he was thousands of test makers, limiting the correct answer to some sort of semantic opposites, so you couldn’t even ask questions like “Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought her ridiculous.” Well, according to my mother, they were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been, and what Mary might have thought of him. I never did well on tests like that.

The same was true with word analogies, pairs of words, in which you had to fill in the blanks, “similar, or a sim... relationship—for example, sun is to nightfall as is to .” And here, you would be presented with a list of four possible options, one of which shared the same kind of relationship: “red is to stop—light, ‘bus is to ‘arrival—chilis is to ‘fever, ‘rains is to ‘boring.”

I knew what the tests were asking, but I could not block out of my mind the images already created by the first pair. “Similar, or a sim... relationship,” I could 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 were filled with the same image, and I just threw up a mass of confusing images, making it impossible for me to sort out any sort of logical thinking.

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 there aren’t more Asian-Americans in creative writing programs? Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering? Well, these are broad sociological questions that are beyond my area. But I have noticed in surveys—in fact, just last week—that Asian students, as a whole, are always significantly better in mathematics than any other students. And this makes me think that there are other Asian-American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as “broken.”

And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what is happening to me.

Fortunately, I have been rebelious in nature, and enjoy the challenge of disproving assumptions made about