

Guided Reading: "Mother Tongue" by 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.

ANNOTATIONS

Why does Tan start this essay in this way?

5 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, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all -- all the Englishes I grew up with.

10 Recently, I was made 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
15 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 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
20 that relates to thus-and-thus"--a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of standard English that I had learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at
25 home with my mother.

In what ways is language a part of Tan's relationships?

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 do use with her. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: "Not waste
30 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
35 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
40 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
45 said in part: "Du Yusong 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 putong, the river east side, he
belong to that side local people. That man want to ask Du Zong
father take him in like become own family. Du Zong father wasn't
50 look 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
55 important won't have to stay too 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 I was nineteen."

You should know that my mother's expressive command of
English belies how much she actually understands. She reads the
60 Forbes report, 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 some of my friends
tell me they understand 50 percent of what my mother says. Some
say they understand 80 to 90 percent. Some say they understand
65 none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my
mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It's my
mother 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.

70 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' or 'fractured' English. But I wince when I say that. It has
always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other
than "broken," as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it
75 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 perceptions of the limited
English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my
80 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. That is, because she expressed them
imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of
empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in
85 department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her
seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to
understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.
My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well.
When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone

What does Tan mean when she describes her mother's English as her "mother tongue"?

How do Tan's descriptions of her mother's English become problematic?

What legacy does Mrs. Tan's language create for Amy?

90 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 out her small portfolio and it just so happened we
95 were going to go to New York the next week, our very first trip
outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an
adolescent voice that was not very convincing, "This is Mrs. Tan."

And my mother was standing in the back whispering loudly,
"Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he
lie to me, losing me money."

100 And then I said in perfect English, "Yes, I'm getting rather
concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it
hasn't arrived."

Then she began to talk more loudly. "What he want, I come
to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?" And I was
105 trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the
stockbroker, "I can't tolerate any 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 sure enough, the
following week there we were in front of this astonished
110 stockbroker, and I was sitting there red-faced and quiet, and my
mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her *impeccable*
broken English.

How does Tan's use of
the word *impeccable*
at the end of this
paragraph impact her
tone?

We used a similar routine just five days ago, for a situation
that was far less humorous. My mother had gone to the hospital for
115 an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT
scan had revealed a month ago. She said she had spoken very good
English, her best English, no mistakes. Still, she said, the hospital
did not apologize when they said they had lost the CAT scan and
she had come for nothing. She said they did not seem to have any
120 sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact
diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain
tumors. She said they would not give her any more information
until the next time and she would have to make another
appointment for that. So she said she would not leave until the
125 doctor called her daughter. She wouldn't budge. And when the
doctor finally called her daughter, me, who spoke in perfect
English -- lo and behold -- we had assurances the CAT scan would
be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be
held, and apologies for any suffering my mother had gone through
130 for a most regrettable mistake.

What does the
anecdote in this
paragraph reveal
about the assumption
people make about
those whose first
language is not
English?

I think my mother's English almost had an effect on limiting
my possibilities in life as well. 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 language spoken in the
135 family, especially in immigrant families which are more insular,

Why does Tan shift to a discussion of test scores here? What effect does this shift have on her message?

plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that it affected my results on achievement tests, I.Q. tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be considered my strong suit.
140 In grade school I did moderately well, getting perhaps B's, sometimes B-pluses, in English and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on achievement 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
145 A's and scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed around items like
150 fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, such as, "Even though Tom was --, Mary thought he was --." And the correct answer always seemed to be the most bland combinations of thoughts, for example, "Even though Tom was shy, Mary thought he was charming:" with the grammatical structure "even though" limiting
155 the correct answer to some sort of semantic opposites, so you wouldn't get answers like, "Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought he was ridiculous:" Well, according to my mother, there were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been and what Mary might have thought of him. So I never did well on tests
160 like that.

The same was true with word analogies, pairs of words in which you were supposed to find some sort of logical, semantic relationship -- for example, "Sunset is to nightfall as -- is to -- ." And here you would be presented with a list of four possible pairs,
165 one of which showed the same kind of relationship: red is to stoplight, bus is to arrival, chills is to fever, yawn is to boring: Well, I could never think that way. 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"--and I would see a burst of
170 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
180 a fever." The only way I would have gotten that answer right would have been to imagine an associative situation, for example, 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.

185 I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother's English, about achievement tests. Because lately I've been asked, as

What legacy does Tan inherit from her mother's English?

a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans represented in American literature. Why are there few Asian Americans enrolled in creative writing programs? Why do so many Chinese students
190 go into engineering! Well, these are broad sociological questions I can't begin to answer. But I have noticed in surveys -- in fact, just last week -- that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English. And this makes me think that there are other Asian-American students whose
195 English spoken in the home might also be described as "broken" or "limited." And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me.

Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious in nature and enjoy the
200 challenge of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing nonfiction 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.

205 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
210 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
215 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
220 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 neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to
225 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
230 reading my book and gave me her verdict: "So easy to read."

How does Tan describe all the different languages in this paragraph? What does this paragraph say about the importance of language?

“Mother Tongue” Synthesis Questions

1. For Tan the phrase “mother tongue” has a special meaning. How would you summarize this meaning? Why does Tan feel so deeply about her “mother tongue”?
2. In what ways does the English that Tan’s mother speaks affect how people outside the Chinese American community think of her? What examples does Tan give to demonstrate this fact of her mother’s life?
3. Why do you suppose Tan wrote this essay? Does she have a purpose beyond changing readers’ perceptions of her mother’s “broken’ English? What passages support your answer?
4. What themes/topics does Tan explore in this essay? What does her treatment of these themes/topics say about the human condition?