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Can't You Hear Your Parent's Accent?

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If you were to take a look at me, you'd see a typical twenty-five-year-old Canadian college student. I get average grades in English and can write a half-decent essay, as evidenced by my history of C+s to B+s. I've never claimed to be the "grammar police" or one of those people who can write beautifully flowing essays at the drop of a hat, but I have been hooked on reading and writing since the day I was able to read my first book on my own, and fell in love with the written word.

This is why I felt such an affinity toward the personal essay "Mother Tongue" by Amy Tan. Tan does not claim to be an amazing scholar or expert linguist, but she is a writer nonetheless. She is a lover of language, and she understands the power behind it. She and I both grew up with mothers who immigrated to North America from Asia and learned English as their second language while raising first-generation North American children. Growing up with a parent who speaks English as a second language has affected various aspects of my life and the woman I have grown into. Tan's story has many parallels to mine, and children of immigrant parents will be familiar with our stories, or some variation of them, all too well.

As a brief disclaimer: both of my parents are immigrants to Canada. My mother came here from the Philippines and my father from Austria. However, because Tan's essay focuses on her personal experiences of growing up with a mother who emigrated from Asia, and my mother also emigrated from Asia, that is going to be the focus of this essay, too.

Growing up as a first-generation daughter in a country that views her parents as foreigners comes with its own unique set of challenges, to say the least. Tan illustrates this in her various reflections, experiences, and thoughts that she compiles in "Mother Tongue." As a first-generation child, the impact of language spreads its roots into all aspects of your life: it affects

how people treat you, opportunities that are given to you or taken from you, and how your perception of yourself and your mother changes as you grow.

Both of my parents immigrated to Canada looking for a better life. My mother was in her late 30s when she came from the Philippines as a nanny, and my father left Austria to escape his failed forestry business. They had my brother and I later in their lives, and their decision not to teach us German or Tagalog was made because the only common language they both could understand was English. However, their decision was accompanied by the consequence that I first learned to communicate in a unique variation of English, which combined Asian sentence structuring with German grammar. At a young age, you don't realize your parent's English is classified as "broken," but the older I got, the more inherently aware of it I became. I can recall countless instances where my friends were not able to understand what my mom had asked them due to her Filipino accent. My friends would look confused and ask her to repeat herself, or just smile politely and nod, clearly not understanding but pretending they had. Tan notes her own experience with this type of situation in her essay: "Yet some of my friends tell me they understand fifty percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand eighty to ninety percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It is my mother tongue" (396).

Language and communication are not solely about being grammatically and phonetically precise. The appropriate emotion of the words uttered is as important as the words chosen, and my true friends loved how vibrant and comical my mother's Filipino English was. They could feel the warmth, joy, and love behind her words. However, this was not always the case. For me, there were two worlds of language: the one spoken at home and the more formal, acceptable one used by the rest of the world.

Kozier states that "verbal communication is the most obvious cultural difference" (216). There have been many cases in my life where this difference has been very apparent in regard to how I witnessed other people stereotype my mother and the preconceptions they tended to have about Asians in general. On a Delta Air Lines flight, the agent asked my mom if she was comfortable with sitting in an exit row as she would be responsible for letting people off the plane if it needed to make an emergency landing. My mom responded with, "Sorry, I didn't understand what you said," as in "Sorry, could you please repeat that?", but the airline agent

abruptly told her she would be moving her to a different seat because she could not understand English. If I had been the one asking for clarification in my North American accent, I am sure the agent would have kindly repeated herself.

The stereotypes and misconceptions others form about my mother because of how she speaks English has become my personal social justice issue that I challenge. These are largely the assumptions of native English speakers that she does not understand or is less educated due to her accent or imperfect grammar. The world of some native English speakers places merit and value on grammar and semantics while shaming those who cannot express themselves in what they consider to be their version of ideal. Feelings of shame crept in to haunt my younger self and Tan based on our own experiences. Like Tan, "I was ashamed of her English. The fact that people in 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" (396). The shame then developed into fear about my own language skills. When entering kindergarten, my brother and I were both paired up with another student who was our "language buddy." Before even meeting us, our teachers had already assumed that we would need help in learning how to communicate properly. Even as I'm writing this essay for a college-level course, it is a conscious fear of mine that my language skills will never be as proficient as those of the people around me.

Tan addresses the effects that language has on a child, writing, "I do think that the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families which are insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child" (397). I agree with her. As I have grown, I have become aware that the upbringing I had has shaped me into the culturally aware person I am today.

As I enter into the profession of nursing, it has been noted in various instructor feedbacks that I am adaptable, empathetic and able to easily understand those around me due to my awareness of personal beliefs and values. According to Stanhope, the definition of cultural knowledge is "The information necessary to provide nurses with an understanding of the organizational elements of cultures and to provide effective nursing care" (595). I have not only accepted but also learned to embrace my background because I greatly value and appreciate the influence my mother's language has had on me.

Tan has led me to reflect upon my mother's English, the challenges we both have faced and the person I have grown into today. I am not an A+ English student or a perfect communicator, and neither is my mother. However, I am rebelling against the stereotypes and misconceptions of language and stripping communication back to its core. The essence and power behind words can evoke emotion, illustrate an image, explain complexities, or reveal simple truths. Language is a vital tool, and it includes the thick accented English of my sweet mother. And while at times it can be intricate or eccentric, there are many, many times when it is not. It can also simply evoke love, humor, and warmth. I hope my own language skills do just that.

Works Cited

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