

Name

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Language and Context: Reflections on Amy Tan's Mother Tongue

Until I read Amy Tan's short story *Mother Tongue*, I thought, or rather assumed, that I just spoke and used "English," in all my conversations and writings. Perhaps because I never thought about it consciously, I assumed that the language I used at home, with friends, in class, and when chatting on social media, was simply "English." I never noticed the subtle changes that I made unconsciously to reflect the immediate context, aim of writing, or the linguistic needs of the targeted audience. Indeed, it never occurred to me before that oftentimes I use, unconsciously, a mix of "Englishes" in different contexts and social situations. Now that I think about it, my consciousness having been roused by Tan's piece, I realize that unlike Tan's mother tongue influences, in my case it is mostly the audience in a conversational situation, or the target audience when writing that, I must stress, *unconsciously*, dictates the language I use in terms of word choice and sentence structure. In this essay, I describe the different "Englishes" that I use in different situations.

At home, the informal setting and the relaxed atmosphere must be the factors that shape the language I use with my siblings and parents. I could describe it as my "home English" because I only use it when at home. The only distinction is that I do not worry about being grammatically correct, formal, or observing conversational etiquette in my utterances and responses. For instance, when I deny an accusation I say, "Not me, how could I?" and I guess with an angry tone. In a formal setting, such as at school, I think I could have thought about it

first, and my response could have been: "It was not me, Sir, I could not do it." While both constructions could be described as perfect English, the first one, to borrow from Amy Tan, is "limited" in terms of completeness. For starters, it no subject, but the context of usage does not demand me to fulfill all the grammatical requirements. As a result, I unconsciously choose the short cut of omitting the subject, but with the knowledge that it does not hinder communication. I guess this is an adaptation when communicating with people one is used with, such as siblings, parents, and friends. The language that Amy Tan uses with her mother also reflects this aspect of a relaxed atmosphere, even by considering the context in which it was used and the audience involved. She says that she was walking down the street with he mother and husband, which suggests a leisurely walk in which "idle talk" is appropriate. One characteristic with idle talk is that the speakers are not worried about talking something irrelevant or concerned on how they phrase their utterances. As a result, Amy was at ease to unconsciously omit the subject and say "Not waste money that way" (Tan 418) instead of saying, "We cannot waste money that way."

Talking with friends, however, I think I get more direct and utterly careless in my word choice, and sometimes use slang English. For instance, in a situation where I could be appropriate to ask, "What is going on here, guys?" I could easily say "Wazup? In the second case, I've simply contracted the sentence "What is up." While the latter ay pass as correct English, it is not appropriate in a formal setting. Consequently, I cannot, after being summoned by my professor, pop into his office and say, "What is up sir," regardless how grammatically correct the sentence is. More appropriately, I will sy, "You sent for me, Sir," or, "I was informed to see you, Sir." But if I was called by my friend to his room, I may, with the arrogance of a king in his palace, saunter in and say, "What now? Likewise, responses on social sites tend to follow a similar cue, whereby little consideration is given to on word choice. For instance, if a friend

posted an insightful answer to a group forum, I may not say explicitly that is insightful. Instead, I may simply respond with one word, “wow,” which, within the circle of social contacts in the group, is easily understandable as an expression of admiration. But if the person is not an acquaintance, I will be a little more formal and courteous, in which case I will say, “This is splendid or simply, “Brilliant.”

Finally, I usually simplify my English when talking to little children. The aim is to simplify utterances to a syntactic and semantic level that they can easily understand. I also stress the theme words by repeating them so as to focus their attention on what I want them to respond to. In such cases, the construction is not always in the subject-verb-object/adjective sequence as is required in Standard English. Accordingly, instead of saying “Nana here is your food come and eat it,” I can simply say, “Nana pizza, Nana eat pizza.” The first phrase is intended to alert the child that there is pizza, and the second one to convey the idea that pizza is for him/her to eat. While the construction sounds awkward, too simplistic and repetitive, it is necessary to enhance the child’s easy understanding.

In conclusion, the context of usage largely determines the kind of “English” I use to communicate. At home, the free atmosphere and lack of formality allows me to use incomplete sentences, usually by omitting the subject. When talking to people I’m used to, such as friends and classmates, it is to use slang English, whereby I contract words and sentences. With children, I simplify my English by using simple words and stressing on the main theme of the communication. Amy Tan makes a similar case when speaking with her mother, whereby she integrates Chinese accent, which her mother can easily understand during conversations. In this regard, as Tan demonstrates, speakers adapt their English to suit the context of usage and needs of their audience.

Works Cited

Tan, Amy. *Mother Tongue*.