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Lost In My Own Language: My Relationship With Chinese

At the start of taking this class, when we went around in a circle explaining our relationship with language, I took a second to reflect on my experiences. Despite priding myself as a "STEM" person, I undoubtedly have a strong relationship with language, both inside and outside of class. It didn't take me long to realize that one of the biggest stories about me is my journey with the Chinese language. In class, I quickly gave a brief introduction about this story and how I had slowly forgotten my native dialect of Taishanese and never learned Mandarin. But, there was so much more to tell that I couldn't possibly fit in a few short spoken sentences. After reading multiple pieces of text in this first unit, I've been able to further explore my relationship with language while learning about similar stories of others.

One text that heavily resonated with me was "Can You Lose A Language You Never Knew?" by Kevin Garcia. After reading the article and hearing Garcia's story, I felt motivated to share my story with language and identity as well. Throughout the article, I found myself nodding and agreeing with the messages shared. When Garcia talked about how he was judged for not speaking Spanish, I instantly thought about all the times that someone tried to speak Mandarin to me while I couldn't even say "I don't speak Mandarin" in Mandarin, causing a lot of confusion since many of my Chinese relatives don't speak English. I felt a lot of embarrassment and disappointment, two feelings that Garcia relates to in the article. Then,

Garcia talks about how he has a lot of Latino friends who use Spanish as a way to connect and communicate with each other. This can be seen when he explains, “For me, this understanding played out on a personal level. In school, my friends were Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican and Salvadoran. We didn't necessarily share a common experience. But Spanish was supposed to be a way we could understand one another despite our different backgrounds” (Garcia). Each Latino culture is very unique and special, and yet they have a shared language that many of them speak. Here, he lists many different nationalities like “Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican and Salvadoran.” Because of this diversity and the importance of a shared language, Garcia feels left out when he is unable to speak Spanish and communicate in such a way. As a Chinese person with a lot of Chinese friends, this mirrors my experiences perfectly. Almost all of my Chinese friends talk in Mandarin, and I’m left on the side, embarrassed that I’m unable to speak along with them. There are also a lot of similarities between my story and Garcia’s because Chinese has a lot of unique dialects, and Mandarin is one dialect that usually strings many communities together.

I also related to the idea that just because you didn’t learn a language, doesn’t mean you voluntarily decided not to learn the language. A lot of people think that just because I didn’t learn Chinese, it means that I tried not to learn it. However, I had no one to learn Mandarin from since my parents spoke in their native dialect (Taishanese) and they also spoke English to me since they wanted to practice their English. This sounds a lot like Garcia’s Aunt, who wanted to speak English with Garcia to practice. For me and Garcia, we didn’t learn our respective languages because we didn’t get the opportunity to learn. As Garcia informs in the article, “Despite this insecurity, Tseng stresses that growing up monolingual, like I did, isn't anyone's

fault. For second- and third-generation Latinx Americans, retaining Spanish ‘isn't a question of how much you want to keep it. It's a question of how much opportunity you have to keep it’” (Garcia). While this quote specifically mentions Latinx Americans and Spanish, I feel this message applies to many other ethnicities and languages, including my own. I never felt like I consciously didn’t want to keep my knowledge of Taishanese and Mandarin. Instead, my opportunities for practicing the language simply decreased. If Garcia and I were given the opportunity to go back in time and learn the language, we would both likely learn the language. For us, it doesn’t have anything to do with us not wanting to embrace our heritage, which is a common misconception. Instead, I greatly desire to learn Mandarin and improve my Taishanese but learning a language takes years of experience and I don’t have adequate time for that at the moment.

In this unit, I’ve also discovered new words and ideas that help me better explain and understand my relationship with language. One of these words is code-switching. Before learning about the idea of code-switching, I never really put much thought into the fact that I spoke a large variety of English variations. But, after putting more thought into my past experiences, I discovered that I speak very different types of English when I’m in a different environment or with different people. When I’m with my family, I speak in a mixture of Chinese and English. I will often attempt to speak in full Chinese, but then I will end up not knowing how to say a certain word, and my brain will effortlessly replace that unknown word with its English translation. It only works with my parents though, since many of my relatives don’t know English, so it’s very confusing for them to understand. And when my parents try to speak full English with me, they will often not pay attention to grammar rules, and I’ll do the same. As

long as the points and messages are understood by the other person, that's good enough for us. When I'm talking to my relatives, it feels very unnatural. I have to think about my sentence beforehand and make sure that none of my words are going to be in English. This means that I have to consciously form my sentences before I say anything. It feels like I'm speaking a language that I just learned. For my friends, I will speak in a much more casual tone. I might say something along the lines of "What's up?" or "Bet," which is slang that I often use. I also don't care much about my grammar or sentence structure when I speak with friends. In a more academic context, I will speak in a more formal variation of English. I won't use slang, and I'll try to use more complex vocabulary words. For example, I might say "The robust wall was built by tenacious men" instead of "The strong wall was built by hard workers." This is especially apparent in my essays.

The idea of code-switching is heavily discussed in Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue," a short text about how Tan grew up around different languages and how code-switching impacts her current life. She also dives into her own experiences of discrimination and how people negatively label her mom's English as "broken" despite her mom's ideas being perfectly clear to Tan. The first major example of code-switching can be found when Tan sees her mom at a formal event. Tan explains, "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 give a lengthy speech, using the kind of English I have never used with her" (Tan 1). I sometimes find myself code-switching incorrectly when I'm speaking to my parents. As I mentioned earlier, I often speak a less formal type of English when I am speaking to my parents. But, I sometimes speak formal English to my parents by accident,

and then my parents are confused about what I'm saying. When this happens, I'm made aware of how different my variations of English are. A few weeks ago, I never knew what code-switching meant. I didn't pay much attention to this idea because I never consciously thought about the different varieties of English that I constantly spoke. Through this text, I was able to understand and reflect on how many different types of English I spoke to my friends, loved ones, and teachers.

As mentioned earlier, Tan informs readers about the discrimination that her family experienced as a result of "broken" English. One of the most tragic examples of this occurs when her mom has to go to the doctor for a CAT scan. Tan writes,

> 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 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 for a most regrettable mistake. (Tan 2)

I would expect something serious like a CAT scan to be treated seriously, despite the quality of English. But, the doctor switched their attitude completely after hearing Amy speak good English. I would also think that someone as professional as a doctor would treat everyone equally, but sadly, this is not always true. While I might not have experienced something as severe as this, my family has also been the victim of "broken" English discrimination. When I'm out in public with my Mom, and we talk or ask questions to strangers, they will often speak to

me, even when I was very young. They would look directly at me, and it felt like my mom wasn't even there despite her being the adult. They would hear my mom's slight accent and then start talking to me. This would often happen when we are at stores, and we ask an employee where a product is located. My mom spoke perfectly fine English, and she has no problem understanding instructions from strangers. But, she still gets treated like she doesn't know English. She has also told me before that when she's working, people will not take her seriously after they hear her accent.

In conclusion, throughout this unit and the multiple texts we've read, I've been able to see myself in other author's writing. In both "Mother Tongue" and "Can You Lose a Language You Never Knew," I had the opportunity to learn from people who had similar stories and can teach readers who struggle with the same problems in language. Moreover, each text told a unique story that touched upon different topics in my journey with Chinese and English. And more importantly, these stories don't just contain one story. Different people will take away different lessons based on their own experiences with language. Even though the readers may read the same story, words, and letters, the interpretation from the reader is what allows a diverse discourse of a single text. My analysis of "Mother Tongue" and "Can You Lose a Language You Never Knew" are my personal takeaways, but these texts tell so much more than I'm able to discuss. Because language is such an integral and unique part of everyone's life, the beauty of these texts is that they are important to each reader for different reasons.

Works Cited

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