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### The Intimacy of Imperfection: Language as Connection

My relationship with language and writing has always been complicated, with my experiences in school serving as a constant source of anxiety. Growing up, I often felt the weight of strict rules and the pressure to be perfect, along with the fear of making mistakes, especially in the context of my ethnic community, where English fluency often determines how you are perceived.

I saw these pressures in my father. Although my dad has lived in America longer than in his birth country and his English is perfect, I spent much of my childhood watching him, a fluent English speaker, constantly striving to improve his grammar and vocabulary. It was as though perfecting his English would validate his intelligence. This mirrors Amy Tan's *Mother Tongue*, where she writes about her relationship with her mother and the realization of her connection with the languages she grew up with. In her piece, Tan recalls times from her childhood when her mother would make her “call people on the phone to pretend [she] was [her mother].” (Tan 2). Tan writes that her mother was self-conscious about her English skills, which made Tan, who grew up in America with fluent English, take calls for her. I feel that this is a common trait seen in many immigrant families. While it was endearing to see my father try to improve himself, it was also heartbreaking. It hurt to see him believe he wasn't good enough, and this pursuit of perfect language often inhibited his ability to speak freely, without worrying whether what he said was correct.

Watching my father navigate these pressures, I found myself inheriting the same anxiety around language, particularly in the context of school. I often felt that I had to be good at English, both in my social life and especially in English class. I obsessed over writing essays

"correctly" to get good grades. Rather than writing what felt true to me, I focused on crafting essays that aligned with my teachers' expectations, fearing a poor outcome otherwise. At that point, writing became less about self-expression and more about fulfilling those expectations. It made me start hating writing and language because I felt trapped within these confines, which made everything feel inauthentic.

However, at the same time, I developed a love for language. It became something that brought me closer to my family. While my dad is more fluent in English, I turn to my mom for questions about Bangla: about the language and specific cultural customs, meanings of words, and symbols. There are phases where I become deeply curious about Bangla and want to learn more, and during those times, my mother is my guide. Being born and raised in America, it sometimes feels that my Bengali side becomes more distant over time, one reason being my lack of fluency in Bangla.

I often struggle with Bangla, mispronouncing words I've used my whole life, like the time I realized I had been calling my favorite Bengali fish dish "Rumi Maas" instead of "Rui Maas". This struck me because I called it that way, thinking that's how my parents pronounced it, illustrating how deeply language is influenced by our upbringing. These moments showed me that language evolves with us and keeps us connected to our roots.

For me, language is more than just a tool for communication. It is a bridge between worlds. My two worlds are my American side and my Bengali side. English is the language of my education and external life, but Bangla is the language of my family and cultural heritage. I love how knowing these two languages almost doubles my vocabulary and gives me exponentially more ways to express myself.

I often mix English words in Bangla when I struggle to get my thoughts through to my parents with my limited fluency. Conversely, there are special Bangla words I use when I want to express something specific that can't be captured in regular English. There are words in Bangla that have no direct English translation, like "adthor." "Adthor" is a word I cherish because its meaning is so beautiful and yet, unique to Bangla. One would use it in circumstances to describe a special person who offers care and love to someone or something else. It means something close to "affection," "love," and "to take care of," but it holds an emotional depth that only Bangla can truly convey.

A fond memory that comes to mind when I think about language connecting me to my family is the way my siblings and I refer to our mom and dad. Instead of saying "mom and dad," we simply say "parents," as though they are one unit. I never thought it was different or weird until other people started pointing it out. But to me, it's not strange; it reflects a unique form of language we developed together. Just how Amy Tan describes her similar experience, realizing that she uses the simpler English she typically uses with her mother when speaking with her husband. She describes her unnoticed use of that type of talk as her "language of intimacy" (Tan 3), used in her most comfortable, casual moments in life. This is the language she falls back on. With my siblings, this small, imperfect phrase represents how we grew up and lived in our own imperfect language.

My relationship with language is complicated. Yes, it has intimidated me with its rules and societal expectations, but it has also offered me ways to express myself that go far beyond those confines. Through the experience of knowing both Bangla and English, I've realized that language isn't something to fear; it's a tool for communication, a reflection of who I am and

where I come from. Language is fluid and ever-changing: It's messy, imperfect, and deeply personal, but that's exactly what makes it unique to me and to all of us.

Work Cited

Tan, Amy. "Mother Tongue." In *Guidelines: A Cross-Cultural Reading/Writing Text*. Ruth Spack.  
New York, Cambridge UP, 2006