

“Broken” English as an Emotional Language in Amy Tan's “Mother Tongue”

Churamoni Kandel, PhD

Department of English

NSU, Shree Vinduwasini Sanskrit Vidyapeeth (Campus), Pokhara

churamoni39@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5002-2354>

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Abstract

This research article examines and analyzes the role of “broken” English as an emotionally expressive and meaningful language in Amy Tan’s essay “Mother Tongue”. It explores the affective dimension of nonstandard English. It makes a study how Tan represents her mother’s language as a medium of intimacy, relational understanding, and cultural identity. It employs a qualitative research design to make a close textual analysis of selected passages, and focuses on narrative tone, diction, imagery, and contextualized dialogue. By doing so, it reveals the emotional richness of what people often termed as “broken”. The analyses portray how Tan’s mother’s English conveys feelings, perceptions, and shared meaning effectively, despite not conforming to standard grammatical norms. These perspectives postulate how societal judgments often marginalize nonstandard speakers while overlooking the emotional and communicative strength of their language. This research foregrounds the emotional expression to portray Tan’s mother’s English as a legitimate form of communication. This claim helps to shape both family dynamics and her literary voice. The findings of the study contribute to literary, sociolinguistic, and educational discourses as grammar solely does not determine the meaning, clarity, and narrative power. Employing the theoretical frameworks like language ideology, symbolic power, identity construction, language and emotion studies; this research finds nonstandard English as a legitimate and emotionally powerful form of communication. These frameworks contribute to broader discussions of language, identity, and cultural representation.

Keywords: Emotional expression, family communication, language and identity, linguistic prejudice, non-standard English

Introduction

This research examines “broken” English as a language of emotion in Amy Tan’s “Mother Tongue”, to explore how language acts not only as a system of grammar and vocabulary, but also a carrier of emotion, memory, and identity. In this essay, Amy Tan

(1990) portrays her experiences growing up between different forms of English, standard academic English and the English spoken by her immigrant mother. While society often labels her mother's speech as "broken" or "limited," Tan gradually recognizes its emotional richness and communicative power. This essay encourages readers to reconsider the meaning of linguistic competence and to question the hierarchy that places standardized English above all other varieties.

Language ideology often equates fluency with intelligence and grammatical accuracy with credibility. Within educational and professional institutions, standardized English functions as the norm against other forms of speech. Dominant language varieties operate as symbolic capital, granting social authority to certain speakers while marginalizing others (Bourdieu, 1991). In such a system, speakers of nonstandard English may be perceived as less capable, regardless of their actual knowledge or experience. Tan's narrative attempts to explore how these assumptions shape everyday interactions and reinforce subtle forms of exclusion.

Scholars in sociolinguistics argue how nonstandard varieties are based on rule-governed and meaningful forms of communication rather than defective versions of a standard norm. From this perspective, the label "broken English" reflects social prejudice more than linguistic reality. Tan's essay supports this view by revealing the gap between external judgments of her mother's speech and the intimate understanding shared within the family. The language spoken at home, though criticized by outsiders, remains fully capable of conveying complex feelings, humour, frustration, and affection.

Much critical attention to "Mother Tongue" focuses on immigrant identity, assimilation, and linguistic discrimination. However, a fewer studies concentrate specifically on how "broken English" functions as an emotional language within the text itself. Tan does not merely defend her mother's speech against public misunderstanding; she portrays it as a language shaped by shared history and emotional closeness. The emotional bond between mother and daughter becomes inseparable from the language they use with each other. In this sense, language acts not simply a tool of communication but also a space of belonging.

Furthermore, Tan's reflection on her own development as a writer portrays how emotional authenticity, rather than grammatical perfection, forms the foundation of meaningful expression. Her awareness of multiple "Englishes" enables her to move between public and private worlds. The English she employs in academic and professional contexts differs from the one she associates with home, yet both coexist within her identity. This tension demonstrates the complex relationship between language, self-perception, and creative expression.

Tan's "Mother Tongue" reframes "broken English" as an emotionally resonant mode of communication that contests linguistic hierarchy and affirms immigrant experience. The close textual analysis demonstrates how Tan transforms a stigmatized variety of English into a source of narrative strength and cultural affirmation. Through this lens, "broken English" emerges not as a sign of deficiency, but as a language of emotional truth.

Language hierarchy shapes how multilingual and immigrant contexts judge speakers, where people often treat standardized English as the primary marker of intelligence and credibility. Although scholars commonly examine the essay in relation to immigrant identity and linguistic discrimination, critical discussions tend to emphasize external systems of power rather than the emotional and relational dimension of language that Tan portrays. The problem, therefore, lies in the limited scholarly attention to the emotional function of "broken English" in Tan's narrative. Without a focused textual analysis of how Tan portrays her mother's English as vivid, intimate, and meaningful, criticism risks repeating the hierarchy the essay seeks to challenge. This study argues that Amy Tan redefines "broken English" as an emotionally expressive and culturally meaningful language, thereby challenging dominant linguistic hierarchies that equate Standard English with intelligence and authority.

This study shifts its critical attention from the social stigma attached to nonstandard English to its emotional and expressive value in "Mother Tongue". Here lies the significance of the study. It foregrounds the emotional dimension of Tan's narrative, which contributes to literary studies, sociolinguistics, and identity studies simultaneously. It offers a balanced understanding of language by demonstrating that grammatical correctness alone cannot measure the communicative effectiveness solely. Furthermore, the study offers pedagogical relevance in multilingual contexts, as it encourages educators and students to value diverse language varieties as meaningful forms of expression rather than as deficiencies. In doing so, it challenges dominant linguistic hierarchies and promotes a more inclusive understanding of language and identity.

The findings of this research limit to literary interpretation and do not incorporate empirical data such as interviews, surveys, or classroom observations. This study bases on the following research questions and objectives

Research Questions

- a. How does Amy Tan portray "broken English" as an emotionally expressive and meaningful form of communication ?
- b. In what ways does Tan's representation of her mother's English challenge dominant linguistic hierarchies that privilege standardized English?

Objectives

- a. To analyze, through close textual reading, how Tan constructs “broken English” as a language of emotional intimacy, memory, and lived experience.
- b. To examine how Tan’s narrative critiques linguistic prejudice and redefines nonstandard English as a legitimate and emotionally rich mode of expression.

Review of Literature

Amy Tan’s (1990) “Mother Tongue” frequently centers on immigrant identity, linguistic prejudice, and the politics of Standard English. Numerous critics generally analyze this essay as a response to what Lippi-Green (2012) defines a standard language ideology as “a bias toward an abstract, idealized, homogenous spoken language” (p.67). This ideology privileges standardized English while marginalizing other varieties. Tan’s narrative reflects this hierarchy by illustrating how public perceives her mother’s English as deficient in contexts. However, while such studies illuminate discrimination, they tend to emphasize institutional bias more than the emotional expressiveness embedded in nonstandard speech.

The concept of linguistic capital further explains how language operates within power structures. Bourdieu (1991) asserts, language functions as “symbolic capital” (p.55). It analyzes how certain ways of speaking carry social authority and legitimacy. In this framework, speakers who do not command the dominant variety may be denied credibility. Tan’s depiction of her mother’s treatment in professional and medical spaces aligns with this theory. Yet, Bourdieu’s structural approach focuses primarily on social power rather than on the intimate and affective value of language within family relationships. Thus, while symbolic capital clarifies the social marginalization of “broken English,” it does not fully account for its emotional resonance.

Research on language and identity also informs the discussion. Norton (2013) makes a study how language closely ties to identity because it shapes how individuals understand themselves and how others understand it. She introduces identity as “multiple, dynamic, and constructed across time and space” (p.45). Tan’s essay demonstrates this dynamic process as she moves from embarrassment about her mother’s English to recognition of its depth and vividness. Similarly, Anzaldúa (1987), while analyzing linguistic marginalization in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, defends nonstandard speech as a marker of cultural survival. She postulates, “if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language” (p.81). This assertion parallels Tan’s realization that criticism of language equates to criticism of identity and emotional belonging.

Interdisciplinary studies in language and emotion further expand this framework. Pavlenko (2005) examines how emotional expression deeply embeds in lived linguistic experience, noting that “emotions are not expressed outside of language but through it” (p.3). From this perspective, emotional meaning does not depend solely on grammatical accuracy but emerges through shared memory and relational context. Tan’s portrayal of her mother’s English as “vivid” and “full of imagery” reflects this understanding, suggesting that emotional authenticity can flourish beyond standardized norms. Although this theory demonstrates the expressive power of language, it rarely applies to “Mother Tongue” in sustained textual analysis.

Language ties to identity and social positioning. James Paul Gee (2015) adduces “language is not just a set of grammatical rules but a way of being in the world” (p.3). This perspective demonstrates that Tan’s mother’s English forms not merely a flawed system but a representation of her lived experience and cultural identity. Gee’s notion of discourses helps explore how Tan navigates between home language and academic English, negotiating different social identities.

Marginalized speech maintains the emotional and political significance. bell hooks (1994) postulates “language is also a place of struggle” (p.146). She makes a study how nonstandard English can function as resistance against dominant linguistic norms. In “Mother Tongue”, Tan’s validation of her mother’s English becomes an act of reclaiming voice and dignity. hooks’ insight frames language as a site where power and emotion intersect. From a sociolinguistic perspective, William Labov (1972) challenges assumptions about linguistic deficiency. He asserts “nonstandard dialects are not linguistically inferior but are systematic and rule-governed” (p.201). His findings dismantle the myth that nonstandard speech reflects intellectual limitation. This argument directly parallels Tan’s realization that her mother’s English, though socially stigmatized, becomes expressive and meaningful.

In the field of linguistic relativity, Deborah Tannen (1990) explores the relational function of language. She explores, “language shapes not only what we say but how we relate to others” (p.16). Her perspective analyzes why Tan experiences deeper emotional resonance when communicating with her mother in their shared home language. The connection demonstrates not simply grammatical but relational and affective. Furthermore, Ngũgĩwa Thiong (1986) introduces the cultural power of mother tongue. He asserts “language carries culture, and culture carries... the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (p.16). Although writing in a postcolonial African context, his insight applies to Tan’s essay. Her mother’s English carries cultural memory and personal history, even when it deviates from standard norms.

Language forms the foundation to human perception. E. Sapir (1929) postulates, “Language is a guide to ‘social reality’” (p.209). He explores how people not only express ideas through language; but also experiences the world through linguistic structures. Language shapes habitual thought. This perspective suggests that Tan’s emotional attachment to her mother’s English influences how she interprets memory, intimacy, and family relations. Sapir’s linguistic relativity analyzes how the so-called “broken English” not only cognitively deficient. Instead, it reflects a distinct worldview formed through lived cultural experience. His theory supports the idea that meaning does not depend solely on grammatical precision but on shared social understanding.

Language contains inherent dialogic nature. M.M. Bakhtin (1981) asserts “language is not a neutral medium... it is populated, overpopulated, with the intentions of others” (p.294). He explores how multiple voices coexist within any discourse. This concept of heteroglossia helps analyze Tan’s narrative voice. She moves between academic English and familial speech. Each variety represents a social voice shaped by different power structures. Bakhtin finds that meaning emerges from interaction between voices rather than from isolated grammar. Tan’s essay embodies this dialogic process. The presence of her mother’s speech within the essay challenges dominant linguistic authority. Bakhtin’s framework therefore demonstrates the coexistence of marginal and dominant discourses within a single text.

Vernacular language inherits the expressive complexity. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) adduces “black vernacular discourse is not only a set of language practices but a system of signification” (p.74). He challenges the assumption that nonstandard forms lack sophistication. He examines how marginalized speech traditions possess rhetorical strategies and cultural depth. His theory of signifying emphasizes creativity within vernacular expression. This insight parallels Tan’s defense of her mother’s English. What appears grammatically limited may contain symbolic richness and emotional resonance. Gates’ perspective strengthens the argument that nonstandard English operates as a meaningful cultural code rather than as linguistic deficiency.

Scholar like Braj B. Kachru (1992) introduces the concept of World Englishes. He asserts “the spread of English has resulted in the pluralization of Englishes” (1992, p.356). He finds how localized varieties of English constitute legitimate forms shaped by sociocultural realities. Kachru challenges the dominance of Inner Circle norms. His model validates linguistic diversity within global contexts. This framework helps reinterpret Tan’s mother’s English as one among many Englishes rather than as broken speech. It situates her language within broader global patterns of linguistic adaptation and hybridization.

Numerous scholars make a study of language from a critical applied linguistics perspective. Alastair Pennycook (2001) examines “language is always embedded in relations of power” (p.43). He finds the standards of correctness as politically constructed. He finds that language practices reflect social inequality. His theory analyzes why nonstandard English becomes stigmatized in institutional settings. Tan’s narrative illustrates this power dynamic. Her mother’s English functions effectively in private domains, but faces discrimination in public institutions. Pennycook’s perspective reinforces the argument that linguistic judgment stands ideological rather than neutral.

Thus, the above scholars reinforce the argument that language connects to identity, emotion, and power. While Standard English dominates institutional spaces, nonstandard varieties retain emotional authenticity and cultural meaning. Tan’s essay aligns with these theoretical positions as it demonstrates “broken English” as neither broken in feeling nor limited in communicative depth. Rather, it functions as a language of intimacy, cultural continuity, and narrative inspiration. While existing scholarship extensively examines linguistic discrimination and identity formation in “Mother Tongue”, it pays insufficient attention to how “broken English” operates as an emotionally expressive and relational language within the text.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research approach grounded in literary analysis and sociolinguistic theory. It draws on frameworks such as language ideology and linguistic capital, particularly from Pierre Bourdieu, to examine how “broken English” functions as an emotionally expressive and socially situated form of communication.

Sampling

This study selects “Mother Tongue” (1990) as the primary text for analysis. It purposively samples relevant excerpts from the essay that illustrate emotional expression, linguistic variation, and instances of social judgment. These excerpts include descriptions of Tan’s mother’s English, reflections on language use in different contexts, and narrative episodes that reveal emotional depth and relational intimacy.

Data Collection

This study collects data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data consist of selected textual excerpts from “Mother Tongue”. Secondary sources include scholarly books in socio linguistics and literary studies, academic journal articles, scholarly commentaries, literary criticisms, critical essays on “Mother Tongue”, and

credible online resources. These sources provide theoretical support and analytical frameworks for interpreting the primary text.

Data Collection Tools

This study employs close reading as the principal tool for data collection from the primary text. This method allows detailed attention to diction, tone, narrative structure, and specific speech examples presented in the essay. For secondary sources, the study employs document analysis to gather relevant scholarly perspectives related to language ideology, linguistic capital, and emotional expression.

Data Analysis Process

This study employs thematic analysis to interpret the collected data. It follows a systematic process of coding to identify recurring patterns related to emotional language, linguistic variation, and social perception. The analysis examines how selected excerpts from the primary text correspond to the research questions. It also compares insights from primary and secondary sources to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. This integrated approach ensures analytical rigour and coherence in the interpretation of the data.

Theoretical Framework

This study grounds in theories to language ideology, linguistic capital, and emotional expression. It primarily draws on Language Ideology Theory and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of Linguistic Capital to explore how certain forms of English gain social legitimacy while others become marginalized. Lippi-Green (2012) postulates "language is a central vehicle for the transmission of social power" (p.64). She demonstrates that judgments about correctness is socially constructed rather than purely linguistic. Similarly, Bourdieu (1991) asserts "linguistic market" determines which forms of speech function as legitimate capital (p.55). In "Mother Tongue", Amy Tan analyzes her mother's English that lacks institutional authority yet it retains communicative strength and experiential authenticity within the family sphere. These theories clarify how "broken English" becomes stigmatized despite its expressive capability.

This research also incorporates Language and Emotion Theory to demonstrate the affective dimension of nonstandard speech. Pavlenko (2005) postulates "emotionality is grounded in linguistic experience" (p.147). She examines how home language often carries deeper emotional resonance than formally acquired language. Tan's portrayal of her mother's English as vivid and intimate aligns with this perspective, portraying how emotional truth does not depend on grammatical precision. Therefore, the framework

supports the argument that language operates simultaneously as symbolic power, identity marker, and emotional medium.

Discussion and Analysis

Multiple “Englishes” and Emotional Context

Tan’s essay (1990) acknowledges linguistic plurality: “I am not a scholar of English or literature” (p.7), yet she immediately situates herself within language debates. She asserts “I speak to my mother in many Englishes” (Tan, 1990, p.7). Her statement is central to understanding the emotional dimension of language. The phrase “many Englishes” challenges the idea of a single, standardized form of correctness. By employing the plural form, she analyzes how language changes according to relationship and context. The English she uses with her mother differs from the English she uses in academic or professional spaces. She postulates “the different Englishes I do use. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—all the Englishes I grew up with” (Tan, 1990, p.7). This variation is not accidental but relational. It reflects intimacy and shared history. Thus, “broken English” becomes not a flawed version of Standard English, but a distinct emotional register shaped by familial closeness.

Redefining “Broken English”

Tan acknowledges how others describe her mother’s English as “broken” or “fractured,” (Tan, 1990, p.8) but she questions these labels. She expresses discomfort with these labels as she asserts, “I wince when I say that” (Tan, 1990, p.8). However, she postulates how her mother’s English remains “vivid, direct, and full of observation and imagery” (Tan, 1990, p.8). This description directly counters the stereotype that nonstandard English lacks clarity or complexity. The adjectives “vivid” and “full of observation” demonstrate richness rather than deficiency. Through this redefinition, she reframes emotional expressiveness as a measure of linguistic value. Her mother’s speech conveys feelings and perceptions effectively within the family context. She asserts “it has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with” (Tan, 1990, p.8). Therefore, emotional meaning becomes more important than grammatical perfection.

Emotional Intimacy and Shared Understanding

Tan analyzes how she once felt ashamed of her mother’s English, particularly in public situations. However, she later realizes that the English spoken at home remains deeply expressive. She asserts, “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” (Tan, 1990, p.7). The metaphor of ‘damage’ reflects societal judgment rather than linguistic reality.

Within the family, her mother's language requires no correction. Emotional intimacy eliminates misunderstanding. She finds how emotional clarity depends on shared context rather than grammatical structure. The daughter understands her mother completely because meaning emerges from relationship, not syntax.

Linguistic Prejudice and Social Power

Tan contrasts emotional understanding at home with prejudice in public spaces. She recounts how people ignore or dismiss her mother because of her English. For instance, she notes how people often respond impatiently or fails to take her mother seriously. In institutional contexts, Standard English carries authority, while nonstandard English invites discrimination. She asserts "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" (Tan, 1990, p.9). However, Tan's narrative suggests that such judgments overlook the communicative power of emotional language. Her mother's speech may not conform to academic standards, but it conveys urgency, frustration, and intelligence.

Writing for the Mother: Emotional Language as Literary Strength

Tan connects her awareness of "broken English" to her development as a writer. She expresses how she consciously imagines her mother as part of her audience when writing fiction. She asserts, "I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers" (Tan, 1990, p.10). This choice influences her narrative voice. By incorporating rhythms and expressions as her mother's speech inspire her, Tan transforms emotional language into literary style. What society labels as "limited" becomes a source of creativity. The emotional texture of home language enriches her storytelling. Thus Tan not only defends her mother's "broken English"; but also she makes it foundational to artistic expression.

Emotional Language versus Grammatical Authority

Tan makes a study how standardized tests once shaped her academic direction. She expresses in her essay how her teachers suggest her to pursue math and science rather than writing, as she postulates "it affected my results on achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT" (Tan, 1990, p.10). Her language and ability influence these institutional judgments. Yet, her later success as a writer challenges those assumptions, as she asserts, "I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as premed" (Tan, 1990, p.11). Emotional insight and narrative sensitivity prove more valuable than rigid grammatical authority. Tan's reflections suggest that linguistic conformity cannot solely

measure intelligence. Emotional expressiveness becomes an alternative standard of evaluation.

Reclaiming “Broken English” as Emotional Truth

By the end of the essay, Tan reclaims the term “broken English.” She demonstrates it as neither broken nor deficient. Instead, it carries emotional truth shaped by migration, memory, and familial bond. Her portrayal of her mother’s language as “vivid” and meaningful destabilizes the hierarchy between Standard and nonstandard English. Emotional language emerges as authentic and powerful. She asserts, “I wanted to 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” (Tan, 1990, p.12). Through close personal reflection, Tan transforms a stigmatized label into a symbol of cultural resilience and relational depth.

Conclusion

This study finds that Amy Tan’s essay challenges conventional assumptions about language, intelligence, and emotional expression. She demonstrates the richness of what people often dismiss as “broken English.” Through close textual analysis, she analyzes her mother’s English not as deficient but as a language of intimacy, observation, and relational meaning. She employs numerous phrases in her essay to illustrate the emotional depth and communicative effectiveness that exist independently of grammatical correctness. She explores the social and cultural implications of linguistic prejudice in her essay. By contrasting her mother’s expressive home language with public judgments and institutional hierarchies, she reveals standardized English that operates as a form of symbolic power, marginalizing nonstandard speakers while overlooking the emotional and intellectual value of their communication. This research finds “broken English” that can serve as a legitimate vehicle for emotional truth, memory, and creative inspiration, influencing not only family dynamics but also literary voice. Emotional language acts as a critical lens for understanding linguistic diversity. Tan’s essay reclaims nonstandard English as a source of cultural identity, narrative power, and personal expression. Thus, her essay encourages readers, educators, scholars, etc. to reconsider dominant definitions of correctness, emphasizing that the affective and relational dimensions shape the meaning and value of language as much as formal grammar. Future scholars may examine emotional expression in other works by Amy Tan or in writings of immigrant and diaspora authors who represent nonstandard English as a meaningful mode of communication. Comparative studies involving *Borderlands/La frontera* and *The Woman Warrior* may further illuminate how nonstandard language functions as a site of emotional, cultural, and political identity formation.

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