

The power of language

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



Language plays an important role in communication by bringing people together and enriching their relationships. Language can also alienate those who do not speak it properly, or at all, from those who do. The essays, *Mother Tongue*, by Amy Tan, best known for her book, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *Se Habla Espanol*, by Tanya Barrientos, delve into the many powers that language holds. These essays reflect how by not speaking a language in proper form and by not speaking a language at all, affects the lives of the subjects of the stories.

People who can speak a certain language, but only in 'broken' form, are generally looked down upon by native language speakers. In her writing, *Mother Tongue*, Amy Tan writes about her mother, who is Chinese and speaks what is referred to as 'broken English'. When Tan was a child, she was embarrassed by the way her mother spoke. In describing how others heard her mother when she spoke English, Tan writes, "Some say they understand 80 to 90 percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese" (566).

People always viewed her mother as stupid because of the way she spoke English. Tan resented people referring to the style as 'broken', insinuating there was something to fix about the way her mother spoke, when in her eyes, there was nothing wrong with it. If people who ridiculed her mother had taken time to know her, their lives would have been richer for it. Those who are not native language speakers, but who have mastered the native language, are still made to feel shameful of their heritage. Like Amy Tan, Tanya Barrientos was embarrassed as a child by the stereotype that her native language carried.

Although she was Mexican, she didn't like the stereotype that came with being Mexican. Barrientos' parents were well educated people. They were both bilingual, speaking fluent English and Spanish, but chose for themselves and their children to only speak English when they immigrated to the United States. Her family was not poor; both her parents had respectable jobs and raised their children in a well-off family. However, many Hispanic families were and in some cases, still are viewed as lower-class citizens. According to Barrientos, " To me, speaking Spanish translated into being poor.

It meant waiting tables and cleaning hotel rooms. It meant being left off the cheerleading squad and receiving a condescending smile from the guidance counselor when you said you planned on becoming a lawyer or a doctor" (561). They are not respected in a lot of communities, they live dirty, and they have bad jobs. These stereotypes are reasons why Barrientos did not want to be called Mexican and never wanted to learn Spanish. If diversity had been celebrated when Barrientos was a child, as it is celebrated and honored now, she would have grown up speaking Spanish and being proud of her heritage.

Children are very impressionable and tend to take on others' opinions as their own, but as they grow older, they develop a greater understanding and perspective of the way things are and the way they should be. As adults, both Tan and Barrientos learned to accept and embrace the languages that previously embarrassed them. Barrientos immersed herself in her Mexican heritage and enrolled in many Spanish classes. With each enrollment, she faced yet another stereotype that came with being of Mexican ethnicity; her instructors thought she should already know Spanish since she was Latina.

Barrientos is now determined to learn her native language. Tan has learned to love the way in which her mother speaks and often finds herself speaking in the same manner when with her mother and even with her husband. Tan describes the way her mother speaks as “vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery” (566). She realized that her mother’s way of speaking contributed to the person she is today. Those who are native English speakers and were born in one of the English speaking countries, tend to think they are of a better class than those who don’t speak English or don’t speak it well.

The argument is that if people want to immigrate to one of the English speaking countries, they should learn the language. If they can’t learn the language, then they should go back to where they are from. The language issue has been raised on many fronts, for example in 2010, the Republican Candidate for Alabama Governor released an advertisement in which he stated, “We speak English. If you want to live here, learn it” (Condon). This sentiment is shared by many citizens of English speaking countries, not just the United States. Language holds so much power.

Language is such an important part of everyday life. People should embrace and celebrate everyone’s diversity, no matter how well they speak, or don’t speak, English. The things that make everyone different, as people, are the things that make our lives rich. Sometimes people forget that just because someone speaks another language or doesn’t speak a certain language well, that doesn’t mean they are stupid or of a lesser class. Perhaps they have learned all they need to know, or want to know, of a certain language others grew up speaking, writing, and reading as second nature.

It is troubling that, even in this day and age, people are still being judged by others based on outward appearances which include how they look and the language they speak. Maybe it is time for people to start putting themselves into the shoes of the ones they are passing judgment over just for not speaking a language properly or even at all. If the first settlers in America were shunned because they didn't speak the native language and were subsequently asked to return to their native land, America wouldn't be the great nation it is today and this conversation wouldn't be had.