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ENGL 131 C

Jan 11th, 2013

Rhetorical Analysis

*Mother Tongue* is a story that describes how Amy Tan’s mother was mistreated because of her “broken English”. As the second generation of Chinese immigrants, Tan faces more problems than her peers do. Her mom who speaks limited English needs Tan to be her “translator” in order to communicate with the native English speakers. Tan states, “I was ashamed of her English.” (713) Her mom is like a burden to her, at least in Tan’s early years. But the cultural conflict she meets becomes the theme of her writing and it is under this situation she wrote a large amount of novels and essays including *Mother Tongue*.

*Mother Tongue* was a speech Amy Tan made in front of many authoritative scholars who had investigated English literature for long time. Tan perhaps had great pressure for the experience she talked about are not familiar at all to those experts. They wouldn’t understand easily how someone from an immigrant family felt. Later the speech became a well-known essay of Tan and the audience changed. She was talking to everybody, especially the ones who speak perfect English. She wanted them to know that one with limited English could still be intelligent. Things behind language might be more valuable than language itself sometimes. That was something exceeded fluency, vocabularies and grammar. Amy Tan’s purpose of writing *Mother Tongue* is to remind the native English speakers to respect the “broken English” speakers and to find out the worthy thoughts concealed by the imperfect language.

Aristotle has an idea that there are three rhetorical appeals people can use to persuade someone else – ethos, pathos and logos. Each of them is very useful and the persuasion will be most effective when three of them are all used. Amy Tan used all in *Mother Tongue*.

At the very beginning, Tan talks about her career, which is a writer, and she states, “Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all – all the Englishes I grew up with.”(711) Most people have positive impression of this career, they may think writers are knowledgeable and they must be very good at English or their native languages. This gives the readers an idea that the author is creditable and her statements are reliable. The audience will probably pay more attention to what the author’s idea is and they are more easily to be persuaded. This is Tan’s use of ethos. She is a knowledgeable figure and the readers should focus on what she’s saying.

Logos is not the major appeal Amy Tan used in this essay, but indeed there are some examples. Tan has mentioned her mom “reads the Forbes report, listens to Wall Street Week, converses daily with her stockbroker, reads all of Shirley MacLaine's books with ease-all kinds of things I can't begin to understand.” (712) It is reasonable to think someone who reads the Forbes report is intelligent, or at least knowledgeable. But this reader of the Forbes report is a “broken English” speaker. This means people who don’t speak fluent second language can still be smart. They should be treated the same as others but not disrespectful. This is logical and perhaps the brains of the audience have been convinced.

The most apparent pathos used in this essay is the paragraph describing how Tan’s mother experienced unfair treatment at the hospital. She portrays the anxiety of her mom. Tan’s mother “was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain tumors.” (714) But the staff members showed their unconcernment. It’s easy for the readers to perceive how helpless and scared Tan’s mom was at that time. Before Amy showed up, they treated her mom disrespectful and told her they might not find her CT. Later the staff members responded differently when Amy Tan showed up at the hospital. It is a scene of how an old woman with “broken English” was treated disrespectfully. By using this example, Amy Tan is touching the audience’s hearts. She also writes about other embarrassed experience she had with her mom that expresses her emotions and infects the readers.

It is an outstanding text because of the appropriate applications of the three appeals. Both the brains and the hearts of the audience have been convinced. But I feel the use of logos is more suitable than the use of the pathos. Because the logos she used really convinced me but the example of her mom’s experience in the hospital only makes me feel sorry but it doesn’t help a lot to explain her claim. The ethos applied in the essay is successful. Compare to the word “broken”, “limited” sounds better. It can have double meanings. People’s understanding of “broken-English” speakers is limited, but the wisdom of the “broken English” speakers is not.

Mengsu,

This is really an excellent start. You have a very clear and lucid writing style, your paragraphs are detailed and well-organized, and the points you make demonstrate a close reading of the text. There are a couple of places where I think that more analysis would benefit your argument, and I have pointed those out above- it might help to “think outside the box” a little bit, as you gesture towards in your critique in the conclusion. Overall, I’m impressed with this, and look forward to reading more of your writing this quarter ☺

Work Cited

Allison Gross, Annie Dwyer, David Holmberg, and Anis Bawarshi edited. *Acts of Inquiry: Mother Tongue.* Amy Tan.Boston, New York: 2011. Print.