Senior Speech: Katelyn Lee, Class of 2019

Opening Sentence from Hans Christian Andersen:

“Where words fail, music speaks.”

A Reading from “Mother Tongue,” by Amy Tan

“You should know that my mother’s expressive command of English belies how much she actually understands. She 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. Yet some of my friends tell me they understand fifty percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand eighty to ninety percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother’s English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It’s my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.”
Tell me, do I sound “Asian” to you? Close your eyes and listen to how I speak.

{Pause} Can you tell from my voice alone that I am Korean?

I ask because I hear the undertones of Hangul in my mom’s voice whenever she speaks English. I hear her palated Ts and poignant Ds, her soft R/Ls and B/Vs that blend together when she says “world” ( wold ) or “very” ( bery ), and how she elides hard consonants like in my name “Katelyn” ( Kaelyn ).

But when I was little, I didn’t notice any of that. Her style of English, with its melodic cadence composed by her hometown in Gangnam, South Korea, was just...English. Really, it was the only English I knew, my “mother tongue”— that’s because my mom was always there for me and with me. My father, who grew up Korean-American in New Jersey and speaks fluent English, left for work before I woke up and returned after I went to sleep, and I doubt the half-day at nursery school, where I conversed with fellow four-year-olds and listened to maybe one or two books read aloud by my teacher, had an effect on my perception of “Normal English.”

My mother’s English was first colored yellow to me with one repeated question. “Katelyn,” each white friend would begin, “Why does your mom say your name weird? Kaelyn . Kaelyn .”

The first time I was asked this, a third grade friend was over at my house for a playdate. I didn’t know what she was talking about. I squinted my eyes and tilted my head left. “Huh?”

And then I heard it. “ Kaelyn , come bring these snacks to your room!”

My Korean grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, father, and older brother—they all said “ Kaelyn ,” except I never did. When I introduce myself, I say, “Hi,
my name is Katelyn Lee.” I embrace the “t” in my name. But it doesn’t bother me to hear my Korean family drop that “t.” I never thought it “weird” or a “mispronunciation.” If anything, it created a nickname used only by the people closest to me—it was a mark of intimacy and of my Korean identity. So the second and third times a middle school friend asked me this question, I just shrugged my shoulders and said, “I dunno.” From a third grader, this question never sought to disparage my mom. It stemmed from pure, childhood curiosity—the way she pronounced my name was merely different for them, but not for me.

But it was different when my fourth grade teacher squinted her eyes and tilted her head, struggling to discern whatever Mom was saying at our parent-teacher conference as if she were utterly fazed by the sound of an Asian accent. I don’t remember exactly what point Mom was making—probably something about how much I was enjoying her class—but I felt myself cringing when I watched the expression on my teacher’s face while she listened to Mom’s voice. I wanted to translate Mom’s “mother tongue” into the teacher’s fluid, accent-free English. I wanted to take her words and string them together so that they flowed and ebbed like my dad’s.

“Sorry?” my teacher said when Mom had finished, her strained smile and patronizing gaze making embarrassment flush on my face. My “mother tongue” sounded childish compared to my teacher’s, and because it did, my mother lost authority in that room. Before that moment, my teachers and my mother always stood on equal ground. Now, with her particular use of words and inability to understand my mother, my teacher challenged my mother’s position as a parent—her wisdom, her care, her understanding. To give some benefit of the doubt, she may have been reacting to the way my mother spoke, similar to my third grade friends. But, confusion
and curiosity that’s ok for a third grader feels like judgement and dismissal from an adult in a position of power.

I realized then that Asian accents do not wield authority in English. As Danny discussed in his speech, there are certain roles ascribed to minority groups—but to be Asian, the role you inhabit is oxymoronic. You must be the super smart, math and science genius; but you also must be illiterate, incoherent, and overall just a blubbering idiot. Asians must be good at the quantitative, and never the qualitative. It’s why our credentials may score higher but our personalities will never be as good. Asian caricatures like the yellow-face portrayal of Mr. Yunioshi in Breakfast at Tiffany’s, with his constant, blunders and crys of, “Ms. Gorighty!” only perpetuate this stereotype. Do Asian comedians like Ken Jeong play into this knowing that this is the comedy they must perform to get a laugh?

But I never thought that this role of the blubbering idiot applied to me. I thought that because I grew up in America, and that English was my first language, I would be separated from these stereotypes. If to anyone, this role had been ascribed to my mom. But in fifth grade, after I spoke in chapel at my old Middle School, I learned that this role would also be ascribed to me. In Fifth Grade, a teacher made my Asian skin feel jaundiced.

I’m standing at a podium, much like I am now, reading the Meditation, or what we called “Intentions,” at our weekly Chapel service. Third, fourth, and fifth graders are all seated in front of me, and their quiet gaze makes me nervous. This role as a speaker is unfamiliar because I’m never picked to deliver the reading. When I perform, I usually sing in choir or lead the song as a soloist—the lyrics are memorized and delivered the assurance and tempo of the song’s melody and the piano accompaniment to keep me
on track. While reading the prayer, however, I feel untethered. All I can hear is my own voice.

“We pray to the Lord,” I say, which marks the end of my reading. I return to my seat, not thinking much of it until Chapel is over and I’m walking out and my religion teacher, with her reddish curls and pale cheeks stops me and, with a smile on her face like she’s congratulating me for a job well done, says, “We play to the Lord?”

I cock my head in confusion, my mind scrambling to make sense of the nonsensical sentence. Then it hits me. She is mocking my pronunciation of the word “Pray.” She thinks I mixed up my “Ls” and “Rs” like an Asian on a sketch comedy show who says, “Herro,” “Prease,” or “He... rook-a rike-a man.” Was she smiling, with a slight chuckle even, because of those comedians who use Asian accents as the punchline in their standup routine? I was one of four Asian girls in my predominately white, fifty person class, and in that moment, she made me painfully realize this. I stood there with my mouth agape. She took my words away from me. I was afraid to reply because I might mess up again. Growing up surrounded by Asian voices, I realized my own voice of authority had become diminished because of my ethnicity. This teacher made my fifth grade self realize that how I speak, regardless of whether she understands what I say, affects her idea of who I am. And I wanted no part of the Asian caricature I knew so well about.

But this was my “mother tongue.” The melody of my mom’s voice—the melody that raised me, taught me, chastised me, loved me—was dissonant to others, and soon, to myself. When I entered Trinity high school, known for its academic excellence and rigor, Mom’s offers to revise my English papers were shot down with a dismissive, “I’m fine. I don’t need your help.” I was always “fine.” I was always “fine” because I chose
not to listen to the “mother tongue,” to turn it off and ignore its music. Even though my mom majored and mastered in journalism in Korea, I sought writing advice from my father, whose fluency in English outweighed his technical background in applied math. It was just easier to go to Dad; we understood the same nuances in English, as evidenced by our rapid fire puns or obscure references at the dinner table that fly over Mom’s head. When talking to her, I had to inch past her accent and between the cracks in her broken English, and even then, I might have to explain some second definition of a word or a sentence structure Dad already knew. My mom is wicked smart, but these naive questions and limited comments on my pieces made me think her broken English reflected broken thoughts. And she knew. And when she admitted to me once that “there are so many things I want to tell you, but I can’t in English,” we cried together because the words we had could not express how we felt.

When English failed us, we turned to music and the musicality of language. For as long as I can remember, whenever my mother and I listen to music, we sing along to the melody with our own words, correct lyrics or not, and our harmonies in one, musical voice. Our favorite album, Norah Jones’ Come Away With Me, has become so soaked with nostalgia from our custom, just listening to it reminds me of my mom and the connection we have through music. If you’ve ever heard an artist with an accent or speech impediment sing, you may notice that these vocal characteristics may melt away in song. It’s because singing and speaking are governed by two different parts of your brain. Singing unifies our voices. And when I listen to music, I listen for the melody, and less for the words—you can change the lyrics of a song, but you can’t change its tune. The same can be said about our speech—there many ways to say one idea, but as long as that one, core idea, like a song’s melody, is present, the same message can be heard.
So understanding all this about the musicality of language, why do we call the English spoken by non-natives “Broken English”? I suppose it’s because native speakers can focus too much on critiquing the superficial, non-native sentence structure and word pronunciation that they fail to hear the melody behind it. In doing so, we judge people’s intelligence based off of how well they can articulate themselves. Immigrants all know this already. The reason why Mom and I never just spoke in Korean is because I never grew up speaking it. In fact, she always pushed us to speak in English at home and correct hers if we caught an error. This began my older brother, who spoke fluent Korean as a child, began struggling with English grammar at pre-school. Knowing how painful it feels to speak “Broken English,” she gave up her native tongue so that my brother and I would never face the judgement and shame she felt.

But the judgement doesn’t stop with how well people can pronounce words and use proper grammar in a foreign language. At Trinity, we “sound smart.” We judge people for how well they can intellectualize something, how well they can string together words to sound as smart as possible and speak so perfectly as to avoid any judgement that non-native speakers face. We are so well spoken, it’s like we “proofread” every sentence we say in our head before we speak it. I’m sure many of you actually do this. I sure have. In class, I’ve felt intimidated to contribute to the discussion because I don’t think I’ll “sound smart.” It doesn’t even matter if I have a good message, a good melody—if I stumbled or repeat, the point is lost to the class, unless repeated by someone more eloquent than I. Sometimes, I fumble over words like “World War II” because I’m so focused on avoiding the L/R mix up from fifth grade that I jumble up the phrase entirely. The last thing I want is to sound like that uneducated Asian caricature, speaking half-baked thoughts like “I-ah.. tink-a, dat-ah..”.
How many of you have kicked yourselves for messing up a word, and feeling stupid for doing so? For a non-native speaker, this fear possesses every moment they speak. If you’re gifted with the natural eloquence of an orator, be the person in the classroom who shares the discussion instead of intimidating others with some spun-out monologue. When you inflate your speech, you neglect and ignore those around you. Don’t be the person whose counter argument already begins unfurling before the person has time to finish their thought. Think instead of the Quaker-style meetings this year, where each speaker’s voice sang with an honesty and openness I’ve never witnessed in the classroom. We, as an Upper School, listened to the rhythms of their speech, the silences, these “mother tongues” we speak in our heads. I call on you now to listen for the message, the music, the melody in whatever someone says. Everyone has a story to tell, a song to sing. Thank you, Mom, for teaching me this beauty. Trinity, I want to hear our harmony.

Thank you.