



A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN AMY TAN'S THE JOY LUCK CLUB

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ABSTRACT

Communication is an act of transferring information from one place, person or group to another. Communication between the people is widely varied but people overcome or accentuate these differences using various techniques. This paper deals with the socio-linguistic study of communication among the people in a society. The linguistic analysis of the novel is implemented with the help of Howard Giles's "Communication Accommodation Theory." The communication between the Chinese mothers and American daughters in the novel *The Joy Luck Club* gives a deep insight into interactions between two different cultures, societies, and ideas. The *Joy Luck Club* characters succeed and fail in using convergence and divergence techniques to articulate with their peers, relatives, family, and friends. The varied results in the usage of techniques determine the relationship status among the people.

KEYWORDS : Communication, Communication Accommodation Theory, Culture, Socio-linguistics

INTRODUCTION:

Amy Ruth Tan (born February 19, 1952) is a Chinese American author born in Oakland, California, U.S. Amy Tan grew up in California and studied English and linguistics at San Jose State University of California, Berkeley. Her novels are about Chinese American women and the immigrant experience. Her famous novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) relates the experiences of four Chinese mothers, their Chinese American daughters and the struggles of the two disparate cultures and generations to relate to each other.

The *Joy Luck Club* is divided into four parts: *Feathers from a Thousand Li Away*, *The Twenty-six Malignant Gates*, *American Translation*, and *Queen Mother of Western Skies*. All these four divisions contain four stories each, totalling sixteen stories. The protagonists of this novel are Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters. A short parable introduces a common theme, connecting the four stories that follow, at the beginning of each part. Each story is told by one of the eight main characters named Suyuan Woo, An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, Ying-Ying ST. Clair, Jing-Mei Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong, and Lena ST. Clair. All their stories are woven together into a larger complex narrative. Suyuan Woo, An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-Ying ST. Clair, the Chinese mothers, emigrated to the United States because of the World War II. They met in a San Francisco refugee center and became friends. "The Joy Luck Club" is a weekly mahjong game meeting that has been going on between four friends for almost forty years. Jing-Mei Woo (June Woo), Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong, and Lena ST. Clair are the American-born daughters.

Communication Accommodation Theory:

Howard Giles's concept of 'Communication Accommodation Theory', explains the communication behavior of an individual in social interaction. It predicts how, why and when people adjust their communication in a social structure and the result of such communicative adaption. His theory is divided into two groups: convergence and divergence.

Convergence means shaping our language according to the person we are talking to. Giles says that convergence allows us to 'accommodate' with the person we talk to. It is a natural process of people trying to connect and decrease the differences among the people around them by using a similar way of communication. There are different ways of convergence. For example, people adopt the accents, slang, or specific diction that their friends or colleagues use to fit in. The convergence will help to connect more with the people around and create a comfort zone. As the saying goes, "Every coin has two sides", this theory also have some downsides. People who fail to adopt the communication accommodation

theory as a natural artifact to leverage their communication have to go through a series of accusations and misunderstandings among their colleagues and their social group. The person who fails in using the communication accommodation theory will make the situation awkward. The other person can consider him as fake or pretentious, and sometimes it can also be taken as mockery.

Divergence can be used to assert dominance while communicating with the people. Divergence is a process where the person does not try to adapt the other people's communication but tries to maintain their distance and assert dominance in their unique way of communication. For example, a person of a high standard like a boss always tries to be unique and expresses divergence characteristics to assert his dominance and high standards towards his employees. Over usage of divergence can create barriers in communication as distance is maintained among people, and these results not only in making the person distinctive but also a person whom the social group cannot relate to. People will start to avoid that person eventually.

People use different communication styles, which pertain to various groups like children, elders, youth, men, women, friends, bosses, etc. We can infer from the dictions and gestures with whom they communicate. People try to get approval for everything they say and do to create a positive image of themselves in front of the other communicators. The theory is related to four similar socio-psychological theories: attraction theory, intergroup distinctiveness theory, causal attribution process theory, and social exchange process theory. The theory is used in intergenerational communication, young to elderly communication, intercultural communication, etc.

Convergence:

In the novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, the story stresses the culture and social identity. Communication plays a vital role in shaping the relationship between the mother and the daughter. As the first generation emigrants, the Chinese mothers try to fit in the American culture. They desire for the acceptance of the people around them in the foreign country, inspite of trying to protect and cherish their Chinese roots. Accommodating and adapting certain dictions, using some native pronunciations and imitating accents in the novel by the Chinese mothers is an apt example of convergence. The American-born daughters are torn between the Chinese roots that they cannot relate to and the American society they live in. Convergence is one of the techniques used by the daughters to fit in with their American family after their marriages. There are some instances in which, the usage of convergence is apparent in the novel.

Back home, I thought about what she said. And it was true. Lately, I had been feeling huluhudu. And everything around me seemed to be heimongmong. These were words I had never thought about in English terms. I suppose the closest in meaning would be "confused" and "dark fog." (The Joy Luck Club 224)

Rose ponders over her mother's words and certain dictions in the story titled "Without Wood" under the subtitle "American Translation." She tries to interpret the meaning in English as she is more comfortable in English than Chinese. Rose implements the convergence technique successfully to understand the Chinese words so that it can be helpful when she converses with her mother. This adaptation of dictions makes their communication easy and convenient.

In the story titled "The Joy Luck Club" under the subtitle "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," Auntie Lin explains how mad she got at a store clerk who refused to let her return a skirt with a broken zipper. "I was chiszle," she says, still fuming, "mad to death" (27). Here, Aunt Lin uses the convergence technique to express her annoyance and rage in the English language so that her friend's daughters can also relate to her frustration, but her incorrect grammar and pronunciation make others feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. Though Aunt Lin tries to adapt herself in the English speaking society, she fails in her attempt. All the Chinese mothers have difficulty in spoken English and pronunciation. Their accents are terrible, as their English language has more Chinese influence. Though the mothers make efforts to adapt to their surroundings, they are criticized for their failure in effective articulation and become a fun element because of their thick accent and incorrect English.

My mother believed in God's will for many years. It was as if she had turned on a celestial faucet and goodness kept pouring out. She said it was faith that kept all these good things coming our way, only I thought she said "fate," because she couldn't pronounce that "th" sound in "faith." (137)

In the story "Half and Half" under the subtitle "The Twenty-six Malignant Gates," Rose reminisces her mother's advice. She realizes that her mother's inaccurate pronunciation of specific sounds, often misled the listeners. The miscommunication pushed her into a tight spot. Rose takes the role of middle man to rectify the situation often. She is embarrassed by her mother's ignorance and her attempt to communicate in English with others.

Divergence:

Chinese mothers often try to assert their authority over their daughters by switching back to speaking in Chinese or using their Chinese knowledge to intimidate their daughters. There are times when mothers demonstrate their rich Chinese heritage and culture by quoting some sayings from the Chinese books, and exhibit like a high standard people with immense knowledge. They perceive that their daughters neither know nor experience life.

"Bite back your tongue," scolded my mother when I cried loudly, yanking her hand toward the store that sold bags of salted plums. At home, she said, "Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese we say, Come from South, blow with wind-poom!-North will follow. Strongest wind cannot be seen." (95)

This is an instance from the story titled "Rules of the Game" narrated by Waverly Jong, about her childhood days. This story is under the subtitle "The Twenty-six Malignant Gates." Waverly was six years old when she went shopping with her mother. She asked her mother to buy candies, which her mother refused to do so. Returning home, she imparted her knowledge in Chinese to Waverly. As a six-year-old child,

Waverly was not familiar with her mother's usage of words. Her mother quotes the Chinese sayings to teach her how to hold back the desire of wanting something. This incident shows her divergence way of communication and asserting dominance. The mothers criticize their daughters as ignorant and inexperienced. This over usage of divergence technique in their communication creates a rift between the mothers and daughters. Incidents as such serve as the root cause of misunderstanding.

The story titled "Without Wood" narrated by Rose Hsu Jordan, under the subtitle "American Translation" has similar situation. Rose uses divergence technique successfully by the change of her tone and brave countenance. Her husband has an affair with another woman and tries to break off their marriage by making her sign on the divorce agreement with unfair terms. Her usual low, soft, and hesitant voice is replaced with confident countenance and unmistakable voice which scares her husband. She demands what she wants and refuses to sign the papers.

And the answer, the one that was important above everything else, ran through my body and fell from my lips: "You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away." I saw what I wanted: his eyes, confused, then scared. He was huluhudu. The power of my words was that strong. (234)

The divergence technique is enforced upon people to induce fear. Waverly is scared to tell her mother about her marriage with her boyfriend, Rich. Waverly's fear of her mother Jong destroys their intimate bond of the mother-daughter relationship. It is the leading cause of misunderstanding between them. This instance briefs the people's opinion and idea towards the person who practices divergence technique constantly in their life. "I never had a chance," I said, which was true. How would I have told my mother I was getting married, when at every possible moment we were alone, she seemed to remark on how much expensive wine Rich like to drink, or how pale and ill he looked, or how sad Shoshana seemed to be.

Rich was smiling. "How long does it take to say, Mom, Dad, I'm getting married?" "You don't understand. You don't understand my mother." (212)

CONCLUSION:

The language and communication differences vary from person to person in their speech, gestures, and behavior based on their culture, social status and experience. Howard Giles's "Communication Accommodation Theory" gives us further insights into a better understanding of the sociolinguistic aspects of the novel. The theory throws more light on novel's different types of interaction and the adaptability of humans in the social community and structure by using methods like convergence and divergence.

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