

Forgetting My First Language

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No one prepared me for the heartbreak of losing my first language. It doesn't feel like the sudden, sharp pain of losing someone you love, but rather a dull ache that builds slowly until it becomes a part of you. My first language, Cantonese, is the only one I share with my parents, and, as it slips from my memory, I also lose my ability to communicate with them. When I tell people this, their eyes tend to grow wide with disbelief, as if it's so absurd that I must be joking. "They can't speak English?" they ask. "So how do you talk to your parents?" I never have a good answer. The truth is, I rely on translation apps and online dictionaries for most of our conversations.

It's strange when I hear myself say that I have trouble talking to my parents, because I still don't quite believe it myself. We speak on the phone once a week and the script is the same: "Have you eaten yet?" my father asks in Cantonese. Long pause. "No, not yet. You?" I reply. "Why not? It's so late," my mother cuts in. Long pause. "Remember to drink more water and wear a mask outside," she continues. "O.K. You too." Longest pause. "We'll stop bothering you, then." The conversation is shallow but familiar. Deviating from it puts us (or, if I'm being honest, just me) at risk of discomfort, which I try to avoid at all costs.

I grew up during the nineties in Sheepshead Bay, a quiet neighborhood located in the southern tip of Brooklyn, where the residents were mostly Russian-Jewish immigrants. Unable to communicate with neighbors, my parents kept to themselves and found other ways to participate in American culture. Once a month, my dad attempted to re-create McDonald's chicken nuggets at home for my two brothers and me before taking us to the Coney Island boardwalk to watch the Cyclone roller coaster rumble by. On Sundays, my mom brought me to violin lessons, and afterward I accompanied her to a factory in Chinatown where she sacrificed her day off to sew blouses to pay for my next lesson while I did homework. These constant acts of love—my parents' ideas of Americana—shaped who I am today. Why is it so difficult for me, at age thirty-two, to have a meaningful discussion with them? As an adult, I feel like their acquaintance instead of their daughter.

During my visits back home from California, our time together is quiet, our conversations brief. My parents ask about my life in Cantonese over plates of *siu yuk* and *choy sum* while I clumsily piece together incomplete sentences peppered with English in response. I have so much to say, but the Cantonese words are just out of reach, my tongue unable to retrieve them after being neglected in favor of English for so long. I feel emptier with each visit, like I'm losing not only my connection to my parents but also fragments of my Chinese heritage. Can I call myself Chinese if I barely speak the language?

My parents taught me my first words: *naai*, when I was hungry for milk, and *gai*, when I was hungry for chicken. I was born in New York City and spent most of my childhood, in Brooklyn, speaking Cantonese, since it was (and still is) the only language that my parents understand. In the nineteen-eighties, they immigrated to the U.S. from Guangdong, a province in southern China. The jobs they found in hot kitchens and cramped garment factories came with long hours, leaving them no time to learn English. As a result, my parents relied heavily on the Chinese community in New York to survive. I looked forward to running errands with my mother in Manhattan's Chinatown, where I heard Cantonese spoken all around me in grocery stores, doctors' offices, and hair salons. On special occasions, we would *yum cha* with my mother's friends and eat my favorite dim-sum dishes like *cheung fun* and *pai gwut* while they praised my voracious appetite. At home, we watched "Journey to the West," a popular Hong Kong television series that aired on TVB, and listened to catchy Cantopop songs by Jacky Cheung on repeat. Before I started school, my only friends were the children of other Cantonese-speaking immigrants, with whom I bonded over our shared love of White Rabbit candies and fruit-jelly cups. Cantonese surrounded every aspect of my life; it was all I knew.

When I first learned English in elementary school, I became bilingual quickly with help from English-as-a-second-language classes. I switched back and forth seamlessly between the two languages, running through multiplication tables with my mother in Cantonese and, in the same breath, telling my brother in English that I hated math. I attended my parent-teacher conferences as a translator for my mother despite the obvious conflict of interest; "Jenny is an excellent student over all but needs just a little more help with math," my third-grade teacher said, which I'd relay to my mom with pride only after redacting the bit about math.

It wasn't an issue that my math skills weren't strong. My parents encouraged me to excel in English class because they believed it to be the key to success in America, even if they never learned the language. English would aid in my performance across all subjects in school because that was the language my teachers taught in. But, most important, my parents believed that a

mastery of English would promise a good, stable job in the future. This missing piece in my parents' lives would propel me forward for the rest of mine.

Before long, I learned that there was also significant social currency in adopting English as a primary language. Outside of E.S.L. class, I encountered the first of many "ching chongs" shouted my way. "Do you know that's what you sound like?" a kid asked, laughing. I did not know, because "ching chong" had never come out of my mouth before. Still, it went on to be a common taunt I endured, along with "No speaky English?," even though I spoke English. I was humiliated based on how I looked and the fact that I could speak another language. It was an easy decision to suppress Cantonese in an effort to blend in, to feel more American. This didn't actually work; instead, I felt a diminished sense of both identities.

As I entered my teen-age years, my social circle shifted. I attended Brooklyn Technical High School, where the students were predominantly Asian. For the first time since I was a preschooler, most of my friends looked like me. My personality evolved; I became bold, rebellious, and maybe even a bit brash compared with the painfully shy wallflower I had played in the past. I dyed my hair magenta and shoplifted makeup for the thrill. Upon meeting other Chinese American students who spoke English at home with their parents, I became furious that my parents weren't bilingual, too. If they valued English so much and knew how necessary it was in this country, why didn't they do whatever it took to learn it? "Mommy and Baba had to start working. We had no money. We had no time. We needed to raise you and your brothers." All I heard were excuses. I resented them for what I thought was laziness, an absence of sense and foresight that they should have had as my protectors. When I continued to be subjected to racial slurs even after my English had become pitch-perfect, I blamed my parents. Any progress I made towards acceptance in America was negated by their lack of assimilation. With nowhere to channel my fury, I spoke English to my parents, knowing that they couldn't understand me. I was cruel; I called them hurtful names and belittled their intelligence. I used English, a language they admired, against them.

Over time, Cantonese played a more minor role in my life. When I went away for college at Syracuse University, I heard it less often. After starting my first advertising job, I spoke it infrequently. And now, as an adult living thousands of miles away from my family, I understand it rarely. It served no purpose in my life other than to humor my parents when they called me.

My fluency eroded so gradually through the years that there isn't a definitive moment when my vocabulary became less extensive, my grammar less polished. It didn't occur to me that my

Cantonese was regressing well beyond the tip of my tongue until it was too late. First, my directions were off. I started saying *jau*, which means “right,” when I meant to say *zo*, which means “left.” This caused my dad to make wrong turns when I navigated in his car. Then, the names of colors started to escape me. “I like your green dress,” I said to my mom in Cantonese once. “This is blue, silly!” she laughed. And a couple of years ago, I tried replicating my grandma’s steamed-egg recipe but asked my dad how she used to pan-fry them. “You mean ‘steam,’ right?” He intrinsically knew how to decipher my broken Cantonese. Eventually, I struggled to construct sentences altogether, often mispronouncing words or failing completely to recall them.

The struggle to retain my first language feels isolating but isn’t unique; it’s a shared pain common among first- and second-generation immigrants. This phenomenon is known as first-language attrition, the process of forgetting a first or native language. My brothers are further along in this process—they have more trouble communicating with my parents than I do. They’re both older than I am by nearly a decade, so they’ve had more time to forget. The frustration is palpable when they rummage through what’s left of their Cantonese to make small talk, whether it’s describing the weather or pointing out what’s on TV.

My closest friends include first-generation Chinese Americans who also have fraught relationships with their parents. Our group chats read like a Cantonese 101 class: “How do you say . . . ,” “What’s the word for . . . ,” “What’s the difference between” Emotional connections between a child and parent are weakened if the only language they share is also the language being forgotten. This is the case for many children of immigrants; to “succeed” in America, we must adopt a new language in place of our first—the one our parents speak best—without fully considering the strain it places on our relationships for the rest of our lives.

There are many milestones I wish I could have shared with my parents—awards I’ve won, career changes I’ve made, occasions I knew they would have been proud of. But I couldn’t find the words in between the ums and ahs, the never-ending games of charades to explain the happenings in my life. Throughout my career as a strategist in advertising, *gwong gou*, Cantonese for “advertisement,” was the furthest I got when explaining my job. After I decided to move across the country from New York City to Los Angeles, I didn’t know how to say “California.” Instead, I mangled the translation and strung together the Cantonese words for “other side of America, closer to China.” My parents guessed correctly. “*Gaa zau?*” And, after my now-fiancé proposed, I mistakenly told my parents, “I’m married!” My mother thought she had missed a wedding that hadn’t happened yet, all because I didn’t know the word for

“engaged.” It took a few rounds of online searches to find the Cantonese translation (most translation apps default to Mandarin), coupled with a photo of my engagement ring, before my mother understood.

It’s deeply disorienting to have thoughts that I so eagerly want to share with my parents but which are impossible to express. Cantonese no longer feels natural, and sometimes even feels ridiculous, for me to speak. My parents and I have no heart-to-heart conversations, no mutual understanding, on top of cultural and generational gaps to reckon with. My mother has a habit of following her sentences with “Do you understand what I’m saying?” More often than not, I don’t. She hasn’t mastered translation apps yet, but, like me, she’ll resort to using synonyms and simpler phrases until I’m able to piece her words together. My heart aches, knowing there’s a distance between us that may never fully be bridged.

On my mom’s sixty-fourth birthday, at the peak of the pandemic, I became increasingly anxious over her mortality, compounded by the preexisting health conditions that put her more at risk. My parents may look younger than their ages suggest, but there’s no avoiding the fact that we have a limited amount of time together. Did I really want to spend the rest of our lives with a language barrier between us? I made it a goal to relearn Cantonese, and, ultimately, rebuild the relationship with my parents. I attempt conversations with the kind women behind the bun counter at Taipan, my favorite bakery in Manhattan’s Chinatown, or the waiters at East Harbor Seafood Palace, my go-to Cantonese restaurant in Brooklyn. I listen to Jacky Cheung these days on Spotify instead of a cassette tape and transport myself back to my parents’ living room. I watch Wong Kar-wai movies like “In the Mood for Love” and hang on to each of Maggie Cheung’s beautifully spoken words, repeating them over and over until I get the tones just right. But, most of all, I call my parents and stammer through more meaningful conversations with them, no matter how challenging it gets.

Looking back, forfeiting the language passed on to me from my parents was the cost of assimilation. I don’t view this as a blemish on my family’s narrative but rather as a symbol of our perseverance. I feel pangs of guilt when I have trouble interacting with my parents, but I remind myself not to be discouraged. During a recent chat, I mentioned a fund-raiser that I had hosted for Heart of Dinner, an organization that delivers fresh meals and groceries to Asian seniors experiencing food insecurity in New York City. I deployed all of the translation tools in my arsenal to explain my motivation for fund-raising, fumbling through one of our longest conversations. The nuances would be lost in translation, but I punched the words in anyway: anti-Asian violence, isolation, elderly Asians afraid of leaving home, pandemic. It was a hot

papier-mâché mess of an explanation, but, like my blatantly incorrect request for my grandmother’s egg recipe, they still understood. “*Gum ho sum!*” Such a good heart.

Our weekly calls are livelier now. I have a backlog of topics and no idea how to broach them, but, armed with my phone and a bit of patience, I’m up for the challenge. Though Cantonese no longer feels natural for me to speak, it will always be my first language—even if it takes a few translation apps and a lifetime for us to get reacquainted.