Primary reading  
• “Mother Tongue.” By Amy Tan, 1990.

Secondary reading  

Genres
- □ fiction
- □ poetry
- □ drama
- ■ prose
- □ song
- □ news
- □ art
- ■ speech
- ■ movie
- ■ on-line information
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Learning focus
- ■ listening
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Handouts by
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I am not a scholar of English or literature. I cannot give you much more than personal opinions on the English language and its variations in this country or others.

I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language -- the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all -- all the Englishes I grew up with.

Recently, I was made keenly aware of the different Englishes I do use. I was giving a talk to a large group of people, the same talk I had already given to half a dozen other groups. The nature of the talk was about my writing, my life, and my book, The Joy Luck Club. The talk was going along well enough, until I remembered one major difference that made the whole talk sound wrong. My mother was in the room. And it was perhaps the first time she had heard me give a lengthy speech, using the kind of English I have never used with her. I was saying things like, "The intersection of memory upon imagination" and "There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to thus-and-thus'--a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of standard English that I had learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother.

Just last week, I was walking down the street with my mother, and I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, the English I do use with her. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: "Not waste money that way." My husband was with us as well, and he didn't notice any switch in my English. And then I realized why. It's because over the twenty years we've been together I've often used that same kind of English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with.

So you'll have some idea of what this family talk I heard sounds like, I'll quote what my mother said during a recent conversation which I videotaped and then transcribed. During this conversation, my mother was talking about a political gangster in Shanghai who had the same last name as her family’s, Du, and how the gangster in his early years wanted to be adopted by her family, which was rich by comparison. Later, the gangster became more powerful, far richer than my mother's family, and one day showed up at my mother's wedding to pay his respects. Here's what she said in part: "Du Yusong having business like fruit stand. Like off the street kind. He is Du like Du Zong -- but not Tsung-ming Island people. The local people call putong, the river east side, he belong to that side local people. That man want to ask Du Zong father take him in like become own family. Du Zong father wasn't look down on him, but didn't take seriously, until that man big like become a mafia. Now important person, very hard to inviting him. Chinese way, came only to show respect, don't stay for dinner. Respect for making big celebration, he shows up. Mean gives lots of respect. Chinese custom. Chinese social life that way. If too important won't have to stay too long. He come to my wedding. I didn't see, I heard it. I gone to boy's side, they have YMCA dinner. Chinese age I was
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 50 percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand 80 to 90 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.

Lately, I've been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as 'broken' or "fractured" English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than "broken," as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I've heard other terms used, "limited English," for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people's perceptions of the limited English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother's "limited" English limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.

My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. One time it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed out her small portfolio and it just so happened we were going to go to New York the next week, our very first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, "This is Mrs. Tan."

And my mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, "Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money.

And then I said in perfect English, "Yes, I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn't arrived."

Then she began to talk more loudly. "What he want, I come to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?" And I was trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, "I can't tolerate any more excuses. If I don't receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I'm in New York next week." And sure enough, the following week there we were in front of this astonished stockbroker, and I was sitting there red-faced and quiet, and my mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her impeccable broken English.

We used a similar routine just five days ago, for a situation that was far less humorous. My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT scan had revealed a month ago. She said she had spoken very good English, her best English, no mistakes. Still, she said, the hospital did not apologize when they said they had lost the CAT scan and she had come for nothing. She said they did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain tumors. She said they would not give her any more information until the next time and she would have to make

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another appointment for that. So she said she would not leave until the doctor called her daughter. She wouldn't budge. And when the doctor finally called her daughter, me, who spoke in perfect English -- lo and behold -- we had assurances the CAT scan would be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be held, and apologies for any suffering my mother had gone through for a most regrettable mistake.

I think my mother's English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well. Sociologists and linguists probably will tell you that a person's developing language skills are more influenced by peers. But I do think that the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families which are more insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that it affected my results on achievement tests, I.Q. tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be considered my strong suit. In grade school I did moderately well, getting perhaps B's, sometimes B-pluses, in English and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on achievement tests. But those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science, because in those areas I achieved A's and scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed around items like fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, such as, "Even though Tom was, Mary thought he was --." And the correct answer always seemed to be the most bland combinations of thoughts, for example, "Even though Tom was shy, Mary thought he was charming:' with the grammatical structure "even though" limiting the correct answer to some sort of semantic opposites, so you wouldn't get answers like, "Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought he was ridiculous.' Well, according to my mother, there were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been and what Mary might have thought of him. So I never did well on tests like that.

The same was true with word analogies, pairs of words in which you were supposed to find some sort of logical, semantic relationship -- for example, "Sunset is to nightfall as is to." And here you would be presented with a list of four possible pairs, one of which showed the same kind of relationship: red is to stoplight, bus is to arrival, chill is to fever, yawn is to boring: Well, I could never think that way. I knew what the tests were asking, but I could not block out of my mind the images already created by the first pair, "sunset is to nightfall"--and I would see a burst of colors against a darkening sky, the moon rising, the lowering of a curtain of stars. And all the other pairs of words --red, bus, stoplight, boring--just threw up a mass of confusing images, making it impossible for me to sort out something as logical as saying: "A sunset precedes nightfall" is the same as "a chill precedes a fever." The only way I would have gotten that answer right would have been to imagine an associative situation, for example, my being disobedient and staying out past sunset, catching a chill at night, which turns into feverish pneumonia as punishment, which indeed did happen to me.

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother's English, about achievement tests. Because lately I've been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans represented in American literature. Why are there few Asian Americans enrolled in creative writing programs? Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering! Well, these are broad sociological questions I can't begin to answer. But I have noticed in surveys -- in fact, just last week -- that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English. And this makes me think that there are other Asian-American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as "broken" or "limited." And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me.

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Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious in nature and enjoy the challenge of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing nonfiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management.

But it wasn't until 1985 that I finally began to write fiction. And at first I wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language. Here's an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into The Joy Luck Club, but without this line: "That was my mental quandary in its nascent state." A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce.

Fortunately, for reasons I won't get into today, I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind -- and in fact she did read my early drafts--I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as "simple"; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as "broken"; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as "watered down"; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.

Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: "So easy to read."

Amy Tan

Amy Tan (born February 19, 1952) is an American writer whose works explore mother-daughter relationships. Her most well-known work is *The Joy Luck Club*, which has been translated into 35 languages. In 1993, the book was adapted into a commercially successful film.

Tan has written several other bestselling novels, including *The Kitchen God's Wife*, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and *Saving Fish from Drowning*. She also wrote a collection of non-fiction essays entitled *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings*. Her most recent novel *Saving Fish from Drowning* explores the tribulations experienced by a group of people who disappear while on an expedition in the jungles of Burma. In addition to these, Tan has written two children's books: *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994), which was turned into an animated series which aired on PBS. She also appeared on PBS in a short spot encouraging children to write. Tan is also in a band with several other well-known writers, the *Rock Bottom Remainders*.

Tan was born in Oakland, California. She is the second of three children born to Chinese immigrants Daisy (née Li), who was forced to leave her three daughters from a previous marriage behind in Shanghai, and John Tan, an electrical engineer and Baptist minister. This incident provided the basis for Tan's first novel, 1989 New York Times bestseller *The Joy Luck Club*. When Tan was 15 years old, her older brother Peter and father both died of brain tumors within a year of each other. Daisy moved Amy and her younger brother John Jr. to Switzerland, where Amy finished high school. During this period, Amy learned about her mother's
former marriage to an abusive man in China, and of their four children, including three daughters and a son who died as a toddler. In 1987 Amy traveled with Daisy to China. There, Amy met her three half-sisters. Tan received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English and linguistics from San José State University, and later did doctoral linguistics studies at UC Santa Cruz and UC Berkeley.

She resides in Sausalito, California, with her husband, Louis DeMattei, a tax attorney whom she met on a blind date and married in 1974.

Tan was featured on The Simpsons episode "Insane Clown Poppy" on Season 12, Episode 3.

Reference

Source: <https://skintightjeanz.wordpress.com/2012/12/02/mother-tongue-analysis/>, 2015/6/23

“Mother Tongue Analysis”, by Levil S. DaCosta, in 2012

Living in America does not necessarily mean that someone is American and regardless of being born in California Amy Tan knew that she is not simply American, at least, not all of the time. “Mother Tongue” gives an example of a woman struggling with various identities bestowed upon her. In the essay, she struggles with identity through language (both mainstream English and Mandarin), and her outside world’s perspectives. Tan shows how hard it is to be just one person while dealing with the looks and voices of the people she familiarizes herself with.

Tan suffers from a total cultural clash in the dialect world. At home she uses “broken English” to better communicate with her mother, although, she speaks perfect English outside of the household. Unfortunately, neither of the two languages can coexist in Tan’s life simultaneously. Her mother is not fluent in English as her daughter, and with that communication is strained. Tan has even stated that the manor of English that her mother speaks in is almost embarrassing and shameful, stating that “imperfect voices” comes from “imperfect thought”. It is very common for those from other countries to adopt a more strained form of English, since it’s near impossible for anyone to just learn a new language, especially those who were accustomed to a previous one for so many years.

Tan states that her interests also further put her in an equally frustrating position, being equally ostracized by both white-America and the Asian population. From the perspective of Americans with the stereotypical views of Asians, Tan has said that she was looked funny, being an English major and of Chinese decent mainly because of the notorious stereotype of Asian being more affiliated with math and science. Ironically, Tan had discovered based on surveys that a majority of Asians do in fact excel in mathematics and sciences. She also noticed that many of her teachers had even pushed her more into the path of math and science as well and was even told by a former boss that writing was not something she was good at and should focus more onto her account management. It’s clearly been shown on multiple occasions, both directly and indirectly, that ethnicity clouds others judgment on Tan and her interests, hobbies, and aspirations.

Identity is not something that can easily be found. It is something that takes years to learn, embrace and adjust to. Willing to love both the origin of where one was once from and the settlement they have now partaken in takes time. Tan cannot say she is Chinese but easily cannot say she is American and the world can be a divider of a single person’s life. Who she is in one environment is not who she will be in another, thus it is easy to say there is no balance, although, having two worlds does not make someone two separate beings which Tan demonstrates. Regardless of there being faults in one part of her life, there are always rewards in another that balance it all out.
Pre-reading discussion:
1. What’s your impression of a Taiwanese speaking perfect Mandarin?
2. What’s your impression of a Taiwanese speaking perfect English?
3. Is there any difference in your tone and word choice when you speak in public and when you talk to your family and friends?
4. Have you experienced any frustration because you cannot express yourself well in another language? How do you deal with the frustrating situation?
5. What are the languages that you speak? Which one do you use the most often? Which one is your best and is it your mother tongue?
6. Do you judge a person (in either a negative or positive way) based on the language (written or spoken) he/she uses? Why or why not?

Questions for the reading:
7. Why does Tan open her essay by explaining what she is not?
8. According to Tan, how does the power of language manifest itself?
9. What does “different Englishes” mean?
10. Why does Amy Tan speak different Englishes to her mother and to her husband? Do you have similar experiences?
11. Do you think the development of our language skills is influenced more by our family or by our peers?
12. Why does Tan imagine her mother as the reader of her novels?

Post-reading discussion:
13. Listen to the clips of the different voices in English. Will you be able to describe the possible personality or identity of the speakers?
15. In your opinion, which is more important, to speak a language, e. g. English, in a correct, authentic manner, or to use the language as a tool of communication where grammar or diction should be secondary in importance?
16. Compare and contrast the qualities and characteristics of Mandarin and Taiwanese in our life.
“If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?”
by James Baldwin

The following essay is first published on The New York Times, 1979, July 29.

1 St. Paul de Vence, France--The argument concerning the use, or the status, or the reality, of black English is rooted in American history and has absolutely nothing to do with the question the argument supposes itself to be posing. The argument has nothing to do with language itself but with the role of language. Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other--and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.

2 People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they are submerged.) A Frenchman living in Paris speaks a subtly and crucially different language from that of the man living in Marseilles; neither sounds very much like a man living in Quebec; and they would all have great difficulty in apprehending what the man from Guadeloupe, or Martinique, is saying, to say nothing of the man from Senegal--although the "common" language of all these areas is French. But each has paid, and is paying, a different price for this "common" language, in which, as it turns out, they are not saying, and cannot be saying, the same things: They each have very different realities to articulate, or control.

3 What joins all languages, and all men, is the necessity to confront life, in order, not inconceivably, to outwit death: The price for this is the acceptance, and achievement, of one's temporal identity. So that, for example, thought it is not taught in the schools (and this has the potential of becoming a political issue) the south of France still clings to its ancient and musical Provençal, which resists being described as a "dialect." And much of the tension in the Basque countries, and in Wales, is due to the Basque and Welsh determination not to allow their languages to be destroyed. This determination also feeds the flames in Ireland for many indignities the Irish have been forced to undergo at English hands is the English contempt for their language.

4 It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. This is true in France, and is absolutely true in England: The range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island make England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to "put your business in the street": You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future.

5 Now, I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound. Jazz, for example, is a very specific sexual term, as in jazz me, baby, but white people purified it into the Jazz Age. Sock it to me, which means, roughly, the same thing, has been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne's descendants

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with no qualms or hesitations at all, along with let it all hang out and right on! Beat to his socks which was once the black's most total and despairing image of poverty, was transformed into a thing called the Beat Generation, which phenomenon was, largely, composed of uptight, middle-class white people, imitating poverty, trying to get down, to get with it, doing their thing, doing their despairing best to be funky, which we, the blacks, never dreamed of doing—we were funky, baby, like funk was going out of style.

Now, no one can eat his cake, and have it, too, and it is late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more whipped than it is.

I say that the present skirmish is rooted in American history, and it is. Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: Neither could speak the other's language. If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world's history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did. Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun, of his master, Congo Square, and the Bible—or in other words, and under these conditions, the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed. This was not, merely, as in the European example, the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language: A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.

There was a moment, in time, and in this place, when my brother, or my mother, or my father, or my sister, had to convey to me, for example, the danger in which I was standing from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could not possibly understand, and that, indeed, he cannot understand, until today. He cannot afford to understand it. This understanding would reveal to him too much about himself, and smash that mirror before which he has been frozen for so long.

Now, if this passion, this skill, this (to quote Toni Morrison) "sheer intelligence," this incredible music, the mighty achievement of having brought a people utterly unknown to, or despised by "history"—to have brought this people to their present, troubled, troubling, and unassailable and unanswerable place—if this absolutely unprecedented journey does not indicate that black English is a language, I am curious to know what definition of language is to be trusted.

A people at the center of the Western world, and in the midst of so hostile a population, has not endured and transcended by means of what is patronizingly called a "dialect." We, the blacks, are in trouble, certainly, but we are not doomed, and we are not inarticulate because we are not compelled to defend a morality that we know to be a lie.

The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in American never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way.

And, after all, finally, in a country with standards so untrustworthy, a country that makes heroes of so many criminal mediocrities, a country unable to face why so many of the nonwhite are in prison, or on the needle, or standing, futureless, in the streets—it may very well be that both the child, and his
elder, have concluded that they have nothing whatever to learn from the people of a country that has managed to learn so little.

James Baldwin (1924-87)

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Baldwin], 2015/06/24

James Arthur Baldwin (August 2, 1924 – December 1, 1987) was an American novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic. His essays, as collected in Notes of a Native Son (1955), explore palpable yet unspoken intricacies of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in Western societies, most notably in mid-20th-century America, and their inevitable if unnameable tensions.[1] Some Baldwin essays are book-length, for instance The Fire Next Time (1963), No Name in the Street (1972), and The Devil Finds Work (1976).

Baldwin's novels and plays fictionalize fundamental personal questions and dilemmas amid complex social and psychological pressures thwarting the equitable integration of not only blacks, but also of gay and bisexual men, while depicting some internalized obstacles to such individuals' quests for acceptance. Such dynamics are prominent in Baldwin's second novel, written well before gay equality was widely espoused in America: Giovanni's Room (1956). Baldwin's first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain, is said to be his best-known work.

“Sonny's Blues James Baldwin on Language”, by Sonny's Blues, in 2012

Two weeks after James Baldwin's death in December of 1987, the University of Massachusetts held a service for the American author. At the service, Chinua Achebe, famed African writer and intellectual, claimed that Baldwin had reached "a new perfection of language" (Terry 552). He had managed to express the essence of the African American experience in English, something that would elude many authors before and after him.

James Baldwin's use of the English was anything but incidental. Baldwin considered American English a language alien to his experiences and perspectives, as it was the language of the dominant white culture. Throughout his long career, he struggled to mold the language to his needs. Writing in the London Observer he explained his thought process:

“My quarrel with English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way… Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it. If this were so, then it might be made to bear the burden of my experience if I could find the stamina to challenge it, and me, to such a test” (“English and the African Writer” 349).

For Baldwin, language was a reflection of a people's needs. It evolved in order to allow a people "to describe and thus control their circumstances" (“If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?”). Given the racial history of the United States, African American and white citizens had different needs and faced different realities. Indeed, Baldwin believed that there was "a great distance between the language of

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an American black and an American white” (Fares 71), even arguing that "Black English" was a separate language altogether.

Throughout his life Baldwin struggled to make the English language, so dominate by white culture, to "bear the burden" of both his experience and the African American experience at large. For many critics, activist, intellectuals and readers he not only succeeded -- he excelled.

**Discussion**

1. Why does Baldwin believe (in Paragraph 4) that “language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power”? Can you give specific example to explain how language could be used or abused in this respect?

2. What does Baldwin mean by saying that the White people have purified *Jazz*, a sexual term (Paragraph 5)? Do we have something similar in Mandarin or Taiwanese?

**Class activities**

😊 Group work: to share a story about “language,” 5 minutes for each group.

😊 Suggested topics: an important language policy in Taiwan, a personal experience of language learning/usage/conflict; an event/activity about saving a certain language; etc.