

## The Weight of My Mother Tongue

*How has language impacted your life?*

A seemingly innocent (and predictable) question for the topic of a 12th grade Spanish class's starting essay, my first reaction is to, of course, explain how language helps me communicate and express emotions and all those obvious answers. Sitting on my teal-colored bed with my laptop overheating in my lap, I have a ton of assignments left to do in anatomy, and I really just want to spew some sensical nonsense onto the page so I can focus on what I think is more important instead.

But, like usual, Dr. Lupo reverberates in my head. With her curly, dusty brunette hair, Dr. Lupo is like any stereotypical high school Spanish teacher: a total nerd about the language. Stepping into her classroom itself is a peculiar experience, with *bachata* music always playing in the background. All throughout the room are mahogany bookshelves stacked with memorabilia from her time growing up in Spain and Mexico: from a gray, *burro* shaped pencil holder to a beautifully painted black and white *calavera*. Most recently plastered on the walls are our posters about *Don Quixote*, featuring images of towering *molinos* (that are definitely not giants) and ratty armour.

And as though Dr. Lupo purposefully knows what this question will do, I begin to feel a sense of unease ball up in me. Here is my teacher, unabashedly proud of her language, her *culture*, and I...

*I don't know how to characterize my relationship with my Indian Mother Tongue, Konkani.*

The thought of that startles me. And all at once, an onslaught of memories and emotions hit me.

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Standing in front of my kindergarten class, dressed in a peach dress with puffed sleeves and wearing two short pigtails atop my head, I excitedly face my classmates.

“Okay, Maya, let’s hear you count to 10!” exclaims my teacher.

“Ok! One, two, *theen-*”

I hear a few giggles and some quiet mumbling in the background.

“four, five, six, seven, *aaath-*”

Again, more giggles break through.

“nine, and ten!” I finish, splaying out all ten fingers to demonstrate. Completely unaware of my mistakes in saying three and eight in Konkani and thinking the giggling I heard was because of another one of my classmates, I look expectantly into the face of my teacher, Mrs. Terri.

“Good job Maya! You did pronounce two of the numbers wrong though. Remember, it’s ‘three’ and ‘eight,’ honey,” outlines my teacher.

Confused, I head back to my seat on the plush blue sitting rug with a deflated sense of pride. I didn’t think I said anything “wrong.”



Walking into Walmart behind my parents, we head to the grocery section to pick up some produce. With my short second grade self, I hurry up to keep at the same pace as my *amma* and *aanu*, grasping my hand within *amma*’s when I catch up to her. Like always, *amma* and *aanu* debate about what specific produce we need for our meals for the week.

“*Thook* carrots *jhaai*? *Aamk sabji*’k *jaou-ka*,” says *amma*.

“*Naa, ami thae auth khaale. Aamk* cauliflower *sabji jhaai*.” says *aanu*.

I nod my head, perfectly understanding everything. Cauliflower *sabji* is better than carrot *sabji* any day.

But off to the side, I see a white couple near the leafy greens section shake their heads, looking down their noses at my parents with condescension. As though somehow my parents are revolting to them. As though somehow my parents are...less.

Shame blooms within me, and I decide not to try to enter my *amma* and *aanu*'s conversation, backing away an inch, as though proof of my identity.

*I can speak English. I am American.*



Stepping off the bus from my first day of sixth grade, I run to my mom and dad's car. I yank open the side door of the black Kia van, plop my backpack onto the seat next to me, and buckle myself in.

"School *khashi ashi-le?*" my dad asks, starting the car for home.

"Eh, it was fine! Already have homework though, and I have a ton of papers for you guys to sign, like usual."

My mom beams back at me, happy to just see me at the end of the day. But my dad...

"*Konkani aanth saangh!*" he commands.

I internally groan, rolling my eyes.

*Not this again.*

"Ramesh, she just came back from her first day of school. Don't force her to speak Konkani," defends my mom.

"But she's never going to remember it if she doesn't practice now!" exclaims my dad.

Used to this argument, I tune their conversation out, staring out of the window and finding the trees to be a much more interesting subject. They don't ever judge me.

*But why can't I just speak Konkani?*

Guilt grows, my constant companion—an invasive species within me.



Entering the classroom I have been assigned to for my high school's incoming freshman summer orientation, I inspect the beige room filled with mahogany desks to choose where I want to sit.

Locating a bubbly red-head who I had met earlier in the day, I sit at the desk directly next to her.

After the rest of our 25 student orientation group filters in, our leader, a senior, begins to speak.

“I know y'all are all pretty nervous, and that is perfectly normal. As you have probably expected, we are going to do an introductory icebreaker to cut through the awkwardness!”

A few groans ring out.

“Okay, fine, to make this unique, I want you to meet someone and share with each other your names and...oooh! How about how many languages you can speak? Go!” instructs our group leader.

Turning to the red-head, we introduce ourselves again.

“Hey, girl! Nice to see you again, haha! I'm Devon!”

“Hi again Devon! I'm Maya!” I respond, smiling.

“Honestly, girl, haha, I am the stereotypical white person who only knows English. But I am taking Spanish here at Magnet.” she answers.

“Haha that is okay! Probably the main fault lies with the education system,” I reply.

“I feel that. What about you?” she questions.

I immediately like that she doesn't assume despite my Indian features.

“I obviously know English, you know, cause I grew up here,” I state, feeling the familiar need to emphasize my “American” status, “but my parents are both from India, so I actually grew up

speaking a language called Konkani that has no written alphabet. Basically it is just a spoken dialect,” I explain.

“Maya, that is so cool! Is that what you normally speak at home?” she innocently questions. I don’t know the right way to respond. Personally, I know that I don’t speak much Konkani at home, but in an academic social setting, I know that saying yes will ironically make me sound...cool.

“Um, yes, sometimes,” I state, finding middle ground between truth and dishonesty.

My conversation with Devon continues, but in the pit of my stomach, Revulsion and Hypocrisy rear their heads, growing tenfold.



These emotions, they churn in my chest, bringing to the foreground so much—confusion about labelling my identity, inadequacy in the face of my “more Indian” parents and other family members, guilt for my inability to keep my language alive. My fingers typing on my keyboard become the bridge between my present and my alienated self, channeling years of societal and self-inflicted judgement onto the page. My writing becomes my voice, more so than my physical one, and in disjointed Spanish I communicate my complex relationship with my own language. My experiences as a second-generation Indian-American flood the page, and even before anyone has read the paper staring back at me, I feel heard— as though the words splayed on the screen talk back to me and say, *I understand you*.



I walk into Spanish class the next day, and take my usual seat in the front row. Dr. Lupu begins reading our essays one-by-one, giving each student feedback and praise.

Busy completing another assignment for this class, I am startled when Dr. Lupo eventually addresses me.

“MAYA. Your essay is incredible. Your experiences as a second generation immigrant are so relatable and unfortunately uncommon,” she candidly expresses.

Tears welling up in my eyes, my South Korean-American classmate, Janice, overhears from behind me.

“I wrote about that too! We as a society totally need to talk about this more,” she inputs.

Beaming up at both of them, we begin a discussion that progresses into an intellectual conversation involving everyone in the class.

And a little of the burden weighing down on me begins to dissipate.



My relationship with Konkani, my Mother Tongue, is complicated. It coincides with my experiences as a person of color growing up in Southern America, and it also revolves around my own personal complications. Without sugarcoating it, Konkani has brought me intense emotional strife in relation to the complicated structures and implicit rules of American society. I have also dealt, and still struggle, with the related pressure from my parents, the sponsors of my familial language, which has caused considerable tension between me and them. Combined, the differing messages I receive from home and outside about my first language can be excruciatingly painful and confusing to navigate.

But my Mother Tongue also reflects the complexity of me, in that it also has origins in India and is always evolving. I can't say that my relationship with regards to speaking Konkani has changed much, but the difference is that now I am working on bettering that, and I am doing so on my own terms. I have become emboldened and motivated by Dr. Lupo, who inadvertently

sponsored and inspired me to explore my relationship with Konkani through her essay. Because of her and my own self-composed literature, I now acknowledge that my words, whether spoken or written, whether in English, Konkani, or any other language, hold power. They are fraught with raw emotion, both positive and negative, and they weigh. But that weight no longer has to hold me down.

## Works Cited

- Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 49, no. 2, National Council of Teachers of English, 1998, pp. 165–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/358929>.