

Growing up schooled in an English medium curriculum can bring with it a certain disconnect with the Bengali language. Or at least it did for me. Yes, we grew up speaking almost entirely in Bangla at home, but there was no taking away from the fact that doing “well” in Bangla at school meant being able to translate a few passages, memorising some poems and passing basic comprehension tests on small texts. For all my love for literature and language, I still have to look up every fifth word while reading in Bangla or watching the news on TV; I still write with a distinct lack of nuance in Bangla than in English.

would often revert to giving examples in French. And the woman who cleaned my dorm room would unlock my door every Tuesday at 9 am sharp, and the only way to stop her from barging in while I was in the shower was to ask her to stop au Française. I should clarify that my knowledge of French at the time only allowed me to say 'hello', 'goodbye', and 'thank you.'

My misadventures in French, however, came second to the bigger, and more surprising, hurdle—for the first time in my life, I couldn't speak in Bangla at all, and so suddenly found English suffocating. All my life, I had (guiltily) clutched at English phrases to explain ideas that I couldn't seem to articulate in Bangla. Now, discussing ideas in the classroom that I was passionate about, that I wanted to rant endlessly about, I hated not being able to insert Bengali phrases into my sentences. English is bouncy, fun. Sharp and bendable. It let me explain how I enjoyed reading *Anna Karenina* because of her melodrama, her penchant for histrionics, the fluidity with which her whims and wiles fluctuated. So many synonyms for what could have

and permutations for thoughts that can be swapped like spare change. But words, and hence sentiments, that I feel in Bangla are absolute. Irreplaceable. Rooted in comfort and cultural context that will travel with me wherever I go.

Once I'd settled into the linguistic gridlock somewhat, I noticed more than the contrast between English and Bangla. I found the similarities in nuance and gravity shared by Bangla and French. My American friends were surprised to hear how my parents and I seldom say “I love you” or “I miss you” to each other. They and my French friends were shocked at the mouthful it takes to say the two phrases in Bangla—*ami tomake bhalo bashi and tomar kotha mone pore*. In English, 'I' simply perform or feel the action of 'loving' or 'missing' someone. To be in love in Bangla is to *bashi*, to 'live' and 'be' in a state of 'goodness' for someone else. To miss them is for your *mon*, i.e. both your heart and your mind to remember them, and to feel the weight of their essence. To miss someone in French is similar. *Tu me manques* is to be in a state in which 'you are missing from me', implying that you are somehow present



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

All my life, I've wondered if I really, truly know my own language.

And then I moved to France for a year in 2016. The Master's programme I was attending would be taught mainly in English. Upon first stepping foot in my Paris dorm, however, I realised that every minute of my life for the next 12 months would entail translating my thoughts from Bengali to English to very poor French if I wanted anyone to understand them. The receptionist and guards at my dorm and my university spoke only French. The cashiers at the grocery store spoke only French. The French professors in classes meant to be taught in English

THE YEAR I SPENT WITHOUT BANGLA

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been explained with a single *neka* in Bangla. *Anna Karenina* is amusing because she's *neka*, because she's *obhimaani*.

But more desperately missed than such dictionary terms were words that we live and breathe here in our daily lives in Bangladesh. The first time I met my thesis supervisor, she asked me to tell her a bit about myself. I have no idea why, but it took me a few seconds to realise that I'd started answering in Bangla. The language burst out of me unexpectedly, when I was most nervous and also most at ease. Professors got sentences that started with *oboshsho*, *othoba*, *mane*, *je*, *ashole*. People knocking on my door got an *ashchi* and an *ek second*! People I passed in the hallways frequently got a *Ki obostha*? Friends who shared their problems with me got an *ahare* and an *ayhay*. By the end of the year, everyone I knew was taught to expect and eventually say *uff*, *dhuro*, *arre*, *oh acha*, *tai naki*? (Some had taken to screaming *Ami tomake bhalo bashi* out loud in trains and grocery stores, and I'd taught others to respond with a *joss* when asked “How are you”).

And so this was the first thing I discovered about my relationship with my mother tongue in Paris: that I have endless linguistic alternatives for ideas in English—a hundred colourful synonyms

in me to begin with. Similarly, while *Je t'aime* might directly translate to 'I love you' in English, its derivation from the French word for like—*aimer*—ties it more closely to the Bangla concept of *bhalo laga*, of 'liking' someone and finding good in them. They're heavy sentiments, and so they borrow and weave from a handful of words that carry armfuls of connotations. It was a comfort to find these traces of my language in a foreign tongue that otherwise felt so alienating.

I went to France believing that I didn't know my language very well and so would be fine living in English and trying to inch my way into French. But it was a year of surprises. I wouldn't say it taught me more about Bangla, but it certainly taught me more about my relationship with it. By disengaging with it, by being forced to leave it alone in conversations that were often poetic, intellectual, emotional, and frustrating, I discovered just how close I am to it. Close like you are to a family member, to someone you live with and spare sparse thoughts to, but someone whose ins and outs you've subconsciously made a habit out of. Their sheer presence allows you to be a more articulate version of yourself.

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