

Prompt

Life presents us all with obstacles. How we react to them is up to us. In a well-constructed essay write about such an obstacle you encountered, and how it turned out.

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I was born with a hammer in my ear. It enables me to hear the 6,000 human languages. One strikes me most: English. I speak it as my fifth. Read it as my second. Write it as my first. Although I speak four languages (excluding English), I am unfortunately and almost painfully a trite occurrence in my family. I come from the village of Tordher, Pakistan, a place where if you are born monolingual you will be regarded as an anomaly.

My family's first language is Pashto. My mother's second language is Hindko. My father's second languages are Urdu and Hindi. This almost evokes a redefinition of the word infant (in fans, Latin for born without speech). At 10 months of age, a baby's babbling resembles the household language. At 12 months, the baby can decipher sounds that carry a meaning (such as ma-ma). This is called the one-word stage, during which babies can become deaf to other languages in order to hone in on their native tongue. Big problem. It is hard to discriminate languages when they are spoken equally in a household. Thus, the first language I spoke at infancy is a conundrum. My best theory is that I was born with a hammer in my ear. It strikes spontaneously at sound waves, smiting them upon an anvil and transmuting them into words, sending back the useless while securing the significant.

The hammer strikes and selects. I do not. It decides if I need a word. This is why English is unique to me. It is the only language that I had the option to learn. It's also the first that I learned in a classroom setting, and the only one for which I did not rely on my hammer or my family; when I first immigrated to the United States, upwards of 95% of my total family did not speak English. I found it a challenge, middle school through high school, to learn vocabulary and syntax. But then, I also saw how much of a polar opposite it was to the ability of my hammer.

Memorization of vocab lists did not come as easily as learning 3,500 words a year before puberty, when the receptive senses develop. I excelled nonetheless and English became the first language that I could write and the second that I could read, after Arabic.

Now I am an honors student, yet I see myself as illiterate. Even though scientifically the ability to learn languages exponentially decreases with age, I am

still shocked I can no longer depend on my hammer. I am also speaking my other languages less and less frequently because I am fixated on this language, English. I find 'illiterate' to be a strong and dangerous word. It conjures an image of an immigrant who cannot speak English. It is dangerous because it creates a one-sided opinion. Who would think that the immigrant speaks four languages? Literate is a strong word because it is used only in relation to English. Yet, I find the same bias while speaking with family in Pakistan through Skype. I speak all of my languages with an American accent, and my relatives call me illiterate as a joke in response. I take it seriously.

I am on a trek to bridge the gap between writing in-depth English essays (regarding subjects like Thomas Jefferson's contradictory life) and delivering English analyses orally to my peers (about topics such as Islamophobia and the dangers of stereotypes), while relearning how to enunciate words, with perfection, in the other languages that I know. For balance, I keep my feet in stirrups on the sides of the saddle of this speaking, bucking animal.

Now I can hear the hammer striking in the distance. The process takes effort. I am trying to dispel my bias of language and those who speak it. It is even more astounding and rewarding to know the fact that the hammer, anvil, and stirrup are more than symbols, but are actual parts of the human ear. They are the smallest bones in the human body, but arguably have the largest impact in transforming individuals. This minutia has to be heard. As I become an alumnus and walk across that platform, I want people to see more than just an archetypal, aspiring immigrant who seeks success through studying. We are all born with hammers in our ears. What sets everyone apart is the decision to see this as minutia or see this as the greatest gift.