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A Place to Belong

“You’re killing me, Smalls!” exclaimed my friend with an exasperated sigh, as he tried to explain for the third time how football, or as I like to call it, *American football* (which is completely different from soccer) is played. Sensing my confusion, he said, “You need to watch *The Sandlot!*”. My exchanges with American English are always a mix of confusion and fascination – I’m initially confused when I come across a new phrase, but it is always amusing to get into the depths of that phrase, perhaps even watch a whole movie just to figure out the context of the words that have assimilated into the everyday verbatim of native English speakers. To me, my language was always an expression of my identity, a reflection of my background yet as I transitioned to American language and continued to adapt new phrases in my diction, I faced a dilemma – Should I adapt to a completely new style of speaking that felt more natural to people around me or to stick to what was more natural to me? My challenge was to find a middle ground, in between my old identity and the new literacy that I had begun to absorb.

Growing up in India, my experience of learning and speaking English was very different, as compared to that of the average American. At school I was taught formal English through classical British Literature and Shakespeare. Outside of school, I had conveniently adopted the Indian-English dialect or “Hinglish” as it is called in India. “Do this *na* (*please*)”, “That *toh* (*is something*) I know”, “What is your good name?”, “It’s raining cats and dogs!” “Sober colored shirt”; “Hinglish” is a mix of remnants of British English from the era of colonialism, directly

translated Hindi-to-English phrases, and some slang in my native language. The accent itself varies from state to state, mine being a northern one. In India being able to converse in English is viewed as a symbol of status. “I can talk English, I can walk English, I can laugh English because English is a very *phunny* (funny) language.” The sentiment of wanting to speak the language even if voiced clumsily as presented by this dialogue from the famous Indian movie *Namakhalaal* echoes through most of India. Owing to our colonial past, being able to converse in English is seen not only seen as a mark of literacy but also economic prosperity. Naturally, schools emphasize the use of English even more often than our own native language. I grew up with the mindset that it was a language I had to master to be successful. But no matter how many words of English I learned and incorporated into my vernacular, I continued to speak the language only in form but not in spirit.

When the British first introduced English in India, they did so with the aim of creating a class of people who were "Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions and morals and intellect". Ironically, what remained of their policy was the complete opposite. Though Indians began to speak the foreign language, their thoughts never changed, and they fused their culture with the influx of new language and made it their own. And so was my experience learning English in India. I learned the language as a tool of communication with foreigners and not as one of self-expression or an expression of my culture. To be fully fluent at a language one needs to live the language, experience the society it sprung out of, and be able to think in that language. And for me that was always my native languages, Hindi and Urdu.

In the Fall of 2018 when I moved to America, I had the realization that English spoken here was vastly different from what I had learned back at home. “Your total is *seven-fifty-four*”

(which meant \$7.54 and not \$754), its ‘Alu-min-um’ trioxide and not ‘Alu-mi-ni-um’, ‘Vy-ta-min’ (with the extra jaw movement) instead of ‘vi-ta-min’, and “Show me the money” meant cutting to the chase. From differences of pronunciation and lingo to body language and connotation, the language here was an entirely different creature for me to adapt to. Suddenly, I found myself dangling in between cultures, trying to grasp onto pieces of my old identity whilst building a new one in a completely new culture. However, I also found it much easier to interact with the people around me when I spoke *American*. To me, it was a step towards diminishing cultural barriers. I felt a stronger sense of belonging when I spoke differently than what I grew up learning. When I met someone for the first time, they did not perceive me as ‘alien’, ‘foreign’ or different. It also allowed people to look beyond my accent or my way of speaking and focus on who I was as a person. “It’s easiest to connect with someone when you speak their tongue”, I thought. And so, began my journey of learning and transitioning to American English.

I grew up trilingual, so learning new words or phrases or even pronunciations was naturally easy for me. However, there is so much more to language than just words. Literacy extends beyond mere combination of words to encompass facial expressions, body language, cultural background, and connotations. Context makes up a much larger part of a language than the words themselves. It adds a tone to the discourse, a character to the vernacular that is being used. In fact, language is incomplete without context. Learning new words or changing my accent was barely anything compared to the challenge of understanding where certain phrases came from and what they meant. Having grown up in a foreign country, I could never relate to the experiences my American peers had growing up. “Run Forrest, run!”, “Here’s Johnny”, “You’ll shoot your eye out!” – phrases like these were never a part of my vocabulary. As a result, I struggled to comprehend much of the pop culture references that are ingrained in the modern

American lingo. And that was not my only challenge. I feared losing my identity as a result of acclimating myself to the new way of talking. Language and identity are closely interwoven. In fact, language can be viewed as a form of expression of one's identity. I felt that if I changed my accent and lingo, I would not be myself anymore. I would lose my authenticity. However, during the course of my transition I realized that learning something new did not mean erasing my old self but rather making new additions to it. Besides, I knew that to be successful in any given situation one needs to adapt to the environment they are in. And thus, I began to view the change as less of loss of my identity and more as a tool of communication.

Today, I am still in the midst of my transition. Day by day I am learning new phrases and adapting the new language. From learning how to verbalize change correctly to being able to use pop culture references in my day to day conversations, I've come a long way and I have learned to find enjoyment in learning something new - it excites me, makes me happy and gives me something to care about. However, I also know it is not possible to completely assimilate in a culture because my experiences are so much different from everyone else. But I find contentment in the uniqueness that adds to my persona. It symbolizes the part of my old identity that I retained, a part that I never want to do away with.

From my experience, it would not be wrong to say that language can change a person, the way you speak forms your perception and becomes a reflection of your thoughts. Moreover, language becomes so much more powerful when paired with context – the culture, the society, and its background. However, change doesn't necessarily mean losing something old – to me, it meant improving upon what was already established; and that was my middle ground, my place to belong.