

Linguistic Anthropology Lalini Shanela Ranaraja

Nihongo/Japanese/日本語

The kanji hangs over my head and weaves itself into my dreams. 忍/*shinobu/endure*. It's an eighth-century Japanese ideogram, rendered in thick brush strokes on an A5 canvas daubed to look like parchment; my little sister and I painted it together, one of the last things we would share before the coronavirus pandemic trapped us on opposite sides of the globe. I've worn the same kanji around my neck for two years, on a copper pendant I ordered from Etsy; I wear it all through the semester in which I take Japanese 101. I register for the class on a whim, with vague aspirations of reading Haruki Murakami and watching Naruto in their original incarnations. Sure enough, within weeks words start leaping out at me from the Netflix subtitles - *tomodachi/friend, tadaima/I'm home, itadakimasu/thank you for this meal*.

But my motivations for continuing with the class change. I am one of two seniors studying with the freshmen, and they are energized beyond belief, hungry for learning even in an era when group work entails shouting through masks at each other and the Google Meet screen. They are zestful; they remind me of myself, and learning with them becomes renewal of faith. I start asking questions and finding connections again; I remember the mythology of *shinobi* that first fascinated me, its references to the *shinobi* or ninja of feudal Japan, the way researchers dissect both the word and the warriors it came to represent. However, *sensei/teacher* is the word I keep saying even after the class ends, every time I run into one of my professors at the track. There's always a breathless, "*Genki desu ka?/ "Are you good?"*" as we sprint past each other; she jogs for miles and around my neck the pendant turns ever greener with oxidation.

Nederlands/Dutch

I take astronomy to fulfil my science requirement, which is one of the conditions of a liberal arts education. The language of mathematics has lain dormant in me since the SATs and I try to remedy matters by translating the PowerPoint slides into Dutch, which I'm learning in preparation for a semester away. *Sterrenstelsels/galaxies. Maansverduistering/lunar eclipse. Sterrenstof/stardust*. Polysyllabic compound nouns, reminiscent of German but somehow more delicate - or maybe that is my bias, imbuing them with the memory of the sweet, sharp Dutch boys whom I keep meeting, who are maybe one-third of the inspiration behind the planned trip. That fall in Amsterdam, I don't speak Dutch so much as I lose myself in it, singing along to Marco Borsato in the supermarket, foraging in the farmer's market for *azijn/vinegar* and *kaneel/cinnamon*, obeying swift, split-lipped orders at the dojo. But I am proudest of having a 20-minute conversation with the non-English speaking exterminator who arrives for the rats in my shoebox apartment. Some of what I say is actually in German, but Karl is kind enough not to remark on it and lets me chatter away as he affixes boards

over the mouseholes. He asks where I'm from and when I say Sri Lanka, he knows where it is on the map, because his country colonized mine three hundred and eighty years ago.

हिंदी/Hindi

I only started watching Hindi movies after moving to America. Before, I associated Hindi with the telenovelas my grandmother watched at full volume in the afternoons, high drama and fields of flowers and more musical numbers than Broadway. But then I am eating cold wontons in the empty dorms during a muddy spring, and I realize that India has made it to Netflix; I turn there for comfort and find a surprising abundance of friendly rhythms. In Sri Lanka that summer I take Hindi classes for three months; my mother makes me lie to the teacher and say I'm in the twelfth grade, because if the teacher finds out we have the dollars to live in America she'll charge us more for the classes. I tire of the lie long before the lessons are over, but I delight in the learning, the delicate suspense of the Devanagari script, the links between this language and mine. When the summer ends my teacher sends me a Facebook request that I cannot accept and I don't end up speaking it as much as I'd thought; it becomes one of the several languages I don't acknowledge on my resumé or during my icebreaker self-introductions. But I keep watching the movies and memorizing the soundtracks; I rejoice, along with the Indian subcontinent, in the marriage of Nick Jonas to Priyanka Chopra. On the wall in my house that is papered with vocabulary lists, there are words that remind me of the Indian-American girl my best friend once loved. *Dil/heart, jaan/life, pyaar/love.*

தமிழ்/Tamil

The second time I learn Tamil it is at the convent school I attend until the seventh grade, and it is mandated by the government. I am abysmal at it. A tutor is engaged at the house of another child, and a group of us walk there every Tuesday after school. I remember nothing from those sessions except the dread suffusing her frilly bedroom, all of us futilely hoping that the tutor will miss her bus and we will get to disperse home early.

The third time I learn Tamil I have multiple reasons for believing it will work. It's the same summer I learn Hindi and my brain is primed for language acquisition; being trilingual will be an asset once I start working within my country; I made the choice to pick it up again. My father suggests I learn Chinese instead; my grandmother says at least I'll be able to get better service in the Tamil-owned textile shops. The Tamil teacher is the same one who used to tutor my brother, who ended up being far better at HTML than he was at Tamil. The lessons are at her house; it has metal grilles instead of windows and the mosquitos eat us alive. We both try our best - I buy every textbook on offer and she offers to teach me via telephone in America, but when the summer ends I leave the textbooks behind and I don't speak any of those words again.

I don't list Tamil on my resumé, but this omission, unlike the others, suffuses me with guilt. I was twelve when the civil war ended, so I remember what it was like before that at the convent school,

how my best friend with a Tamil surname insisted she was a Sinhalese Catholic like her mother, how everything from textbooks to classrooms to playground games was split into Sinhala and Tamil and no one crossed over. But somehow, in all that, the idea of learning Tamil would not let go of me, so the first time I learned, it was from a Tamil girl in my age cohort. At this distance all I remember is that she was tall and moon-skinned and she had a name that meant *gift from God*. Our classroom was the corridor, because the monkeys had invaded the school again and were destroying the actual classrooms. I have no idea what became of that girl, but I remember the words she taught me, because they were the ones that made sense to us when we were too young to understand why we were supposed to feel divided. *Kudhirai/horse, punai/cat, nai/dog*.

Deutsch/German

For a long time, German is my favourite language. My teacher is a blue-eyed, corn-haired Austrian who falls in love with Sri Lanka even as half the students at the international school fall in love with her. Her name is Sylvia. She wears saris and learns broken Sinhala while teaching the eighth grade to bake lemon cookies. She and I bond over shining compound nouns - *Engelsgeduld/saintly patience, Dämonenkinder/demon children, Schmetterlingskuss/butterfly kiss*. When I demand to specialize in French *and* German in my final three years - unheard of even at an international school - she goes to bat for me. The summer before my last year of high school, she wrangles a three-week trip to Austria with me and two other girls from the school.

It is one of the Wendepunkte - turning points - of my life. I am seventeen and I fall hard for Europe - the cathedral cities, the motorways threaded through mountains meadows, the freedom of swimming the Danube in summer, wandering the streets of Vienna, taking a tram to anywhere. We stay in a youth hostel for a fortnight and I speak a mix of French and German and unaccented English to other teenagers from Morocco, Luxembourg, Sweden. The Sri Lankan girls huddle together and glower as I chatter about Zara Larsson and gender fluidity and postcolonialism, as I run off to museums with Alex and Nathaniel, a pair of worldly tow-headed twins from London who would rather read *Brighton Rock* than swim the Danube. It is the first time I catch a glimpse of the many kinds of people I could be. When Sylvia arrives to drive us to the airport, I do not want to leave.

Français/French

French is my first escape. I am failing every class at the convent school, miserable under the reign of terrifying nuns, and my mother, farsighted and armed with her own affinity for languages, enrolls me at the local Alliance Française. The textbooks are bright and beautifully illustrated and I bloom; within eight months I am reading French picture books. I transfer to the international school and work my way through the perfect tense, the subjunctive, the pluperfect. The first book I buy off Amazon France is called *La Maîtresse de la Guerre/The Mistress of War*, a YA fantasy about a woman who goes from prisoner of war to master swordswoman in a kingdom that sounds like Samarkand. I

am still thrilled today by the memory of reading it piecemeal, paragraphs and pages come together in leaps and bounds of understanding.

By the twelfth grade I am the only person still taking French. My teachers are expatriates and they push me. The first is from Alsace-Lorraine, no-nonsense and intimidating, but when she migrates to Australia she leaves me eight Margaret Atwood novels that become my comfort food. The second is a Scotsman who fled the UK school system because students used to attack him bodily. He asks me philosophical questions - if a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound? - and lets me pick the novel I have to study for the final exam. By the time I make it to college, I've been studying French for over half my life. Every language after that is exotic in some way, but French is my baseline, my fallback, the language in which I know the most songs after English, the language my little sister speaks better than either of us speak our mother tongue.

ඉංග්‍රීසි/Ingrisi/English - සිංහල/Sinhala

When I look at job postings that ask for native speakers of English, I skip them automatically because I don't want to give the explanation/defence for which they will ask. The first time I bought coffee in America the barista looked at my face and expressed amazement at how good my English was: did anyone even speak it where I was from? It was the first in a litany of microaggressions, and it was ironic, because English - the language of a people who colonized my country for a hundred and thirty three years - is natural to me, more natural than my mother tongue. But that nuance is lost in America, a country that has no official language but still prizes English above all else.

The truth is this - as a toddler I am bilingual, because my entire family is bilingual, but as many young bilinguals do, I talk too fast for my thoughts and develop a stutter. My parents take me to a doctor - I do not know what kind - and the doctor says, "Stick to one language." And they choose English, because English was and is the lingua franca, the currency, the meal ticket and - perhaps - because English was neutral ground during a civil war fought in part over the two mother tongues of two ethnic groups, Sinhala and Tamil. I read British storybooks and sing British nursery rhymes and go to English Catholic mass and watch Disney movies without the subtitles. My parents listen to Coldplay and Celtic Woman. I am, quite honestly, enormously privileged, because when it comes time to apply to American colleges, I can speak, I can write, I can *think* in English. Like every other international student I meet, from Austria to America to Amsterdam, English is my ticket out. I come to college and get a job that sometimes involves tutoring Americans on the use of the semicolon.

But I also remember coming last in every class at the convent school, where every class was in Sinhala. Remember parents of friends crowding me at the school gates, asking me to say something in Sinhala and howling in mirth when I inevitably pronounced it wrong. I remember those friends snubbing me at playdates, saying, "She only speaks English," in the same way they said "Her skirts are too short." I remember the only consistent encounters I had with Sinhala were houseboys

and maids and trishaw drivers and louts who loitered around the lake catcalling any woman on two legs. I learned to forget I had a mother tongue even when I was living in my homeland, because in my mind, there had always been a backup.

America changes things. People ask me, “What language do you speak there?” (after they ask for directions to my country) and I tell them that Sinhala is endemic to Sri Lanka, with fewer native speakers than the population of the state of New York. My international friends tell me there’s no difference whether I say “whale” or “veil”, and as much as I protest, it’s true, because Sinhala has 60 letters but only one that signifies *v*. My mother tongue becomes a secret code allowing me to gossip with my parents about people in the room, the same way Spanish and Amharic and Dutch become codes to other multilinguals. I swear a lot more in Sinhala, but I know no songs. I can name no great books. But I begin writing Sinhala in the margins of my class notes, in the curlicued abugida alphabet that monks once inked on ola leaves. Sometimes it’s a transliteration of my English thoughts about the polar vortex. Sometimes it’s a long list of every noun I can remember, everyday words that I have never learned in German or Japanese or French but are most beautiful in my language.

හන්දුරු/ handhunkuru/ incense sticks.

අහස්/ ahaskuru/ fireworks.

කලාමැදි/ kalamadiriya/ firefly.

In my final year of college another girl from Sri Lanka flies in, and I find myself bubbling with Sinhala every time we have a conversation. I think she is startled by it and I wonder if she minds being marked as other so obviously, but I have spent three years with people who emanate clouds of Amharic or Nepali or French, weaving shields from their otherness, and I want that for myself. I share secrets and advice and warnings in Sinhala and there is something different about these words, something rich and dark like arrack and treacle. I’m still unsure sometimes which consonants to use when writing my own name. There are words I will forget the longer I live abroad. But others are coming back. Sometimes, I’ll walk away from someone who’s angered me and I will think an insult. It’s in Sinhala. It’s probably not what any of my teachers envisioned for me, but it’s a start.

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