

**I wrote this for my mother but she can't read it**

**By Sohani Goonetillake**



“Have you ever been frustrated that you’re not fluent in English?”

“No, but I think my personality would be better.”

I probe Ammi further, “What do you mean?”

She takes longer to respond now. “If my English is fluent... I can say anything I want. Now I can manage to explain anything but not one hundred percent.”

I know better than to ask any more questions and she reverts back to our usual exchanges: “What did you eat today?”, “There’s parippu in the fridge” and “Are you going to see Akki?”. Every day is Groundhog Day when I visit Ammi and it baffles me how we got to a point where our conversations are limited by so many barriers.

There’s no easy explanation as to why Ammi and I don’t speak the same language, but one of the precursors of the 26-year civil war was nationalist ideologies that influenced

my mother's education. Since Ammi was born to two Sinhalese parents she was not allowed to take subjects in English.

Decades later through no fault of her own, by moving our family to Australia, she moved me beyond her understanding.

When we first arrived in Melbourne, I distinctly remember Ammi and I learning English together. We would sit at the dining table for hours and practice our spelling but it didn't take long for me to outpace her, especially when I picked up a love for reading and she spent most of her days at home.

In public spaces, Ammi would often look to me for confirmation that what she said made sense and I would take it upon myself to translate for her if it didn't. Sometimes, people would be impatient and unkind to her and, as the unofficial translator, I would experience the first wave of shame associated with not being able to speak English.

I tried my best to shield her from the ignorant comments, fearing that if she heard them it would damage her confidence to try and speak completely. After all, 'broken' and grammatically incorrect English was better than nothing at all.

Once during a parent-teacher interview, my English teacher praised me for being at the top of her class and I could feel my mother light up next to me.

"To her we try to talk in English at home," Ammi beamed proudly.

As I became more proficient in English, my competency in Sinhala dwindled with every passing day. There is no definitive moment when my grammar began to slip or when my vocabulary whittled down to the basics, but one day, I couldn't retrieve the same Sinhala words at the tip of my tongue as before.

This should have come as no surprise given I often neglected my native tongue in favour of English. Even at such a young age I knew Sinhala held little practical advantage; it would not assist me when it came to making new friends or help me excel in school.

I had no comprehension of the significance of what I was losing.

My Sinhala isn't non-existent though. To give you a sense of my competency, I can order Sri Lankan food at a restaurant and eavesdrop on family drama when Ammi is speaking loudly over the phone (so, the essentials). But I can't recall the last time I was able to fumble a sentence together or understand a story in its entirety.

When I overhear Ammi chatting with relatives on Whatsapp, I struggle to gather the threads of the storytelling. *So my aunty's name... something about her daughter... and oh she's a pandithaya.* ('Pandithaya' roughly translates to a big shot know-it-all. I have definitely heard that one before.)

Her tone of voice often sounds boisterous and joyous even when talking to distant relatives who are connected to our family in some convoluted way she can't explain. It upsets me that she can never speak to me that way and our conversations are reduced to sterile back and forths.

Even if I improve my rudimentary Sinhala, there are still so many things that would get lost in translation. Sinhala, like all languages, is enriched with its own proverbs, idioms and witty remarks and translation can't fully capture the essence of every word. I know these long-forgotten words and phrases exist because on rare occasions, they reemerge from the recesses of my memory and I can't think of an appropriate English substitute. Ammi must have a whole host of these words in her vocabulary.

It almost feels like she has inside jokes with my extended family that I could never understand because "I had to be there". Sometimes, thankfully not often, she asks me to speak to said extended family. I have actually met most of them several times before and love them dearly but our conversations have gradually declined to a point where they're non-existent.

Currently, our way of desperately connecting with one another is to look at each other longingly through the phone screen, smiling. As you can imagine, that gets awkward fast and I rush to give the phone back to Ammi.

Anytime I lose my patience with my mother, I remember that if I tried to string a sentence together for my family what would spill out is some very broken Sinhala stripped down to its most basic units of meaning. Despite both of us speaking broken versions of the other's language, we have developed our own shared language that's a mix of the most convenient words from the two.

In our linguistic Venn diagram, there's an overlap, albeit a small one, I like to call 'Singlish'. Credit to my mother, there's a lot more English words in 'Singlish' than I'm proud of.

Though we can still converse with each other, relationships are built on subtleties. So for every concept and nuanced topic I cannot verbalise such as politics, religion, and mental health, I let out a sigh of exasperation. These complex discussions are difficult to have at the best of times with generational and cultural differences but the added barrier of linguistic challenges makes it near impossible.

The most frustrating example I can recall was my inability to find the words to explain why I wanted to leave my Catholic middle school. I was being bullied by my former friends but she fixated on the wrong element of the conversation: leaving a Catholic institution.

She found it too difficult to wrap her head around my descriptions of social exclusion and mental health. The amount of synonyms I had to throw at her hoping she'd be able to hold on to something tipped me to a boiling point until I tearfully yelled "they're just not nice to me anymore". We sat there in silence, while she tried to piece together everything I said and I came to the realisation we could never have a proper heart-to-heart conversation.

It's times like these that I often forget Ammi faces similar challenges when we're trying to understand one another. I was so self absorbed in my teenage angst that it only occurred to me in adulthood that she likely confronted many challenges as an adult immigrant that she couldn't articulate to me as well.

Now it plagues my brain – were her days filled with laboured interactions at the grocery store or in the doctor’s office? Does she perceive herself as boring in the Western world because she can’t put colour and life into her conversations? Does it bother her that she has no choice but to describe raising two young children during a civil war in a reductive way to me?

We’re both struggling to bridge the gulf between our worldviews with words. It’s like we’re on opposite sides of a fault line that’s threatening to disconnect us even farther from each other after the slightest argument. So we stay clear of getting too close in case we encounter possible misunderstandings that often arise because we are oblivious to the other’s intentions and expectations.

I have learnt overtime that I shouldn’t let potential blow ups discourage us from pursuing more challenging conversations. I admit, using every synonym under the sun until something clicks can be irritating. For starters, even explaining my current job was painful. *Media you can only hear... radio but not live... listen to stories... Spotify but for talking...* That messy collage of keywords was my attempt at trying to describe a podcast network.

I have made peace with the fact that I have spent and will continue to spend a lot of time with Ammi trying to get her to understand me. It’s similar to a newborn trying to communicate why they are upset. But just like she did when I was a baby, she tries to soothe me. Even if her attempts at consoling me often stop at advising me to pray and have faith in God, I have grown to realise it’s enough that she’ll even *try* to console me when life experiences occur beyond her vocabulary.

Somehow, Ammi is understanding even when she doesn’t understand.

I may never be able to fully communicate the nuances of my life to her but communication is so much more than just what we say. Ammi expresses her love through freshly squeezed orange juice, tupperware filled to the brim with home cooked food, plates of cut fruit and a fridge stocked with Mango Passion kombucha because I said I liked it once.

Food has come to symbolise our common ground and unspoken language. I know all the Sinhalese names for the dishes Ammi cooks. It is one of the few parts of Sinhala that I inherently know. Appa, kottu rotti, pol sambol, pittu, kiribath, gotu kola, idiyappam, bandakka – they all exist somewhere in my psyche and I don't even know the names of their English substitutes.

Since I've shown a keen interest in cooking she has recently started teaching me and my partner how to cook traditional meals. So far her version of cooking lessons involves cryptic instructions with unclear measurements. And she has a tendency to finish every sentence with "add to taste" or "are you looking?".

Regardless of her strange teaching approach, I appreciate her taking the time to show me how to cook because she is the only blueprint I have for what it's like to be Sri Lankan. Her homemade curry powder and traditional meals are the reason I feel like I have any sort of claim to my birthplace.

To this day, every time I wind up under the odorous roof of a Sri Lankan grocery store, I call Ammi to ask her questions like which brand of tamarind I should buy or which street food I used to like as a child. She always picks up the phone, answers my trivial questions without judgment and asks me when I will be coming over next.

Ammi has never ended a phone call with the words 'I love you' and yet, I have never once felt unloved.

Instead, as a devout Catholic, she says 'God bless you', which I have come to realise is her version of those three special words. I don't believe in a higher power so the phrase 'God bless you' holds little meaning to me.

Most of the time, atheists mind their own business, but as Ammi would say I have been a 'stubborn pandithaya' about my lack of beliefs. Much to my mother's dismay, I roll my eyes every time she quotes Bible verses and I refuse to go to church. Up until recently, my stance on religion has been unwavering.

My best friend has similar religious beliefs to me and one morning last week, she came over and pointed out the statue of Jesus on our kitchen wall. It was only his head and his face was gaunt and dripping with blood. It was meant to serve as a reminder of his sacrifice on the crucifix.

“That is hilarious, I wish I had something like that on my wall,” she laughed.

Her house is full of knick knacks and unusual items so this came as no surprise to me. What did shock me was Ammi’s reaction to what she overheard.

“If you want, you can have,” she said, smiling warmly at my friend.

I was suddenly overcome with a need to protect her. This situation was a prime example of how vulnerable my mother can be to people’s motives. Ammi must have misunderstood because she would never give that statue to my friend willingly if she knew she was being disrespectful in the slightest.

“No, we should keep it,” I immediately said.

In that moment, I realised no one has sacrificed more for me than my mother, not even Jesus (although, she’d fight me on that). I hold a kind of reverence for her that many have for religious deities.

Maybe the next time we end a call, I’ll tell her, ‘God bless you too’.

Word Count: 2161 words