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# ENGLISH IS THE LANGUAGE OF MY CHILDHOOD

By Kristin De Decker



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When I roll my tongue around the word ‘mellifluous’ or ‘labyrinth’, I delight in the swirling sounds and vocal vibrations. Being monolingual means that words like this are my only window to the world. While my DNA is a co-mingling of Belgian, Italian, Irish, and British molecular strands, English is the language of my soul.

Yet, it is also a language of privilege.

In South Africa, *well-spoken* English and a *well-paired* accent are often conflated with erudition and intelligence – one of the many colonial aftertastes that come with my home language’s heritage. This speaks to the infinite complexities that arise when loving a first language like English.

And, there is much to be loved – a myriad of classical or contemporary references could be inserted here. This, however, cannot mute the role of English as an implement of empires and a tool of oppression. South African poet Malika Ndlovu poignantly articulates this in her poem ‘born in africa but’. Here the speaker is “born in africa but/breastfed another mother tongue” and “put to sleep on foreign lullabies.”

In her short story, *Peking Duck*, writer Ling Ma echoes a

related experience. Here the protagonist divulges that, “English is just a play language to [her], the words tethered to their meanings by the loosest, most tenuous connections. So it’s easy to lie. [She] [tells] the truth in Chinese, [she] [makes] up stories in English.” In this story, English is thus at the helm of gatekeeping assimilation, linguistic and otherwise, into US culture.

Zadie Smith expresses a similar sentiment in a lecture given at the New York Public Library, titled *Speaking in Tongues*. In her vibrant speech she says: “this English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place – this is not the voice of my childhood.” Her delivery hinges on the power of voice and accents, which are the life-force behind words. She also opines how an ‘English voice’ is often seen as lettered and “Voice adaptation is still the original British sin.”

These literary snapshots of Ndlovu, Ma and Smith’s work merely offer a glimpse of the erasure and destruction caused by the language that is entwined with my identity. As an English writer, poet, and editor there is no escaping these past and present pitfalls of the language. My linguistic heritage is both a simultaneous source of tremendous pride and immense shame.

In the same breath, even with the irresolution that these dual forces bring, my love for the language is inescapable. It is embedded in the way that my mother says the crisp ‘K’ in my name and its double syllabic punch. It is in every pun, and accompanying grin, that my eldest brother makes. It is yet to be discovered in the poems that I still need to write. It is rooted in all the adjectives my mother taught me, with their multi-coloured descriptions pinned with *Prestik* to the wall. It is in all the childhood stories that I still cherish and it is in the lavender box on my desk that is saturated with notebooks.

English is the language of my childhood – it was passed down with love from my mother’s tongue. I delight in saying words like ‘resolute’ and ‘vapid’, whose sounds mirror their meanings. I can say these words in a voice and accent that are my own. My privileged experience of English is disparate from the experiences of others. It is a language that requires a type of love that is nuanced, idiosyncratic and unwavering.

Ma, L. (2022). *Peking Duck*. *The New Yorker*.

Ndlovu, M. (2022). ‘Malika Ndlovu’. The Poetry Archive. Available at: <https://poetryarchive.org/poet/malika-ndlovu/>.

Smith, Z. (2009). *Speaking in Tongues*. *The New York Review of Books*.

*Kristin De Decker is completing her MA in Creative Writing at the University of Pretoria.*