**Language and belonging**

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William Shakespeare’s line from the theatrical play ‘Hamlet’ from 1602, “To be or not to be, that is the question”, is said to be the most cited phrase from any drama. It refers to the many difficulties life offers to everyone, even the most successful and comfortable, and certainly the less lucky, materially, intellectually, spiritually, existentially, and for other issues and situations. Most people cling to life, and most people, or at least, many, live happy and content lives, even in poverty and situations that objectively may seem difficult. But in ‘Hamlet’, Shakespeare also shows that some people, perhaps most people, may find it unbearable at time, even considering an early end to it all. But then life after death is unknown; it is “the undiscovered country from which no traveller returns”, Shakespeare says, and he doesn’t bring in religion directly in any of his plays. In Hamlet, in the phrase of “to be or not to be”, is about the individual, not the community, and we know that human beings can only ‘be’ together with others. So, I would expand the issue of “to be” also to include “to belong”.

[Trials to select Sindh basketball team for National Games on May 7](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-May-2023/trials-to-select-sindh-basketball-team-for-national-games-on-may-7)

My reason for bringing in Shakespeare at the introduction of today’s article has to do with the fact that the United Nations in 2010 named 23 April the ‘International Day of the English Language’, drawing attention both to the unique writer and his language. Shakespeare’s both date is said to 23 April, 1564, and his date of death 23 April 1616. The day is also meant to remind us of the UN having six official UN languages, namely, Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. Let me add, too, that the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organizations, UNESCO, in 1995 named 23 April the ‘World Book and Copyright Day’, and it was first celebrated in the UK and Ireland in 1997, and now over one hundred countries around the world hold events on the day, with emphasis on young people and developing their interest in reading, not only for exams and tests, but for pleasure, too.

There are many good reasons for marking the English language and the book day. In our time with the new digital technologies, we should take note of the importance of reading of books and texts in physical forms, too, for pleasure, utility, learning and knowledge. We should note that in our time, the physical book must be protected so that we don’t just end up with short WhatsApp texts, SMS messages, and short Internet texts, which we in the last couple of decades have become so fond of. But we must still enjoy reading long texts, and learn intricate aspects of our mother tongue, the national language, and one or more foreign languages.

[Enaam becomes the first Pakistani to finish Top 5 in a Grand Prix](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-May-2023/enaam-becomes-the-first-pakistani-to-finish-top-5-in-a-grand-prix)

A recent survey in Norway has revealed that in thirty-five percent of schools, no physical books are used, only the reading of soft-version books and other texts. The world famous Norwegian writer Maya Lunde has called for serious attention to this situation because young people are about to avoid reading longer texts at all, either they are on the screen or in physical books, which means that the overall and deeper learning become less. Lunde says that it is not enough to advice parents and teacher about the situation and the importance bringing back the ‘old fashioned’ books back to the homes and schools. She says there must also be deliberate political decisions as soon as possible. We must not blame the children for the state of affairs, but rather blame those who make money on the new technologies. We don’t want a new generation of people who only have scattered, often superficial information, but people with deeper knowledge to solve today’s and tomorrow’s problems.

[KSF hosts Eid Milan gathering for special athletes](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-May-2023/ksf-hosts-eid-milan-gathering-for-special-athletes)

Back to Shakespeare a bit now. It is interesting to know that at his time, English was just a small ‘tribal language’ in a few parts of Southern England, but due to UK’s military rule at home and abroad, with cultural and language influences, eventually building a world empire ‘where the sun never set’, English became the world language it is today. If Germany had not lost WWI and WWII, we would probably have had a good number of countries in Africa and elsewhere using German. The French language and cultural influences were significant a couple of hundred years ago. Had not the colonies in North America, now USA and Canada, chosen English as their language, but French instead, English would also not have had the standing it has today in the world.

Towards the end of the 1800’s, an artificial international language was created, notably Esperanto. It would have been a neutral language, not belong to any country or world power. But the efforts did not succeed, and today English has taken Esperanto’s intended place. Yet, we should not oversee other big languages, indeed all of the official UN languages. But even if, or when, China becomes the most powerful world power, it is not likely that Chinese will push aside English. After all, English is easier for feigners to learn than Chinese is, well, if it were written using the ‘English’ alphabet, it might have a chance.

[Noman, Haris reach Image 2nd Torsam Khan National U-15 final](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-May-2023/noman-haris-reach-image-2nd-torsam-khan-national-u-15-final)

The way one had thought that Esperanto could have been used, as a common language for communication across all country borders to include the whole world, it would have given a stronger place for the local languages, too, big or small. Today, English influences the local languages to a major extent, such as my mother tongue, Norwegian, which on top of it has two similar but different official versions, just for five and a half million people. Nowadays, from kindergarten onwards, everyone learns English, and children love using English words even when they speak their mother tongue. People have begun to worry about keep the future place of the local languages and dialects.

Some say we don’t necessarily need to have our own mother tongue; we can all use English. Today, there are some ten thousand languages worldwide, according to linguists, and hundreds of thousands of dialects. We need them to stay alive, all of them, in the languages in Norway, Pakistan, and everywhere else. If we allow languages to die, we also allow cultures, knowledge and diversity to die.

[Rizwan reveals preferred batting position in ODIs](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-May-2023/rizwan-reveals-preferred-batting-position-in-odis)

Human beings cannot ‘be’ alone; we can only ‘be’ together with others in a flock, a community, and a country. Language is essential in order for us to feel that we belong to a place, a culture, and a cosmology. It is important to feel strong and accepted in one’s own culture. From there, we can expand our learning and being. I am a Norwegian, but I can also speak and write English, not entirely as an Englishman, but good enough to for the sake of communication and exchange. I have lived in several foreign countries for a long time, but I can never quite be part of another culture or language, although still feel quite accepted. A Pakistani, be he or she a Punjabi, Pashtu, or Sindhi, has roots his or her language and culture, and should be proud of his or her local language and of Urdu, and in addition, learn some English depending on work and life. English should not come instead of the local language and culture, but in addition to it. Pakistanis ask me: ‘what country do you belong to? They use the term ‘belong to’, not ‘come from’. That language concept must come from Urdu, and I like it.

And to all who belong to Islam, and all others, too, let me wish you Eid Mubarak.