



I speak in many tongues

Hélène Christella Mungayende

It was late afternoon. A sharp April wind cut into my face. As I get off the tram, I see from a distance a middle-aged woman approaching me. Lost at the Oostende coast, a little while later, I would ask the same woman the way. The woman stopped for a moment, like she was trying to think up all the different scenarios that could have led to this moment. She looked at me inquisitively, and asked: “Are you from Surinam or something?”

Ok, I had not expected this.

Following up on her question she added: “Because your Dutch is so good!”

Here at the Belgian coast I came to realise how misleading our perception is of the connection between language and identity.

I was 5 years old when I learned how to click my tongue to the rhythm of the Dutch language. Since then language diversity has been a red thread throughout my colourful life. My identity is in a lot of ways determined by language, in other ways it is the same diversity which makes my identity even more complex.

I was born in Rwanda in 1993. My dad called me “Munganyende”, which means “whoever, however, no-one can trump her”. This is the power of language, the power that one specific word can have in a language.

The first language that I came into contact with was French. My parents sent me to a French speaking “maternelle”-school. A year later the civil war broke out, after which my parents and me fled the country. It was this experience that taught me the power of language.

Language is something beautiful and strong. Language can be used to pronounce love, and to sow hatred. In 1994 it is the power of language that shook Rwanda at its core, which was heard by the songs on the radio stations and which pitted two peoples against each other.

In 1998 I ended up in the Netherlands as a liberated young girl. “The Dutch dream”, a kind of Dutch version of ‘The American Dream’, which we proudly call “super-diversity”. This pride soon changed into suffocation, when I started noticing more often that Dutch tolerance had an expiration date.

When I got out of the asylum seeker center, I went on to regular education, where for the first time I noticed that I was different. My elementary school teacher asked me on my first day of school to introduce myself. We were sitting in a circle. When I was done, the teacher looked at me with surprise and she said: “Christella, when I close my eyes, you are just like a real Dutch girl.”

It is almost poetic; speaking the language of a country you have never really known.

It is almost a tragedy; speaking the language of a country where you will never really belong.

16 years later, in 2012, I moved to the multicultural city of Brussels. The vibrant city is an explosion of different cultures and identities.

Upon my arrival in bilingual Brussel, I soon discovered how strongly your language can determine your identity. It is supposedly unusual for young people with a migrant background to be bilingual from birth.

Research taught me that this fact has more to do with socioeconomic segregation that starts from a young age as opposed to the abilities of the kids themselves. Just think back to the media circus around Molenbeek. The same Molenbeek where I just live ten minutes away from, where, on Sunday, I get my weekly groceries in French.

The surprising thing about Brussels is that differences in language immediately indicate the differences in class. Prejudices do not care about academic research, and that is why I perfectly fit into the box of “poor French-speaking immigrant”. It is

for this reason that I have startled a lot of Flemish people with my “correct Dutch”. The struggle is real.

I have actually never felt more Dutch. Because now, more than ever before, Belgians frequently call me “The Dutch Girl”. In the Netherlands my identity crisis luckily only involves *one* national language.

On the other hand, I have never felt more of an outsider because of the negative discussion around immigration and refugees in both countries.

In the Netherlands, my language identity and matching accent result in being taken for a Limburger when I am in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. In Eindhoven, in the first student dorm where I lived, they would often lovingly call me the “Braboneger” (‘Brabo negro’). One of my friends told me how, when she asked for a brochure at the frontdesk of the University of Rotterdam, the woman behind the desk was completely flabbergasted. “I never would have expected *that* accent from you!” she said.

A week ago, when I was preparing my speech for Rutu, I contacted Ellen-Rose. I asked her, “Hey Ellen, do you know if I can find some numbers about the number of multilinguals in the Netherlands?”. Ellen’s answer to my question came to me as a surprise. I was already living for such a long time in Belgium, in the capital of language conflicts and language diversity, that I could not imagine that something so important did not receive any attention in the Netherlands. “The statistics are not there”, Ellen said, “because educators and pedagogues do not see the importance”.

I, however, am the living proof of the importance of language diversity: me and so many multilingual Dutch youths with me. It is the power of language that brought the Rwandan people back together and still does. Language does not care whether I am Hutu or Tutsi and to which tribe my parents belong. Language just *is*. Within this simple fact, we find the meaning of life. All Rwandans speak Rwandan and all the Dutch speak Dutch; but all humans speak the language of humanity. The language of existence, the language of diversity.

Language barriers do not only exist between countries and cultures, but also between individuals. This is why we should actively work towards giving language diversity the space in society that it deserves. In business, on the labor market,

in education and between people. Only in this way, we can promote an inclusive society. Less tolerance and more *real* diversity.

Wandering, wandering in the present and in the past. You wander in love for language, the love for culture. Wander through my thoughts and let me get lost in yours.

Show me your dark places and I might show you mine. You a fellow soul, or I at least happy to pretend. Let us stand in the light together. Light that shines upon us. Oh how light we are. Let us drift, embrace and give, relive the essence of this moment.

Hélène Christella Mungayende is political scientist, publicist and founder of lamShero.

How bilingualism affected my school career

Jahkini Bisselink

My name is Jahkini and I am currently enrolled in a bilingual education programme at my high school (5VWO). I am an active member of the student council and I also work at an Ethiopian restaurant. My mother is from a small town in the Netherlands, Groessen to be exact, and she speaks Dutch. My father, on the other hand, was born in what is formerly known as British Guiana. In Guyana they speak English. The Guyanese version of English is comparable to Jamaican English, as they both are sometimes grammatically different from standard English. At home I speak English with my father and Dutch with my mother.

In elementary school, my bilingualism soon became a problem for my teachers. In the first grade, they introduced a 'moon-star-sun system'. Getting a 'moon' was the worst, a 'star' meant acceptable and a 'sun' referred to the best. This system mainly served to indicate the student's attitude in class and to give an impression of how well the student was able to deal with the curriculum. In the third grade this system became a problem for me.

Despite the fact that my grades were always around 8, I would always receive a 'moon'. Each year, this system, despite the results obtained in the past, was transferred from teacher to teacher. One day, one of my teachers advised me, in a coercive tone, to stop speaking English at home.

Entering fifth grade was a crucial moment, as this is the year in which the school gives an advice which level of high school education you should follow after elementary school. Because the moon system had been passed on year after year, my teachers told me "we advise you go on to MAVO [the lowest academic level], and, if you work hard, you might be able to go to HAVO". A year later, I got a new teacher who told me that he would look at the results I had obtained for my exams instead

of looking at the moon-star-sun system. Eventually, I received the advice to go on to HAVO/VWO after elementary school and after one year, I moved on to a Dutch/English bilingual programme at VWO level, which is the highest academic level in the Netherlands.

During high school, my bilingualism was naturally encouraged, as I was following a bilingual programme. Teachers, however, noticed that my grammar was not up to standard. They advised me to take a dyslexia test. I followed their advice and the outcome of the test was once again striking. After the test, we received a report stating that: "it seems very unlikely that she will be able to obtain her VWO degree" and "she has a serious language deficiency in comparison to other VWO student". It stated that I had a language deficiency, but not dyslexia. Not once in this test they asked me whether I was bilingual, or if Dutch was even my mother tongue.

To make a long story short; in my experience people and especially teachers still consider bilingualism a handicap rather than a benefit.

Jahkini Bisselink (16 jaar) is a high school student in Amsterdam.

Being bilingual for those who are not

Aroha MacKay

To me, being bilingual is like playing a game of memory with your mind. Except instead of an image on your card, you have a word in one of the languages you speak. Sometimes you find the matching card immediately. At other times it takes a lot longer. And you just keep staring at the card in your hand and it is all you can see, but you just can't manage to find the other. Which, as you can imagine, is very frustrating because you know it's there, it has to be, yet you just keep turning over other cards. And when you finally find that one card, the one you were looking for, it's a personal victory.

This whole memory game can make it kind of hard talk to people at times. Because it's equally confusing to them as it is frustrating to you. When playing the memory game it's all I can focus on, so sometimes I may go mute when I am playing.

However, being bilingual opens up a whole new world, full of people to meet, which isn't there when you aren't bilingual. And to be honest, I wouldn't trade my cards for the world.

Aroha MacKay (14 years) is a high school student in Amsterdam and speaks English and Dutch.

I am a woman of many languages

Dionne Swedo

I am Dionne Swedo. My parents only spoke Dutch with my sisters and me. When I was six my family moved from Paramaribo to the district of Marowijne, in the far east of Suriname. I ended up in a totally alien environment where I wondered what language they spoke. As I grew older, I understood that that language is called Sranan Tongo. At school it became more difficult for me. There they spoke Aucaans and Sranan Tongo. I didn't have any girlfriends, because I didn't understand anything and I was ridiculed for being a city dweller.

I then decided that I no longer wanted to be an outsider. I learned to speak Aucaans and by the time I was thirteen I spoke better Aucaans than Sranan Tongo. When I was thirteen I started my first summer job as a saleswoman at a Chinese grocery store, and got in touch with different people and languages (Chinese, English, Spanish, Portuguese and French). This sparked my interest to learn new languages, because I wanted to understand what was said.

By speaking multiple languages, I have been able to develop myself further. In daily life I encounter different people with various cultural backgrounds and learning something from them is immensely worthwhile for me. I don't have one mother language, even though I am a mix of indigenous and creole people, I feel attracted to every language that is spoken in Suriname. I view different languages as a rainbow, they each color my life and make working together with different people nice and educational.

I now have more than one mother language. Because of my work as Basic Life Skills trainer and Resistance and Crime Prevention Facilitator in Suriname (Marowijne), working with primarily young people I speak Aucaans and Sranan Tongo. I enjoy to be able to say *bonjour* when I'm in French Guyana, *fawaka* to a

friend, *obrigado* or *gaantangi* to an older Aukaner person. I may have not mastered all languages fully, but I can manage. Suriname is a country of many languages and I'm a woman of many languages.

Dionne Swedo is coach and counsellor and facilitates Basic Life Skills trainings in Suriname.

Two places where you belong

Isaure Vorstman

I guess the best thing about having two mother languages is having two different roots, two places where you belong. It's more interesting and also more fun. You get to experience two sides of everything: while the French do not directly say what they think in a formal situation, the Dutch are more inclined to speak their mind when being polite. It makes me aware that there is not one definition of politeness or expressing kindness – there are thousands, just as there are thousands of languages and thousands of different cultures. I like having two cultures where I feel at home – whenever I feel sad at my school in the Netherlands, I think of my family in France who would have reacted very differently to the situation, et vice versa. Learning English at the age of 6 has also opened a different world for me. While I am not especially familiar with the culture of an English-speaking country in particular, I do enjoy being able to communicate verbally almost everywhere in the world, as it is so widely spoken. Being fluent in three languages already only gives me motivation to learn more languages and cultures... There is so much more to discover and the world is so big!

Isaure Vorstman (16 years) is a high school student.

Language discrimination and multilingualism: a view across generations

Jamiu Busari

Irrespective of race or creed, it is important to acknowledge that in a world where children are being born into migrant families, mixed race relationships, and minority groups, we have a collective and moral obligation to guarantee that each child has access to basic and fair education; the education they need to be able to participate fully in society

Introduction

Earlier this year, I was approached to participate in a panel discussion organized by the Rutu Foundation on multilingualism and language discrimination in school systems.

When I received the invitation, I responded immediately with a 'yes' without thinking twice. I have always entertained a moral obligation to share my knowledge and experiences with society in general and the less privileged in particular, hopefully as a contribution to improving the general welfare of all. When I was told however that the topic was on language discrimination in the Dutch educational system, I heard myself thinking "hmmm, that I am not a native Dutch speaker makes sense, but talking about language discrimination in the Dutch school system is a somewhat unfamiliar terrain to me", at least until that moment.

Being a pediatrician and educationalist (medical education), language discrimination is not a major area of focus in my work. Yet, it was evident to me that I was approached because my personal background and my profession could provide relevant contexts to talk about, during the event. So what is it about my own background and my profession that made me a suitable candidate for this panel discussion?

Who am I?

To begin with, I am of African descent (Nigeria) and speak at least 6 languages (4 of them fluently). I am a British citizen, born and raised in England, lived, studied and worked in 5 different countries, the last being the Netherlands where I have spent the last 24 years. Regarding my profession, I conduct my work in a third language, i.e. Dutch (after English and Yoruba) and am exposed to a population that is still of “school going” age and who often visit my workplace for a variety of problems ranging from a simple cold to complex cases such as delayed language development and learning disabilities. Many of the children who present with complaints of speech and language impairments have either one or both of their parents being of non-Dutch descent.

As I continued contemplating on why I was invited, I gradually figured out that I could contribute something to the panel discussion. My next step therefore, was to find out some more information about language discrimination, as this was a new subject for me. Being multilingual myself, I knew I had experience with the benefits and challenges of speaking multiple languages, but in the context of the invitation from the Rutu foundation, I felt this might not be enough. I set out to work and started first by looking for information on the internet, and it did yield results.

Language discrimination

Language or linguistic discrimination I discovered, was often defined in terms of prejudice of language. While there is a relationship between prejudice and discrimination, they are not always directly related. In language, a person may hold a prejudice against someone due to their use of language, but they may not act out on that prejudice. In theory, any individual may be the victim of linguisticism regardless of social and ethnic status. Unfortunately, oppressed and marginalized social minorities are often consistent targets, due to the stigmatization associated with the speech varieties found in such groups. In the United States, for example, some African-Americans speak a particular variety of English, which is often seen as substandard i.e. African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Consequently, many African-Americans are regular targets of linguisticism just because mainstream American society perceives AAVE as indicative of low intelligence or limited education. Furthermore, as with many other non-standard dialects and especially creole languages, AAVE is often called “lazy” or “bad” English. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_discrimination].

This trend is familiar within the Dutch society as well, where Dutch citizens of Moroccan, Turkish, creole (Surinam/Curacao) background have a variant of the Dutch vernacular called “straattaal.” This vernacular evolved out of the need for easier communication in these groups and at the same time for the creation of a social identity for these specific minority groups. Jacomine Nortier, a Dutch sociolinguist argued that the emergence of this new vernacular among the Dutch youth, as well as, speaking Dutch with a Moroccan accent is not because the language cannot be spoken. On the contrary, in addition to having a good mastery of the Dutch language, Dutch youths choose to speak “straattaal” in certain circumstances as a form of identity and control [, Nederland Meertalenland. Feiten, perspectieven en meningen over meertaligheid, Aksant, Amsterdam, 2009. (pg. 158-159) ISBN109052603383]

My story

Having taken the time to find out more about linguistic prejudice and discrimination, I now linked my newly found insight to both my personal background and the invitation I received, to share my views in a panel discussion on language discrimination. What follows are my thoughts as told in a story during that event...

I shared the story of a 5-year-old youngster, the son of a middle-class immigrant African couple who grew up in Manchester, North of England. At that time, Manchester was famous for its history as a leading city in the textile industry. This young boy attended primary school in the suburbs of the city and was the only black kid in the class at the time. As young as he was, it did not take too long for him to get acquainted with the fact he was different. This was despite the fact that he was British and a native and fluent speaker of the English language. As the story goes, there was a day that the boy was engaged in a conversation with his mother. During the discourse, the boy stopped to tell his mom that the way she pronounced the word “the” [stressed th ee; unstressed before a consonant th uh; unstressed before a vowel th ee] was wrong. His mom, in full bewilderment, looked at him asked: “how do you know that?” He responded, “because my teacher in school told me that.”

A couple of years later this youngster, now a teenager, finds himself in Africa having emigrated there with his parents. He is now in a different society, one that he feels he belongs to and does not see himself as a minority in. Unfortunately, to this young man’s surprise, he was faced with a new reality: He happened to speak English differently than the locals did, i.e. with a “British” accent, and discovered

that this differentiated him from the rest of the group. Sadly, the boy now a young man witnessed the feeling of being different again. This time however it was not because of the color of his skin, but due to the language he spoke. The young man moved on in life and ambitious as he was, found himself in the Netherlands pursuing a postgraduate education. Now an established academic with an impressive track record for his educational achievement, he experienced a different challenge. This time it was related to his mastery of the Dutch language. The experiences he had gained growing up in both a British (heterogeneous) and African (homogenous) ethnic community combined with his academic achievements were unfortunately not enough to spare him the prejudice and pain associated with not being a native Dutch speaker despite speaking the language fluently with an English accent.

The 5-year-old youngster who has now grown into an adult man in his mid-forties, happily married and a father of two is an established and a leading professional in his field. Recently, he was in a conversation with his 7-year-old daughter. During their discussion, his daughter suddenly stopped him. She did that because she wanted to correct him for a word he pronounced wrongly in Dutch. At this point, a wave of déjà vu flooded him, as he saw at that point, the 5-year-old boy (himself) correcting his mom for pronouncing the word “the” wrong. But the essence of this story goes beyond this...

This man’s daughter, born and bred in the Netherlands comes back from school a few days after that incident and looking sad. She is upset because one of her classmates tells her that her mastery of Dutch is poor. The father, helpless at this point, struggles to console her. He knows that his daughters’ knowledge of the language is good and certainly better than his. But how do you explain to a black 7-year-old, in a Dutch white school that her mastery of her mother tongue is exceptional when you as a father are often discriminated because of the accent you have speaking the same language? As things would turn out though, a few weeks later, the father is invited to his daughter’s school to find out how she has fared during her mid-term tests. He discovers, contrary to all expectations, that she performed as best in her class for comprehension and application of Dutch grammar!

Conclusion

The story of this 5-year-old youngster, now and adult man, reflects the thin line between language discrimination and the preexistent prejudices related to ethnicity

and race. It shows that discrimination and prejudices on the basis of language or physical features is a phenomenon that cuts across generations and shall remain, due to increased global migration. Furthermore, it demands that there more awareness of the consequences and limitations of language discrimination must be created within the contexts of socio-political, educational and health care services. So while language discrimination may be a topic that many would prefer to shy away from, it is important to acknowledge that in a world where children are being born into migrant families, mixed race relationships, and minority groups, there is a collective and moral obligation that we have to uphold, that is, to ensure that each child (irrespective of background) has access to basic and fair education so that they can participate fully in society.

Jamiu Busari is Pediatrician, head of the Department of Pediatrics at Zuyderland Medisch Centrum, Heerlen.

Privileged for speaking four languages

Mag Ramachandran

I was born in the 1970s in Singapore and grew up predominantly in a multilingual and multicultural environment till young adulthood before I set forth unexpectedly on a lifelong journey through different countries and even continents.

The language situation in Singapore is unique in the sense that English along with Mandarin, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil are the four official languages. Like many Singaporeans in my age group, I can understand and hold simple everyday conversations in Mandarin, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil. In my opinion, learning and using other languages used within a community, lead to greater acceptance and appreciation of cultural norms and values existing within individual cultures.

Although my mother tongue(s) are Bahasa Melayu and Tamil, my most commonly used language both at home and in school is English. In Singapore, English is the international language for business, government and the main language of instruction in schools. As a result, English has become my preferred language over the other languages since my elementary school days. It is the dominant language in which I think, analyse, evaluate, debate (argue) and even dream in!

I am privileged to have been given the opportunity to celebrate Mother Language Day with knowing the languages I know, and to have lived in a culturally rich environment where linguistic diversity was celebrated. The fundamental relationship between language and culture undoubtedly have led me to my persistence towards learning my fifth language (Dutch) in order to positively integrate and contribute to my current community in Amsterdam.

謝謝 (xiexie), terima kasih, நன்றி (nanri), and thank you for this invitation to celebrate International Mother Language Day with the Rutu Foundation in Amsterdam.

Mag Ramachandran is English Language Teacher at Amsterdam International Community School and English Language Tutor and Teacher Trainer at Hogeschool van Amsterdam

Ahang, you have my attention

Pamela Mercera

The melodious sound of Bonaire Papiamentu is grooved into my memory. It is a very melodic language. I am a daughter of parents from Bonaire and I lived in Curaçao. Thus, I grew up with different versions of Papiamentu: Bonaire and Curaçao. I myself speak the Curaçao version of Papiamentu.

Currently I live in the Netherlands and Papiamentu is my most emotional language, even though my daily life plays out in Dutch. With my family I speak Papiamentu.

A word that confuses the Dutch is the word, or rather the sound, *ahang*. It can mean 'yes' or 'no', depending on the accent. Because they do not understand this, *ahang* is often interpreted as "I'm not interested in your story." While at such a moment it may mean the opposite: "Yes, you have my attention."

Pamela Mercera is cyber security expert in Amsterdam.

Benefit during French class

Alexis Vorstman

What is my mother tongue? Is it the language that I learned from my mother? Or the language of the country where I live? For me, my mother tongue is French, because it is the first language that I ever learned. Still, my Dutch is better than my French. That's because I live in the Netherlands. People always think it's a big advantage that I know French and Dutch. Personally, I benefit from it during the French lessons at school. But often my friends point out that I make a lot of mistakes with accentuation. It was also a major blow when I started learning German: it was a whole new language for me. It was the first time I had to learn a language that was completely new to me.

Still, I think one of the advantages of my bilingualism is that I can easily put on a good accent. Friends often look surprised when I call my mother and I speak French. It also often happens automatically. For example, when I'm eating lunch with a friend at my home and my mother suddenly starts to talk in French.

It was hard for me to imagine how it felt for my friends, until I experienced it myself one time when I was with some Polish friends. It makes you wonder what they are talking about. Of course you don't dare say anything about it. You just wait until they switch back to the language you know. Nevertheless, French remains very important to me.

Alexis Vorstman (14 years) is a high school student.

The biggest mistake of my life

Suheyła Yalçın

My father decided not to teach the Turkish language to me and my younger brothers, because that would diminish our chance at a good education. Our school told my parents that, if we would only learn the Dutch language, we would become good students: language deficiency must be prevented.

Regardless of the tireless efforts of my parents, my younger brother still ended up needing the help of a speech therapist. He could not pronounce the letter 'r' correctly. This is not very strange, as in Eindhoven the rolling 'r' is an unusual sound. Little did my parents know that learning two languages could have actually contributed to the language proficiency of me and my brothers.

The decision my parents made to only teach us Dutch still has an impact today, leading to more disadvantages than advantages for their children. My father calls it the biggest mistake of his life. Actually, there has not been any real advantage; my cousins who did learn the Turkish language speak Dutch just as well as I do.

In the asylum center where I work, I was asked whether I could speak to our Turkish speaking Syrian clients. When I told my supervisor that I was unable to speak Turkish, you could tell by the expression on her face that she was very sorry to hear that. "Yeah, tell me about", I thought.

The children living at the asylum center are all taught at the same primary school. When I was writing my bachelor thesis, I focused on the social development of children between the age of six and twelve. The teachers of this school who I interviewed for my research told me that the children pick up the Dutch language very quickly. This is also the only language they are allowed to speak at

school. Whether this is really an advantage, has not been researched: Dutch is the norm, it is “just the way it is”.

When I asked whether these children were behind in their social development, they answered negatively and said that “the these kids are just like any other kids”. I am happy that these teachers see that, as this is something others could learn from. An immigrant who cannot speak the language of his/her host country often get talked to in simplified, childlike words.

Besides the fact that I have not been able to have a real conversation with a big part of my family, including my grandfather and grandmother, I have experienced other disadvantages as a result of only having been taught Dutch. For example, I have difficulties relating to the Turkish culture. Why would I join going to a concert if I cannot understand the lyrics? When I am visiting my family, I always hope they will not ask me questions that are too difficult. They know I will just answer with: *tamam?* The feeling of not being fully able to be myself and experiencing a sense of shame is not nice.

You might think, what is keeping a twenty-five year old girl from taking a Turkish language course? Trust me, I have. Twice I have signed up for a course. Together with my brother I went to every class each week. During class time we spoke Turkish with the other students, but at home it was hard to break with the habit of speaking Dutch with each other: after all those years, you can't suddenly start speaking a different language with your family.

After the course, my brother and I were able to speak a little Turkish; we can now understand the grammar and it has become easier to speak to our cousins in Istanbul over Facebook. At home it is still not a habit to speak Turkish. Now that I have finished my education and I am trying to get a job, I am often asked whether I can speak Turkish or Arabic. Because I want to go into social work or work with refugees, this would be a big plus. Unfortunately, I always have to say that I am not able to speak either of those languages and I also have to confess that not being able to speak Turkish did not bring me anything, it has only disadvantaged me. It wasn't the case that my Dutch- only upbringing resulted in writing my thesis without any Dutch spelling mistakes. To quote my father: it is the biggest mistake of his life.

Suheyła Yalçın is re-integration consultant and co-founder of foundation İmSHERO for the rights of women with a migration background.

A wider world thanks to multilingualism

Thijs Vorstman

Ever since I was a toddler, French (my native language) has opened a world for me with a lot more possibilities. On the one hand, it gave me a vocabulary that was very open, but on the other hand there is also a downside. Because I am bilingual, I have to maintain both my French and my Dutch. I have to read in both languages, and also write and talk. It is difficult to maintain, but the outcome is beautiful! That became clear, for example, when I went with my friend on holiday. His parents have a bed and breakfast in Belgium. It was just next to France. When his parents weren't at home, the bell rung. There were French tourists at the door who had arrived without a reservation and asked for a room. Because my friend did not know what to do, I had to talk to them and explain the situation to them. I did not have the best vocabulary as I was ten years old but I found I could still manage well. Now I follow bilingual education, so my English is getting better too. My conclusion is that my mother opened a wider world for me, but I have to maintain three languages: French and Dutch and English, and that is a lot harder!

Thijs Vorstman (12 years) is a high school student.

Mother Tongue

Nosrat Mansouri Gilani, Amsterdam

The first thing that came to me when I heard the phrase 'mother tongue', was the thought of something nice, something sweet on my tongue, my mother. Whether this is because the concept of mother in the word 'mother tongue', or because there is more to it, I do not know.

Meanwhile, a dear friend passed away. I see all kinds of messages coming through on Facebook. All sad. It keeps me busy. But only when I encounter a message that is written in Farsi, something breaks. The lump in my throat slides down until it reaches my heart.

My profession, art, I learned in the Netherlands. That's why it's generally easier to talk about my profession in Dutch, rather than in my native language. As an artist, you are consciously or unconsciously in constant contact with everything you ever have stored in your brain. So my art arises in the context of two environments. That of my mother tongue and that of the new language. I'm extremely happy with that. Two gold mines.

Nosrat Mansouri Gilani is a visual artist. He lives and works in Amsterdam.