

*Google Translate Doesn't Do Kashmiri*

Name: Nikunj (1.)<sup>1</sup>

Age and location(s): 48. Currently lives in Maryland. Born in the Netherlands, grew up in several locations in the Netherlands. (2. 3.)

Languages mentioned: 10, English, Dutch, Kashmiri (also known as Koshur), Hindi, French, German, Chinese, Latin, Ancient Greek, and Japanese. (Ancient Greek, Latin, and Japanese were only mentioned once) (4.)

Languages and reason for learning them/when they were learned: Speaks English (spoken at home), Dutch (born and raised in the Netherlands), Hindi (Learnt from his friends in his 20s, he is culturally Indian), German (K-12 schooling), French (K-12 schooling), and Chinese (Business). Understands Kashmiri (Culturally Kashmiri). Also, learned Latin and Ancient Greek when in school and Japanese in college, but these have been mostly lost and were only mentioned once. (5.)

Fluency: Fluent in Dutch and English. Mostly fluent in German. Decently fluent in French. “Gets by” in Hindi because his grammar is not terribly strong. Understands Kashmiri. Described his level of fluency in Chinese as “survival”. (6.)

Dominance and when used: English dominant, lives in the U.S. Used to be 50/50 in dominance with Dutch and English due to growing up in the Netherlands. Looks for any excuse possible to speak Dutch now with childhood friends and Dutch colleagues but doesn't speak it with his family (even those who do speak it). Speaks Hindi with wife and extended family. Uses Kashmiri only

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<sup>1</sup> Information in parentheses refers to which specific question or questions in the corpus of the interview are being answered. If a question is not specifically mentioned, it is a larger question that is answered throughout this essay or is answered indirectly.

when in Kashmir. Speaks Chinese sometimes to connect with Chinese-speaking colleagues and when in Chinese-speaking countries but never seriously; most Chinese-speaking colleagues also speak English. Uses French and German only when in countries that speak it. (7. 8.)

Use with parents/siblings/family/homes: Speaks English with his mother and brother. Speaks English in the home now, sometimes Hindi with his wife. His parents spoke only English with him but he spoke Dutch in his community and at school. (9. 10.)

My father is a rather secretive man. He'd only mentioned knowing five languages to me before, those languages being Dutch, English, Chinese, Hindi, and Kashmiri. I certainly didn't expect him to eventually come out with *ten* languages that he'd learned over the course of his lifetime.

His parents were Kashmiri immigrants, ethnically Kashmiri Hindus who moved to the Netherlands for his father's job. They spoke both Hindi and Kashmiri and spoke it infrequently around Nikunj and his brother. He seems to have become an accidental polyglot due to the nature of the many paths he's pursued and the nature of the evolving world. For example, in college he "misjudged" whether Japanese or Chinese was the "language of the future" and took a year of Japanese. Later in his life he was forced to learn Chinese anyway because he travels to China and Chinese-speaking countries so often.

His voice is a little bit nostalgic when he talks about his experiences with Dutch. He used to think in Dutch, apparently, but now almost all his thoughts are in English. (14.) When I ask him "Do you dream in one language or another in particular?" he is caught a bit off guard. Nikunj says he dreams in English now but used to dream primarily in Dutch when he lived in Holland. Apparently, he used to sleep talk in Dutch. (15.) He left Holland more than two decades ago to

pursue his graduate studies in the United States, but always wants to hold onto his Dutch roots. As he expounds upon this I'm reminded of his quiet insistence on my sister and I holding onto our Dutch citizenship. However, whenever caught on an offbeat or speaking in moments of high emotion, his first impulse is to speak in English, mainly because he's not in a Dutch-speaking environment and hasn't lived in one for many, many years. (16.) Nikunj seems a bit happy to tell me that he still sometimes mixes up Dutch and English words in private. (17.) When I ask him about which cultures he belongs to, he mentions the Dutch and Anglo-Saxon cultures first. (21.) He used to be more "outgoing" with friends and family due to speaking mainly in Dutch, he says (partly due to their somewhat-more-abrasive culture), but now that he's grown accustomed to English (and American culture) he is more "held back". (27. 28.) In my notes, I write: "associations with Dutch—home, childhood." (20.) He still visits his mother in the Netherlands quite often, and every time he came back from the Netherlands when I was much younger he used to bring my siblings and me Dutch chocolate shaped like the initials of our names. None of us ever actually finished any of them; he'd eat them himself when he thought no one was looking. I used to think he did this because they were especially tasty. Perhaps it's *really* because they were especially *lekker* (an untranslatable word that very roughly means "tasty" but can be used in many contexts). (26.) It's evident that Nikunj feels great pride in his Dutch heritage and in his speaking Dutch, and it's an especially niche language that allows him to connect very fluidly to other Dutch speakers. It may not be a terribly utilitarian language but it is, perhaps, the one dearest to him.

I am a bit surprised when he later mentions that he only considers himself a native speaker of Dutch and English. (18.)

"Not Hindi?" I ask, despite wanting to stay neutral.

He says that no, his accent would give him away immediately. (29.) His grammar is very anglicized, and he doesn't speak it very confidently. Though colloquial Hindi in general has a generous heaping of English words sown into it, he isn't at the level of a native speaker. Hindi and, by extension Kashmiri<sup>2</sup>, were languages that he was exposed to as his parents spoke them fluently. However, he didn't start speaking Hindi until his friends started learning it and he started to learn alongside them. Nikunj's parents never officially taught him either of these languages and he never formally learnt them, something he seems to regret. He'd never speak Hindi in a business setting. However, it's still something that connects him to his family and roots and that he holds onto quite solidly. Kashmiri holds similar meaning (ethnicity, family, roots) but he cannot speak it to connect to native speakers. He says his associations with the language include much broader and less personal concepts such as the long Mughal<sup>3</sup> history and the fact that it's in some ways a mix of Sanskrit, Hindi, and Arabic. (20.) Nikunj speaks with a great nationalist pride about Kashmir, even though he's never actually lived there. It reminds me of his parents, my grandparents, teaching me random Kashmiri phrases over the phone when I was younger so that the "glorious language" doesn't die out.

While native speakers of Hindi may look at Nikunj and see him as another Hindi speaker (before he opens his mouth), native speakers of Kashmiri usually don't. (29.) For example, he often uses his knowledge of Kashmiri to aid him in interactions with local people. I've personally witnessed him get an especially good bargain out of some street vendors who were discussing, in Kashmiri in front of him, the *actual* price of the bauble he was looking at Therefore, Kashmiri and

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<sup>2</sup> Hindi is one of the most widely-spoken languages in India. Kashmiri is another Indian language, spoken almost only in the contested Jammu-Kashmir region of Northern India/Southern Pakistan. Many ethnically Kashmiri Hindus speak both languages, while Kashmiri Muslims tend to speak Kashmiri and Arabic.

<sup>3</sup> The Mughal Empire was a dynasty of Muslim and Arabic-speaking peoples that ruled over large parts of Northern India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Hindi occupy similar spaces culture-wise and, in some ways, use-wise both still fundamentally serve him differently. Kashmiri isn't something he can speak with his extended family, but Hindi is (though not completely accurately). It's something he's still personally proud of, but it has less nationalism attached to it, it appears. (20.)

Chinese was mentioned only a few times more than German and French. He mentioned it strictly in business settings. He doesn't use it to seriously communicate except when out and about in China itself. Again, he uses it as a connection point between himself and Chinese-speaking colleagues and business partners. German and French are used exclusively when in countries that speak them. (7.)

He seemed to somewhat lament that most people now speak English rather than their own native tongues. While writing this essay, I wanted to make a title using the same word in the ten languages he knew, but I discovered that some of them weren't available in online translators like Google Translate. Nikunj would probably agree that this is an increasingly important sign that people need to document, speak, and learn many languages. Outside of our personal conversation, while discussing the content of this interview with my family, he mentioned that Hindi and Urdu, another Indian language, are so similar in how they're spoken that he can basically speak Urdu as well (though the written alphabets are very different). Perhaps this is an indicator that no one truly knows what it means to be multilingual, and that the world of languages and linguistics is more complex than any single individual can ever imagine. This is why linguistics is an important part of society as we move forward, and why interviewing my father about his multilingualism was far more rewarding, informative, and interesting than I could have ever imagined.