

A Pakistani student finds the right words
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What is your favorite word?

It seemed an innocuous enough question on the surface—a breath of fresh air amidst the spate of otherwise daunting supplemental essays required of students applying to Princeton University. Its superficial appearance, of course, belied its anxiety-inducing properties; it was almost cruel in its simplicity.

But Wafa Zaka, then just one of the thousands of teenagers who would apply to the Ivy League school in 2017, offered a bold answer: her favorite word was “words”.

Zaka’s relationship with words has not always been positive. Quite the contrary: words have, at times, caused her great distress. But these challenges have shaped her in profound and important ways, and her resilience in overcoming them has left her with a deep commitment to using language for the greater good.

Zaka was born in Salam, a small village in Pakistan where she was raised speaking Punjabi. When she was seven years old, her family moved to Lahore, one of Pakistan’s largest cities. Zaka was transferred to a co-educational school where, as a first-grader, she was expected to speak only in English or Urdu. Punjabi—the only means of expression she knew—was looked down upon. So she often stayed silent.

“The entire year, I just hated it so much, because I couldn’t communicate with people,” she said. “And they just expected me to speak in English, and I couldn’t tell them, you know, that’s why I didn’t do my homework.”

Her early struggles in the classroom motivated her to work hard to excel in school—which she did. Books were critical to her academic success and her changing relationship with English.

“[E]ven though initially, I hated the language, I eventually fell in love with literature, because, you know, with books—they are not impatient with you. Like, when you’re trying to talk to a teacher, they just want you to quickly say what you’re trying to say. But with books, they waited for me,” she said.

When Zaka initially learned about Princeton through a Pakistani novel, attending the school was a far-off dream. Her grandmother had lived her entire life in a village, eventually entering into an arranged marriage; her grandfather hadn’t allowed his daughters to pursue an education beyond middle school. Attending university abroad was a pathbreaking idea for a young woman in her family.

And yet, when her plane hit the tarmac in New York many months later, the challenges ahead were far from abstract. With no family around to help her move in, Zaka turned to the only other Pakistani arrival in her year, Amina Ahmad, as a source of comfort.

The two were placed in the same orientation group, both immersed in a sea of newness and surrounded by people who knew little about their home country.

“Everybody else was a stranger, and she was that one familiar face in the crowd,” Ahmad said, reflecting on her first days on campus with Zaka. “I just felt this sense of comfort and familiarity—like a home away from home, sort of.”

As they grew closer, a shared language—Urdu—underpinned the sense that someone was around who could understand their innermost feelings. After long days of live-translating their thoughts into English, they could fall back on a more familiar way of speaking.

“It’s always good to have Pakistanis around...you can just say something in Urdu and others won’t understand it,” Zaka said. “And there [are] some things I can only express in Urdu, you know?”

On Princeton’s campus, Zaka encountered an unfamiliar degree of liberty—not only in the places she could go at night or the clothing she could wear during the day, but also in the words she could use in public. Despite holding strong political opinions, she had grown up learning not to critique the Pakistani government; she was amazed that Americans openly maligned their own political leaders. She found that she had a knack for it, too.

“That struggle of what I can say and what I can’t say is a very constant theme in my life, and it was very liberating to be able to come to the US...[and to] be able to talk about all the things that I’m very passionate about,” she said.

Zaka’s renewed political engagement coincided with a deepened relationship with the written word. Studying political theory gave her the “vocabulary to talk about” the issues she cares about, including the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan. Diversifying her literary consumption beyond Western writing helped her develop new frameworks for understanding cultural differences. And pursuing new forms of journalism convinced her of the value in storytelling.

“She has power with words, language,” one of her roommates, Priya Vulchi, said. “I think she just pulls people in, in the way that only language can do, you know, and a love for language can do.”

Her academic and political interests have even prompted her to enter new linguistic spaces—but this time, voluntarily. Following her interest in the politics of the Middle East, she’s taken steps toward learning Arabic.

“[I]f I want to do any serious journalism or writing about a completely new culture or society and people, how could [I] do that without knowing their language? It’s just wrong,” she said. In her eyes, South Asia has had its “fair share” of misrepresentation by foreign correspondents. She sees language as an access point and as a means of empowerment for often-misunderstood groups.

Advocacy is an important part of Zaka's long-term mission. She pictures herself writing "a book or two" down the line, citing Arundhati Roy, an Indian author and political activist, as a role model. And she understands that fighting for religious tolerance in Pakistan has been a fatal pursuit for some activists.

"But I don't know if I'll be able to not work for this, even if it threatens my life," she said.

Now, long after she was first left speechless, Zaka knows the power of her words. And she's not afraid to use them.