

Poet Ali: Hi. Audience: Hi.

00:06

PA: I want to ask you guys a question. How many languages do you speak? This is not a rhetorical question. I actually want you to think of a number. For some of you, it's pretty easy. Inside your head, you're like, "It's one. You're speaking it, buddy. I'm done." Others of you maybe are wondering if the language an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend taught you, where you learned all the cusswords, if it counts -- go ahead and count it. When I asked myself the question, I came up with four, arguably five, if I've been drinking.

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(Laughter)

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(In Italian: With a little bit of wine I can speak Italian.)

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(Applause)

00:38

Cheers!

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But on closer examination, I came up with 83 -- 83 languages, and I got tired and I stopped counting. And it forced me to revisit this definition that we have of language. The first entry said, "The method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured or conventional way." The definition at the bottom refers to specialized fields, like medicine, science, tech. We know they have their own vernacular, their own jargon. But what most interested me was that definition right in the center there: "the system of communication used by a particular community or country." And I'm not interested in altering this definition. I'm interested in applying it to everything we do, because I believe that we speak far more languages than we realize. And for the rest of our time together, I'm going to attempt to speak in one language that is native to every single human being in this room.

01:30

But that changes things a little bit, because then it's no longer a presentation. It becomes a conversation, and in any conversation, there must be some sort of interaction. And for any interaction to happen, there has to be a degree of willingness on both parties. And I think if we just are willing, we will see the magic that can happen with just a little bit of willingness. So I've chosen a relatively low-risk common denominator that can kind of gauge if we're all willing. If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.

02:04

(Claps)

02:05

Now you're talking!

02:08

(In Spanish: For all the people who speak Spanish, please stand up. And look at a person sitting to your side and start laughing.)

02:19

(Laughter)

02:23

Thank you so much. Please be seated.

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Now, if that felt a little bit awkward, I promise there was no joke being had at your expense. I simply asked the Spanish-speaking audience to stand up, look at a person that was sitting close to them and laugh. And I know that wasn't nice, and I'm sorry, but in that moment, some of us felt something. You see, we're often aware of what language does when we speak somebody's language, what it does to connect, what it does to bind. But we often forget what it does when you can't speak that language, what it does to isolate, what it does to exclude. And I want us to hold on as we journey through our little walk of languages here.

03:04

(In Farsi: I'd like to translate the idea of "taarof.") I said in Farsi, "I'd like to translate this idea of 'taarof' in the Persian culture," which, really -- it has no equivalent in the English lexicon. The best definition would be something like an extreme grace or an extreme humility. But that doesn't quite get the job done. So I'll give you an example. If two gentlemen were walking by each other, it'd be very common for the first one to say, (In Farsi: I am indebted to you), which means, "I am indebted to you." The other gentlemen would respond back, (In Farsi: I open my shirt for you) which means, "I open my shirt for you." The first guy would respond back, (In Farsi: I am your servant) which means, "I am your servant." And then the second guy would respond back to him, (In Farsi: I am the dirt beneath your feet) which literally means, "I am the dirt beneath your feet."

03:50

(Laughter)

03:51

Here's an exhibit for you guys, in case you didn't get the picture.

03:54

(Laughter)

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And I share that with you, because with new languages come new concepts that didn't exist before. And the other thing is, sometimes we think language is about understanding the meaning of a word, but I believe language is about making a word meaningful for yourself.

04:12

If I were to flash this series of words on the screen, some of you, you'd know exactly what it is right away. Others of you, you might struggle a little bit. And I could probably draw a pretty clear-cut line right around the age of 35 and older, 35 and younger. And for those of us that are in the know, we know that's text-speak, or SMS language. It's a series of characters meant to convey the most amount of meaning with the least amount of characters, which sounds pretty similar to our definition of languages: "system of communication used by a community." Now, anyone who's ever got into an argument via text can make a case for how it's maybe not the best

method of communication, but what if I told you that what you saw earlier was a modern-day love letter?

04:57

If you follow along: "For the time being, I love you lots, because you positively bring out all the best in me, and I laugh out loud, in other words, let's me know what's up. 'Cause you are a cutie in my opinion, and as far as I know to see you, if you're not seeing someone, would make happy. For your information, I'll be right there forever. In any case, keep in touch, no response necessary, all my best wishes, don't know, don't care if anyone sees this. Don't go there, see you later, bye for now, hugs and kisses, you only live once."

05:26

(Applause)

05:28

Kind of a modern-day Romeo or Juliet.

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In that moment, if you laughed, you spoke another language that needs no explanation: laughter. It's one of the most common languages in the world. We don't have to explain it to each other, it's just something we all feel, and that's why things like laughter and things like music are so prevalent, because they seem to somehow transcend explanation and convey a profound amount of meaning.

05:54

Every language we learn is a portal by which we can access another language. The more you know, the more you can speak. And it's something common that we all do. We take any new concept, and we filter it through an already existing access of reality within us. And that's why languages are so important, because they give us access to new worlds, not just people. It's not just about seeing or hearing, it's about feeling, experiencing, sharing.

06:22

And despite these languages that we've covered, I really don't think we've covered one of the most profound languages, and that's the language of experience. That's why when you're talking with someone, if they've shared something you've shared, you don't need to explain it much. Or that's why, when you're sharing a story and you finish, and the people you're talking to don't quite get it, the first thing we all say is, "Guess you had to be there." I guess you had to be here this week to know what this is about. It's kind of hard to explain, isn't it?

06:50

And for the sake of our research, I'm going to close by asking that you participate one more time in this language of experience. I'm going to filter through some languages, and if I'm speaking your language, I'm going to ask that you just stand and you stay standing. You don't need to ask permission, just let me know that you see me, and I can also see you if you speak this language of experience. Do you speak this language? When I was growing up in primary school, at the end of the year, we would have these parties, and we'd vote on whether we wanted to celebrate at an amusement park or a water park. And I would really hope the party wasn't at a water park, because then I'd have to be in a bathing suit. I don't know about you, but sometimes when I approach a dressing room, my sweat glands start activating on their own, because I know the garment is not going to look on me like it did on that mannequin.

07:42

Or how about this? When I would go to family functions or family gatherings, every time I wanted a second plate -- and I usually did --

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(Laughter)

07:52

it was a whole exercise in cost-benefit analysis, my relatives looking at me like, "I don't know. Do you really need that? Looks like you're doing OK there, bud." Did my cheeks have a big "Pinch me" sign that I didn't see? And if you're squirming or you're laughing or you stood up, or you're beginning to stand, you're speaking the language that I endearingly call "the language of growing up a fat kid." And any body-image issue is a dialect of that language.

08:20

I want you to stay standing. Again, if I'm speaking your language, please go ahead and stand. Imagine two bills in my hand. One is the phone bill, and one is the electric bill. Eeny, meeny, miny, mo, pay one off, let the other one go, which means, "I might not have enough to pay both at the current moment." You've got to be resourceful. You've got to figure it out. And if you're standing, you know the language of barely making ends meet, of financial struggle. And if you've been lucky enough to speak that language, you understand that there is no motivator of greatness like deficiency. Not having resources, not having looks, not having finances can often be the barren soil from which the most productive seeds are painstakingly plowed and harvested.

09:11

I'm going to ask if you speak this language. The second you recognize it, feel free to stand. When we heard the diagnosis, I thought, "Not that word. Anything but that word. I hate that word." And then you ask a series of questions: "Are you sure?" "Has it spread?" "How long?" "Doctor, how long?" And a series of answers determines a person's life. And when my dad was hungry, we'd all rush to the dinner table to eat, because that's what we did before. We ate together, so we were going to continue doing that. And I didn't understand why we were losing this battle, because I was taught if you fight and if you have the right spirit, you're supposed to win. And we weren't winning. For any of you that stood up, you know very well that I'm speaking the language of watching a loved one battle cancer.

10:12

(Applause)

10:17

Any terminal illness is a derivative of that language.

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I'm going to speak one last language. Oh -- no, no, I'm listening. Yeah, yeah, yeah, no no, no no, me and you, right here, yup.

10:36

(Laughter)

10:38

No, I'm with ya. I'm with ya!

10:40

(Laughter)

10:42

Or, imagine the lights are all off and a blue light is just shining in your face as you're laying on the bed. And I know some of you, like me, have dropped that phone right on your face.

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(Laughter)

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Or this one, right? Passenger seat freaking out, like, "Can you watch the road?" And for anybody that stood up, you speak the language that I like to call "the language of disconnection." It's been called the language of connection, but I like to call it the language of disconnection. I don't mean disconnection, I mean disconnection, human disconnection, disconnected from each other, from where we are, from our own thoughts, so we can occupy another space.

11:28

If you're not standing, you probably know what it's like to feel left out.

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(Laughter)

11:38

(Applause)

11:41

You probably -- you know what it's like when everybody's a part of something, and you're not. You know what it's like being the minority. And now that I'm speaking your language, I'm going to ask you to stand, since we're speaking the same language. Because I believe that language of being the minority is one of the most important languages you can ever speak in your life, because how you feel in that position of compromise will directly determine how you act in that position of power.

12:11

Thank you for participating. If you'd take a seat, I want to speak one last language.

12:15

(Applause)

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This one, you don't need to stand. I just want to see if you recognize it.

12:27

Most the girls in the world are complainin' about it. Most the poems in the world been written about it. Most the music on the radio be hittin' about it, kickin' about it, or rippin' about it. Most the verses in the game people spittin' about it, most the songs in the world, people talkin' about it. Most the broken hearts I know are walkin' without it, started to doubt it, or lost without it. Most the shadows in the dark have forgotten about it. Everybody in the world would be trippin' without it. Every boy and every girl will be dead without it, struggle without it, nothing without it. Most the pages that are filled are filled about it. ["It" = Love] The tears that are spilled are spilled about it. The people that have felt it are real about it. A life without it, you'd be lost. When I'm in it and I feel it, I be shoutin' about it. Everybody in the whole world knowin' about it. I'm hurt and broke down and be flowin' about it, goin' about it wrong 'cause I didn't allow it. Can the wound or scar heal without it? Can't the way that you feel be concealed about it? Everybody has their own ideal about it, dream about it, appeal about it. So what's the deal about it? Are you 'bout it to know that life is a dream and unreal without it? But I'm just a writer. What can I reveal about it?

13:41

Why is it that the most spoken-about language in the world is the one we have the toughest time speaking or expressing? No matter how many books, how many seminars, how many life-coaching sessions we go to, we just can't get enough of it. And I ask you now: Is that number that you had at the beginning, has that changed? And I challenge you, when you see someone, to ask yourself: What languages do we share? And if you don't come up with anything, ask yourself: What languages could we share? And if you still don't come up with anything, ask yourself: What languages can I learn? And now matter how inconsequential or insignificant that conversation seems at the moment, I promise you it will serve you in the future.

14:30

My name is Poet Ali. Thank you.

14:32

(Applause)