

FOUR

Serving All Languages

Why are you reading this book in English? For native speakers, that question has a simple answer. English just happens to be the language you grew up hearing from your parents, your community, and your teachers. It is only natural that you would learn to read in English. This is, however, a privileged position to occupy. Many—perhaps even most—of the readers of this book are not native speakers of the language. They are among the half billion people in the world who have learned English through years of intensive study.

According to David Crystal, English is the most widely studied foreign language in the world. Since World War II, it has emerged as the dominant language of global

commerce and culture. English now serves as the adopted common language of India, Pakistan, the Philippines, most of the African continent, and the United Nations. One-quarter of the world's population speaks English as a native or an acquired language.

Whether by chance or by choice, to be fluent in English greatly expands one's reading options. English accounts for 80 percent of the e-book titles available on Amazon.com, 80 percent of academic journals, and more than half of all content on the Internet. The dominance of English as a global publishing language is a chicken-and-egg story. Bilingual and multilingual writers often choose to publish in English to reach the widest possible audience. Publishers are more enthusiastic about investing in English-language titles because the potential market is so large. In turn, people clamor to learn English in large part because the language opens doors to so much cultural and reading material.

Neglected Languages

According to Ethnologue's *Languages of the World*, more than seven thousand languages are in use today. Nearly all have established writing systems, but only one in a hundred has a commercially viable publishing industry. English is the clear leader, accounting for twice as many

books as Mandarin Chinese and German combined. Next follow three global imperialists: Spanish, French, and Russian. Rounding out the top of the list are national languages tied to particularly large economies: Portuguese (Brazil), Italian, Dutch (the Netherlands), Japanese, and Korean. Together, these eleven languages encompass just 22 percent of the world's population, but 83 percent of book publishing.

In the vast majority of languages, demographics and economics make publishing much less profitable. One billion people speak Hindi, making its publishing potential seem strong; but India's per capita income is only around U.S. \$1,500. Educated Indians study English to gain access to books, and India's English-language book sales far outnumber its Hindi-language sales. A handful of other poor but populous languages have vibrant publishing scenes, although not lucrative ones: Arabic, Bengali, and Vietnamese, for instance. Many small but wealthy communities also do significant publishing, though not at significant profit. These include languages like Catalan, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Icelandic, Hebrew, Norwegian and Swedish.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of the world's languages face the dual disadvantage of high poverty and small populations. While a children's book in the United

States might retail for ten to twenty dollars, publishers in Africa and most of Asia must sell books for only a dollar or two if they are to find buyers. It is virtually impossible to earn a return on investment at prices like this when volume is also low. A survey of children's publishing in Africa by Neil Butcher and associates concluded that profitable business models "simply do not exist" in low-income countries, "and the more marginalized the language, the less realistic this is." As a result, "The publishing of children's storybooks in most developing countries has tended to be a labour of love and commitment rather than a major business opportunity."

These economic realities result in very different opportunities for readers in different language communities. English has approximately one billion speakers, and represents the world's largest publishing market. English-speaking children can choose from approximately fifty-five thousand children's picture books currently in print. The world's sixth-largest language, Portuguese, has around 250 million speakers and is one of the world's top ten publishing markets. Yet there are only about two thousand picture books in print for Portuguese-speaking children. Moving further down the list, Zulu has ten million native speakers, making it the world's eighty-second largest language. Yet there are fewer than five hundred Zulu-language children's

books in print. This is not even 1 percent of what is available to English-speaking children. For most languages, the situation is even worse. By my estimate, between 500 million and 1.25 billion children currently suffer from what I call extreme book hunger: in their languages, children's books are not available at any price. Melody Zalava, director of the Asia Foundation's Books for Asia program, explains: "In minority languages, which commercial publishing has no financial incentive to serve, you really have no books. Children are not learning in schools because they are being taught in languages that they do not understand." Organizations intent on improving education in neglected languages have had to grapple with this reality by becoming publishers themselves.

Room to Read

In Zambia, six-year-old Dabora scampers to a shelf in the brand-new library built at her government school. A bright green book has caught her eye. Written in Nyanja and attractively illustrated, its title is *Njala Nakolombo: Hunger Is a Monster*. The topic is something that Dabora has often dealt with in her life. Wide-eyed, little Dabora opens the book, puts her finger to the page, and begins to read. She reads fluently, her voice rising and falling, clearly enjoying the story. This book speaks to her, in her native tongue.

Nyanja is one of Zambia's seven official languages, the mother tongue of about four million people in the region. In line with internationally recommended educational practice, the children at this elementary school start their education by learning to read and write in their native language. In fourth grade, they will begin to study English. If they do well, they will continue to secondary education, which is taught exclusively in English. Dabora's school boasts new facilities, thanks to the American charity Room to Read. Room to Read provided a budget to stock the library shelves, and produced several original children's titles in Nyanja, including the one Dabora reads.

Not far away, Alisha Berger beams with pride at this "small miracle." A former children's book editor in New York, Berger now leads Room to Read's efforts to develop original picture books in the local languages for the communities Room to Read serves. She is in Zambia to see the fruits of their labors. Turning her attention from little Dabora, Berger scans the shelves of the newly stocked school library. There are about a thousand books, an enormous achievement but the selection is not ideal. Locally purchased copies of British fairy tales like *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* feature heavily, supplemented by books donated from overseas, which are a mixture of

great and not-so-great items. Almost nothing is culturally relevant. Almost everything is in English, which Dabora and her classmates barely speak. In the entire library, there are just ten books in the Nyanja language. All of these were published by Room to Read.

Better options are simply not available. Few children's titles have ever been produced in Zambian languages. Once published, they do not stay in print for long, and they can be impossible to find even a few years later. "I was really surprised to learn there was a series of Cambridge University-supported books in Zambian languages," Berger says. But "I can't find them, and nobody seems to know about them." This further contributes to the shortage of relevant titles a child like Dabora is able to access. Berger laments, "Given how my personal habit of reading has made my life incredibly rich with new ideas, worlds, and possibilities, it's hard to conceive of being Dabora, with not nearly enough books to feed her."

Room to Read started its own publishing program out of necessity. "Our organization's primary goal is really not to be a publisher. We want to make sure that children have enough books to develop the skill and habit of reading. So we have fallen into publishing to fill a market gap." Since 2003, the heart of Room to Read's internal

publishing effort has been early readers: short picture books that use compelling stories to introduce phonics and build fluency. The organization has now published more than thirteen hundred original children's book titles in thirty-two languages.

"In many countries where we work, there are almost no children's books," Berger says. "It is a matter of disposable income." As a result, "People haven't seen this type of a story or thought of it as a creative possibility." To assist the imagination, Room to Read leads workshops to train locals to be children's book authors and illustrators. Berger illustrates concepts of visual storytelling—using details in the illustrations to tell a more complex story, even if the text is very simple. Results vary across countries. In parts of Africa, artists typically have less professional training and fewer resources at their disposal. "The work may be painted with student watercolors on newsprint, scanned in at the local copy shop," Berger notes. At the other end, Room to Read's team in Vietnam is particularly strong. "We work with some incredibly talented, very young and eager folks raised on anime and fun cartoony sort of child-appealing artwork, with visual vocabularies. They are fantastic and have really been able to do some work that has attracted the eye of Vietnamese publishing."

Pratham Books

While publishing is a side endeavor for Room to Read, it is the core mission of Pratham Books, a charity based in India. In 1995, the Indian educational organization Pratham began providing early education to children in the slums of Mumbai. Today, Pratham is the country's largest nongovernmental educational organization, serving 4.7 million children throughout India through a network of tens of thousands of volunteers. Pratham's mission focuses on eradicating illiteracy in order to break the cycle of poverty, under the slogan "Every child in school and learning well."

The scale of this challenge is enormous: an estimated 40 percent of the world's illiterate children live in India. Suzanne Singh, chairwoman of Pratham Books, explains: "Half of children with three years of school cannot read on [their grade] level. Because they cannot read, they cannot learn, and in a few years the dropouts begin." Ultimately, about half of Indian children drop out of school, unless interventions to improve reading succeed. Recognizing this, Pratham has piloted, tested, and scaled up cost-effective educational interventions that rapidly improve child literacy.

As these efforts began to achieve success, Pratham recognized the need to support emerging skills with more

reading material. “So libraries began to get set up,” Singh recounts. “And as Pratham set up these libraries, they realized there was not enough content available in many languages. Not enough content for sale, and not at realistic price points.” Pratham spoke to commercial publishers in India and asked them to develop a special line of books that would meet the organization’s needs, but did not get a sufficiently enthusiastic response. Rather than give up, three entrepreneurial philanthropists—Rohini Nilekani, Ashok Kamatha, and Rekha Menon—decided to publish the needed books themselves. In this way, Pratham Books was born.

From the start, Pratham Books was organized as a distinct organization from Pratham. Pratham Books is an independent social enterprise with its own executive board, although it remains in close communication with the older and larger organization. Rohini Nilekani, the founding chairperson of Pratham Books, described its ambitious mission: “We would enable appropriate, indigenuous content of high quality and an attractive price, and in multiple languages, to democratize the joy of reading for India’s children.” At the beginning, Nilekani admits, “We had more passion than experience. We had more commitment than competence.” Through experimentation and error, however, the startup found its way. Today,

Pratham Books is a global leader in charitable publishing innovation.

Nilekani herself penned one of the first titles, *The Annual Haircut Day*, using the pseudonym Noni. Nilekani's delightful book tells the story of a village man with very long hair who wants to have it cut. Unfortunately, everyone is too busy cutting the hair of other people. This problem ultimately leads him to a dramatic encounter with a tiger and a satisfying conclusion. The story derives much of its charm from a classic device of children's literature: exaggerated repetition of a silly-sounding phrase. In this case, the silly phrase is the name of the primary character, Sringeri Srinivas. Because the phrase is a name, it appears identically in all translations of the book—currently including English, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, and Malayalam. Silly Sringeri Srinivas went on to star in other Pratham Books titles, including *Too Many Bananas* and *Too Much Noise*.

In the first year, most copies went to Pratham educators, as originally anticipated. By the second or third year, Singh notes with pride, “everyone was buying from us.” Today, around 15 percent of Pratham Books' production goes into the Pratham network. Other major institutional buyers include Room to Read, UNICEF, the Akshara

Foundation, and the Swades Foundation, as well as many smaller ones. According to Singh, “Anybody who is working in the space of literacy for children buys our books.” Many schools also use local funds to purchase Pratham Books titles featured on the recommended reading lists of India’s Central Board of Secondary Education. Pratham Books now has more than 11 million copies in circulation, mostly in schools and other institutions where they can be used by many children. Through statistical sampling methodology, Pratham Books has estimated that its titles have been read at least 52 million times.

Pratham Books initially relied on members of its staff and network of teachers and volunteers to write and illustrate its first dozen or two stories. Very early on, however, Pratham Books began to commission titles by drawing on the same roster of professional authors and illustrators used by commercial publishers in India. In this way, Pratham Books reproduced a tried-and-true publishing business model. The twist is that philanthropy covers the cost of book development, and the sales price covers only the marginal costs of paper, printing, and distribution. This straightforward approach to creating local literature has worked well in India. The genre of illustrated children’s storybooks is already familiar to India’s English-fluent middle class. There is also a deep roster of local

artistic talent to draw upon, including professional illustrators working in animation and marketing.

Pratham Books has also used a workshop approach, similar to Room to Read's, for some titles. Manisha Chaudhry describes a particularly successful workshop in an extremely challenging setting. "Odisha has over 62 tribes," Chaudhry explains. "These tribes live very close to nature and have a great oral literature. But these students are really at a disadvantage, because there is no printed material available in their language." Pratham Books editor Mala Kumar picks up the story: "We went there with the partner organization that has worked there for a long time, where we listened to stories we had never heard." Chaudhry continues: "We stayed together for three days with eighteen authors from four of these languages. We explored the idea of why a book, why is it important to write a book, why for children? After that they started writing, because they have a lot of stories. But they are used to storytelling, adding details with their eye movement or their hand movement. We needed to stress that you need to be descriptive in the book because the child cannot see your eye movement or hand movement." More than fifty finished stories were read to children from the community to select the ten most popular. Artists in the local tradition of mural painting were recruited

for an illustrators' workshop. "The books came out brilliant," Chaudhry beams. "That style of illustration was new to every other person in the country, and it had a modern twist. And the stories were so cute."

Use of translation to accommodate linguistic diversity was central from the beginning. Manisha Chaudhry, head of content development for Pratham Books, explains the challenge. "There are 786 languages spoken in India on last count. About 29 are officially recognized languages by the government of India. But there are several more that have scripts, and even without government support are producing literature." Chaudhry explains how the organization chose which languages to prioritize. "We started out with English, Hindi, Marathi, and Kannada in 2004. English is international and spoken by all of us, being an ex-colony of the British. If you are a middle-class Indian, you are most likely to be educated in an English-medium school." Other languages were more idiosyncratically prioritized. Pratham began in the city of Mumbai, serving largely Marathi-speaking children. Kannada is the official state language of the nearby city of Bangalore, where Pratham Books is headquartered. Over time, Pratham Books added more Indian languages, and now publishes in more than twenty. A single title is typically printed in at least a dozen languages.

Once all translations are prepared and triple-checked for accuracy, the entire batch goes to printing. By ordering very large print runs across multiple languages, Pratham Books secures better prices. Printers realize economies of scale when they fulfill such orders, because the illustration plates are the same across all the languages, and only the black plate containing the text must be changed. Much of the savings is passed along. Chaudhry explains, “We don’t go in for printing until it’s ready in at least 6 languages—that is the only way we can leverage economies of scale. Our first print run is usually 8,000–10,000 copies. English and Hindi would be larger, and some of the other languages would be smaller, but nothing less than 500 copies.”

Working in non-Roman scripts brings special challenges. “The digital fonts are very well developed in English, but in Indic languages the fonts have a tendency to break up when it goes into printing,” Chaudhry explains. “So it is proofed again and again and again and there is lots of loss in transfer. So if you upload a book in Delhi for printing here, there is every chance that there might be a loss of a diacritic, and if that critical little mark drops off it may change the word and even the meaning of the story. So the proofing has to be very sharp.” Pratham Books’ lead editor, Mala Kumar, agrees: “Our gestation

periods are really long, considering that many of our books are only 12 pages long, 8 pages plus a cover. But multiplied into ten languages, with these problems in each of the languages, the production and proofing necessarily takes a very long time.”

To support this work, Pratham Books prioritizes hiring staff members with multiple language competencies. Chaudhry, for instance, can write both in English and in Hindi, her mother tongue. She also understands Punjabi and Bangla. Mala Kumar writes in English, Hindi, and Tamil, and can understand Kannada and a bit of Gujarati. Kumar explains, “Even though I may not have the language expertise needed to write or review or edit a book in that language, I would be able to talk to people doing that in that language to find out if they are competent enough in that language. I would be talking to people in the southern states who become our resource people there. Similarly, the other editors also get their people around the state they live in, so we get the most authentic voices reflecting that language and local culture. It is still a challenge because there are so many ways of speaking a language.”

The Right to Read

A connection between reading and human rights has long been recognized in terms of liberty from censorship. In

the 1960s, the global community dedicated increased attention to the entitlement of education for literacy. Today, the critical connection between reading and human rights is the need to expand the availability of reading material. Too few children have access to the books they need to develop as readers, particularly in disadvantaged languages. Supporting the right to read means believing that reading or education and pleasure is the entitlement of every child, rather than a privilege of those born into certain language communities.

The right to read is not a new human right, but simply a new way of looking at older ones. Since 1948, international human rights documents have recognized several closely related human rights: freedom of expression, the right to education, the right to science and culture, and minority cultural rights. Between 1989 and today, nearly every country in the world has also joined the newer United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 17 of this convention establishes each government's duty to ensure every child can access media that supports his or her physical, mental, social, moral, and spiritual well-being. It also specifically commits national governments to "encourage the production and distribution of children's books," particularly in minority and indigenous languages and through international cooperation.

Many organizations are working to expand multilingual children's literature: the African Storybook Project, Books for Asia, the Global Book Alliance, Nabu.org, Worldreader, and myriad small publishers serving specific language communities. Room to Read and Pratham Books are two of the largest and most successful. Their programs make clearer than ever before what it means to effectively promote the right to read. These efforts must be multiplied many times over, in every country and for every language. A task of this scale is not one that any single charity, or even a handful of international agencies, can accomplish on its own. It will require the coordinated efforts of the United Nations, national governments, foundations, businesspeople, charities, publishers, authors, and illustrators. Recognition of the universal human right to read offers a moral framework to unite their efforts.