

The iterations developed through this project attempt to examine themes of language and identity, specifically the sociocultural identity that arises from my knowledge (or lack thereof) of Urdu. While I was taught Urdu by a maulvi<sup>1</sup> for many years as a child, I have since lost touch with the language - now only using it sporadically to converse with (elder) family members, and very rarely in its written form.

In this project, I began with my name (ماہم / Maaham) which led me to the Urdu letter meem (م / m); the letter then became a means of examining the visual and cultural systems embedded in Urdu learning materials, particularly those for children (qaidas<sup>2</sup>). While qaidas function as instructional tools for letter recognition and pronunciation, they also introduce specific vocabularies, images and associations that shape ideas around religion, morality and identity. I believe these are themes reflective of my own interests and positionality. By exploring typographic compositions and word-image pairings, I would like to investigate both the visual form of Urdu letters as well as how meaning is constructed not only through language but through the methods used to teach it.

*What does meem (m) stand for or signify? What is the story being told through Urdu qaidas and if we consider Urdu as taught alongside Arabic, often by a religious teacher, then how does that influence the way in which the language is learnt? Is meem for masjid (mosque) or mandir (temple)? Why is Urdu associated with Muslim(ness); what is the "language ideology"<sup>3</sup> of a (minority) community? Do we assert our identity through the language or is the language (or a distance from it) an expression of our identity?*

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<sup>1</sup> A maulvi is a Muslim scholar or teacher

<sup>2</sup> Qaidas are fundamental primers or a beginner's textbook designed to teach the basics of the Urdu language

<sup>3</sup> The term as used to refer to a set of beliefs and perceptions that speakers have about their language (Ahmad, 2014)

**Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents by Lisa Gitelman**

(a) Gitelman, L. (2014). Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents. Durham: Duke University Press, pp.1-20.

(b) *“Documents are integral to the ways people think as well as to the social order that they inhabit. Knowing- showing, in short, can never be disentangled from power—or, more properly, control... In the modern era documents have cultural weight mostly according to their institutional frames—the university for example...”*

(c) While defining a textbook or educational material as a “document” may itself be a contested statement, this reading helped me to look at the “document” as a specific object in itself and apply its functionality to my own enquiry. Documents, as described in the quote above - and Urdu qaidas in particular - are reflective of the institutional frameworks in which they exist. Urdu, while not a “Muslim” language, is often taught in conjunction with religious education; thus, the document of a qaida presents an intersection of typography, pedagogy and social identity within an educational system. The reading also encouraged me to think about ways in which the document is “used” also contribute to the shaping of a specific linguistic and cultural identity (i.e. the qaida through acts of repetition, tracing and memorization).

**Exercises in style by Raymond Queneau**

(a) Queneau, R. and Wright, B. (2012). Exercises in style. Richmond: Alma Classics.

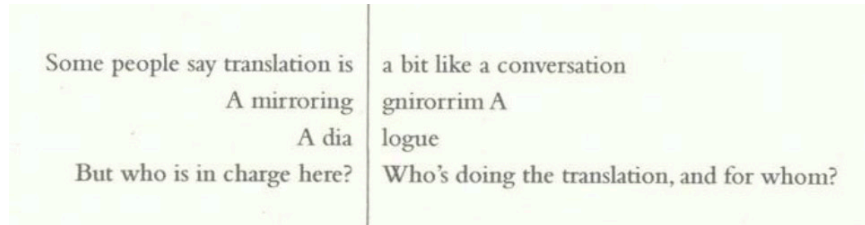
(b) *“...His purpose here, in the Exercises, is, I think a profound exploration into the possibilities of language. It is an experiment in the philosophy of language. He pushes language around in a multiplicity of directions to see what will happen...”*

(c) This reference helped me think of language as something flexible and fluid - often constructed through repetition and context rather than as a fixed system. In Exercises in Style, the repetition of a single narrative through different structures demonstrates how meaning can be shifted by experimenting with form and style. I attempted to perform a similar exercise with the Urdu letter *meem* (m) by using the letter to explore various typographic and phonetic forms. By focusing on a specific letter across different forms, combinations and layouts, I wanted to treat language as a visual structure - which, in this case, also very specifically shapes and is shaped by a social and cultural context.

### Preserving the Tender Things by Ayesha M Siddiqi

(a) Siddiqi, A.M. (2022). Preserving the Tender Things. In: J. Tiang and K. Bhanot, eds., Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation. Inpress Books - Ipsuk, pp.83-102.

(b)



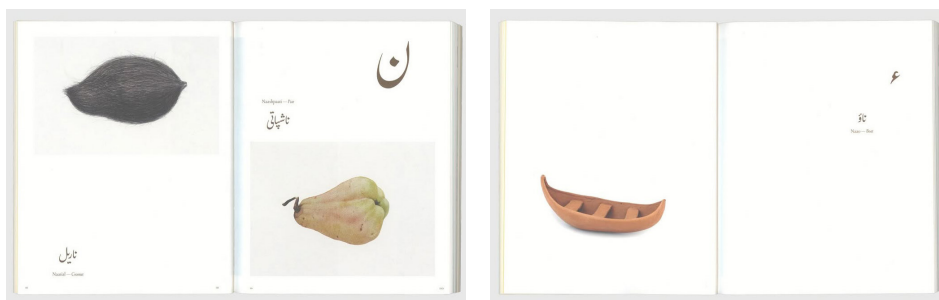
(c) My initial enquiry for this project began with the idea of translation and my knowledge (or lack thereof) of languages I grew up with and those considered to be my “mother tongue”. As someone raised in a Muslim household - this meant, for a few sporadic years of my life, Arabic and Urdu lessons primarily learned through Quranic and religious study; however, as a third culture kid, these lessons were irregular and ceased completely by the time I turned twelve. And while spoken Urdu remains a part of my life, both languages now feel distant and inaccessible. Siddiqi’s essay, specifically in its critical examination of the act of translation, helped me to think of translation as a political act shaped by distance and interpretation. This became relevant to my enquiry into Urdu typography and pedagogy: what does it mean to translate, reconstruct or analyse a language that is both familiar and foreign?

### MEDIUM/ METHOD

### Alphabet Book // Urdu Qaida by Ali Kazim

(a) Ali Kazim, A., Nasar, H. and Kamran, A. (2026). Alphabet Book/ Urdu Qaida. Ochre Books.

(b)



(c) Ali Kazim’s Alphabet Book was particularly relevant to my project as it reimagines the qaida (or Urdu alphabet) as a beautiful visual journey, acting as celebration of culture and linguistic identity. This directly influenced my own exploration of the Urdu letter meem, as well as the systems through which language and identity are constructed. Visually, this project explores how the aesthetics of qaida can be recontextualized through a contemporary approach, while still retaining similar elements of instruction and nostalgia. Similar to my own approach, the book uses the format of qaidas to explore the intersection of Urdu typography and pedagogy.

## Polyphony of Urdu in Post-colonial North India by Rizwan Ahmad

(a) Ahmad, R. (2014). Polyphony of Urdu in Post-colonial North India. *Modern Asian Studies*, [online] 49(3), pp.678–710. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x13000425>.

(b) *“...symbolic meanings of languages are not fixed: they are in a state of flux—continually constituting and reconstituting themselves...the reconstitution of symbolic meanings can take place fairly quickly if powerful social and political forces are present...the meanings of languages are organically linked to the sociolinguistic conditions of their speakers and evolve in conjunction with them.”*

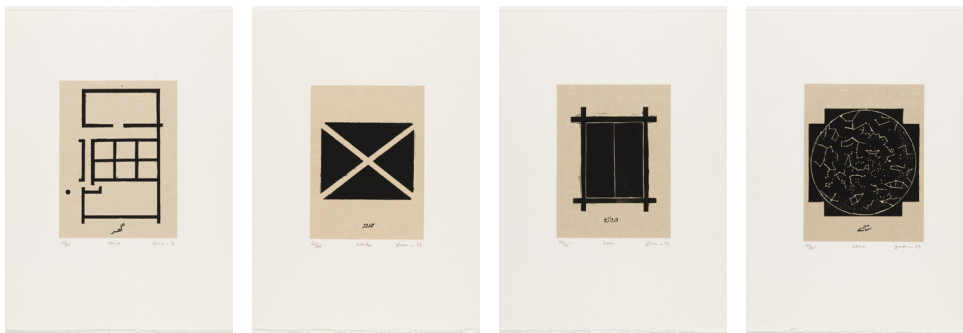
(c) Ahmad’s essay helped me to understand more critically and clearly the politicisation of Urdu in India and the social processes that have assigned various, often harmful, symbolic meanings to the language. Ahmad traces this evolution across three generations and demonstrates the ways in which language ideology shifted following Indian independence and the Partition in 1947; interestingly, I can apply his findings to my own family – particularly in the differences between my perception and knowledge of Urdu compared to that of my parents or grandparents. I believe this reference helps situate my personal experiences with Urdu within a larger socio-political context by highlighting the historical and social factors that have shaped the ways in which the language has been taught, understood and culturally positioned.

## WILD CARD

### Home is a Foreign Place by Zarina

(a) Zarina (1999). Home Is a Foreign Place. [Woodcut]  
Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/132514>.

(b)



*“All the words I have chosen are triggers for memory. My memory is intertwined with the word... I do realize that the home I’m talking about has become a foreign place to me, but I revisit it with the help of language.”*

(c) Zarina’s Home is a Foreign Place was especially relevant to my enquiry into language, identity and cultural familiarity with Urdu. In this series, Zarina uses woodcut prints paired with single Urdu words, exploring how language functions both as memory, place and distance - this format is also similar to the pedagogical structure of the qaida. The project not only uses Urdu words but reflects a visual and emotional identity that is indicative of Zarina’s own cultural identity and positionality. Similar to this approach, my enquiry is also shaped by engaging with a language that is both intimate and partially inaccessible. This work also informed my understanding of typography as a carrier of personal and collective history.

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