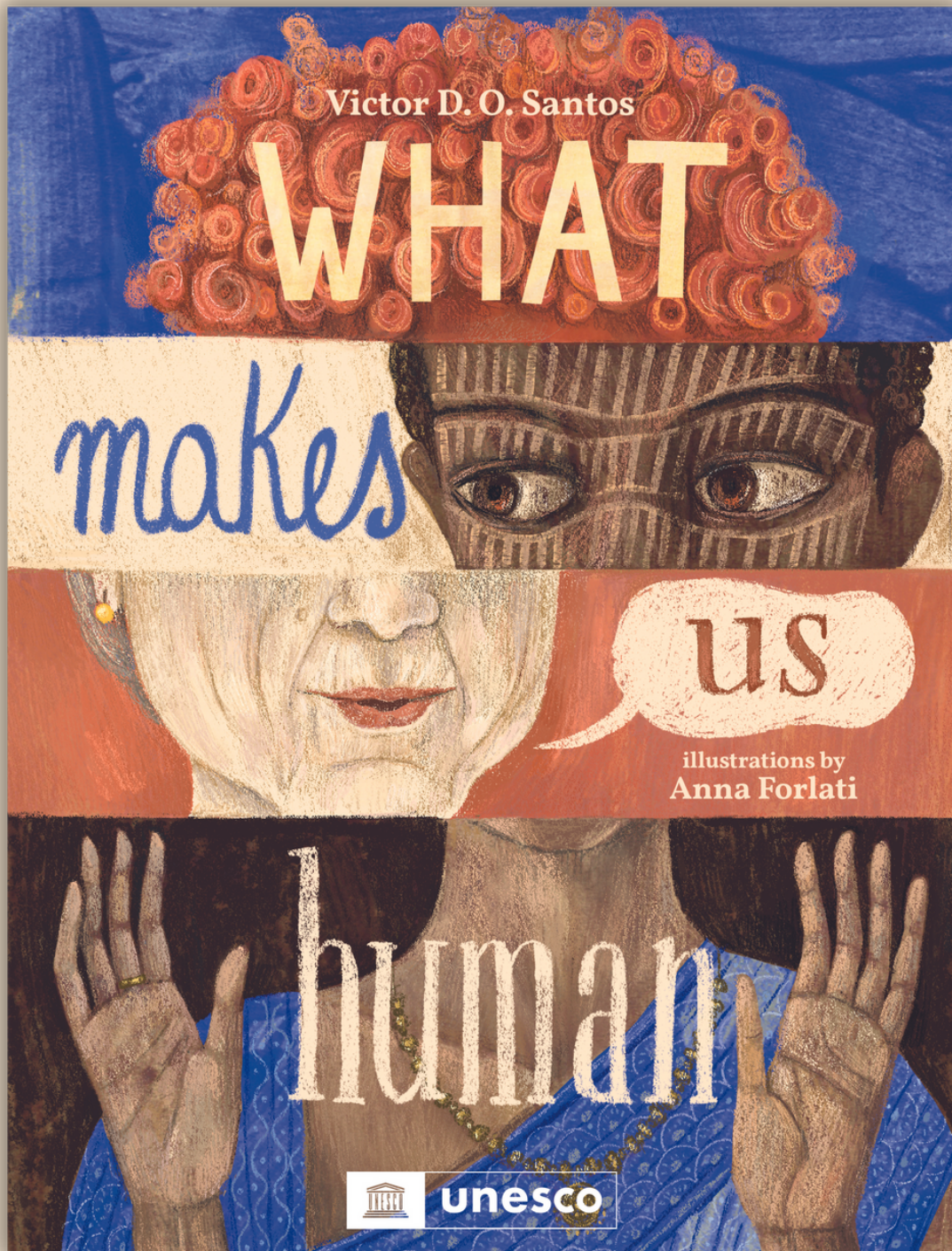


# A DISCUSSION GUIDE



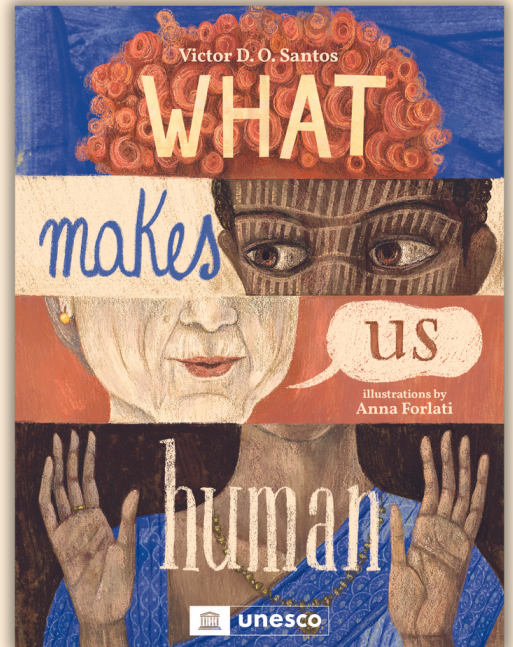


# ABOUT THE BOOK

*A poetic riddle about language, history, and culture, released in partnership with UNESCO for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032).*

Can you guess what I am? I have been around a very, very long time. You hardly knew me as a baby, but now you cannot get me out of your head. There are thousands of me, all over the globe, and some of those forms are disappearing. I can connect you to the past, present, and future. Who am I—and why am I so important to humanity?

Clever and thought-provoking, *What Makes Us Human* is an accessible introduction to how language connects people across the world. This unique book celebrates all the amazing ways communication shapes our lives, including through text messages on phones, Braille buttons in elevators, and endangered languages at risk of disappearing.



*What Makes Us Human* / Hardcover / ISBN: 9780802856258 / \$18.99 / 48 pages / Ages 5–9

# ABOUT THE CREATORS

**VICTOR D.O. SANTOS** is a linguist and children’s author who has lived in six different countries and studied ten different languages. *My Dad, My Rock*, his English-language debut (Scribble), was a Kirkus Best Book of 2022. Originally from Brazil, Victor now lives in Des Moines, Iowa, where he and his Ukrainian wife are raising two multicultural, multilingual children. Follow Victor on Instagram @linguacious\_llc and visit his website at [authorvictorsantos.com](http://authorvictorsantos.com).

**ANNA FORLATI** is an artist and illustrator whose books include *Yoga Poses for Kids* (Albert Whitman) and *My Dad, My Rock* (Scribble). *What Makes Us Human* was featured in dPICTUS’s Unpublished Picture Book Showcase and was exhibited at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair. Anna has studied Greek and Latin and is currently learning Arabic. She lives in Turin, Italy. Visit Anna’s website at [annaforlati.com](http://annaforlati.com).



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *What Makes Us Human* reads as a riddle, in which the actual theme of the book (language) is not fully revealed until the last page. Were you able to guess what the theme of the book was before the last page? What page, illustration, or sentence gave away the answer for you and why? As you read the book, what other things did you think could have been the theme?
- How do you think the phrases “I am sure you saw me today. Or heard me. Or felt me” are connected to language? How can a language be “felt”? (Hint: think about Braille and human emotions!)
- When the first-person narrator (language) says “But now, you can find me in many different shapes and forms,” what do you think is meant by “shapes” and “forms”? (Answer: ‘shapes’ refers to the various writing systems used in the world, and “forms” refers to visual forms, as in reading/writing/sign language, aural form, as in listening and speaking, or tactile form, as in Braille). Of the various writing systems seen in the book, do students have a preferred one? Did students notice that in the garden scene in the book, there are many different writing systems hidden in the vegetation?
- In the text, the first-person narrator (language) says “I can be as soft as a kitten or as harsh as the Alaskan winter.” In what ways can language(s) be soft? And in what ways can language(s) be harsh? The text also states: “I can show you love. But also hurt you.” How do you think language can be used to love or to hurt someone?
- Do you think that some languages have more speakers than others? Why might that be the case? Why might someone stop speaking one language and start speaking another?
- Can you imagine being the last speaker of the language you learned from your parents as a child? How do you think you would be affected? What would you do? Do you think it would be just as easy to convey your thoughts, emotions, and ideas in a second or foreign language as it is in your native/mother tongue? Why is that?
- What do you call someone who speaks two languages (answer: bilingual)? What do you call someone who speaks more than two languages (answer: multilingual)? How do you think that speaking more languages could help you “open doors” in life? How do you think it could help you connect with other people? How could more doors (opportunities) open to people who speak more than one language?
- A culture is the traditions and practices of a group of people (including music, cooking, and religion). How might languages and cultures be connected? How do you see that in *What Makes Us Human*? How could losing a language hurt or even pose a threat to the survival of a culture?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONT'D)

- Set a timer for three minutes and name as many living languages as you can. How many languages did you name? Then check the back matter of *What Makes Us Human* for the number of living languages in the world. Did you think there were fewer or more than this number? What made you think that?
- As described in the back matter, *What Makes Us Human* is officially associated with the United Nations' International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032). Indigenous languages are some of the most beautifully complex and difficult to learn in the world, yet they tend to be the ones in the highest risk of going extinct soon. Why do you think so many indigenous languages are at risk of disappearing?
- If you look at the children's book section in your local library, what other languages besides English are books available in? What are those languages? Are they languages spoken in your community?
- In the spread with the text "Some are disappearing quickly. By the time you grow up, too many could be gone," why do you think the illustrator decided to use birds? What are the birds carrying on their beaks (answer: letters in endangered or extinct languages)? The bird at the bottom of the page is called "dodo" and is a famous bird. It was first identified by Dutch soldiers in the year 1800 and less than eighty years later, it was extinct due to being hunted and having its habitat destroyed by humans. What are some things that humans may do that could have a negative impact on the future of some languages, even increasing their chance of going extinct forever, like the dodo?
- The pages in which a girl is seen in an elevator with a dog offers an important clue for solving the riddle of the book and guessing the topic of the book (language). Why is that? (Answer: the girl has a walking stick and a seeing dog, indicating she is blind + the buttons in the elevator show Braille, the tactile writing system used by visually impaired people.) How do you think that being visually impaired could affect your ability to function in a world so full of spoken language?



# INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Go to the website below and use the map to locate the native/indigenous language spoken near to the city where you live or were born.

[ethnologue.com/insights/how-many-languages/](https://www.ethnologue.com/insights/how-many-languages/)

Once you know the name of the language, use the Internet to do some research and answer the questions below. Here are some additional websites that can be useful in your research about this language:

- [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com)
- [ethnologue.com](https://www.ethnologue.com)
- [omniglot.com](https://www.omniglot.com)

## Research Questions to Answer

Where is the language spoken?

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How many native speakers of this language are estimated to be left?

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# INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Can you find any online videos or audio recordings of the language being spoken? If not, are there any dictionaries of the language where you could learn a word or two in the language and teach to the rest of the class? What does the word mean?

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Does this language use the same writing system as English? (i.e., the Latin alphabet, with letters A, B, C, D, etc.)? If not, describe how this language's speakers record their language.

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# OTHER HANDS-ON ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR TEACHERS

## EXPLORING THE NAVAJO LANGUAGE

Students should do some research to find out: (a) where Navajo is spoken (answer: Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado); (b) why the Navajo language was so important in the past for the United States (answer: it was used as a secret code language to help the US win World War 2, with the Navajo people who participated in this effort becoming known as code talkers and receiving presidential medals for their patriotic efforts).

If students would like, they can try to learn a few words for animals in Navajo from the video below. Are there any sounds they find difficult to pronounce and that maybe they do not have in their own language(s)?

[youtube.com/watch?v=YVceGzTaL3s&ab\\_channel=daybreakwarrior](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVceGzTaL3s&ab_channel=daybreakwarrior)



# OTHER HANDS-ON ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR TEACHERS

## EXPLORING ASL AND BSL

One of the languages depicted in the book is American Sign Language (ASL). Can you find the *What Makes Us Human* page in which sign language is depicted? Did you know that sign language is not just a basic way to communicate in which people try to make random hand signs that kind of look like what they are describing? And did you know that American Sign Language is not simply a translation of American English? Sign languages are full, complex languages in themselves, with their own grammar, vocabulary, and accents. If you think sign language is easy, try to observe someone using sign language and guess what they are talking about.



In this activity, students should try to learn 5 words of their choice in American Sign Language (ASL) or British Sign Language (BSL). These two varieties are quite different from one another, with only about 30% of the signs being the same between them, even though both countries where they are used speak English! Once students learn the signs (via an app like Lingvano, a YouTube video, or best of all, an ASL speaker), they should share them with the class, asking their classmates to first try to guess the meaning of the word before the answer is revealed.

**Additional learning activities can be found at [authorvictorsantos.com](http://authorvictorsantos.com).**



# OTHER CHILDREN'S BOOKS ABOUT LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND GLOBAL DIVERSITY

Florence, Melanie. *Stolen Words*. Toronto: Second Story, 2017.

Heck, Ellen. *A Is For Bee: An Alphabet Book in Translation*. Hoboken, NJ: Levine Querido, 2022.

Menon, Uma. *My Mother's Tongues: A Weaving of Languages*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2024.

Wang, Andrea. *Luli and the Language of Tea*. New York: Holiday House, 2022.

Winston, Sam. *One and Everything*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2022.

## LINKS FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Britannica, "Why Do Languages Die?"

[britannica.com/story/why-do-languages](https://www.britannica.com/story/why-do-languages-die#:~:text=Most%20languages%2C%20though%2C%20die%20out,advantages%20or%20to%20avoid%20discrimination)

[die#:~:text=Most%20languages%2C%20though%2C%20die%20out,advantages%20or%20to%20avoid%20discrimination](https://www.britannica.com/story/why-do-languages-die#:~:text=Most%20languages%2C%20though%2C%20die%20out,advantages%20or%20to%20avoid%20discrimination)

Ethnologue, various articles

[ethnologue.com](https://www.ethnologue.com)

Omniglot, various articles

[omniglot.com](https://www.omniglot.com)



# PRAISE FOR WHAT MAKES US HUMAN

"Will make readers wonder more with every turn of a page . . . Illustrations are beautifully rendered . . . The profundity of the topic of language itself hits its mark. A beautiful addition to all libraries." — *School Library Journal* (STARRED REVIEW)

"Thought-provoking . . . engaging . . . [a] fine book." — *Horn Book*

"Lovely . . . satisfying . . . appealing." — *Booklist*

"[An] intoxicating consideration of the connections between language and humanity." — *Betsy Bird (School Library Journal's A Fuse #8 Production)*

"*What Makes Us Human* does what the best books do. It brings us together, celebrating our differences and commonalities while engaging the reader with beautiful illustrations and text that challenges and rewards." — *Sydney Smith, author/illustrator of Do You Remember? and Small in the City, illustrator of I Talk Like a River*

"A beautifully illustrated book about our shared humanity. An engaging read and wonderful concept." — *Felicita Sala, illustrator of Dark on Light, Be a Tree, and As Night Falls: Creatures That Go Wild After Dark*





# PRAISE FOR WHAT MAKES US HUMAN

“As you cross time and space and solve a riddle full of beautiful metaphors, an amazing answer awaits at the end to make us look at our existence in a new way.”

— Jihyun Kim, author/illustrator of *The Depth of the Lake* and *The Height of the Sky*

“A thoughtfully guided quest for the identity of a narrator both foreign and familiar. Forlati’s textural mixed-media illustrations offer a map of meaningful keys and symbols.” — Ellen Heck, author/illustrator of *A Is for Bee*

“*What Makes Us Human*, through its journey of searching for the identity of the narrator, opens a vast window to understanding the world and ourselves. ‘I’ becomes a tree, putting down roots; a river, threading time; it transforms into a beautiful song and into the thunderous sounds of a pouring bombardment. Gradually, ‘I’ becomes ‘You’ and morphs into ‘Us.’” — Hyo-eun Kim, author/illustrator of *I am the Subway*

“A splendid achievement by the author and illustrator. They convey a powerful message about language in a simple, moving, and effective way. I’m sure children will love it - and I suspect adults too will appreciate the universal appeal of the way they tell their story.” — Professor David Crystal, Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bangor (Wales) and author of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language and Language Death*

- Selected for the White Ravens 2023 catalogue, by the International Youth Library in Munich, Germany (Brazilian Portuguese edition)
- Selected for the dPICTUS Unpublished Picture Book Showcase 4 (2022 edition), receiving 14 votes from a panel of 50 international publishers.
- Selected for the 2023 Bologna Children’s Book Fair exhibition Beauty and the World: The New Nonfiction Picture Books (March 5, 2023, Bologna)
- Published in partnership with UNESCO in many editions in association with the United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages
- Already translated into over 20 languages