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Close Study Two: 'The Only Speaker of His Tongue'

A lexicographer wants to research the last speaker of an Aboriginal language, an ordinary 'flabby thickset man' the 'only surviving speaker of his tongue' whose people were massacred but he will not share his language and stays silent. This leads to philosophising about the nature of language.

Pre-reading

Student activity

Start in groups before reading the story and consider: If you had to choose twenty words to record for posterity from your language which words would you choose? Why did you choose these words? Explain your choices to the class.

The philosopher Wittgenstein wrote that 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.' What does this mean? What limits are placed on your worlds because of language? The idea of language appears in one of Malouf's essays 'Made In England' (published in *A First Place* by David Malouf). Read this extract from the essay:

A language is the history and experience of the men and women who, in their complex dealings with the world, made it; but it is itself one of the makers of that history, and the history that makes it is determined – limited by its having developed in one direction rather than another; in one direction to the exclusion of other makers of history. It is also shaped and changed by what is said in it. (p. 302)

Write a plan for a story about language using Wittgenstein's and Malouf's ideas.

Post-reading

- Trace the references to silence and mystery and comment on why they are mentioned so often in this story about language.
- What is the power of language? Why does it attract the lexicographer?
- How is the land connected to language?
- Paul Sharrad writes about this story: 'The Aborigine knows the words but he also knows the lexicographer has not the authority to hear them... [he] becomes a 'site of resistance' ('A Delicate Business: David Malouf's Shorter Works', p.102) Why does the lexicographer face resistance? Consider the two characters and what each of them represents and what each of them wants.
- What new insights has this story offered to your understanding of language?
- Is this a story according to your definition of story?

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Extended study

Students might study this short story alongside the novel *Remembering Babylon*. What is Malouf saying about language in the two texts?

Follow-up activity

Silence: Malouf's stories are as much about silence as about speech. Many characters sense something they can't voice. Students can be allocated one story each for close reading; they should look for moments of silence and inarticulateness in their story. Each student should share this with the class.

Other related stories for comparison:

Indigenous issues: 'Blacksoil Country', 'Great Day', 'The Valley of Lagoons'

Character of the researcher: 'A Traveller's Tale'