

Language

When Lewis and Clark's expedition headed west from St. Louis, the group knew the land ahead was populated by numerous Indian nations that spoke many different languages. Communication would be a challenge.

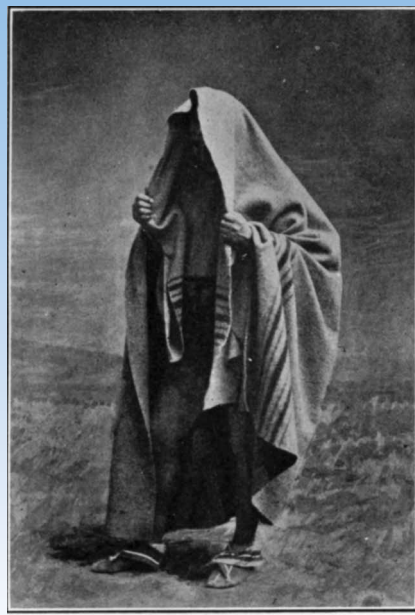
Today it's difficult to count how many tribal groups the expedition met. Sometimes Lewis and Clark thought they met several Indian groups, when the groups were really part of the same culture. Other times the tribes were not near the river when Lewis and Clark passed through. Some tribes knew Lewis and Clark were in their vicinity and chose not to interact with them.

One way the various tribes communicated with each other was



Sign language gestures from "Sign Language Among North American Indians," Bureau of American Ethnology, 1879-80 — Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis
In 1880 Tendoy, then chief of the Lemhi Shoshone, spoke in sign language with an Apache when both were visiting Washington, D.C. Someone recorded their signs, shown here.

Communication in the West took many forms. Language in Indian societies extended into space and movement — how a person stood, wore his clothes, gestured, performed rituals, made facial expressions and exchanged objects.



When Lewis first met a Shoshone man, he tried to communicate by gesturing with a blanket. He made what he thought was "the signal of friendship" by pretending to spread the blanket on the ground. But the man did not understand and fled. Native Americans used blankets to convey many messages, but robe language was not always easy to translate. In about 1905 an Omaha man demonstrated this by posing with a blanket. What is he communicating here?*

*ANSWER: He is communicating his anger by withdrawing and pulling the blanket over his head. How do people communicate anger today?



Feast bowl, pre-1865 — Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, ©President and Fellows of Harvard College, photo by Hillel Burger

"The means I had of communicating with these people was by way of Drewyer [Drouillard] who understood perfectly the common language of jesticulation or signs which seems to be universally understood by all Nations we have yet seen. It is true that this language is imperfect and liable to error but is much less so than would be expected. The strong parts of the ideas are seldom mistaken."
Meriwether Lewis, August 14, 1805

through sign language. Lewis and Clark hired George Drouillard, who was part Shawnee, to go along on the expedition. He was skilled in sign language.

How do you communicate with someone who doesn't speak your language? Besides gestures and body language, Lewis and Clark used symbolic objects and gifts. Lewis and Clark often gave Indians American flags. They brought three sizes of flags for presentation to tribal leaders. Often an object that held strong meaning for one side did not translate to the other. **What do you think a colored piece of cloth meant to Indians who had never heard of the United States?**

"When the dried meat was brought to the men, they just looked at it and put it back. It was really good to eat, but they seemed to think it was bark or wood. Also, they didn't know that camas roots are good to eat ..."
Sophie Moiese, Salish, early 1900s



Map of the Louisiana Purchase Indian Lands — Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis
This map shows the tribal lands through which the expedition traveled. If you carefully trace the red and yellow lines, how many can you count?

"Not everything translates directly. For example, in our language, there is not a word that means the same thing as art. We also don't have a word for wilderness, places that are untrammelled by man and pristine and need to be protected. That's a notion that's foreign. And we don't have words for husband and wife. We have words for different ages of girls, different familial relationships in our kinship system depending on whether they're on the mother's or father's side. We have lots of terminology that describe loved ones, old one, girl, little one, but nothing that translates husband and wife."
Bobbie Conner, Cayuse-Nez Perce, 2002

Even communication among the members of the corps could be challenging, because they spoke different languages. If Lewis wanted to speak to Sacagawea, he needed two interpreters. It was important to know who spoke what language. Lewis and Clark often used language chains to communicate with the Indians. When Lewis and Clark reached the Shoshone Indians in present-day western Montana, they were desperate to obtain horses to cross the mountains. Fortunately, Sacagawea spoke the Shoshone language. It took five people to pass along a message.

Today, many Indian languages are in danger of being lost because the younger generations are not learning to speak them.

"Language itself is an integral part of our culture, you cannot separate culture and language. Our language describes our world view, how the world is around us, the way we look at it. We don't look at it in the same way that other people do."
Ronald "Snake" Edmo, Shoshone, 2001

Activity

Help Meriwether Lewis, who speaks only English, ask Cameahwait, who speaks only Shoshone, for horses. See if you can put the people in the correct order to communicate the message.*

Did You Know?

Thomas Jefferson devised a list of vocabulary words to compare vocabularies of Indian languages. Lewis collected 23 vocabularies, all of which were lost in an accident. He was assuming that all cultures have words to describe certain things. This is not always the case.

Captain Lewis speaks English	Sacagawea speaks Hidatsa and Shoshone	Charbonneau speaks Hidatsa and French	François Labiche speaks English and several Indian languages but not Shoshone	Cameahwait speaks Shoshone

*ANSWER: From left to right: Lewis, Labiche, Charbonneau, Sacagawea, Cameahwait

Omaha man demonstrating robe language. c. 1905. from "The Omaha Tribe," Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, 27th Annual Report — Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis