

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

"The means I had of communicating with these people was by way of Dreyer [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.



Shoshone



Chief



Many

Sign language gestures from "Sign Language Among North American Indians," Bureau of American Ethnology, 1879-80 — Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

In 1880 Tendo, 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.

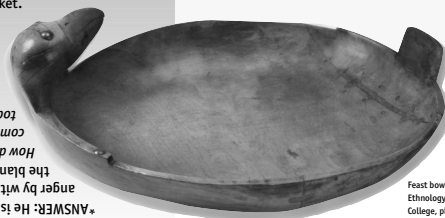
Communication in the West took many forms. Language in Indian societies extended into space and movement — how a person stood, wore his clothes, gestured, performed rituals, made facial expressions and exchanged objects.



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

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 anger by withdrawing and pulling the blanket over his head. How do people communicate anger today?

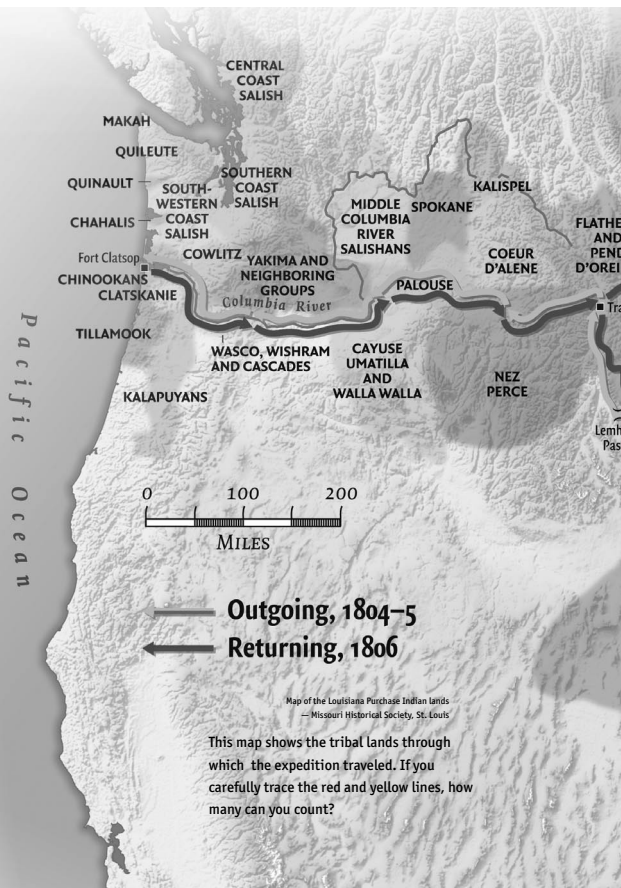


Feast bowl, pre-1865 — Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, ©President and Fellows of Harvard College, photo by Hillel Burger

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?**

Sharing food was an important part of communicating friendship. Sometimes a person's reaction to the food also communicated a message. Here is oral tradition from the Salish nation about some expedition members' reactions to a gift of food:

"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



— Outgoing, 1804-5
— Returning, 1806

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?