Gestures and Symbols

Unit: Language (Elementary and Middle School)

From *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide* by Carolyn Gilman

On the other side of the Continental Divide, Meriwether Lewis finally met up with a Shoshone Indian. But the explorer immediately faced a problem: his translator, Sacagawea, was miles behind with the boats, and neither he nor his three companions spoke Shoshone. He had come prepared with only a single word: *tab-ba-bone,* which he believed to mean "white man" but which modern-day Shoshone speakers either do not recognize or do not agree on. In this critical moment, language failed Lewis as a mode of communication, and he had to resort to other means. Fortunately for him, language in Indian societies extended beyond the purely verbal. It included space and movement—how one stood, wore clothes, gestured, performed ritual, made facial expressions, and exchanged objects. Unfortunately for Lewis, the messages conveyed by such means were sometimes no more translatable than words.

His first recourse was to a blanket. "Unloosing my blanket from my pack, I mad[e] him the signal of friendship . . . which is by holding the mantle or robe in your hands at two corners and then throwing [it] up in the air higher than the head bringing it to the earth as if in the act of spreading it, thus repeating three times. this signal of the robe has arrisen from a custom among all those nations of spreading a robe or skin for ther gests." The symbol he had chosen was an evocative one. Native Americans

conveyed many messages with robes, from purposes and moods to roles in society, by the way they wore and gestured with them. But in this case, the signal "had not the desired effect." Lewis explained: "He suddonly turned his ho[r]se about, gave him the whip leaped the creek and disapeared. . . . with him vanished all my hopes of obtaining horses."

What went wrong? One possible explanation may lie in a set of photographs taken years later of an Omaha man who demonstrated for an anthropologist the subtleties of Plains Indian robe language. The body language of the Omaha man was not European. For example, Euro-Americans had no qualms about displaying anger in public; anger was how they got their way. In Plains Indian society, by contrast, leadership was signified by a man's ability to control his emotions and stay calm. Men who grew angry in public hid their faces with their robes in a gesture more eloquent and intimidating, to those who knew how to read it, than any amount of Euro-American bluster. If Lewis mistook any such subtleties, or conveyed one thing through his unconscious body language and another through his robe gesture, it may have made the message as incomprehensible as his crying out *tab-ba-bone!*

Having missed their chance to communicate with the lone rider, Lewis and his party continued to walk westward. The day after crossing the divide, they again encountered Indians. "We had not continued our rout more than a mile when we were so fortunate as to meet with three female savages. . . . they appeared much allarmed but . . . seated themselves on the ground, holding down their heads as if reconciled to die." This time, Lewis tried the universal language of gifts. "I took the elderly woman by the hand and raised her up. . . . I gave these women some beads a few mockerson awls some

pewter looking-glasses and a little paint. . . . I now painted their tawny cheeks with some vermillion which with this nation is emblematic of peace." Whether or not Lewis was right about the symbolism of vermillion, the language of gifts worked. The women "appeared instantly reconciled," and Lewis prevailed on them to lead him to the Shoshone camp.

But they had gone only two miles when they "met a party of about 60 warriors mounted on excellent horses who came in nearly full speed." In this risky moment, when any slip could have resulted in disaster, Lewis tried yet another symbol with great resonance to his own culture: a flag. In a single expressive square of cloth, the flag wove together messages about his national identity, his mission, his republican beliefs, and his wishes.

He had been trying to show the flag to the Shoshone for several days. Previously, he had "fixed a small flag of the U'S. to a pole which I made McNeal carry. and planted in the ground where we halted or encamped." Once before he had unfurled it to show, without success. Now, he "advanced towards them with the flag," but it was the gifts that continued to do the talking. "The women . . . informed them who we were and exultingly shewed the presents which had been given them. . . . The principal chief Ca-me-ah-wait made a short speach to the warriors. I gave him the flag which I informed him was an emblem of peace among whitemen and now that it had been received by him it was to be respected as the bond of union between us."

Gestures of greeting came next. "These men then advanced and embraced me very affectionately in their way which is by puting their left arm over you wright sholder . . . while they apply their left cheek to yours and frequently vociforate the word *âh-hi-e,*

âh-hi-e that is, I am much pleased. . . . we wer all carresed and besmeared with their grease and paint till I was heartily tired of the national hug." As strange as this greeting seemed to Lewis, shaking hands seemed as strange to a Crow chief met by the trader François La Rocque in the same year, 1805. "When we offered to shake hands with this great man, he did not understand the intention, and stood motionless until he was informed that shaking hands was the sign of friendship among white men: then he stretched forth both his hands to receive ours." But even stranger to Indians was the facial expression of smiling, not part of most Native American greetings; in fact, Euro-American smiling seemed improper and ridiculous to many tribes.

The burden of communication then passed to the Shoshone. They continued to use symbolic objects, but they chose ones from their own culture, and the messages may have been as opaque to Lewis as the flag had been to the Indians. As soon as the men reached the Shoshone camp, they "were seated on green boughs and the skins of Antelopes. . . . The chief next . . . began a long cerimony of the pipe. . . . [He] lit his pipe at the fire kindled in this little magic circle, and standing . . . uttered a speach of several minutes in length at the conclusion of which he pointed the stem to the four cardinal points of the heavens. . . . he . . . repeated the same c[e]remony three times, after which he pointed the stem first to the heavens then to the center of the magic circle smoked himself with three whifs and . . . then held it to each of the white persons and then gave it to be consumed by his warriors." Despite the photographic detail of Lewis's observations, the rich symbolism and the religious meaning of the ceremony were lost on him.

Another message was conveyed by the etiquette surrounding moccasins. “They . . . pulled of[f] their mockersons before they would receive or smoke the pipe. this is a custom among them as I afterwards learned indicative of a sacred obligation of sincerity in their profession of friendship . . . as much as to say that they wish they may always go bearfoot if they are not sincere; a pretty heavy penalty if they are to march through the plains of their country. . . . this we complyed with.”