

Student Reading Group 1 – Language of the Robe

Unit: Language (Elementary and Middle School)

Paraphrased from *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide*
By Carolyn Gilman

When they came to the Rocky Mountains, Lewis and Clark needed to find the Shoshone Indians. They needed to obtain horses from the Shoshones to help them travel over the mountains. At 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 learned 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 way to communicate, and he had to find other ways. Fortunately for him, language in Indian societies was not just verbal. It included space and movement—how one stood, wore clothes, gestured, made facial expressions, and exchanged objects. Unfortunately for Lewis, the messages conveyed by such means were sometimes no more translatable than words.

He first tried to use a blanket. “Unloosing my blanket from my pack, I made 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 arisen from a custom among all those nations of spreading a robe or skin for their guests.”

Native Americans conveyed many messages, from purposes and moods to roles in society, with robes, by the way they wore and gestured with them. But in this case, the signal didn't work. Lewis explained, "He suddenly turned his horse about, gave him the whip leaped the creek and disappeared. . . . 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 Plains Indian robe language. The body language of the Omaha man was not European. For example, Euro-Americans did not hesitate to display 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 yelling. Lewis may have sent mixed messages through his gesture.