

Plains Indian Sign Language*

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Indian sign language, also known as Plains Sign Talk, is an intertribal language of gestural signs used by American Indians of the Great Plains region. Although origins remain obscure, Spanish explorers documented its use on the southern Plains during the sixteenth century. Extensive trade networks and political alliances brought tribes who spoke many different languages into regular contact with each other. Vocal communication was difficult and people probably maximized the panhuman tendency to resort to gestures in such contexts. Over time, such gestures were conventionalized into a language with a unique vocabulary and spatial grammar.

The sign language became so widespread that, despite dialect differences, a Blackfoot from the Canadian border could communicate with a Comanche from Texas, although neither understood the other's spoken language. The impetus for widespread standardization came from intertribal functions, but people within the same tribe integrated speech and signs, especially during storytelling and public oratory, and in communication with deaf and elderly persons. Plains Sign Talk flourished particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, along with many other aspects of Plains cultures, as horse nomadism and the permanent population of the Plains increased.

Although simple spoken trade "jargons" (pidgins) developed in other regions of the continent, for example, Mobilian jargon in the Southeast and Chinook jargon on the Northwest Coast, the Plains area was unique in developing a signed *lingua franca*. Three factors shed some light on how and why it developed. First, no one nation in the Plains area was economically or politically dominant, so no one spoken language became widespread. Second, in contrast to philosophical and religious biases against the body in European thought, Plains people traditionally did not consider gestures to be more "primitive" than speech as a means of communicating. Third, sign languages have properties that make them easier to learn than spoken languages. Extensive use is made of signs that look like the objects and actions to which they refer (iconic signs), in addition to signs that are grammaticalized pointing gestures (indexical signs). This makes signs quicker to learn than the abstract sound combinations of spoken language. Contrary to the popular misconception about the universality of gestural signs, however, Plains Sign Language is unique among the many sign languages of the world. It is not mutually intelligible with American Sign Language, the language used by members of the American Deaf community.

Colonial suppression of indigenous languages and forced accommodation to English led to a gradual decline in the use of Plains Sign Language during the twentieth century. Fluent sign talkers are rare, but the language remains active in numerous contexts, including storytelling, public oratory, ritual events,

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games, dances, and other social events, and wherever deafness is present. When speaking their native language, Plains people often continue to accompany their speech with signs. On the Northern Plains, educators working to revitalize the endangered spoken languages of the region, for example, Blackfoot, Assiniboine, Crow, and Cheyenne, incorporate Plains Sign Language in the language-maintenance programs.

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