

## SIGN LANGUAGE AND PICTURE WRITING

Among the Plains Indians varieties of dialects of six distinct languages were spoken. Nor were Indian languages simple, as many people believe. Large vocabularies and complicated grammar were often present. Even within the same family grouping of Indians, such as the Sioux, tribes were often unable to communicate except through the sign language.

Sign language was a major invention of the Plains Indians. No one knows how it started, but perhaps it was begun when several tribes of strangers found themselves camped nearby on a buffalo hunt. The Plains Indian had no alphabet, but like the Chinese they used a form of picture writing, in which each sign stood for a word or an idea. It must have existed in prehistory, since the Conquistador Coronado's men saw Indians making use of it. It became so effective over the years that friendly tribes who lived close to one another for long periods of time never bothered to learn their neighbor's language. Signs did as well. In sign language, a white man was designated by drawing a finger across the forehead-the sign for "hat". Later, a number of "hat-wearers" learned sign language, and were able to "talk" as freely to Indians as the Indians "talked" among themselves.

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