Revisiting Syncretism in Blackfoot

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This paper presents an analysis of syncretism in the nominal inflectional system of Blackfoot. Nouns in Blackfoot are inflected for ANIMACY, NUMBER, and OBVIATION features, realized by one of four fusional suffixes (Fig. 1). Like all Algonquian languages, Blackfoot exhibits syncretism in its nominal paradigm. The suffixes *-iksi* and *-yi* both cross-cut categories to realize distinct meanings without corresponding distinctions in form.

Figure 1. Blackfoot Nominal Paradigm

	Animate		Inanimate
	Proximate	Obviative	—
Singular	*-wa*	*-yi*	
Plural	*-iksi*		*-istsi*

Building on prior work (Bliss & Oxford 2015, 2017), I reexamine these syncretisms in terms of markedness (Béjar & Hall 1999, Béjar 2000, Nevins 2011) and impoverishment (Halle & Marantz 1993, 1994). My proposal is that the shape of the Blackfoot paradigm reflects the relative markedness of the features it encodes. Following Nevins (2011), the presence of a marked feature on the noun triggers the impoverishment of a less marked feature, allowing a single form to realize an otherwise incompatible set of meanings. In other words, syncretic suffixes are derived by suppressing certain featural contrasts in order to preserve distinctions among more highly marked features.

To derive *-iksi* (animate plural), the highly marked PLURAL feature triggers the deletion of conflicting OBVIATION features that are less marked. For *-yi* (obviative singular), ANIMACY features are deleted in the context of the relatively more marked OBVIATIVE feature. Taken together, this yields a hierarchy in which NUMBER is more marked than OBVIATION, and OBVIATION is in turn more marked than ANIMACY (NUMBER > OBVIATION > ANIMACY). This is born out in the Blackfoot system, where singular-plural contrasts are always maintained, proximate-obviative distinctions are leveled for animate plurals, and animacy is not marked on obviative singular nouns.

This analysis can be extended to Algonquian more broadly, where varying patterns of syncretism across the family may be attributed to language-specific relationships among features, and recurrent patterns may point to deeper facts about Algonquian as a whole. Beyond Algonquian linguistics, this has implications for the theorization of features and paradigms more broadly; and for language revitalization, where linguistic analysis can be leveraged to support grounded documentation and pedagogy.

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