

Description of Relative Pitch Movement in Blackfoot Words with Multiple Pitch Accents

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Introduction: Pitch accents and other prosodic aspects in Blackfoot have been discussed for a few decades. The accent location in Blackfoot is considered idiosyncratic and marked inherently (Frantz 2017). Weber (2012) advances the concept and claim that it is largely predictable. From a pedagogical point of view, however, predictability alone does not make the pronunciation accessible for language teachers to incorporate into classrooms (Fish 2028). This paper investigates and describes relative pitch patterns in Blackfoot words with multiple accents.

Background: Fish (2017) shares his perspective as a Blackfoot community language teacher: rather than providing information only on the location of prominence, the focus of pronunciation instruction should be on explaining the relative pitch movement throughout a word. A previous study of pitch movement reveals that pitch patterns are predictable once the accent location is determined (Miyashita and Weber 2020), and a visual guide of Blackfoot word melodies has been developed (Fish and Miyashita 2017).

Issue: The pedagogical tool that provides learners with a visual guide for practicing pronunciation is based on the previous study and therefore limited in terms of the type of words supported: the words have two, three or four vowels, with one pitch accent per word (Fish and Miyashita 2017; Miyashita and Weber 2020). However, many Blackfoot words contain multiple accents, especially when the word is a verb that is morphologically highly complex, and the prosodic structure of Blackfoot words with multiple accents has not been extensively discussed.

Impressionistic description: While the prosodic study of a word with multiple accents is scarce, Frantz (2017) provides an impressionistic description with the word *máátaissikópiiwa* ‘he’s not resting’ as an example, stating “an accented syllable toward the end of a word of several syllables may actually be of lower pitch than an unaccented syllable earlier in the word” and “the accented syllable will still be relatively higher in pitch as compared with the syllable which follows it” (3-4). This description sets an important starting point for further study.

Goal & Result: This paper provides instrumental accounts for the relative pitch movement of Blackfoot words with two accents using Praat (Boersma and Weenink 1992–2022), drawing on the impressionistic description of Frantz (2017) and the theoretical claim of Miyashita and Weber (2020). Among 33 words pronounced by a native speaker, the study examined 10 with accents both on the first vowel and on the third or later vowel. The study’s results support the previous studies. In addition, it offers a visual representation of the pitch movement of a word with two accented vowels: there is a tendency to have relatively flat pitch movement among a series of unaccented vowels toward the second accented vowel.

Significance: The present study bears a theoretically interesting component. It challenges the abstraction of prosodic study that symbolizes tonal characteristics as H or L pitch. The study also augments the method of word melody visualization (Fish 2018). Therefore, it can contribute to the community’s language reclamation efforts when it is adopted for language teaching.

References

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