

Not Just “Broken English”: Some Grammatical Characteristics of Blackfoot English

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Based on a set of written and oral sources from the mid 1950s and the early 21st century, we sketch an outline of the grammar of Blackfoot English, a distinct variety of Indigenous English spoken by some members of Blackfoot communities in Southern Alberta. Closer analysis of grammatical characteristics of Blackfoot English shows that it is not simply a form of “bad” or “broken” English, but that it has its own rules of grammar. A comparison with parallel structures in the Blackfoot language shows that some rules of Blackfoot English grammar reflect aspects of the grammar of Blackfoot. A better understanding of the nature of the Blackfoot English dialect might help educators and speech-language pathologists better understand the language use of their students and clients.

Indigenous Englishes

Many Indigenous people in Canada live in a linguistically complex world in which at least three or four language varieties play a role: (a) an Indigenous language (sometimes more than one), (b) one of Canada’s two official languages: standard (Canadian) English (S(C)E) or standard Canadian French, (c) a local variety of nonstandard (Canadian) English (NSE) or nonstandard (Canadian) French, and (d) a local ethnically specific Indigenous English (IE) or Indigenous French. This article is concerned with Blackfoot English (BE), a specific variety of IE.¹

The existence of distinct Indigenous² Englishes (IE) in Canada is becoming increasingly accepted by some Aboriginal Elders, community members, educators, and speech-language pathologists and by linguists with an interest in Canadian dialectology, sociolinguistics, and the role of language in (Indigenous) education (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2005, 2006; Darnell, 1993; Epstein & Xu, 2003; Heit & Blair, 1993; Mulder, 1982; Peltier, 2008, 2009; Sterzuk, 2008, in press; Tarpent, 1982; Toohey, 1985, 1986; see also the recent special issue of *Clinical Linguistics and Phonetics*, 22(8), 2008; and last but not least, the symposium that led to this special issue of *Canadian Journal of Native Education*; for Indigenous French, see Rosen, 2008). Anecdotal evidence and a small but thought-provoking body of literature (Alford, 1974; Ball et al.; Flanigan,

1983; Leap, 1982; Long & Christensen, 1998; Neha, 2003; Peltier; Toohey) suggest that aspects of IE occurring in the speech of (often monolingual) English-speaking Indigenous children are often one of the reasons for a diagnosis of language delay or impairment, which then follows these children throughout their school careers. Children may be inappropriately referred for speech-language therapy, which not only deprives them of useful classroom time, but also incorrectly and unfairly stigmatizes them as delayed or impaired rather than bidialectal, perpetuating the persistent "difference-equals-deficit" attitude toward language diversity prevalent in so many classrooms (Edwards, 2010).

A recurring comment in the literature concerns the lack of proper linguistic, sociolinguistic, and ethnographic descriptions of IE (for similar points made with reference to the United States, see Bartelt, 1993, 2001; Neha, 2003; Wolfram & Christian, 1979). This is important, because practitioners who deal with Aboriginal children such as educators and speech-language pathologists cannot be expected to begin developing more creative and appropriate ways of handling linguistic differences if they do not have access to basic information about relevant characteristics of the language varieties spoken by their students/clients (Crago & Westernoff, 1997).

In this article, we provide a preliminary inventory of some key grammatical characteristics of Blackfoot English (BE), a variety of English spoken by members of the Blackfoot Confederacy in Southern Alberta, Canada.³ We hope that an awareness of the existence and special nature of these specific characteristics by educators at the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels may allow teachers, writing instructors, and speech-language pathologists to put them in their proper context and find more appropriate ways of assisting their students in acquiring SE in addition to, rather than in place of, their home variety.⁴

We are acutely aware of the extremely preliminary status of our investigations and of the limitations imposed by the number and nature of our data. Nevertheless, we feel it is warranted even at this early stage to share some of our results, simply because we are convinced that the availability of even the beginnings of a description of specific varieties of IE is needed to underpin any further applied work in this area. We sincerely and humbly hope that the reader will accept our sketch in the spirit in which it is intended: as a first step to be built upon.

Data

Our preliminary study is based on three sources. The first is a BE manuscript from the mid 1950s by Joe (Joseph) Little Chief (Blackfoot name: Pe-ta-kis-kis-na-ma, White Eagle) from the Siksika reserve east of Calgary (Little Chief, 1956). He was born in 1894 and entered the Crowfoot (St. Joseph) Catholic residential school in 1900, where he remained probably until 1911 and where he learned English as a second language. In

1956 he sold a large collection of handwritten English-language manuscripts to the Glenbow Museum and Archives in Calgary. The texts contain an account of Blackfoot life and culture as Little Chief knew it, based on his own experience and on knowledge gathered from other prominent Blackfoot people.⁵ Little Chief's writings provide us with a rich source for the nature of the type of English acquired in the early residential school setting: a very important setting given that several generations of Blackfoot people, many of whom are now middle-aged people raising children and grandchildren, received their first and sometimes only training in English in this context.

The second source consists of a set of short essays and exercises written by Blackfoot students at the University of Lethbridge during the 2008-2009 academic year. Most of these students are from the Kainai (Blood) and Piikani (Peigan) Reserves near Lethbridge and Fort Macleod and vary in age from their early 20s to mid 50s. Examples from this source are indicated with the year and a reference number.

The third source consists of our own, as yet unsystematic, observations made in oral interactions with a variety of Blackfoot individuals from all three Canadian reserves over the past few years. Examples based on observations from the oral language are marked as oral and indicated with the approximate date of observation. We hope to be able to conduct more systematic investigations of oral language use in a variety of settings and genres and with a variety of speakers in the near future.

Some Grammatical Characteristics of Blackfoot English

Our collection does not aim at completeness. In selecting features for inclusion in our sketch, we have applied the following criteria.

1. We have restricted ourselves to morphosyntactic characteristics, for the time being ignoring any lexical, pragmatic, discourse-related, or phonological features, which we hope to address in future work.
2. We have as much as possible focused on those characteristics of BE that occur in both periods. These features cannot be reduced to simple transfer features resulting from incomplete second-language acquisition given the fact that they persist in the spoken and written language use of people who generally speak English rather than Blackfoot as their first language. They can be argued to be part of stable, intergenerationally transmitted variety of English rather than idiosyncrasies in the speech of individual speakers.
3. We have mainly selected those characteristics of BE that have a potential source in the grammar of Blackfoot. We do not, of course, suggest that this means that all these features are the direct result of Blackfoot influence on BE. The question of their origin is a much more complicated matter, which we hope to address elsewhere. We nevertheless hope that pointing out parallels in the grammar of Blackfoot will highlight the extent to which Blackfoot linguistic

structures may be perpetuated in BE (see especially Leap, 1993, for this type of argument with respect to American Indian Englishes).

4. We have excluded NSE features that also occur widely in the speech and/or writing of non-Aboriginal Anglo-Canadians, selecting only those that seem to be unique to BE in the sense that they distinguish it from the NSE of non-Aboriginal speakers (although many of them do occur in other varieties of IE; for recent descriptions of Canadian varieties of IE, see especially Ball et al., 2006; Heit & Blair, 1993; Mulder, 1982; Peltier, 2008, 2009; Tarpent, 1982). For example, in the student writings we have many examples of irregular past tense for past participle, as in *Our times have **took** a dramatic turn* or *Her parents had always **did** their work*. These examples are not specifically BE or IE: although they would probably not use them in writing, well-educated Anglo-Canadian adults around the university of Lethbridge can be heard saying things like *I could have **went** back to my office*.
5. We have selected mainly those morphosyntactic characteristics of BE that can be expected, both on the basis of the literature and on the basis of our own personal experience in talking to educators, students, and speech-language pathologists, to be most likely to cause problems or confusion in educational contexts and/or to lead to references for further assessment in the area of language and literacy. Although individual speakers may be proficient in a continuum of speech styles all the way from BE to SE, and many report an ability to switch consciously between the two varieties, it nevertheless seems to be the case that the characteristics that we discuss here seem to cluster in particular individuals. Therefore, the occurrence of one or a few of these features should prompt teaching and speech-language personnel to probe actively for the others in order to gain a more complete profile of the linguistic abilities of individual students.

In the following sections, we present characteristics related to the verb, the noun, the pronoun, possessive constructions and articles, and demonstratives.

Characteristics Related to the Verb

Verbs Uninflected for Tense

Where SE requires the verb to be inflected for past tense, BE may omit the inflection and have an uninflected verb instead. This occurs quite frequently in Little Chief's (1956) texts as shown in examples 1-6; it may affect both regular verbs as in 1, 2, 5, and 6, and irregular verbs as in 3, 4, and 6 (verbs inflected for past tense underlined, uninflected verbs in boldface; all spellings as in the originals).

1. they were about out of meat and **need** some clothes (M-4394-1:t1)
2. they camped from one place to another findly they **camp** in a place (M-4394-1:t1)
3. after he **eat** it was dark (M-4394-1:t1)

4. so they both looked for their daughter but could not find her so they **give** up (M-4394-1:t1)
 5. so I **jump** him and took my knife and **stab** him (M-4394-8:t2)
 6. he took his pipe **light** it and **pass** it from his left (M-4394-23:t1)
- Comparable examples from the U of L students occur especially frequently in the writing of some students, whereas others do not exhibit this feature at all.
7. There were times when a lot of people would stare and to me it **look** like they were judging my nephew. (2009.10)⁶
 8. Cheechoos identity was a Cree from Moose Factory, father **live** off the land, **chop** wood, had traplines to capture his food. (2009.16)
 9. ... she had one friend named Eleanor whom she **tell** and **relate** many of her feelings with. (2009.18)
 10. The photo session was in the plans of Harlem and it was suppose to be only one family but instead everybody **show** up at the studio. (2009.22)

It is important to note that the occurrence of uninflected verbs does not mean that the writers do not know how to inflect verbs for past tense: all the examples given include both inflected and uninflected verb forms, and they may even appear in both forms next to each other in the same sentence as in example 2. Verbs uninflected for tense occur only when the time reference of the clause is clear either from the context, from time adverbials, or from preceding or following inflected verbs. This means that there is never confusion about when the event designated by the verb took place: verbs are only unmarked for tense when tense marking is truly semantically redundant.

It is a well-known fact of Blackfoot grammar that tense marking is optional in most contexts (Frantz, 2009; Ritter & Wiltschko, 2004, 2005). Past tense is often expressed by the "simple absence of both the durative aspect and future prefixes" (p. 36). Many verbs allow both inflectional and noninflectional marking of past tense, so that multiple equivalent forms may exist side-by-side as in:

11. a. nit-ókska'si 'I ran' b. nit-s-í-kska'si 'I ran'
 1-run 1-TR-PAST-run (Frantz, 2009, p. 37)

This ties in well with the optional nature of inflection for tense in BE: the writers do know how to inflect English verbs according to SE rules, but their BE grammar offers them the additional option of expressing past tense by the absence of inflection when the context provides sufficient clues to establish time reference. (See the next section for a discussion of possible phonological factors involved in the omission of *-ed* endings.)

Uninflected Participle Forms

Past participles undergo various morphological modifications. Infrequently, a present participle is substituted for a past participle. These cases all involve past participles ending in *-en*, leading us to suspect the feature

might be phonological in origin as is also suggested by Little Chief's spelling of *wooding* for *wooden* (M-4394-23:t11) and *olding* for *olden* (M-4394-17:t2) and the present-day pronunciation of *human being* as *human bean*.⁷ From Little Chief we have:

12. ... after they all have **eating** (M-4394-17:t2)

13. ... he was badly scratch and **biting** (M-4394-18:t2)

From the U of L students we have the following example.

14. ... when she was **taking** away from her parents ... (2009.17)

With participles ending in -ed, the ending may be omitted, resulting in an uninflected form:

15. he was badly **scratch** and biting (M-4394-18:t2)

16. all was **sentence** to be **hang** (M-4394-19:t2)

17. when he was **finish** he went in that hole (M-4394-23:t2)

Similar examples occur in the students' writings:

18. She was pretty like Ann Margaret and everybody like her, but this was **ruin** when she got **rape**, did not want to be pretty anymore. (2009.16)

19. ... at the beginning of the movie Will was immediately **place** on the basketball team. (2009.22)

20. We are living in a **fast pace** world ... (2009.6)

21. ... but Will does not want to get **involve** with them. (2009.22)

22. ... because the black coat had **use** religion as a scare tactic ... (2009.17)

The fact that these ending-less forms occur in writing suggests that the absence of [-t] or [-d] is not purely phonological.⁸ Restrictions on word-final consonant clusters are frequently mentioned for many IE and other NSE dialects (Bartelt, 2001; Bautista & Gonzalez, 2006; Leap, 1993; Platt, Weber, & Ho, 1984; Rickford, 1999). Although Consonant Cluster Reduction may, therefore, easily be explained as a common simplification process, it could also be a feature originating in Blackfoot, which does not allow any consonant clusters either at the beginning or at the end of the syllable (with some exceptions involving /s/, Derrick, 2006). In combination with the absence in Blackfoot of sounds like /l/, /r/, and /v/, this results in present-day pronunciations such as:

23. a. [ko:w wɪn] 'cold wind'

b. [to:w mi] 'told me'

c. [o:w leidi] 'old lady'

d. [twew] 'twelve'

e. [fal] 'five'

f. [ɛn] 'end'

There is no direct Blackfoot parallel for these uninflected past participles, because Blackfoot does not have a comparable word class. Passives as in examples 15-16 and 18-19 above are expressed by means of impersonal verbs.

24. Ikóónii'pi ómistsi ksíkkokóówaistsi
 Ikooni-'p-yi om-istsi ksikkokóówa-istsi
 Take.down-21-PL DEM-INAN:PL tent-INAN:PL
 'We (incl.) took those tents down'/'Someone took those tents
 down'/'Those tents were taken down' (Frantz, 2009, p. 44)

Perfect aspect as in ex. (17) and (22), is expressed with a verbal prefix *ákaa-/lkaa-*:

25. Oma imitááwa íikáóoyiwa
 Om-wa imitáá-wa ii-Ikaa-ooyi-wa
 DEM-3SG dog-3SG PAST-PERF-eat-3SG
 'that dog had eaten' (Frantz, 2009, p. 38)

The closest semantico-syntactic equivalent to adjective-like participles as in ex. (20) would be a variety of nominalized construction types that roughly translate into English relative clauses (Frantz, 2009).

A direct source of unmarked past participles can, therefore, not be found in Blackfoot, and we must look for another explanation for the occurrence of this feature. Peltier's list of IE features (cited in Ball et al., 2006) includes an item suggesting difficulties with verb+*en* and verb+*ed* type participles, but she gives no concrete examples and the list is not specific as to tribal and/or language background.

Infinitive Constructions

Infinitive constructions may omit the particle *to* as in examples 26-28 from Little Chief and 29 from one of the U of L students.

26. they started [**to**] dig under their bed (M-4394-1:t1)
 27. they made their plans how they were going [**to**] attack (M-4394-23:t14)
 28. to wait for his wife [**to**] come back (M-4394-3:t2)
 29. ... the play ... is Shirley Cheechoo's elaboration of her own voyage for her [**to**] reclaim her identity ... (2009.20)

As with the participles discussed above, Blackfoot does not have a word class equivalent to an English infinitive, and expressions requiring one in English correspond to completely different kinds of constructions in Blackfoot. In English, inchoative or immediate future is expressed by means of complement taking predicates such as 'start' in example 26 and '(be) going to' in example 27, which take complements such as 'dig' and 'attack'. In Blackfoot, the English complement verb would correspond to the main verb and the inchoative or (immediate) future aspect would be expressed as prefixes on that main verb.

30. Anná pookááwa áyaakasai'niwa
 Ann-wa pookaa-wa ayaak-wa:sai'ni-wa
 DEM-3SG child-3SG IMM.FUT-cry-3SG
 'that child is about to cry'/'that child is going to cry' (Frantz, 2009, p. 33)

English expressions like 28 and 29 would correspond to finite complement-like or purpose clauses in Blackfoot, such as:

31. nomohtó'too kááhksspommookssoaayi
 n-omoht-ó'too k-ááhk-sspommo-o:k-i-hs-oaa-yi
 1-SO-arrive(AI) 2-NFACT-help-INV-1-CONJ-2PL-CONJ
 'I came for you to help me' (lit. 'I came (that) you might help me')
 (Frantz, 2009, p. 109)

As with the participle constructions discussed above, there is, therefore, no parallel Blackfoot construction type that could be the direct source of the *to*-omission we see here: rather, the complete absence of anything like a *to*-infinitive might explain its variable occurrence in BE.

Omission of 'To Be'

Various forms of 'to be' may be omitted, whether used as copula as in examples 32-34 as auxiliary as in examples 35-37, or as existential verb as in examples 38-39 (omitted verb forms added in boldface square brackets).

32. a nice looking fellow his name [**was**] Pretty (M-4394-6:t1)
 33. you will live [**to be**] an old man like me (M-4394-6:t1)
 34. the leader told his men now we [**are**] near the Camps (M-4394-7:t2)
 35. those beavers you [**are**] trying to kill he is one of them (M-4394-3:t2)
 36. just when they [**were**] cutting the ropes of the two horses the Cree woman went out of her tent (M-4394-4:t2)
 37. those fellows [**are**] taking they horses (M-4394-4:t2)
 38. he than moved to where Water-loo Lake [**was**] (M-4394-3:t1)
 39. they [there] [**is**] some one watching (M-4394-3:t2)

We have similar examples from present-day BE, including omitted copula 'be' in 40-41, omitted auxiliary 'be' in 42-43, and omitted existential/presentative 'be' in 44.

40. So this [**is**] why I can relate to the storie and understand. (2009.10)
 41. I should [**be**] able to remember (oral; fall 2009)
 42. when we [**are**] doing things like that (oral; fall 2009)
 43. they [**are**] gonna say no (oral; fall 2009)
 44. there [**is**] no privacy if Harlem hears about somebody doing something. (2009.22)

In considering possible parallels in Blackfoot, it is important to distinguish between the three main uses of the verb 'to be.' Blackfoot does have a verb that translates as 'to be,' but it does not occur in many of the grammatical contexts where SE requires it and BE allows for its omission.

Copula constructions, used to link a subject noun phrase with a predicate noun (phrase) or adjective, require a form of the verb 'to be' in English, but not in Blackfoot. In Blackfoot, adjectives and nouns used in what would be non-verbal predications in English are fully inflected verbs (Frantz, 2009).

45. a. soka'pii (II) 'be good' (said of inanimate entities)
 soká'piiwa 'it is good'

- be:good(II)-3SG (Frantz, 2009, p. 23; Frantz & Russell, 1995, p. 215)
 b. nínaa 'man, chief'
 nínaa-Ø-wa 'he is a man, chief'
 man-be-3SG (Frantz, 2009, p. 106)
 kit-áak-s-ina-yi 'you will be chief'
 2SG-FUT-TR-chief-be (Frantz, 2009, p. 24)

Corresponding to auxiliary 'be' in English progressive and immediate future constructions, we find aspectual affixes in Blackfoot. Compare the English immediate future/inchoative expression '(be) gonna' in example 43 with the Blackfoot immediate future prefix *ayaak-* in example 30; and compare the English progressives ending in -ing in examples 35-37 and 42 with the durative prefix *á-* in 46.

46. á-waawahkaa-y(i)-aawa 'they are playing'
 DUR-play-PL-PRO:PL (Frantz, 2009, p. 33)

Even existential/presentative uses of 'be' in constructions of the type 'there is/are/was ...' in examples 39 and 44 above may also lack the equivalent of a verb 'to be' in Blackfoot. Blackfoot does have an existential verb 'to be, exist,' which is used in constructions like:

47. áak-itstsi- 'pa aohkí-yi
 FUT-be(II)-UNSP.SUBJ water-SG:INAN
 'there will be water' (Frantz & Russell, 1995, p. 104)

But such constructions may also lack a verb. In 48, a new character is introduced into a story simply by means of an NP, with no verb at all.

48. Omá kipitáakiwa niitá'piiksippitáakiwa
 om-wa kipita-aaki-wa niitá'p-iik-ippita-aakii-wa
 DEM-3SG old-woman-3SG really-very-old-woman-3SG
 '(There was) this old woman, (she was) a really old woman ...'
 (Genee, 2009, p. 936)

In summary, it appears that BE may omit forms of copula, auxiliary and existential/presentative 'to be' under the same conditions where such a verb would not occur in Blackfoot.

Characteristics Related to the Noun

Number Marking

Nonstandard or absent number marking in Little Chief's (1959) texts includes both cases of singular for plural as in examples 49-54, and plural for singular as in examples 55-58 (affected nouns in boldface, quantifying expressions underlined).

49. and start to tell the people to keep on making **arrow** (M-4394-2:t3)
 50. it was the Kootneys **Indain** (M-4394-2:t6)
 51. the other two **boy** got a scalp (M-4394-2:t5)
 52. White Eagle done a lot of **raid** (M-4394-2:t7)
 53. his father was one of those **warrior** (M-4393-2:t1)
 54. already how many **scalp** did you get (M-4394-6:t1)
 55. when White Eagle was at the **ages** of twelve winters (M-4394-2:t1)

75. Niiwókskayi nookówaistsi
 Niiwókska-yi n-ookóówa-istsi
 be.three(II)-3PL 1-house-PL:INAN

'My houses are three' / 'I have three houses' (Frantz, 2009, p. 144)

There is also a set of quantifying verbal prefixes that combine directly with a number of verbs stems such as *itapi-* 'be person' in example 76 to create complex quantificational verb stems.

76. Náánisiitapiyaawa
 Náánisi-itapi-yi-aawa
 eight-be.person(AI)-3PL-PRO:PL

'There are eight people' (Frantz, 2009, p. 148)

Examples that may on the surface look like English-style noun phrases containing a numeral in fact contain nominalized intransitive verbs functioning as relative clauses; in these cases, the numeral itself has a (verbal) plural marker, which could provide a parallel for examples like 56 above.

77. Nitsowatayi anniksisska naato'kammiksi apasstammiinammiksi
 Nit-s-oowat-a-yi ann-iksi-hka
 1-TR-eat(TA)-DIR-3PL DEM-PL:ANIM-INVS
 nááto'kaM:-iksi apasstaammiinamm-iksi
 be.two(AI)-PL.ANIM apple-PL:ANIM

'I ate those two apples' (literally 'I ate those apples which are two') (Frantz, 2009, p. 145)

As the examples above show, NS marking is particularly frequent on nouns accompanied by quantifiers. Whereas SE requires nouns to be inflected for plural when the quantifier indicates plural, plural marking in BE appears to be optional if number is already clear through other means. We cannot easily point to a direct parallel or possible source for this in Blackfoot, which generally requires number marking on both verbs and nouns. We note only that quantification is expressed differently in the grammar of Blackfoot, which could contribute indirectly to difficulties in its acquisition by non-native speakers.

Mass Nouns

So-called mass nouns, which usually are grammatically singular but semantically plural in SE, may become grammatically plural in BE. This may result in the addition of a plural -s as with the word *cattles* in example 73 or *stuffs* in 85, but is more frequently reflected in patterns of plural agreement with pronouns, determiners, and verbs. We offer the following examples with the word *stuff*, which appears to be plural for both Little Chief and many present-day speakers of BE (*stuff* in italics, plural elements in boldface).

- 78 ... his friend Paul's brother told him where is all you *stuff* said Little Walker we got **them** out a ways from the camps we will pass by **them** we will pick **them** up alright said his brother lets start off

where did you put your *stuff* we will show you where so the boys started in the direction where they left they *stuff* they picked **them** up (M-4394-4:t1)

79. I get really excited when I see **those** *stuff* (oral; fall 2009)
80. We look for *stuff* that **are** very similar (oral; fall 2009)
81. Most of the *stuff* he had **were** yellow and blue (oral; fall 2009)
82. **These are** some of the *stuff* that came from our area (oral; fall 2009)
83. Again there's so **many** different *stuff* (oral; fall 2009)
84. The grandparents would own all **these** *stuff* (oral; winter 2009)
85. ... really represent **these** *stuffs* ... (oral; winter 2009)

Similar pluralizations occur with words like *wheat*, *hay*, *firewood*, *money*, *cloth*, *beadwork*, *love*, *material*, *welfare*, and *gossip*.

Blackfoot does not have a mass/count distinction: all nouns are count nouns and can occur in the singular or plural. This includes words like

86. a. i'ksisakoyi sg. i'ksisakoistsi pl. 'meat' (Frantz, 2009, p. 7)
- b. aohkiiyi sg. aohkiistsi pl. 'water' (p. 8)

Some such words appear to prefer the plural:

87. a. miiniinokoistsi pl. 'wheat' (Frantz & Russell, 1995, p. 125)

Against this background the reassignment of mass nouns as count nouns that can be pluralized is not surprising.

Characteristics Related to the Pronoun

Omission of Personal Pronouns

Personal pronouns are sometimes missing in Little Chief's text, especially in subject position as in examples 88-91, but occasionally also in object position as in example 92 (missing pronouns in boldface in square brackets; antecedents and coreferents underlined).

88. when she got up [**she**] went outside (M-4394-1:t2)
 89. all the people were very glad to see him and [**he**] was well welcome back (M-4394-1:t3)
 90. he told NA PE WA what are [**you**] crying for (M-4394-5:t8)
 91. they have some long thing [**I**] do not know what it is (M-4394-11:t1)
 92. the sun told [**him**] do not kill that fellow (M-4394-23:t2)
- From the U of L students we have similar examples, all subjects:
93. [**She**] Talks about the years in her life ... (2009.16)
 94. She was pretty like Ann Margaret and everybody like her, but this was ruin when she got rape, [**she**] did not want to be pretty anymore. (2009.16)
 95. These were just excuses and [**he**] wanted Will to believe him but Will had already heard the truth. (2009.22)
 96. ... it was the only thing that made her drown out all the bad feelings and events and [**she**] knew that she can count on it for comfort that she did not have. (2009.18)
 97. I had waited anxiously all night because [**I**]⁹ was allowed to have a friend come along. (2009.15)

Blackfoot verbs are marked for person by means of cross-referencing morphemes. Independent subject and object pronouns are optional and tend to be restricted to contexts of emphasis or the introduction of a new character into the narrative. Once a character has been introduced into a text, it may be maintained over long stretches of text by cross-referencing morphology on the verb only, without explicit pronominal reference. When we look at the examples of missing pronouns in our BE data, we see that they all concern persons who have been referred to by means of a pronoun in the immediately preceding context or are obvious from the pragmatics of the utterance or the speech situation. Therefore, the grammar of BE here corresponds to the grammar of Blackfoot.

Pronoun Gender

SE requires a distinction between masculine *he, his, him*, feminine *she, her*, and neuter *it, its* when using personal pronouns depending on whether the referent is masculine, feminine, or neither. These gender distinctions are often neutralized in BE, and the masculine and feminine pronouns are used interchangeably regardless of the gender of the referent. From Little Chief we have examples like the following (subscript indexes indicate which entities are identical).

98. So this old Crow woman_i said to **himself**_i now I can save that Blackfoot (M-4394-23:t11)
99. Calf Looking_i got down on the ground the old woman sit down with **her**_i than give him_i something to eat (M-4394-23:t11)
100. The old lady_i started to fix food for **his**_i son (M-4394-23:t14)
101. when the woman_i saw Little Walker_j **he**_i told him_j **he**_k is inside (M-4394-4:t7)
102. This poor girl_i **his**_i sisters told why you should have a sweet heart among these men (M-4394-5:t6)

We do not have examples of gender mixing from the students' written texts, but the phenomenon can easily be observed in the spoken language.

103. My Auntie, wasn't feeling very good so I had to take **him**_i to the hospital (oral; spring 2009)
104. I told **him**_i that we're gonna mention her_i in there (referring to woman, oral, winter 2009)
105. **His** great great grandfather was Chief Old Sun (referring to woman) (oral, winter 2009)

BE speakers themselves readily recognize this feature and identify it as influenced by Blackfoot, which has an animacy rather than a gender distinction. This means that the basic grammatical distinction is between animate (living or significant) and inanimate (not living or significant) entities rather than between male and female persons. The animate/inanimate distinction permeates the entire grammar of Blackfoot, determining not only the inflection of nouns, but also the form of verbs. Here we

give some examples of the difference between animate and inanimate nouns (106) and between verbs with animate or inanimate subjects (107).

106. a. *ninaa-wa* 'man' *nina-iksi* 'men'
 man-AN:SG man-AN:PL (Frantz, 2009, p. 9)
 b. *i'ksisako-yi* 'meat' *i'ksisako-istsi* pl. 'meats'
 Meat-INAN:SG meat-INAN:PL (p. 7)
107. a. *aak-s-ipakkskaa-wa*
 FUT-TR-burst(AI)-3SG 'he/she will burst' (animate subject)
 b. *aak-s-ipakksii-wa*
 FUT-TR-burst(II)-3SG 'it will burst' (inanimate subject) (p. 40;
 Frantz & Russell, 1995, p. 67)

We may conclude that gender mixing in BE pronouns closely corresponds to Blackfoot.

Possessive Constructions

Possessive constructions may have a nonstandard possessive determiner as in examples 108-110, or the genitive *-s* on the possessor noun may be omitted as in example 111. In the latter case, the possessor relation must be inferred from the simple juxtaposition of the two nouns, but because this is the only possible interpretation in such cases, no ambiguity arises from the lack of morphological marking.

108. they did not move **they** tepee (M-4394-1:t1)
 109. you do not belong to **us** tribe (M-4394-16:t1)
 110. w[h]ere is all **you** stuff (M-4394-4:t1)
 111. White Eagle band was called (A K TIS TA TIS) making bread in an open fire (M-4394-2:t7)

NS possessives occasionally occur in present-day BE as in example 112. One of the students occasionally completely omits possessive determiners as in example 113. Genitive *-s* on possessor nouns may be omitted both in written and spoken language as in examples 114-115.

112. **Us** [i.e., ours] wasn't as good as their hides (oral; fall 2009)
 113. Cheechoos identity was a Cree from Moose Factory, [X] father live off the land, chop wood, had traplines to capture his food. (2009.16)
 114. The black coat intentions were slowly being revealed ... (2009.17)
 115. And Scarface scar disappeared (oral; fall 2009)

Examples 108-111 and 112, in which the wrong case form of the possessive determiner is chosen, can be explained on the basis of Blackfoot grammar. The Blackfoot morphemes that mark possessors are non-gender-specific and case-less: third person singular morphemes could be equally well translated into English as 'he,' 'him,' 'his,' 'she,' 'her,' 'it,' or 'its,' and third person plural morphemes could equally well be translated as 'they,' 'their,' or 'them' depending on the demands of English grammar. Thus to a Blackfoot speaker, there is no difference between 'he' and 'his,' 'she' and 'her,' 'me' and 'my,' 'you' and 'your,' or 'they' and 'their.' In example 116, the morpheme *w-* is translated as 'her,' but in other gram-

matical contexts it could be translated not only as 'his,' but also as 'he/she' or 'him/her.'

- | | | |
|----------|--------------|----------------|
| 116. amo | aakíkoana | oksísstsi |
| amo-Ø | aakiikoaN-wa | w-iksísst-yi |
| DEM-3SG | girl-3SG | 3SG-mother-OBV |
- 'this girl's mother' (literally 'this girl her-mother') (Frantz, 2009, p. 72)

Example 116 also demonstrates that Blackfoot marks possession on the possessed rather than on the possessor (head marking), whereas English marks possession on the possessor (dependent marking) as in *the girl's horse* or *her horse*. In other words, Blackfoot has no equivalent to the English genitive -s. This may explain the absence of genitive -s in examples like 111 and 115 above.

Examples 117-118 confirm the suggestion made above about the absence of case in Blackfoot pronouns: although example 108 has NS *they* for SE *their*, examples 117-118 show the reverse: they have NS *their* (or rather its homophone *there*) for SE *they*. Examples 119-121 then show how this may also result in the substitution of NS *they* for SE *there* in presentative constructions.

117. **there** must have wander away from the other horse (M-4394-2:t6)
 118. **there** heard voices in the bush (M-4394-4:t4)
 119. Long ago **they** was an Indain (M-4394-3:t1)
 120. **they** is a turnip (MA SE) that is very big (M-4394-16:t3)
 121. **They** were different kinds of rope were you cross and they were about 30 feet in the trees. (2009.3)

We may conclude that the characteristics of BE possessive constructions discussed here are consistent with the grammar of Blackfoot.

Articles

Article use may be quite variable in BE. We find omitted indefinite and definite articles, redundant indefinite and definite articles, and substitution of definite for indefinite articles.

Little Chief deletes the indefinite article *a(n)* quite frequently.

122. this hill had [a] lot of trees (M-4394-4:t2)
 123. they saw [a] rider on top of this hill (M-4394-7:t2)
 124. about one and [a] half foot (M-4394-12:t1)
 125. he was [a] very pretty boy (M-4394-14:t2)
 126. they went on [an] expedition and got [a] lot of horses (M-4394-18:t1)
 Similar deletions occur in present-day BE.
 127. things seem to be told in [a] way that ... there is always a moral to the story (2009.1)
 128. It's [a] slang term for a claustrophobic reaction. (2009.9)
 129. Her feelings of going back home were [a] natural instinct for her (2009.17)

130. Harlem was the repair man and middle man and has [a] solution to the problem of people's lives (2009.22)
131. Around 1880 was [a] very bad year for our people (oral; fall 2009)
The definite article *the* may also be deleted in Little Chief's writings.
132. but he moved to [the] Bloods (M-4394-2:t2)
133. all the Medicine Men [and] all [the] Chief warrior[s] (M-4394-6:t2)
134. the best part of [the] meat (M-4394-7:t2)
135. they were going to attack [the] next night (M-4394-21:t2)
136. from [the] earliest years (M-4394-24:t1)
- Similar deletions occur in the students' writings.
137. another explanation for [the] term "rule of thumb" (2009.2)
138. the origin is from [the] 18th century (2009.6)
139. [the] majority of the First Nations people are all based in acculturation ... (2009.21)

More rarely, a redundant definite article may be present as in example 140 from Little Chief and 141 from one of the students.

140. they [were] camping at **the** Blackfoot Crossing (M-4394-14:t1)
141. The theme to this story is **the** colonialism (2009.17)

Redundant indefinite articles also occur.

142. his wife was taken **a** prisoner (M-4394-23:t1)
143. Cheechoos identity was **a** Cree from Moose Factory (2009.16)

Or an indefinite article may be used where SE would prefer a definite article.

144. he put him in **a** shade by a big tree (M-4394-14:t2)

Blackfoot, like other Algonquian languages, does not have articles, but perhaps more important, its grammar does not include definiteness as a semantic distinction. Blackfoot nominal and verbal morphology distinguishes specificity (referentiality) rather than definiteness. Nonspecific nouns cannot be marked for animacy, number, or obviation, and the verb cannot show agreement with a grammatically nonspecific subject or object (Frantz, 2009). BE speakers are thus faced with having to express both an English word class *and* an English semantic distinction not present in Blackfoot. As we can see from the examples, this may result in omission of both indefinite and definite articles, especially, although not exclusively, in nonspecific and generic predicate and object noun phrases.

Discussion and Conclusion

Even from this extremely preliminary sketch it should be abundantly clear that we are not dealing here with errors, but rather with rule-governed grammatical behavior that simply differs from the grammatical rules of SE. The consistency found between sources spanning more than half a century and between individuals from all three communities strongly suggests that these varieties are not idiolects or otherwise highly individual language varieties, but form a relatively stable variety of English: a dialect, or if you will, an ethnolect. Reactions from Blackfoot individuals

to any mention of BE vary from dismissal to mild interest or amusement, but the crucial fact is that everyone always immediately knows what is meant—even if they may insist it is just slang or bad English or broken English, they never deny its existence. It is this consistency across time, communities, and individuals and the recognition of its reality by its speakers that we believe warrants further investigation of BE and other varieties of IE.

It should also be clear that the grammar of BE reflects some features of the grammar of Blackfoot. Thus even individuals who speak only English preserve essential aspects of their ancestral language. Recent descriptions such as Ball et al. (2006) suggest that Canadian IEs would have many characteristics in common with each other and with IEs in the US (see, e.g., the descriptions in Alford, 1974; Bartelt, 1993, 2001; Bartelt, Jasper, & Hoffer, 1982; Craig, 1991; Dubois, 1978; Flanigan, 1985, 1987; Rowicka, 2005; Stout, 1979), but that other features may be unique to specific communities and may be tied to the underlying ancestral language. Such issues require much more in-depth descriptive, comparative, and historical work.

From a practical point of view, we have some evidence that insights from careful grammatical descriptions can be beneficial in academic contexts: Shelley Stigter, one of the authors of this article, has begun to incorporate insights gained from the grammatical analysis of her Blackfoot students' writing into the feedback that she gives them. In her experience, students find this feedback enlightening and helpful, but perhaps even more important, it offers them a new and more positive approach to their own language use, allowing them to begin to see how what they have always considered "bad English" is intimately connected with their community language, even if they themselves may not be fluent Blackfoot speakers.

As Peltier (2009) has recently warned us, "mislabeling of students as developmentally delayed and language deficient has reached epidemic proportions" (p. 4). Although some standardized tests make systematic allowances for dialect features, many tests commonly used in Canada were developed in the US. They may take into account systematic dialect features of African-American and Hispanic speakers, but are generally not validated for Aboriginal populations. Peltier (2008; also in Ball et al., 2006), an Aboriginal speech-language pathologist herself, reports that she frequently simply does not employ certain standardized tests, because the characteristics of the language of her clients result in automatic failure on too many test items (Bayles & Harris, 1982; Berman, 1976; Eriks-Brophy, Quittenbaum, Anderson, & Nelson, 2008; Flanigan, 1985; Fletcher, 1983; Gould, 2008; Long & Christensen, 1998; Neha, 2003; Wolfram, 1993). However, the speech-language pathology profession cannot be expected to develop assessment tools that take varieties of English into account that

are not well described. It is no coincidence that African-American and Hispanic dialect features are taken into account in some test instruments: thanks to many years of solid linguistic work (Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999), these varieties are now well described and understood, allowing educators and speech-language pathologists who serve these communities to distinguish clearly between dialect features and language impairments. Indigenous dialect features are just as important in the Canadian context, especially given the growing Aboriginal population, but much of the groundwork remains to be done.

Although it is understandable that many linguists working in Aboriginal communities focus primarily on the description and revitalization of Aboriginal languages, we suggest that sustained, detailed, and solid work on Indigenous Englishes is also urgently needed and may benefit Aboriginal communities, and especially Aboriginal children, in important ways.

Notes

¹This article began as an invited response to Andrea Sterzuk's paper *Educator Language Bias and Indigenous English in Saskatchewan Schools: Practices for Interacting with Pre-service Educator Belief Systems* presented at the symposium *Celebrating the Local, Negotiating the School: Symposium on English Language and Literacy in Aboriginal Communities* held on November 7-8, 2008 in Saskatoon, SK. We are very grateful to all participants at this symposium and especially to Andrea Sterzuk and Geraldine Balzer for stimulating discussion and for encouraging us to pursue our work in this area. All errors of fact and interpretation of course remain our own. The research for this article was supported in part by University of Lethbridge Research Fund grant #13198-4160-8015 awarded to Inge Genee.

²A note on terminology is perhaps in order here. Because the term *First Nations* strictly speaking excludes the Inuit and Métis populations, we have chosen the more neutral and inclusive term *Indigenous English* rather than the commonly used *First Nations English* for the Englishes spoken by the Canadian FNMI populations.

³We have not been able to ascertain directly to what extent BE is also spoken by members of the Blackfeet tribe in Montana, but would expect our discussion here to be largely applicable in that context as well.

⁴See Toohey (1986) for some harsh but still relevant early criticism of the failures to translate the purely linguistic approach into effective practice.

⁵We are grateful to Kaylene Campbell and Michaela DeBeyer for assistance with the collection and preliminary analysis of some of the Little Chief data reported here and to Lea Zuyderhoudt for pointing us to this source.

⁶Wolfram (1984) suggests that spoken versions of utterances like example 7 may be the result of "a phonological process of would reduction and eventual deletion" (p. 37).

⁷Further research will have to determine whether [bi:n] 'bean,' and [bi:n] 'being' really are homophones. Compare also the Cheyenne English pronunciation of singer as *siyner* (presumably representing [si:(j)n?r]) in Alford (1974).

⁸This is also of relevance to the discussion of unmarked past tense forms in *-ed* in the previous section.

⁹The student who wrote this sentence initially omitted the second *I*, but added it later as a correction in the margin.

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Appendix

Abbreviations

>	acts on
1	first person
2	second person
21	first person plural inclusive ('you and I')
3	third person
(V)AI	animate intransitive (verb)
AN	animate
CONJ	conjunctive
DEM	demonstrative
DIR	direct
DUR	durative
FUT	future
IMM.FUT	immediate future
(V)II	inanimate intransitive (verb)
IMP	imperative
INAN	inanimate
INV	inverse
INVS	invisible
NFACT	nonfactual
NSPEC	nonspecific
OBV	obviative
PAST	past
PERF	perfect
PRO	pronoun
SG	singular
SO	source
(V)TA	transitive animate (verb)
TR	transitional phoneme
UNSP.SUBJ	unspecified subject