THE INDEFINITE POSSESSOR PREFIX IN BLACKFOOT

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1. Background. Most nouns which denote body parts in Blackfoot have a form which begins with /m/ if no specified possessor is indicated. Note the following sets of inflected forms:

no’tsísí ‘my hand’
ko’tsísí ‘your hand’
o’tsísí ‘his hand’
mo’tsísí ‘hand’

no’tokaání ‘my head’
ko’tokaání ‘your head’
o’tokaání ‘his head’
mo’tokaání ‘head’

Both Uhlenbeck (1938) and Taylor (1969) describe this /m/ as a prefix marking indefinite possessor:

The names of parts of the body can be used without any possessive prefix of a definite person, but as most of them in their non-specialized-possessive form have the initial syllable mo-, or, at least, the initial consonant m-, we can safely assume that this mo- or m- is also a prefix, and that it serves to indicate the indefinite possessor. (Uhlenbeck 1938:49).

Indefinite person m- appears with dependent noun themes whose denotata are body parts or intimate personal possessions. (Taylor 1969:195).

As the quote from Taylor indicates, the putative prefix /m-/ appears on a few stems besides those with body parts as denotata. Here are some examples:

noksísá ‘my awl’
koksísá ‘your awl’
oksísá ‘his awl’
moksísá ‘awl’

noohsokóyi ‘my road’
koohsokóyi ‘your road’
oohsokóyi ‘his road’
mooohsokóyi ‘road’

For Taylor, the primary structural factor defining the set of dependent noun themes is obligatory inflection for possession (161). Other factors include absence of intercalated /t/ after possessive prefixes (195), absence of the suffix /-im/ which [most] independent stems require when inflected for possessor (179), and the limitation to specific inflection (191). Unfortunately, these four criteria define four different (though intersecting) sets, requiring numerous statements

1 Taylor was, no doubt, influenced by Bloomfield’s statements about Proto-Algonquian (Bloomfield 1946:96) and Menomini (Bloomfield 1962:128).
of subclassification and exceptionality in a thorough description attempting to unify the sets.²

2. An Alternative Analysis. Under the Uhlenbeck and Taylor analyses, /m/ is a prefix marking indefinite possessor, hence a morpheme as that term is usually defined in linguistics. In this paper I compare their analysis (henceforth the prefix analysis) with an alternative in which the /m/ is not a morpheme but rather the first segment of allomorphs of the stems in question (henceforth the allomorphy analysis). Under this alternative analysis, most body part noun stems have an allomorph which begins with /m/ in only those cases in which the stem is in word-initial position.

3. The Plausibility of the Allomorphy Analysis. While he opted for the prefix analysis, it is clear that Uhlenbeck recognized that an allomorphy analysis was possible for these stems (1938:8), for he showed that there is a large number of other stems with an initial /m/ increment for which an allomorphy analysis is necessary (1938:9). These include noun stems which do not fit into the possessive paradigm shown in 1., as well as various other stems and roots. A representative sample follows:

moyis- ~ oyis- ‘lodge’: moyís ‘lodge’; niitóyisí ‘tipi’ (NB: *noyísí)
mai’sto- ~ ai’sto- ‘crow’: mai’stówa ‘crow’, mi’kai’stowa ‘Red Crow’
miistak- ~ istak- ‘mountain’: miistáki ‘mountain’; nínaitako ‘Chief Mountain’
matt- ~ att- ‘again’: máttsó’kaawa ‘he slept again’; áakattso’kaawa ‘he will sleep again’
miistap- ~ iistap- ‘away’: múístapoota ‘go away’; kippiístapoota ‘please go away’
missi- ~ issi- ‘tough, brave’: míssiwa ‘he’s tough’; iksissiwa ‘he’s very tough’

There are dozens of other stems and roots in Blackfoot which have word-initial variants with an /m/ that is not present in other positions. Since the variation in these stems will have to be dealt with as allomorphy (Uhlenbeck called it “intermutation”), the same treatment for stems such as those illustrated in 1. should not be considered to be as costly or bizarre as it might otherwise. Moreover, stems which begin with permanent nasals are very rare, and hence can be treated

²However, the degree of intersection of the sets may make the fiction of identity between them of value for certain purposes.
as exceptions. Thus the variation in the stems for body parts is, for Blackfoot, unmarked.

4. The Advantages of the Allomorphy Analysis. Comparing the prefix and allomorphy analyses, we can show that the latter is superior in that it makes a correct prediction that the prefix analysis does not make.

The allomorphy analysis predicts that the /m/ in question will be present only if the root or stem is in word-initial position. This, of course, also predicts that if another possessive prefix is present, the /m/ will not appear. And as seen in the paradigms in 1., this is the case. This analysis requires recognition that the third person possessor prefix is /w-/ , plus two phonological rules involving /w/:

(1) /w/ plus /i/ > /o/
(2) /w/ at the beginning of a word is always lost

As Uhlenbeck pointed out, the prefix analysis makes the same prediction regarding the /m/, for if a definite possessor is indicated, there should be no co-occurring indefinite possessor prefix.

However, the prefix analysis does not predict absence of the /m/ if some element other than a possessive prefix is present. The allomorphy analysis, on the other hand, predicts that there will be nothing that can be identified as the putative indefinite possessor prefix if any element precedes the stem. And we see this to be true in the following:

nitómahko’kaani ‘my big head’
kítómahko’tokaani ‘your big head’
ótómahko’tokaani ‘his big head’
ómahko’tokaani ‘big head’
(cf. mo’tokaáni of section 1.)

nitáwo’táánookitsisi ‘my fingernail/toenail’
kítáwo’táánookitsisi ‘your fingernail’
ótáwo’táánookitsisi ‘his fingernail’
áwo’táánookitsisi ‘fingernail’
(literally, ‘shield of the finger’; cf. mookítsisi ‘finger/toe’)

nikáóhsokoyi ‘my former road’
kikáóhsokoyi ‘your former road’
okáóhsokoyi ‘his former road’
ákaoohsokoyi ‘former road’
(cf. mohsokóyi of section 1.)
Compare also:

moksísaatsiksi? ‘is it an awl?’
kátao’ksísaatsiksi? ‘is it an awl?’

The first form of the last pair is a question by virtue of the non-affirmative suffix, while the second also has the interrogative prefix /kata’-/. As the allomorphy analysis predicts, the first has the initial /m/ segment and the latter does not.

Whether or not the prefix set has the so-called intercalated /t/ (Taylor 1969) in Blackfoot is actually a function of the following morpheme rather than determined by dependent status of the stem or theme. The allomorphy analysis is slightly superior in another regard as well. Under the prefix analysis, the /m/ is a morpheme and must be assigned a meaning. ‘Indefinite possessor’ is the meaning assigned by both Taylor and Uhlenbeck. This has initial plausibility because, at least in the case of body parts, the denotata seldom exist without being part of a whole body. However, this meaning of the putative prefix can be questioned on various grounds. First of all, the form of the stem with the initial /m/ will be used even in cases where the denotatum has never been attached to any body (e.g. if modeled) or has never belonged to anyone. For example:

nitáaka’pistotaki moksí ‘I’ll make an awl’
nit-áak-á’pistotaki moksí-i
1st-fut-make (AI) awl-non partic.

Second, not all body part nominals have this /m/ increment. For example, note the following paradigm:

nohkíni ‘my bone’
kohkíni ‘your bone’
ohkíni ‘his bone’
ohkíni ‘bone’

Nor do all stems which by at least two of Taylor’s criteria are dependent themes have this /m/ when no (other) possessor is indicated. For example, /ookowa-/ ‘dwelling’ has no intercalated /t/ after possessive prefixes and does not take suffix /-im/ when possessed, yet its unpossessed form is without initial /m/:

3 A discussant suggested that the addition of another root gives a new theme or stem which is no longer a dependent theme, hence does not take the putative prefix. But such an explanation seems to make the question of whether or not /m/ is (structurally) a morpheme untestable, as well as further undermining the validity of a class of dependent themes.
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nookówayi 'my house' ookówayi 'his house'
kookówayi 'your house' ookówayi 'dwelling'

Finally, as further evidence of the non-morpheme status of the /m/ in question, there are doublets with and without the /m/, yet exhibiting no difference in meaning or usage:

mo'pūi ~ o'pūi 'brain(s)' mótsi'tsisa ~ átsi'tsisa 'glove'

5. Conclusion. While arranging stems such as the examples of 1. into paradigms invites an indefinite possessor prefix analysis for /m/, consideration of a wider range of facts shows that this /m/ is best viewed as the first segment of the word-initial allomorph of such stems. And because there are relatively few stems of any syntactic class with an initial nasal which retain the nasal in other than word-initial position, the stems with permanent nasals should be treated as exceptions to an allomorphy rule dropping stem-initial nasals when not preceded by a word boundary. Consequently, the allomorphy analysis cannot be viewed as costly by any simplicity criterion. Thus I see no reason for a class of dependent themes in Blackfoot; the three-way classification of noun stems with regard to possessor inflection given in Frantz(1971) seems preferable:

1. Obligatorily possessed: primarily the class of kinship terms, which are always inflected for a specific possessor.
2. Inherently possessed: may or may not be inflected for possessor, and when so inflected do not take the suffix /-im/.
3. Non-inherently possessed: if inflected for possessor, the stems require the suffix /-im/.

There are members of both classes 2. and 3. with initial /m/ when no prefix is present, though the /m/ is most common for members of class 2.4

The allomorphy analysis does leave one a bit dissatisfied, however, for there seems to be no account given of the generality of the opening sentence of this paper: it is useful to know that most body parts participate in the alternation exhibited there. The prefix analysis attempts to account for this by assigning the /m/ a meaning. Even if we believe that the prefix analysis is inferior to the allomorphy analysis, this does not make its near-generalization about the behaviour

4 There are several noun stems, including almost all deverbal nouns in /-a'tsis/ 'instrument', which take /-im/ facultatively; e.g.: /nisóópa'tsisìi/ 'my chair', /nisóópa'tsiimi/ 'my (very own) chair'.

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of body part stems any less true. It is a fact which should be stated in any description of Blackfoot, although its theoretical status is questionable except in frameworks which value tendency statements. Finally, one wonders whether most, or even all, of the factors cited in favour of the allomorphy analysis for Blackfoot are present in other Algonquian languages whose descriptions include an indefinite possessor prefix (see e.g. Bloomfield 1962:128 and Wolfart 1973:15).

REFERENCES

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