

CODE-SWITCHING IN BLACKFOOT STORIES*

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1 Introduction

The goal of this project is to document and analyse instances of code-switching in oral stories told in Blackfoot, an Algonquian language spoken in Southern Alberta. In this context, *code-switching* refers to the alternating use of Blackfoot and English within the same monologue. This paper represents the first steps in this project; the findings presented here are largely empirical, addressing questions such as who code-switches, how frequently, and with what linguistic content. It is observed that, amongst a group of 24 Blackfoot speakers and learners of varying ages and language backgrounds, all of them code-switch, some more so than others. Moreover, code-switches can be organized into a relatively small number of categories based on their linguistic content. Temporal expressions comprise the largest number of switches from Blackfoot to English for all speakers, and other code-switches include locative expressions, other nominal referents, discourse markers, and longer stretches of discourse. In addition to presenting these empirical findings, preliminary thoughts on their implications— for both syntactic theory and language revitalization – are discussed.

2 Background: The Blackfoot Oral Stories Database

The data in this paper are drawn from the Blackfoot Oral Stories Database, which is available online at <http://stories.blackfoot.atlas-ling.ca>. The database was established in 2016 following a history of community collaborations on language projects dating back to 2005 (e.g., Bliss 2005, 2013; Gick et al. 2012; Ritter & Rosen 2010). The idea for the database was borne of mutual interests: my research was initially centred around questions related to linguistic theory and how Blackfoot fits or expands contemporary models, but in working with community collaborators, the research shifted to also focus on questions of

* Nitsiko'tahsi'taki and thank you to the Siksika and Kainai storytellers who have shared their words and wisdom. They are listed here in alphabetical order by English surname: Ahsikinaa Donna Axe, Mikiisistayii Shawn Axe, Apohyaki Trudy Axe, Dakota Back Fat, Iss-awa-waak-yaa Edith Breaker, Natóóhkitopi Fred Breaker, Naatoopii Lee Breaker, late Tootsinam Beatrice Bullshields Clifford Crane Bear, Ikino'motstaan Noreen Breaker, Aahpiis Hanks Eagle Head, Pióhkómiaaki Rachel Ermineskin, late Annie Fox, Beverly Little Bear Hungry Wolf, Kah-tsi-kom-iki-kamosaahki Elsie Maguire, Roslyn Many Guns, Omahkaonopssi Dion Stevens, Sahsinaamskaa Allan Stevens, Kevin Stevens, Issookimiaaki Melinda Stevens, Sohkapini Walter Stevens, Katai'tsinopaakii Mildred Three Suns, Evelyn Weaselhead, Ruth Yellowfly. I am also grateful to the following colleagues and advisors for their insights and support: Charm Breaker, Ikino'motstaan Noreen Breaker, Inge Genee, Marie-Odile Junker, Betsy Ritter, Leslie Saxon, Delasie Torkornoo, Martina Wiltschko. This work has been financially supported by a Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship, the Jacobs Research Funds, the Phillips Fund, the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the University of Calgary.

how our work could contribute to the documentation and preservation of this language. A Banting postdoctoral fellowship gave us an opportunity to focus on documenting stories, and the Algonquian Dictionaries Project (Junker et al. 2005-2019) has situated the database in a larger network and has provided the digital platform, infrastructure, technical support, and server space.

At the time of writing, the database houses over 100 stories told by 24 storytellers of varying ages and linguistic backgrounds. For the most part, the stories have been curated in group storytelling sessions, in which 2-10 storytellers take turns sharing and recording stories in a conversational setting. The sessions often focus on a particular theme (such as floods, for example) and sometimes take place in locations of interest relevant to that theme (such as along the banks of the Bow River). There are numerous advantages to the group storytelling methodology: the sessions are fun and engaging, and create a natural environment for storytelling. Due to the conversational nature of the sessions, the result is a different kind of data – more naturalistic – than that which is elicited when individuals are “put on the spot” to tell stories. Moreover, the group setting sparks creativity, with one story leading to others, and as a result, the corpus grows quickly.

The original plan for curating stories for the database was to document fluent L1 speakers, but as we began the project there was an organic change in our methodology as L1 speakers started bringing their (mostly adult) children to the group storytelling sessions. Initially, most of these younger participants were observers, but with increasing frequency, they are telling stories of their own – sometimes in English, sometimes in Blackfoot, and sometimes a bit of both. These younger storytellers tend to be self-reported learners and/or semi-speakers who hear and understand Blackfoot but rarely speak it. The advantage of the group sessions is that Elders are present and can assist when the younger speakers “get stuck,” by prompting vocabulary and helping translate English passages into Blackfoot.

3 Current Study

The Blackfoot Oral Stories Database provides a rich source of data on various linguistic topics. In this study, we are concerned with the general question of what code-switching patterns can be observed in the database, with *code-switching* here referring to the alternating use of Blackfoot and English within the same monologue. Our specific questions are as follows:

- Which storytellers code-switch?
- How frequently do different storytellers switch to English?
- How much English (versus Blackfoot) is there in the different stories?
- When is English used in the stories (i.e., under what syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic conditions?)
- What are the overarching patterns and what can these patterns tell us about (i) the organization of Blackfoot grammar, and (ii) trends regarding Blackfoot language use across generations?

3.2 Methods

All of the stories were audio-recorded, edited and uploaded to the database, and also securely archived. Only those stories that storytellers wish to share are made publicly available on the database; some stories can only be viewed by the research team. At the storytellers' discretion, extraneous material such as coughs, mumbles, pauses, and the like may have been edited out of the public version, although the original audio files were retained and archived. Code-switches were not (typically) edited out.

For purposes of this study, the original WAV files were segmented into English and Blackfoot contents and the total times for each language was calculated. Each switch into English was catalogued and transcribed along with its surrounding content. The switches were coded in a spreadsheet according to the storyteller, story, time of occurrence in the story, and linguistic content (syntactic and semantic categories).

3.3 Results

Although code-switching is not found in every story in the database, every storyteller code-switches, some with greater frequency than others. Speakers of various ages code-switch; the youngest storyteller in the database was born in the 1980s, and the oldest was born in the 1930s. Speakers of various language backgrounds code-switch; most storytellers in the database are L1 Blackfoot (Siksika dialect), but some are L1 English, and while a few of the L1 storytellers mostly use Blackfoot at home, the majority mostly use English at home.

In what follows, I focus on three storytellers who have diverse language backgrounds and collectively represent the range of storyteller demographics in the database. The storytellers are henceforth referred to by their English initials. The youngest of these three, LB, was born in the 1970s and is L1 English; he mostly uses English at home but is actively trying to use more Blackfoot. The second storyteller, DA, was born in the 1950s and is L1 Blackfoot; she uses a combination of Blackfoot and English in the home. The third, AS, was born in the 1940s, is L1 Blackfoot, and mostly uses Blackfoot at home.

The frequency of code-switching amongst these three storytellers and the relative amounts of Blackfoot and English in their stories is presented in Table 1.¹

¹ The number of stories and cumulative recording time is calculated as of January 2019. Additional stories have been recorded for some speakers since that time.

Table 1. Code-switching frequencies for three storytellers

Storyteller	LB	DA	AS
Number of stories	5	7	10
Cumulative recording time (minutes)	9:58	31:02	17:42
Total number of switches to English	31	53	21
Average number of switches (per minute)	3.1	1.7	1.3
% Blackfoot	41%	91%	97%
% English	59%	9%	3%

As for the question of when code-switches occur and what their linguistic content is, the English content could be grouped into five categories. A summary is given in Table 2, and discussion of each of the categories follows.

Table 2. Code-switching content for three storytellers

Storyteller	LB	DA	AS	AVERAGE
Temporal expressions	n=10 (32%)	n=25 (47%)	n=9 (43%)	41%
Locative expressions	n=3 (10%)	n=5 (9%)	n=5 (24%)	14%
Other nominal referents	n=2 (6%)	n=13 (24%)	n=5 (24%)	18%
Discourse markers	n=7 (23%)	n=8 (15%)	n=2 (9%)	16%
Stretches of discourse	n=9 (29%)	n=2 (5%)	n=0 (0%)	11%

For all three speakers, temporal expressions account for the largest majority of English content in the stories. In the category of temporal expressions are both referential time expressions and quantified time expressions. The former includes phrases referring time in general (*at that time, back then*), days or times of day (*the next morning, the same day, today*), years or times of year (*last summer, this year, in 2013, about 1997, twenty years ago, years ago*). Quantified temporal expressions include phrases such as *not all the time, every time, and each time*.

Locative expressions account for nearly a quarter of the English content in stories told by AS, but are less frequent in the stories of the two younger storytellers. The bulk of the locative expressions are place names (which may not have Blackfoot equivalents), such as *Sandhills, Old Sun School, and Axe Flats*. Other locative expressions refer to specific locations (*the other side of the boat, in a park, up on a cliff*) or are nominals serving as locations (*hallway, washroom, room*).

Other nominal expressions (that have neither are locative or temporal reference) were grouped together into one category. These account for nearly a quarter of the switches for both DA and AS, and they include kin relations (*my dad, grandpa*), quantified pronouns (*somebody, everybody*), common nouns (*gills, sturgeon, leader, sinks, blanket, birds*), and noun phrases (*millions of them, right shoulder, my cell phone*).

English discourse markers account for nearly a quarter of the switches in the stories told by LB, but are found less frequently in the stories told by the two older speakers. Discourse markers include evidential expressions such as *I think, I still think that, I know*, closing remarks such as *that's it* (which always follows its Blackfoot equivalent *ki ann*), conjunctions such as *but* and *and so*, and other miscellaneous expressions such as *y'know* and *especially*.

The final category of code-switches is longer stretches of discourse. Some of these are sentence fragments such as *I was, told a story*, or *and helped them*, and some of these are short sentences such as *I think it was 2005, I recognize that voice* or *I was up on a cliff*. For some of the stories told by LB, there are long stretches of English with shorter stretches of Blackfoot, as in the following example.

- (1) *There was a flood that happened. I just forget who I was with. We were standing on top of that hill, and I could see **nanípitaamiwa otaaáhsi i'tsinopaaw**. Harry Red Gun. He was still in his house; he was the only one there and we had to evacuate him.*

→ Blackfoot translation = “my wife’s father had no other choice.”

4 Discussion

In the preceding section, we saw that code-switching is used by all of the storytellers who contributed to the database, some with greater frequency than others. Of the three storytellers profiled, there is an inverse relation between age of the storyteller and frequency and quantity of switches to English in their stories; the youngest speaker switches to English the most, and the oldest the least. Despite these differences, all of the storytellers show consistent patterns in terms of the linguistic content of their switches: temporal expressions are the most common English expressions, followed by discourse markers, locative expressions and other nominal referents, and finally longer stretches of discourse. In what follows, I discuss some preliminary thoughts on the implications of these findings, first for syntactic theory, and then for language revitalization.

4.1 Implications for Syntax

One of the most striking findings of this study is the use of English temporal expressions; all three of the storytellers profiled switch to English to express temporality more often than any other type of code switch. This observation is particularly notable in light of the expression of temporality in Blackfoot, which is complex and interwoven through the grammar. Blackfoot is argued to lack the syntactic category of Tense (Ritter & Wiltschko 2014), but temporal relations are encoded in various other parts of the language, including on personal pronouns (Bliss & Gruber 2015) and demonstratives (Bliss & Wiltschko 2018). Modals are also sensitive to temporal distinctions (Louie 2015). The use of English temporal expressions in natural discourse can be seen as one of many diverse strategies speakers use to express time relations.

Discourse markers are also frequently expressed in English in the stories, but this varies across storytellers, with the youngest speaker using English discourse markers with the greatest frequency (23% of all switches) and the oldest speaker using them with the least frequency (9%). Like the grammar of temporality, the grammar of discourse markers in Blackfoot is complex. There are very few dedicated discourse particles in Blackfoot, but in lieu, demonstratives fulfill this function (Bliss & Wiltschko 2018). Demonstratives in Blackfoot are morphosyntactically complex and there are 900 unique forms. The use of English discourse markers –particularly by younger (L2 or English-dominant) speakers – perhaps reflects the complexities of the Blackfoot demonstrative system.

With both temporal expressions and discourse markers, English expressions seem to fill in “gaps” in the Blackfoot syntax or appear in places in which the grammar is exceptionally complex.

4.2 Implications for Language Revitalization

Like many other Indigenous languages in Canada, intergenerational transmission of Blackfoot is decreasing (Genee & Junker 2016), and many of the younger community members (under age 50) are self-reported semi-speakers, whose language abilities are sometimes regarded negatively by Elders (Chatsis et al. 2013). These people may face barriers in speaking due to fear of ridicule or fear of not preserving their language in an authentic way (e.g., Juuso 2015). Under the threat of language loss, the community may perceive code-switching with English as a stigmatized form of expression.

This study reveals that code-switching is used by even very experienced L1 Blackfoot storytellers, and moreover, that there are consistencies across storytellers in some of the patterns of when and how English is used. In other words, code-switching with English is a normal part of Blackfoot discourse, and in itself does not reflect the storytellers’ lack of knowledge of the language. Instead, code-switching may be seen as a discourse strategy that storytellers make use of, along with various other grammatical strategies. The fact that English temporal expressions are commonly used in stories suggests that they are included in the wide and diverse range of grammatical devices Blackfoot speakers use to refer to time.

Moreover, that code-switching does not reflect a gap in linguistic knowledge is particularly evident with some of the nominal referents that are expressed in English; some of these may indeed refer to things in the world for which a Blackfoot word is uncommon and perhaps not in the vocabulary of the storyteller (e.g., *cell phone*, *millions*), but others are common words that even L2 learners acquire at a young age (e.g., *dad*, *grandpa*). In some cases, English nominal expressions are followed immediately by their Blackfoot counterparts, as in the following example from LB:

(2) *I saw those birds, amoksi pi'kssíksi ...*

→ Blackfoot translation: ‘those birds’

In short, code-switching is a normal part of the language. This finding is not unique to Blackfoot but is observed in various other Indigenous language communities across Canada. For instance, Collette (2018) documents properties of what he calls “Creenglish” (English-infused Cree), and code-switching to English has been also been observed with Severn Ojibwe (Valentine 1995), Dene Słı́nı́ (Wiens 2014), and Dene Dha’ı́ (Boltokova 2017). These studies are important as they can help to destigmatize code-switching. By encouraging “hybrid” expressions, we may help to ease the fears of semi-speakers, which in turn may encourage language use and transmission. Destigmatizing code-switching and recognizing it as a normal and healthy aspect of language use may help semi-speakers to recognize their potential as active contributors to their language community (Boltokova 2017).

5 Conclusions

Code-switching into English is a regular and normal part of Blackfoot storytelling. This study has found that storytellers of diverse ages and language backgrounds use English to express temporality and location, to refer to individuals and objects, and to signal discourse relations. As might be predicted, younger L2 speakers switch to English more often and for longer stretches than older L1 speakers. However, this does not necessarily reflect a lack of fluency or vocabulary. Rather, there is likely a complex interplay of factors influencing both younger and older speakers’ language choices. Encouraging (particularly younger) speakers to continue using “hybrid” forms can be a way to promote language vitality.

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