

PIEGAN INSTITUTE  
BLACKFEET LANGUAGE  
GRAMMAR RULES

49 RULES  
AS A CONCISE GUIDE  
TO THE STRUCTURE OF  
THE LANGUAGE

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A SPECIAL STUDY OF THE BLACKFEET LANGUAGE  
ON THE BLACKFEET INDIAN RESERVATION  
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## BLACKFEET GRAMMAR RULES

1. OMAHKA DROPS THE FINAL -A if nothing is attached onto it, becoming -OMAHK' (note the use of the spostrophe.) There is another trick to remember if you use ITAUPI OR ITOMO: The "go-between" -t- of nit- and kit- turns into ts in front of the i. (Write Z in place of TS.) Many verbs act like OMAHKA, ITAUPI and ITOMO.
2. AKI and KOAN: Algonquian languages do not distinguish male and female. However, Blackfeet uses these two terms as suffixes in this manner: -AKI is frequently attached to feminine personal names and to tribal and ethnic terms. -KOAN is sometimes attached to masculine tribal and ethnic terms.
3. Prefixes AI and AU: Most verbs in Blackfeet require one or the other of these two prefixes, usually accented.
4. Command Forms: To form a command, add -T to the verb stem when only one person is addressed. e.g. UPIt = sit down! Add -K to pluralize (UPIK).
5. Interrogatives: To ask a question with either of the singular forms we have had, simply add the suffix -HPA to the verb stem. To ask a question using either of the plural forms, add -A at the end of the word.
6. Negatives: To form negatives with any verb in the forms we know, prefix MAT- to the interrogative forms just given. The -T- of nit- and kit- disappears in front of MAT-, and the accent falls back from AI or AU to MAT-. For example: ni-mat-ANI-hpa = I do not say.
7. Plural Imperatives: To make the plural, used for addressing more person than one, put a -K in place of the -T. e.g. anik!.
8. Compound verbs: You can make up new verbs by combining ANI (which drops final -I by prefixing im-, ikip-: e.g. kiz-im-AN' = you're right, you tell the truth. Kiz-ikip-ANI-hpa? = Are you joking?
9. Third Person: The 3rd person singular is formed by suffixing -WA to the stem or root. The 3rd person plural (they) is formed by adding -IAW to the stem. If the stem ends in -I, the two I's blend into one.
10. The 4th person has only a singular form and is made by suffixing -INAI to the stem.
11. Interrogatives of 3rd and 4th Persons: Add -WAZ to the singulars and WEXAW to the plural.
12. Negative of 3rd and 4th persons: Prefix MAT- to the interrogative. To say "never" use KUT- instead of MAT-.
13. How To Talk About the Past: To clarify or emphasize the past action, simply switch the -T- of nit-, kit- to a -K-: nik-, kik-, and in 3rd and 4th persons prefix ak- or ik-.

14. How To Talk About the Future: Prefix ÁK (ÁX-) right in front of the verb root. This gives the meanings "shall, will, going to, about to, intend to, want to."
15. To say "can, be able to" combine the two roots AK- and -OT (from OTO?) producing a new prefix AKOT- (AKOZ-): nitakozaiPUYI (nitakotaiPUYI). To say "wish, want to, feel like, like to" use the verb áiAHSI (áiAHS') with some other verb root: nitái AHS-UYI, kitáiAHS-SIM, nitáiAHS-APOhpinan. To say "go to do....", use OTO in the same manner (though it may be cut down to OT-): nitak-OTO-aiSUMOS'. To say "try to", combine AS- with AK- to form ASAK-: nitasákSAM'. Sometimes AS- is used by itself with the same meaning: ásANIT! To say "must, have to", couple AK- with -S'TAM to get a more urgent form: nitáks'támitAPO.
16. INITIAL M-, N- and P-: When these sounds are initial to a root they often are dropped to make room for a prefix. Examples: mistaki turns into the combining form -istáki; napi- becomes api- (an ancient root for "white").
17. Verbs With the Suffix -M: A few verbs use -M instead of -W or -WA in the 3rd and 4th persons, usually with reference to an animate subject. Color verbs, do this consistently. e.g. "to enter": nitaiIPI but ai-IPIminai; "to fear": nitaiKOP' butaiKOPUm, aiKOPUmiaw, aiKOPUminai: "to swim": nitAUZ' but AUZIm, AUZImiaw, AUZIminai.
18. Color Verbs and Their Type: Many of the verbs of this kind end in -NA (the A is short). e.g. nitSIXINA but SIXINAm, SIXINAmiaw, SIXINAminal.
19. Here are adjectives used also as adjective-verbs: AHS- combining form; AHSSiw' an. verb; AHSiw' in. verb; AHSSix an. pl.; AHSisz in. pl.; nit-AHSSI = I am good. MANI- combining form; MANISiw an. verb; MANIw in. verb. Za ANISTAPSIwaz? = What is it?
20. GENDER IN ANIMALS: Terms for animals (hoofed animals)' -STAMIK is often suffixed to indicate the male and -SKIM or SKINI to designate the female.
21. Negative Imperatives: to say "don't" do this or that, prefix PIN- or MIN- to the positive imperative (it is optional whether you use PIN- or MIN-): e.g. pinUYit!, pinUPIk!, pinOTot!, minIKOKIt!.
22. How To Say "Please": Prefix NOHK- to the ordinary imperative form. Occasionally OH- is inserted between NOHK- and the verb stem: e.g. nohAPOTAKIt!, nohkohKOKIt! (please give it to me).
23. KANAI-, KANAU- and Its Type: The adjectival prefix KAN-, "all, every", usually adds either -AI or -AU to itself. Thus kanai-iniw = all the buffalo; kanai-tapi = all the people; kanai-apikoaix = all the white men; kanai-izitapi = all the Indians; kanau-akiix = all the women; kanau-otasix; kanau-pokaix. KAN- can even be incorporated into compound verbs; ai-kan-istAPOiaw = they all went away.

24. Collectives: Collective nouns are often formed by the suffix -SKO: e.g. akaitapisko (town), konsko, miszisko (timber), ohkotoksko (rocky place). Others, usually referring to people or animals, are formed by prefixing OT- etc. and suffixing -SINA, -SIN: e.g. otapisina (all the people), otaxisina (all the women), opokasina (all the children), unnasina (all the men-- U- = 3rd person as does OT-), onokasina (all the elk), onokamitasina (all the horses), otomitasina (all the dogs).
25. Verb Combinations: -OHKOT- (IHKOT-) = can, be able. Very like AKOT-, but notice the common prefix OH (IH) in front of K-: e.g. nitohkotoHKIMA: ihkotAUZIm; nitohkozOK'. SISZIK- = to be tired (of): e.g. akaisisizix- INIHKIW (he has already got tired of singing). SIKO, SIK- = to stop, quit: aisikAPOXKASIw (he quits running about); aisikAZIMOIHKAw. OMATO, OMATAP-, auMATO = to begin, start: omatapOXKASIw; nitomatapAZ'. KISTAP- = to finish: aikistapOXHASOw. APO (AP-) meaning "around, about", with OXKASI: AP-OXKAAI.
26. Telling Time: Time (by the clock) is indicated by using the verb itOTOW in 3rd person singular; thus, Za-itotowaz? = What time is it? Or for variety, you may say Za-itotowazix? and you may add ihtai xiszikumiopi.
27. More adjective-Verbs: The verb meaning "is high, tall" is: SPITAw (of persons); SPIMIw (of animals); SPIXIm (of animate trees); SPIXIw (of inanimate trees); SPIw (inanimate generally).
28. SAHKIMIw = is short (of animals); SAHXIXIM (for animate trees and wooden objects); SAHXIXIW (of inanimate trees and wooden objects); SAHXIW (of animate generally; and SAHKIW (of inanimate generally).
29. INOIMIw (INOYIMIw) = is long (of animals); INOXIM (of animate trees and wooden objects); INOXIW (of inanimate trees and wooden objects); INOSIm (of animate generally); and INOYIW (of inanimate generally).
30. NAMES for ANIMALS: A number of animal names: omahkstoki = mule; inohxisi = elephant; omahkatayo = mountain lion, puma, cougar; nipumaki = chickadee (summerlady); motoisizsi = junco (spring bird), miomita (tough horse or dog); mexikazi-w = duck (red or pink feet); imahkihkina-w = sheep, goat, bighorn (IMAHK -OMAHK; apomahkihkini = mountain goat.
31. Saying "old": To say "is old" (3rd person), use OMAHKSIm (OMAHXIm) for persons; akaiapiw (of male human and of animals but not of women). This latter form derives from "already" and NAPI. For either animate and inanimate things, except animals, you may use akaisiw.
32. Nouns Formed from Verbs: types of nouns can be derived from verbs. 1) Attach -SIN OR SINI to the verb stem to produce both abstract and concrete nouns like sinak-sin and pikiak-sin. (Note that the final -I was dropped from both SINAKI AND PIKIAKI. 2) If the verb stem ends in -W, the suffix is simply -N or -NI, e.g. potani, ayikinan. 3) Instrumental nouns can be formed by suffixing -ZIS: potazis, pikiazis, or 4) by prefixing IHT- and suffixing OPI (from OP of the 1st person plural inclusive): ihtaiziszikumiopi or 5) by prefixing IT- and suffixing -OPI to form place nouns: itaisapiopi

33. The Demonstrative ANA: This is a demonstrative that is often used as a pronoun. Like AMO and OMA, it has no fixed accent, but in common speech it often drops its initial A- to become simply 'NA, which can mean "he", "she" and even "where?" Here is its declension:

	singular	plural
3rd person animate	ANA, 'NA	
4th person animate	ANI, 'NI	ANIXI
all inanimates	ANI	ANISZI

34. Relative Pronouns: An especially important function of ANA is its use to form relative pronouns, meaning "who", "which", "that". To do this, simply add HK to the singulars and -SK to the plurals:

	singular	plural
animate	ANAHK (who, that)	ANIXISK
INANIMATE	ANIHK (which, that)	ANISZISK

These forms can be verbalized by adding -AYE: anahkAYE, anixiskAYE, and anisziskAYE. ANIHKAYE also means "that's why, because".

35. Counting Within the Decades: To form the numerals between the decades, first name the number of the decade (in this case "twenty" nazipo), then the number used for the "teen" (in this case "eleven" or nizikoputo). Both animate and inanimate forms exist for both, and must be used together according as the object enumerated is animate or inanimate; e.g. 56 = nisizipo naikoputo (neutral), nisizipi naikopuzi (an.), nisizipoyi naikoputoyi (in.).
36. Kinship Terms: Kinship is reckoned differently in different cultures. In the Blackfeet system nixista means "my aunt" as well as "my mother"; niskun (a) means "my younger brother, sister, cousin, nephew, niece but of a male speaker only, and its plural niskaix. Nisisa has all these same meanings but refers back to a female speaker only and its plural nisi-six. Nisa has only -S- for its root but may include a glottal stop (ni+sa) and means "my elder brother, cousin, uncle, son-in-law" of a male speaker, and its plural nisix. Ninista (commonly cut nin'sta or nin+sta) means "my elder sister, cousin, etc. of a female speaker. Its root is NIST and its plural niniszix or nin'szix. And finally naahsa refers to a grandparent of either sex or to a parent-in-law. None of these kinship terms is ever used without a personal possessive prefix and sometimes with a suffix as well. It is important to realize that in Blackfeet, as in other American Indian languages and world-views and in some also of eastern Asia, nothing exists apart from its relationships. (Quite unlike English) This reminds us also of "field theory" in modern subatomic physics and relativity. So the "old ones" were not behind the times after all.

37. Notice that nouns possessed really involve two persons, and not the fictitious unilateral relations imagined in English. The two persons, of course, are the owner and the thing owned. 1st or 2nd person may possess 3rd or 4th, 3rd possesses 4th. Thus, nin'na (root N'N or N+N) carries NI- for the 1st person possessor, but the father himself must therefore be 3rd person which is shown by the ending -A. (On other words the 3rd person ending would be -W, WA or -M.) But his/her father has to be on'ni, the O-for the 3rd person possessor and the -I to make the father 4th person or obviative. A vocation form for "father" (i.e. used in address) is nin'na. So we have altogether the singular forms: my father = nin'na; your father = kin'na; his/her father = un'ni. My mother = nixista; your mother = kixista; his/her mother = oxiszi (T to Z before I). If all this seems complicated, that is the price we must pay to have a language that is logical instead of gibberish.

38. How to Identify Relationships: To claim kinship and identify intimate possession is a simple process. The common way to say, for example, "Red Eagle is my father", "She is my mother", "I am his father", "You are my brother", etc. is to use the appropriate nouns and pronouns without any copula: Mahxi-Pita nin'naw; oma nixista; nistowa un'ni; kistowa niskan'. The negatives of such expressions present more of a problem. "He is not my father" must derive from a hypothetical positive for nitun'na and so turns out to be "(oma) nimatun'naz." Here are a few more illustrations:

kimatun'naz = he is not your father  
 nimatoxistaz = she is not my mother (I O)  
 kimatoxistaz = she is not your mother.  
 kimatakawaz = he is not your friend  
 amo nimatohk = this is not my bucket  
 kin'naz = is he your father?

39. Noun Incorporation: This is an ancient manner of talking which has survived in certain expressions, often related to hunting and herding and speaking languages. It has an exact equivalent in English terms: like "He went deer hunting". Here are some examples:

nizinokauAKIMA = I chase elk  
 nitotasIKIAKI = I trap horses, corral horses.  
 nitauAKIMAw awatuyi = I chase whitetail deer.  
 autapiAUyIw = He/She is a man-eater, eats people, is a cannibal.

These are expressions that tell about speaking languages:

nitaizitapiIPUYI = I speak Indian

nizipikaniIPUYI = I speak Piegan.

kitaiapiIPUYI = you speak English (white man talk).

40. The Erratic Verb IKI: This may well be the most irregular verb in the language because of its occasional incorporation of the prefix AI-. It is also one of the most awkward to translate. When it incorporates AI-, its stem becomes -IKAI- or just -KAI-, but otherwise it is regular. Some examples will demonstrate: nizIKI (1st sing.) kitaikihpā = what are you doing?; kizikihpā = what's the matter with you?; kitaxikihpā = what are you going to do?; za kitaikihpawaw = what are you (pl.) doing? where are you going? what do you want? (can be used as a greeting); ahsa kiwa(z) = what's the matter?; kaiwa(z) = what's the matter with him/her?; nimazikihpā = there's nothing the matter with me. IKI may be used with or without a word for "what" (za, ahsa).
41. The Handy verb POKO: You have already noticed how this verb incorporates a noun or adjectival particle. It often uses IK- (very) in front: ik-ahsiPOKOW = it tastes very good; ikiziPOKOW = it's very sweet.
42. How To Say "Let's": The imperative forms for "let's do this or that" are made by prefixing AHKUN- to the 1st person plural inclusive: e.g. ahkunitapoop = let's go there; ahkunizipuyop = let's talk Indian.
43. Relative Clauses: to change a finite verb into the verb of a relative clause (and in many cases into the relative clause itself), suffix -PI or -HPI to the verb. Sometimes plural verb endings are attached after the -(H)PI. Uhlenbeck recommends the translation "what" for this type of relative clause, but other relatives in English may be used: "which, that".

Examples:

otanihp kin'na, kipaipuyit! = What your father says, say it quickly!

Relative clauses indicating "where" or "when" are formed by using the prefix IT- (there, then) and adding the -(H)PI at the end. Frequently IT- is reinforced by OZ- to make the prefix OZIT-. This is often used in place names or the names of time periods like months:

Mahxi-Pitaw ozitamisowhpi, omi nizitoto. = Where Red Eagle crosses (i.e. Red Eagle Pass), there I went (go).

saiyaix ozitautohpi = when the geese arrive (approximately the month of March).

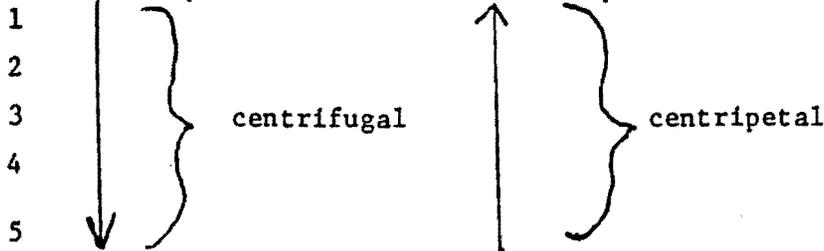
Relative clauses indicating "how" use a similar construction: Begin the clauses with (M)ANIST- and conclude it with -(H)PI.

Nitaisap' nitomitam manistauyihpi. = I see how my dog eats.

Often the prefix MOHT- is used with -(H)PI in this type of sentence, meaning "on account of what", "why", "along or by which" etc. To ask the question "Why?", begin with Ahsa, then incorporate (m)oh- in front of the verb stem: Ahsa kitohpohpa? Another example of the use of MOHT-: nimoh- (aw) auAKAIKI miszis = I hit-with a stick. MOHT- = with, so the verb becomes "hit-with". AND another: Pin-oh- sa-ahsitakit = Don't be displeases on that account (a polite expression).

44. Trouble-Making Verbs: Some verbs cause the student special problems, not because they are irregular, but rather because they begin with M- or N-, which may be dropped in certain forms and so have alternate ways of conjugation. This difficulty will surface especially in the 3rd and 4th person forms. Take the transitive animate of MINANI for example: nitaiINANATAw, kitaiINANATAw & c. (or nizINANATAw & c.); for 3rd and 4th persons MINANATAw, MINANATAinai & c. (or aiINANATAw, aiINANATAinai & c.) For the objects, a similar choice. In Configuration or Structure II: MINANAZIw(aiye), MINANAZIai & c. (or aiINANAZIw(aiye), aiINANAZIinai & c.) Another trouble-maker is the verb MATO. The intransitive runs: nitauTAKI, kitauTAKI & c. (or nitOTAKI, KITOTAKI & c.), 3rd person MAKAKIw. And so on. The transitive animate runs: nitOTOAw, kitOTOAw & c., 3rd person MATAKIw. And so on. The Transitive animate runs: nitOTOAw, kitOTOAw & c., 3rd person MATOIw(aiye) & c. This verb is much used and should be carefully learned. Another favorite beast is NANO. In Configuration II (Singular objects) it will be aINOIw(aiye), aINOinai, AINOiaw(aiye) (or the alternates: NANOiaw(aiye), NANAINai, NANOiaw(aiye). (This last optional suffix aiye sounds like English Ay in "day, stay" etc.) The forms for plural animate objects are: aINOiwaix, aINOinaiaix, aINOiawaix (or NANOiwaix, NANOinaiaix, NONOIawaix).

45. Centrifugal and Centripetal Verb Forms: Linguists have borrowed from physicists a pair of terms to describe a phenomenon that occurs typically in Algonquian languages, but especially in Blackfeet: centrifugal and centripetal. This phenomenon may well be the most difficult for the beginner, so we shall take it bit by bit. Relationship in verbs from 1st person downwards to or toward 5th person is called centrifugal. Relationship from 5th person upwards to or toward 1st person is centripetal. Relationship across the board is reciprocal or reflexive.



So far, most of the verb relationships studied are centrifugal, e.g. 1st person to 3rd, 2nd to 3rd, 3rd to 4th, 4th to 5th. But there is one centrifugal relationship not dealt with: 1st person to 2nd. Here it is, with AKOMI as the model verb:

KitAKOMIMMO = I love you (The final -O may disappear.)

kitAKOMIMMOhpuwaw = I love you (pl.)

kitAKOMIMMOhpinan = we love you (sing & pl.)

You will notice that all these forms are reversed. Intransitive affixes are attached to the transitive stem. -O is the variable vowel and perhaps by coincidence appears to be a suffix meaning "I" (as in Latin/Spanish). However, these forms can also be interpreted as passive: "you are loved (by me" & c. To reverse these forms and get the corresponding centripetal forms, attach -KI to the variable vowel O:

kitAKOMIMMoki = you love me.

kitAKOMIMMokihpuwaw = you (pl.) love me.

kitAKOMIMMoki = you (sing. & pl.) love us.

The suffix -KI seems to mean "me, us" and what used to be a 2nd person prefix has now become a 1st person suffix. This again may be just a coincidence, and the -KI is the sign of reversal or passivity.

46. Centripetals (Continued): Observe that the sign of reversal and/or passivity is an inserted -K-. Centripetal forms also use the variable vowel -O- on the transitive stem, and all centripetal forms belong to the first structure or configuration. (In other words, there is now no second configuration. The prefix series is NIT-, KIT-, OT-, and the suffix series (for the forms considered in this lesson) is \_INAN, -IW, -OAW, -OAIW. The plural "subject" suffix -IAW is attached at the end (-INANIAW, IAW, OAIW) with the 4th person plural indicated by -AIX.

47. Let's look at the paradigm and fret over translating it afterwards:

1st person	nitAKOMIMMok	nitAKOMIMMokinan AKOMINMokiw
2nd person	kitAKOMIMMok	kitAKOMIMMok
3rd person	otAKOMIMMok	

This is the paradigm for a singular "subject". Note that there is no distinction between you singular and you plural.\* If we translate this into the best English, using the English concepts of "subject", "predicate" and "object" from our Greek heritage, we would get: 3rd/4th person loves me, 3rd/4th person loves you, 4th person loves 3rd person; (plural for objects) 3rd/4th person loves you, and 3rd/4th person loves us (excl. & incl.)

However, a better way (though with awkward English) may be to forget about ancient Greek and English notions like "subject and object" and think instead of the entire paradigm as passive, indicating the relationship between a "patient" (the passive recipient of the action) and the "agent" (the producer of the action). Then, this paradigm is the one for a singular agent and both singular and plural patients. Also, in this case we do not really reverse anything. But we shall have to translate these forms as: I am loved by 3rd/4th person, you are loved by 3rd person is loved by 4th person, etc. It is possible that neither alternative interprets the Blackfeet precisely. But take your choice!

Using the terminology of the last paragraph, let's give the paradigm for plural agent with patients both singular and plural:

1st person	nitAKOMIMMokiaw	nitAKOMIMMokinaniaw AKOMIMMokiaw
2nd person	KitAKOMIMMokiaw	kitAKOMIMMokiaw
3rd person	otAKOMIMMokaix	otAKOMIMMokaix

Notice again that the forms for 2nd person (patient) are identical.\* common English translation would be: They love me, they love you, they love us, 4th person love third person(s). Or, in the passive: I am loved by them, you are loved by them etc.

48. NEGATIVE AND INTERROGATIVE CENTRIPETALS: To form the interrogative, and or -AZ, and to form the negative, prefix MAT and retain the -HPA or -A he rules or common usage do not appear to so firmly established with these rarer forms.

<u>Centrifugal</u>	<u>Centripetal</u>
kimataKOMIMMOhpa = I do not love you.	kimataKOMIMMokihpa = you do not love me.
kimataKOMIMMOhpuwaw = id. pl.	kimataKOMIMMokihpuwawa = Id. pl.
kimataKOMIMMOHPINANA = we do not love you.	kimataKOMIMMokihpinana = you do not love us.

As you see, the suffix -HPA is used in the forms between 1st and 2nd persons. But when 3rd/4th persons are the agents, use -AZ or -AIXAW.

Negatives with singular Agent

1st person	nimataKOMIMMokaz	nimataKOMIMMokinanz mataKOMIMMokiwaz
2nd person	kimataKOMIMMokaz	KimataKOMIMMokaz
3rd person	omataKOMIMMokaz	

Negatives with Plural Agent

1st person	nimatAKOMIKKokaziaw	nimatAKOMIMMokinaniawaz mataKOMINMokiawaz
2nd person	kimataKOMIMMokiaziaw	kimataKOMINMokiaziaw
3rd person	omataKOMIMMokaixaw	omataKOMIMMokaixaw

If you need to distinguish "you" singular from "you" plural, used kistowa and xistowaw.

49. Irregular T-Stems: The T-stem verbs have irregularities in centripetal forms and in the indefinite passive: that is, the T disappears before the K. The loss of the T is likely to result in a contraction of vowels that now come together. Here are samples of the indefinite passive:

nitohPAoko = I am carried; nitohKOKo = I am given (something by  
by someone);

nitANIKo = I am called or named; kitANIKo (note loss of S).

SAMPLES of centripetal forms:

nitohPAok; nitohKOK; nitANIK; nitaiSOPOAHZISAK; he/she --- me

kitohPAok; kitohKOK; kitANIK, kitaiSOPOAHZISAK; he/she --- you

otohPAok; otohKOK; otANIK; otaiSOPOAHZISAK: 4th ---- 3rd person