

FIRST EDITION

**A BLACKFOOT LANGUAGE
STUDY**

*A special study of the Blackfoot language
on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation
1932 - 1996*

by
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et. al.**

Presented
by
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BILL OF FARE

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INTRODUCTION

The Blackfoot Confederacy tribes are the Pikuni, Kainai, and Siksika (North and South Piegans, Bloods and Blackfoot). Until 1840, the Inixt (Small Robes), destroyed by a smallpox epidemic, were also part of the confederacy.

Today, the language and customs of the tribes are correctly referred to as the Blackfoot Language and Ways. In the Blackfoot Language all the tribes are related, and each member is a relation. Any Blackfoot speaker was considered a member of the tribe, and in several accounts enemies were spared because they spoke the language. The Blackfoot custom was not to harm a relation.

It is noted in oral tradition neighbors of the Blackfoot Tribe often were fluent in the tribe's language. In the Gros Ventre and Blackfoot relationship it is interesting to note many Gros Ventre spoke Blackfoot, but not necessarily the other way round. This is due to the protector role the Blackfoot had with the Gros Ventre until 1865.

Beginning in the 1860's, the first non-native outsiders to visit the Blackfoot Confederacy were Frenchmen from the Hudson Bay Company. They were the point men, sent ahead to learn the language of the company's potential customers. They often stayed through the winter, and recorded the language for those sent out later. Hugh Monroe, or Rising Wolf, was one of the men who stayed on with the tribe.

Following the Hudson Bay men were missionaries, Anglican and Catholic, who came to proselytize the Blackfoot tribes. They transcribed the languages into grammar and dictionary formats, and later, school curriculums used to teach Blackfoot children English and canon law of their churches. The Society of Jesus Indian Language Collection alone contains twenty-nine major works in the Blackfoot Language. The Reverend J.W. Tims, Church Missionary College, in 1883, completed a major study of the Blackfoot Language still used today by student scholars.

In more recent times, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'i of Canada issued a Message to the Blackfeet Indians, written in both English and Blackfoot. In 1989, Donald Frantz and Norma Jean Russell compiled a Blackfoot Dictionary published by the University of Toronto Press. This was followed by a grammar book published a year later. A conservative count lists forty major compilations of the language.

Among the South Piegans, today called the Blackfeet, several members of the tribe are noted for their dedication teaching the language. Peter Red Horn, Nellie Reevis, Molly Bull Shoe, and Elizabeth Butterfly Lewis made solid contributions to the understanding of the language during the last forty years.

In 1983, at the tribal college, younger members of the tribe began to acquire a respect for the language, and a strong desire to re-learn it. Much of the written work was gathered and studied. Fluent speakers of the tribe soon found themselves sought after in the midst of a renaissance that continues today.

In 1983, Jack Holterman, a long time friend of the Blackfeet Tribe, and scholar of the Blackfoot Language, made available his notes gathered over the years to students of the language. Jack, as a young man, taught on the Blackfeet Reservation for many years at Swims Under, McGovern, Starr, and Pontrasina schools before leaving to work and retire from the National Park Service.

He wrote,

“I have spent a good deal of my life making myself a nuisance among the southern Piegan, begging them “How do you say this?” “How do you say that?” This little work is my way of saying “Thanks for your patience. Sadly, though, I must add that many who helped me have long since gone to the Great Spirit.”

Jack Holterman

Apinakoi Peta

His notes were compiled in 1983, and first used in the Blackfeet Community College’s Bilingual Teacher Training Program. In 1994, he donated his entire collection to the Piegan Institute’s Blackfoot Language Scholarship Fund to support students learning the language. This book presents the collection for the first time in its entirety.

In 1995, the number of young children speaking the Blackfoot Language is small. For many years, the lesson of the day was not to study, or speak the language of the Blackfoot. In spite of the siege the language lives today, and many tribal members wish to relearn, and reclaim it. It is especially important young children learn the language.

The Piegan Institute builds one room schoolhouses on the Blackfeet Reservation where the Blackfoot Language is used exclusively. It has been discovered children of Blackfoot Language Immersion schools gain high-caliber language acquisition skills, and are happy, healthy, and well-adjusted students. It is ironic schools of the early day did not realize this fact, and instead, of expending effort to replace the language, could have done the Blackfoot a major favor by simply adding English to their language repertoire. It is not too late to change a serious miscalculation into a positive result.

The contributions of people like Jack Holterman, Peter Red Horn, Nellie Reevis, Floyd Middle Rider, Joe Kipp of Meriwether, Elizabeth Lewis, George and Percy Bull Child, Joe Bear Medicine, Francis Potts, Gertie Heavy Runner, Clara LaPlant, George and Mollie Kicking Women, Molly Bull Shoe, Mike Swims Under, and the countless others who follow their footsteps make the dream of keeping the Blackfoot Language alive a reality. To the North, our relatives are striving to accomplish the same task.

Hopefully, this book will assist those wishing to become part of the language, and help them discover, as many already have, that the Blackfoot Language is still the Mother and Father nurturing our needs, and dreams.

PREFACE BY JACK HOLTERMAN

The Sounds of Blackfoot

There is a current tendency among linguists to classify Native American languages into three broad groups: 1): Amerind, 2): Athabascan or Na-Dene and 3): Eskimo-Aleutian. Amerind occupies practically all South America and most of North America. One of the major and most northerly stocks of Amerind is Algonquian, which originally spread along the entire east coast from Virginia to Newfoundland. It mostly encircled the Great Lakes as far north as Hudson's Bay and as far west as the Rockies. A division of Algonquian was spoken by the Blackfeet whose territory in historic times reached down to Three Forks and the Missouri River.

The Blackfoot language is spoken with some dialectal variations by the North Blackfoot people, the Bloods or Kaina, the North Piegiens of Alberta and the Southern Piegiens of Montana. It is one of the western types of the Algonquian stock (along with Gros Ventre, Arapaho and Cheyenne and two languages in California). Blackfoot, in its grammatical structure, is fairly typical of Algonquian but is more divergent in its vocabulary, perhaps because of contacts like intermarriage with other western tribes.

Having remained unwritten for centuries, Blackfoot now evinces some phonetic instability, especially in vowels and more especially in initial vowels. Even so, after his detailed study of the Southern Piegan, C.C. Uhlenbeck concluded that the Blackfoot phonological system is "comparatively simple" and that diacritical signs are hardly necessary for "a broad transcription of its sounds." Though a broad transcription may not satisfy some specialists, it seems adequate for the present study.

The vowels in this transcription are assigned "continental" values, but may be either long or short and are most often short. Uhlenbeck evidently suspected that Blackfoot had only three basic vowels: A, I and O, with E and U personal or dialectal variations of I and U respectively. 1): Long A sounds like A in "father," short A like U in "but." 2): E is always long like AY in "day." 3): Long I sounds like EE in "seek," short I as in "bit." 4): U is always long and sounds like OO in "moon."

The diphthong AU is pronounced like OW in "cow," but AI sounds like Y in "my" or AY in "way" and sometimes even like the short A like the U in "but." This variation is a prime example of the "wavering" that is frequent in Blackfoot and seems to be a matter of local or personal habit. Some vowels or even syllables, notably A, are whispered in final position or even dropped altogether, often following W and nasals. North of the international line the final A after W (the suffix -WA that represents the 3rd person is more often preserved, whereas south of the border is left only a trace that sounds like the final W in English "few."

The glottal stop occurs occasionally, but its use or omission may again be a personal or dialectal peculiarity.

In the present transcriptions Z = TS or TZ, and X = KS. A few early writers, notably Prince Maximilian, Catlin and Hayden, recorded KR where most researchers today hear only X or KS. I too have occasionally thought I detected a slightly trilled R following a K.

H represents a post-palatal guttural like Greek Chi and somewhat similar to Parisian R grasseyé. In Canada R has often been written for this sound, e.g. "Sahsi" thus becomes "Sarsi." After an I this guttural H is softened on some lips to SH. In interjections and initial positions H has its English value as a simple aspirant.

K, P and T sound to some persons like G, B and D respectively, but they are unaspirated K, P and T of the English word "sky," "spy" and "sty" or "skate," "spate," and "state." But not as in "kind," "paper," and "total." In Blackfoot they compare with the corresponding phonemes in Spanish, French, Chinese, Cree etc. In final positions, however, these phonemes are more aspirated.

Serious attention should be given to the intonations of Blackfoot. Rather than resort to doubling or tripling the same letter, it seems more practical to represent occasional features of Blackfoot by tonality in vowels. A rising tone can be indicated by ÁHSA (grandparent), a falling tone by A (yes), a flat, short but prolonged vowel as with the I in PÍTA (eagle) or PÍT! (Come on in!). (An alternate method AÁHSA. AÁZISTA.)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A few of my help-mates include Joe Kipp of Meriwether, George Bull Child, Floyd Middle Rider, Published works that I have depended upon in greater less degree are especially the writings of C.C. Uhlenbeck and his coauthors and also REV. J.W. Tims, Father Albert Lacombe, Lanning, Lewis, Don Frantz, and Claude E. Schaeffer.