

Irrealis in Blackfoot?

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1. Introduction¹. The category “irrealis” has been a useful label for numerous languages that show a grammatical contrast between “real” and “unreal” situations. However, the category has been “inconsistently defined” across languages (Kinkade 1998: 234) and the misalignment between how it has been defined and the distribution of irrealis-marked forms across languages has also led to the claim that the realis/irrealis distinction is not cross-linguistically valid (Bybee et al. 1994:237-8). Kinkade (1998) suggests that “it is necessary to distinguish between that which is actually unreal and an irrealis grammatical category”. Thus we might expect all languages to exhibit constructions that describe “logically unreal” contexts, but as Kinkade states “none of these notions must be marked *grammatically* (i.e., morphologically or syntactically) as unreal” (p. 234). The purpose of this paper is to explore whether Blackfoot, an Algonquian language spoken in Montana and Alberta, provides evidence for irrealis as a grammatical category in the language².

Tense, aspect, and even more so, mood, are understudied phenomena in Blackfoot³. The language has been described as having an “irrealis” mood; Uhlenbeck (1938) states that one of the “repressional” moods marked by the suffix *-opi* (and its variants) is used to express “a supposition, nearly always an unreal one, and may therefore be called ‘irrealis’” (p. 169). More recently, this suffix has been described as a marker of the “unreal” paradigm, used in “counterfactual and hypothetical subordinate clauses” (Frantz 1991:115), more specifically “in the apodosis of conditional sentences”, expressing “the action or state which would result if the contrary-to-fact statement of the protasis should happen” (Taylor 1969:170). At first, then, it appears that Blackfoot does show evidence for the category irrealis, not only because it has morphology that has been labeled as such, but because it appears in counterfactual contexts (1), which are among the most typical irrealis contexts:

- | | | | |
|-----|--|--------------|---------|
| (1) | Nitsítssáyoyi htopi , | nitáaksoyi | ánnohka |
| | nit-it-say-loyi- htopi | nit-áak-loyi | annohka |
| | I-then-neg-eat- unreal | 1-fut-eat | now |
| | ‘If I hadn’t eaten then, I’d eat now’ (Frantz 1991:115, ex. x) | | |

However, *-opi* does not appear in all contexts that are associated with “unreality”. Conditionals, for example, are marked by subjunctive morphology (2), not by the “unreal” paradigm:

- (2) Ikkamáyo'kainoainiki, nitáakahkayi.
 ikkam-á-yo'kaa-**inoainiki** nit-yáak-wa:hkayi
 if-dur-sleep(AI)-**2p(subjunctive)** 1-fut-go^home
 'If you2p are sleeping, I'll go home' (Frantz 1991:113, ex. l)

Yes/no questions are marked by nonaffirmative suffixes (3), and not “unreal” morphology:

- (3) Kitsikákomimmoki**hpa**?
 kit-íkakomimm-o:k-i-**hpa**
 2-love-inv-1-**nonaffirm**
 'Do you2s love me?' (Frantz 1991:133, ex. d)

We propose that irrealis is not a relevant grammatical category in Blackfoot because a variety of “logically unreal” contexts are encoded by different morphology. While we may not expect that in a given language irrealis morphology would mark *all* constructions describing logically unreal contexts, we might expect that if irrealis were a relevant category in Blackfoot that it would at least be used in more than one unreal context.

The paper is organized as follows: we first present a brief overview of the category irrealis across languages, viz., how it is described and the instability of the category (§2). We then look at an analysis of irrealis in another Algonquian language: the Moose Cree “preterit” morphemes *-pan* and *-htay* (James 1991), which are most likely historically related to Blackfoot *-opi* (§3). We turn next to our argument that irrealis is not a relevant grammatical category in Blackfoot, by showing that various “logically unreal” contexts in Blackfoot have completely different morphology, as well as commenting on the possible origins of the Blackfoot “unreal” (Frantz 1991) morpheme *-(ht)opi* (§4). We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of our proposals and a summary of issues for further research (§5).

2. The Status of Irrealis as a Grammatical Category. In this section we give an overview of the motivation for positing an irrealis category in some languages. We also address why this does not necessarily lend credence to the idea of irrealis as a universal grammatical category in all languages.

2.1. Irrealis Cross-Linguistically. Chung and Timberlake (1985) define the realis/irrealis split as a distinction between actual and non-actual events. Realis morphology attaches to clauses, verbs, or arguments that refer to some aspect of the world as it is (utterances that make some statement about the state of the world, whether they have a positive or negative logical truth value). Irrealis morphology attaches to clauses, verbs, or arguments that refer to a world other than the one that exists at the time

of the utterance (including statements which refer to the future world, a conditional world, or a counterfactual world that is in some way the opposite of reality at the time of utterance⁴). This is echoed by Mithun (1999) who further suggests that actual events are those which have occurred or are actually occurring, and which are “knowable through direct perception”, while “irrealis portrays situations as purely within the realm of thought, knowable only through imagination” (p. 173). Cross-linguistically, irrealis is used in a variety of “unreal” contexts, such as conditionals, counterfactuals, imperatives, futures, questions, negatives, obligations, potentials, warnings, etc. Although the origin of the term “irrealis” to describe these contexts is not known (Bybee et al. 1994⁵), its use arises as a result of the observation that different constructions are marked in the same way and that the shared characteristic among the constructions is “unreality” or “nonactuality”. Caddo (Caddoan; Oklahoma), for example, encodes the realis/irrealis distinction in pronominal prefixes in the verbal domain (Chafe 1995:354, as cited in Mithun 1999:178-9):

(4) Negation

kúyt’áybah
 kúy-t’a-yibahw
 negative-1agent.irrealis-see
 ‘I don’t see him’

(5) Yes/no questions

sàyybáwnah
 sah?-yibahw-nah
 2agent.irrealis-see-perfect
 ‘Have you (irrealis) seen him?’

(6) Conditionals

hít’áybah
 hí-t’á-yibahw
 conditional-1agent.irrealis-see
 ‘if I see it’

The Caddo data are meant to show that irrealis is a relevant category in this language given that negation, yes/no questions and conditionals are all marked by the same pronominal prefixes. Thus a variety of logically unreal contexts are morphologically marked in the same way in this language.

2.2. Problems with Irrealis. Bybee et al. (1994) suggest that “realis/irrealis is rarely realized in a language as a binary morphological distinction. It appears to be more common to have multiple markers in both domains” (pp. 237-8). The dichotomy between

logically and grammatically unreal, or “that which is actually unreal and an irrealis grammatical category” (Kinkade 1998: 234), is a necessary one because there are few if any languages that encode every possible irrealis context with a unique grammatical morpheme signalling the irrealis mood. However, generalizations about irrealis *can* be drawn: Mithun (1999) suggests that “some constructions, such as conditionals and counterfactuals, are classified as irrealis in all systems” (p. 179)⁶. Thus while languages differ according to which logically unreal contexts are marked with irrealis morphology, we would expect from Mithun’s claim that any language in which a realis/irrealis distinction is useful would mark conditionals and counterfactuals in the same way.

Irrealis has been proposed to be relevant in at least one other Algonquian language, Moose Cree. We now turn to an examination of this paradigm in the following section.

3. Irrealis in Moose Cree. James (1991) claims that in Moose Cree, the morphemes *-pan* and *-htay* have come to form a single “preterit paradigm” which has two usages: an imperfective past aspectual use and an irrealis modal usage which indicates “that the proposition is unreal or hypothetical as opposed to real and factual” (p. 285). The data suggest that this paradigm is used in both present counterfactual (7) and past counterfactual (8) contexts:

- (7) kiša:spin iskwe:wit, ta-miloma:kosi:**pan**
 if he-be-woman he-will-be-good-looking-**PRET**
 ‘If he were a woman, he would be good-looking’
 (James 1991: 286, ex. 7)

- (8) kiša:spin ki:-wa:pama:kopane:,
 if ki:-he-see-her-DUB-**PRET**
 ka-ki:-wi:htama:ko**hta**:naw.
 ki:-he-will-tell-us-about-it-**PRET**
 ‘If he had seen her, he would have told us about it’
 (James 1991: 287, ex. 8)

The preterit paradigm is also used in future conditional contexts (9). As James states, it can be used to describe “something which might take place or be the case in the future, where this is contingent upon some other event taking place” (p. 287):

- (9) kiša:spin itohte:yin mo:sonihk, ka-milowe:lihte:**htay** anta
 if you-go to-Moosonee you-will-like-it-**PRET** there
 ‘If you went to Moosonee, you would like it there’
 (James 1991: 287, ex. 9)

In each of these cases, the so-called preterit marker is used in conjunction with future time reference morphology glossed as ‘will’. The data in (7) shows that *-pan* need not contribute any sense of past tense; in this case it contributes the meaning associated with irrealis counterfactual mood. The past counterfactual meaning of (8) is contributed by *-pan* as well as the preverb *ki:-*. The future conditional sense of (9) may be due to the status of the verb as eventive rather than stative (as in (7)); this, however, would require a closer look at predicate classes in Moose Cree and thus is left for future research.

James’s proposal is that the Moose Cree preterit marker *-pan* developed from Proto-Algonquian (henceforth PA) **(e)pan* which “originally indicated past events specifically not relevant to the present” (p. 290). Some Algonquian languages retained this original meaning; however, many developed other usages (e.g., past, irrealis, evidentiality, etc.). Some modern reflexes of PA **(e)pan* are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Reflexes of PA **(e)pan*

Language	Morpheme	Usage	Source
Ojibwe	<i>-bany</i>	preterit	Rogers (1978:168)
Moose Cree	<i>-pan</i>	preterit, counterfactual	James (1991)
Montagnais	<i>-shapan</i> ⁷	past, indirect evidential	James et al. (2001)
Naskapi	<i>-shapan</i>	past, indirect evidential	James et al. (2001)
East Cree	<i>-shapan</i>	past, indirect evidential	James et al. (2001)
Plains Cree	<i>-pan</i>	preterit	Wolfart (1973:44)

Several Algonquian languages have retained the past tense/aspectual usage that has been proposed for the PA morpheme, but Moose Cree has also developed an irrealis counterfactual usage, and in Montagnais, Naskapi, and East Cree the morpheme is primarily now used as an evidential indicating indirect evidence (James et al. 2001).

James (2001), describing the *-shapan* morpheme in Cree/Montagnais/Naskapi, states that speakers can use the suffix “to indicate that they are distanced in some way from the event of state of affairs described” (p. 240). This distancing effect may be what prompted the development of the irrealis usages in many Algonquian languages. This possible relation between past and irrealis as one of distance or irrelevance to present events has been described in Steele (1975) for Proto-Uto-Aztecan; she shows that the irrealis and past tense morphemes in Proto-Uto-Aztecan apparently came from a single irrealis/preterit morpheme. James (1991) echoes this as an avenue of explanation for Proto-Algonquian. Indeed, the connection between past and irrealis is not an uncommon one cross-linguistically: in Itzaj Maya, “the modal-semantic category ‘irrealis’ interacts with the aspectual distinction, ‘perfect,’ and with tense” (Hofling 1998:214). The fact that so many Algonquian languages have developed some kind of irrealis usage from what is

typically understood to be a preterit morpheme in PA leaves open the question as to what the actual meaning of PA **(e)pan* was.

Given this brief overview of irrealis in Moose Cree and other Algonquian languages, we now turn to an exploration of irrealis in Blackfoot with the aim of understanding whether irrealis is indeed a relevant category in this language.

4. “Irrealis” in Blackfoot. Blackfoot *-opi*, and its variants *-htopi*, *-ohtopi*, and *-wahtopi*, is labeled “unreal” by Frantz (1991) as well as Taylor (1969), who suggests that it is “found in the apodosis of conditional sentences” (Taylor 1969:170), and generally conveys a counterfactual. James (1991, citing Proulx, p.c.) suggests that, like Moose Cree *-pan*, Blackfoot *-opi* probably also developed from PA **(e)pan*.

The Blackfoot “unreal” paradigm is used in past counterfactual (10) and present counterfactual (11) conditions:

- (10) Nitsítssáyoyi**htopi**, nitáaksoyi ánnohka
 nit-it-say-Ioyi-**htopi** nit-áak-Ioyi annohka
 I-then-neg-eat-**unreal** 1-fut-eat now
 ‘If I hadn’t eaten then, I’d eat now’ (Frantz 1991:115, ex. x)
- (11) kátá’yo’kaa**wahtopi**yaawa, áaksstaayaaw mááhksoyssaawa
 kátá’yo’kaa-**wahtopi**-yi-aawa yáak-sstaa-yi-aawa m-ááhk-Ioyi-hsi-aawa
 neg-sleep-**unreal**-3p-PRO fut-want-3p-PRO 3-might-eat-conj-pro
 ‘If they weren’t asleep, they’d want to eat’ (Frantz 1991:115, ex. y)

If irrealis were a grammatical category in Blackfoot, we would expect that multiple “logically unreal” contexts would be marked with similar morphology (following Mithun 1999, minimally counterfactuals and conditionals). This prediction is not borne out, since counterfactuals are marked by the “unreal”, while conditionals are marked by the subjunctive:

- (12) Ikkamín**mmiinnaaniki**, nitáaksowatoo’pinnaana
 ikkam-Ini-**mmiinnaaniki** nit-yáak-Iowatoo-‘p-innaan-wa
 if-see(TI)-**1p(subjunctive)** 1-fut-eat(TI)-theme-1p-in.s
 ‘If we see it, we’ll eat it’ (Frantz 1991:113, ex. m)

Moreover, other logically unreal contexts are marked in even different ways. Imperatives are marked by the suffixes *-t* or *-k*, and not by the “unreal” paradigm:

- (13) Ooyít! Ooyík!
 ooyi-**t** ooyi-**k**
 eat(AI)-**2s(imp)** eat(AI)-**2p(imp)**
 ‘Eat!’ (Frantz 1991: 114, ex. r)

Future tense is marked by the prefix *yáak-*, and not by the “unreal” paradigm⁸:

- (14) Nitáakitsiniki
 nit-**yáak**-itsiniki
 1-**fut**-relate
 ‘I will tell a story’ (Frantz 1991: 31, ex. b)

Interestingly, the only morpheme which, to our knowledge, appears in more than one logically unreal context is *-hpa*, which encodes what Frantz (1991) terms “nonaffirmative”. It appears in both yes/no questions (15) and negative statements in the independent verb paradigm (16):

- (15) Yes/no questions
 Kikáta’yáaka’po’taki**hpa**?
 k-Ikáta’-yáak-a’p-o’taki-**hpa**
 2-interrog-fut-PREF-work-**nonaffirm**
 ‘Will you work?’ (Frantz 1991:133, ex. J)

- (16) Negative statements in the independent verb paradigm
 Nimáátáóoyi**hpa**.
 n-Imáát-á-ooyi-**hpa**
 1-neg-dur-eat-**nonaffirm**
 ‘I’m not eating.’ (Frantz 1991:85)

Table 2 summarizes the ways in which logically unreal contexts in Blackfoot are marked morphologically. With the exception of future and imperative, these morphemes are taken as representative of their respective paradigms, within which morpheme shape is dependent on person marking and verb order:

Table 2. Morphology used in Blackfoot logically unreal contexts.

Counter-factual	Conditional	Future	Imperative	Negative	Yes/No Questions
<i>-opi</i>	<i>-iniki</i>	<i>-yáak</i>	<i>-t, -k</i>	<i>maat-...-hpa</i>	<i>-hpa</i>

Of the six logically unreal contexts given in Table 2, *-opi* is used in only one of those contexts, the counterfactual. Although *-opi* probably did develop from the PA **(e)pan* preterit marker and now has an irrealis usage parallel to Moose Cree *-pan*, its modern use in Blackfoot is too restricted to constitute a grammatical category irrealis.

To our knowledge, no origin has been proposed for the *-(ht)-* portion of the Blackfoot morpheme, but we cannot help noticing the similarity to Moose Cree *-htay*, which James argues had an original irrealis meaning. To account for why these two morphemes *-pan* and *-htay* have come to form a single paradigm in Moose Cree, James appeals to Steele's (1975) claim that past and irrealis "have in common the semantic primitive DISSOCIATIVE.... Past time is dissociated from present time. Irrealis is dissociated from reality" (p. 216-7). A similar explanation might be appropriate for Blackfoot where reflexes of these two morphemes may have merged to form a single morpheme. Unlike Moose Cree where, in addition to having a past tense morpheme *ki:-*, the preterit paradigm has both an irrealis usage and an imperfective past usage, Blackfoot *-opi* does not seem to have distinct imperfective past usage; furthermore, Blackfoot lacks an overt past tense morpheme (see Frantz 1991 and Armoskaite to appear). Thus, while the Moose Cree preterit paradigms seems to have retained some of the meaning of *both* the original PA morphemes, Blackfoot has not.

5. Conclusion. In this section we briefly summarize our proposals and discuss two issues for further research: (i) the patterning of yes/no questions and negation and (ii) the relation between the past and irrealis.

5.1. Summary. Unlike in Moose Cree, Blackfoot counterfactuals and future conditionals are not marked in the same way. The only two logically unreal contexts which are marked similarly are negation and yes/no questions. If irrealis were a grammatical category in Blackfoot, we would expect to find similar morphology across at least some logically unreal contexts (minimally counterfactuals and conditionals). Since the only logically unreal contexts which pattern together in Blackfoot are negation and yes/no questions, neither of which use the "unreal" paradigm, we conclude that irrealis is not a grammatical category in Blackfoot.

Blackfoot *-opi* probably did develop from PA **(e)pan*. Counterfactual usage of the modern reflexes of the PA preterit morpheme is well-documented in other Algonquian languages. Thus both the observed context of use and the phonetics of Blackfoot *-opi* point to this as a reflex (James 1991:291, citing Proulx, p.c.). While the morphological and semantic relation between Moose Cree *-pan/-htay* and Blackfoot *-(ht)opi* is clear, we suggest that the restriction of Blackfoot *-opi* to a single unreal context is not enough to justify irrealis as a grammatical category in the language.

Bybee (1998b) suggests that "the term 'irrealis' is simply too general to be useful, except as a pointer to a very broad domain" (p. 269; see also Bybee et al. 1994 for a

claim against a universal category irrealis). There are languages where reference to the category irrealis seems to be of use (e.g., Caddo; see also Comrie (1985), Mithun (1991) and Bybee (1998a) for further examples). Note that the lack of irrealis as a grammatical category in Blackfoot does not necessarily have implications for the status of irrealis in other languages. Claims about languages that apparently lack the categories tense, number or gender have not all concluded that these categories are irrelevant cross-linguistically, only that they are not relevant in those languages. Likewise, we have shown that irrealis is not a relevant category in Blackfoot, but may still be a relevant category in other languages. Our proposal supports Kinkade's (1998) important observation that logical irrealis does not predict grammatical irrealis.

5.2. Issues for Further Research. It remains to be explained why yes/no questions and negation pattern together (marked by the nonaffirmative *-hpa*), but not with content questions, counterfactuals, or conditionals (or other “logically unreal” contexts). Examining non-affirmative endings in Blackfoot, Louie (2008) shows that they have the same distribution as negative polarity items (NPIs) cross-linguistically: they appear in questions and negative constructions, but not in corresponding positive constructions. This analysis may account for why it might be the case that among the logically unreal contexts in Blackfoot, yes/no questions and negative constructions are the only two that pattern together morphologically. Her analysis of non-affirmative in Blackfoot as NPIs seems to be restricted to non-speech act participants and thus a remaining question is whether it extends to speech act participants as well.

As negative statements are marked with the nonaffirmative suffix in addition to the negative prefix, Blackfoot apparently treats positive assertions and negative assertions differently (perhaps negative statements are not treated as assertions at all), an understanding of which we leave for future research. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether the Blackfoot “unreal” presupposes that the counterfactual condition is false. It has been shown that in English, this is not necessarily the case; although the typical interpretation of (17) below is that John did not come, as Palmer (1986: 191) suggests the sentence “could be used where the speaker does not know whether John came or not”:

(17) If John had come, Mary would have left.

Matthewson, Rullman and Davis (2005:7) argue that the irrealis usage of *ka-* in St'át'imcets (Interior Salish) “requires that the proposition it operates on is false...the falsity cannot be cancelled”. We leave the presupposition facts about counterfactuals in Blackfoot as another issue for further research.

The final remaining question concerns what exactly the relationship is between past and irrealis in Blackfoot. Of particular interest is whether there is a parallel between the development of a PA preterit morpheme into a Blackfoot counterfactual marker and

the lack of an overt past tense morpheme in Blackfoot (see Frantz 1991 and Armoskaite to appear; but also Reis Silva and Matthewson 2007 for the claim that Blackfoot has a phonologically null past tense and Ritter and Wiltschko 2004 for the claim that Blackfoot lacks a T node). This contrasts with Moose Cree, for example, where the preterit paradigm marks imperfective aspect in the past in addition to irrealis. Given the different usages of **(e)pan* reflexes in modern Algonquian languages, the morpheme most likely had a more complex usage than simple past (possibly related to irrealis). The inconsistency of the category irrealis across Algonquian languages points to the need for an in depth study of irrealis (and more broadly, mood) across the Algonquian language family.

Notes

¹Our thanks go to Joshua Birchall, Lisa Matthewson, Mizuki Miyashita, Meredith Ward, Becky Wood and audience members at WAIL 11 for valuable discussion.

²The Blackfoot data in this paper is drawn from Frantz (1991).

³See, however, recent work by Ritter and Wiltschko (2004, 2005), Reis Silva and Matthewson (2007), Reis Silva and Glougie (2007), Durham (2007), Louie (2008) and Armoskaite (to appear) for analyses of Blackfoot tense and aspect.

⁴Given that irrealis terms refer to a world other than the current one, it might be natural to include “past” or “preterit” in this paradigm. This is not the case in the morphology of languages in which irrealis is a distinct grammatical category. Interestingly, though, there does seem to be a relationship between past and irrealis. Steele (1975) suggests that past and irrealis both signify remoteness from present reality (see §4).

⁵According to their study, however, Uhlenbeck’s (1938) description of irrealis in Blackfoot is the earliest recording of the term.

⁶We follow Chung and Timberlake (1985) and assume that past and present conditions reduce to counterfactual conditions while future conditions are neither actual nor counterfactual, but potential.

⁷In Montagnais, Naskapi, and East Cree, this morpheme is directly descended from Proto-Algonquian **(e)sapan*, which is in turn purported to be a combination of **(e)pan* and **(e)san* (James et al. 2001:246).

⁸See also Reis Silva and Gougie (2007) for analysis of two future tense morphemes in Blackfoot.

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