6.5: Inflectional Morphology in Some Indigenous Languages

Talking about morphology when your primary language is English is sometimes a little disappointing because English does not have very much inflectional morphology. Many other languages do much more interesting jobs with inflectional morphology. Many of the Indigenous Languages spoken by the First Peoples of what is currently Canada have rich morphological systems that communicate a great deal of information.

Number in Inuktitut

Inuktitut is one of the dialects spoken by the Inuit people who live in the Arctic region. There is a good deal of dialect variation across the Inuit languages. Inuktitut is the variety that is the official language of the territory of Nunavut, and has about 40,000 speakers.

All languages make a distinction between singular and plural nouns, but some languages, like Inuktitut, also use inflectional morphology to indicate dual number when there are exactly two of something, as in the following examples:

- matu  door
- matuuk  doors (two)
- matuit  doors (three or more)
- nuvuja  cloud
- nuvujaak  clouds (two)
- nuvujaalt  clouds (three or more)
Subject-Verb Agreement in Inuktitut

The three-way distinction between singular, dual, and plural in Inuktitut applies not only to nouns but also to verbs that agree with their noun subjects:

- nirijunga  
  *I eat*  

- nirjuguk  
  *the two of us eat*  

- nirjugut  
  *we (three or more) eat*  

- nirijutit  
  *you (one of you) eat*  

- nirijusik  
  *you two eat*  

- nirijusi  
  *you (three or more) eat*  

- nirijuq  
  *he or she eats*  

- nirijuuk  
  *the two of them eat*  

- nirijut  
  *they (three or more) eat*  

Animacy in Cree

The Cree languages are the Indigenous languages that have the greatest number of speakers, about 80,000 according to Statistics Canada’s 2016 Census.

You might know a language that categorizes nouns according to their gender, like French, which makes a distinction between masculine and feminine nouns, adjectives, and determiners. Of course, grammatical gender has a quite arbitrary relationship to concepts of social and biological gender. Other languages categorize nouns along different criteria. Cree distinguishes words along a dimension called **animacy**. The animacy distinction is approximately related to whether something is alive or not, but the categories for animate vs. inanimate things are somewhat arbitrary, just the like the categories for masculine vs. feminine things in languages that mark grammatical gender. The animacy of a noun affects which demonstrative determiners may be used with it, the form of the plural morphology, and the morphology of the verb that agrees with it.
In Plains Cree (Nêhiyawêwin), the noun *atim* (dog) is animate, while *astotin* (hat) is inanimate. The sentences below show how the noun’s animacy affects the other words in the sentence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>animate</th>
<th>inanimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular</td>
<td><em>atim</em></td>
<td><em>astotin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td><em>atim</em></td>
<td><em>astotin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>singular demo.</td>
<td><em>awa</em></td>
<td><em>ôma</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural demo.</td>
<td><em>ôki</em></td>
<td><em>ôhi</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>singular TV</td>
<td><em>niwâpamâw</em></td>
<td><em>niwâpahtên</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural TV</td>
<td><em>niwâpamâw</em></td>
<td><em>niwâpahtên</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pronouns**

All languages make at least a three-way distinction among pronouns — the first person (*I/me* in English) is the person talking; second person (*you*) is the person being addressed, and third person (*she, he, they, it*, etc.) is anybody or anything else. Some languages make even more distinctions in pronouns.

In Ojibwe (Anishnaabemowin), which has about 20,000 speakers, there are two pronouns for the first-person plural. The pronoun *niinwi* refers to the speaker plus other people but not the person being addressed (that is, “we but not you”). This is known as the exclusive we. The pronoun for inclusive we (“all of us including you”) is *kiinwi*. The distinction between inclusive and exclusive we is sometimes referred to as **clusivity**.

Cree also makes an inclusive/exclusive distinction in the first-person plural. The inclusive form is *niyanân* and the exclusive form is *kiyânaw*.

**Subject-Verb Agreement in Cree**

In the third person, Cree makes a distinction between **proximate** and **obviative** third person. You might think of this distinction as something similar to the near/far distinction between *this* and *that* in English, where *this* is used for something that is closer to the speaker and *that* is for something farther away. But, like in English, the proximate/obviative distinction is not just about physical distance; it can also allude to distance in time, or within a conversation, to someone that has been mentioned recently (proximate) versus someone that is being mentioned for the first time (obviative). The distinction is marked on the verbal morphology, as illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>proximate</th>
<th>obviative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>wikiwak.</td>
<td>kiskinwahamâkosiyiwa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>They live in Regina.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Their friend/someone else lives in</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Anthropology/Linguistics/Book%3A_Essentials_of_Linguistics_(Anderson)/06%3A…

Updated: Fri, 24 Jul 2020 04:04:51 GMT

Powered by
These few examples illustrate that the rich morphological systems of these languages can communicate a great deal of information efficiently.