

Syllabicity of [X] in Blackfoot: An Empirical Investigation

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This study examines the syllabicity of a dorsal fricative /x/ in Blackfoot. Blackfoot has two fricatives, /s/ and /x/, and it has been claimed that Blackfoot /s/ is syllabic (Derrick 2007; Denzer-King 2009; Goad and Shimada 2014). The syllabicity of /x/, however, has never been investigated, though Elfner (2006) states that /x/'s phonetic variants are possibly moraic. The sound /x/ always surfaces as [x], [ç], or [x^w], and these surface forms are collectively represented as [X] in this paper, omitting place features. This study examines the native speaker intuition of two Blackfoot speakers and suggests that [X] may be conditionally syllabic.

Although obstruents' syllabicity is typically determined by native-speaker researchers (e.g., Tashlhiyt Berber: Dell and Elmedlaoui 1985, 1988; Ridouane 2008), native intuition has not been extensively relied on in Blackfoot prosodic research. This study addresses this issue by conducting a tapping method with two Blackfoot native speakers. The results showed that the speakers did tap on [X] when it was bounded by consonants and the preceding consonant followed another [X] (e.g., [mi:.sta.k^so:mX.kX.ki.na:] *miistáksoomahkihkinaa* 'bighorn sheep'). However, they did not tap on [X] when it followed a vowel (e.g., [in.noX.k^si.sii] *innóóhksisii* 'elephant') or when [X] followed a consonant and was followed by a consonant then a vowel (e.g., [omX.ko.ka.ta] 'gopher'). The results suggest that [X]'s syllabicity is not inherent and is controlled by the environment.

This study contributes to several areas in linguistics: typology, the sonority sequencing principle, mora theory, and syllabification. It also provides important information to language teachers and learners, as it demonstrates that one must learn that [X] is a possible syllable head and learn the environments where it is treated as syllabic.

References

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