ON THE ANIMATE-INANIMATE DISTINCTION IN CREE*

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Like other Algonkian languages, Cree has a grammatical distinction, relevant for the selection of nominal and verbal inflectional endings, between two classes of nouns, generally referred to as animate and inanimate, respectively. This distinction overlaps in part with the distinction drawn in a Western language like English, for the purposes of pronoun selection for example, between nouns representing living objects versus those representing nonliving ones. The Cree distinction, however, does not correspond point for point with the English one — while there are grammatically animate nouns in Cree which correspond exactly to 'living' nouns in English, e.g. Cree nāpēw = Eng. man, and inanimate Cree nouns which correspond exactly to English 'nonliving' nouns, e.g. Cree masinahikan = Eng. book, there are also many Cree nouns which pattern like nāpēw and hence are to be classed as grammatically animate but which represent objects that would be considered (biologically and grammatically) nonliving by Western standards, e.g. ospwākan pipe, mīhkwan spoon, āpoy paddle, and others.

The fact that the Cree animate-inanimate gender distinction does not correlate exactly with living versus nonliving does not mean, however, that the distinction between living and nonliving entities is not reflected in Cree at all. In fact, this latter distinction is necessary for correct generalizations regarding the distribution of two nominal suffixes in the language.[1] Thus the distinction between living and nonliving cuts across the animate-inanimate distinction relevant for other aspects of nominal inflection.

The first suffix of interest here is -ipan, which according to Wolfart (1973:31) means former or absent and 'indicates that the denotatum of the noun no longer exists', e.g. kisēyiniw old man ∿ kisēyinīpan old man no longer alive, nimosōm my grandfather ∿ nimosōmipan my late grandfather. As these examples indicate, -ipan can be added to a variety of grammatically animate nouns (old man and grandfather are animate in Cree); moreover, for many speakers, -ipan cannot be used with grammatically inanimate nouns, e.g. *nīkīpan my former home. The qualification 'for many speakers' is needed because although Wolfart (1973:31) confirms the facts reported here, in that speakers he consulted rejected -ipan added to inanimate nouns, nonetheless he notes that Lacombe (1874:18-19) 'gives an entire inanimate paradigm without even mentioning the problem'; thus this aspect of the use of -ipan may be subject to some dialectal or even diachronic variability.

So far, the grammatical animate-inanimate distinction is adequate to describe the distribution of -ipan (for those speakers who reject forms like *nīkīpan). However, the crucial test regarding the use of -ipan comes with grammatically animate nouns which are (to Western sensibilities) nonliving, such as ospwākan mentioned above. With these nouns, -ipan cannot be used:

(1)   *nitospwākanipan   my former pipe
        *nimīhkwanipan   my former spoon
        *nisoniyāpan   my former money
        *nipahkwēsikanipan   my former bannock.

These facts show that the distribution of -ipan is not governed simply by the animate-inanimate distinction. Rather, these facts show that the correct generalization regarding -ipan will have to refer to a distinction between nouns representing living and those representing nonliving things. This distribution of -ipan is such that it can be added only to a noun whose denotatum is living,[2] and cannot be added to a noun whose denotatum is nonliving.

A similar situation is found with the locative suffix -ihk which expresses at, in, on. It can be added readily to grammatically inanimate nouns, e. g. sākahikan lake ~ sākahikanihk at the lake, pihko ashes ~ pihkohk in the ashes, etc. Furthermore, with many animate nouns, the suffix cannot be used — Cree speakers consulted in this regard reported contrasts such as the following:

(2)   cān ē-tīhtapit tīhtapowinihk
        John sat on the chair
(3)   cān ē-tīhtapit mistatimwa / *mistatimohk
        John sat on the horse

where the same verb form governs a locative inanimate object (tīhtapowinihk) but a nonlocative animate object (mistatimwa, here obviative in form due to the other third person noun, cān, in the sentence). Also, these same speakers rejected locatives formed from animate nouns like atim dog altogether (i. e. *atimohk on/in the dog). This is an area, though, in which there may be some dialect variation, perhaps of a different sort from that discussed above for -ipan, because in this case, some of Wolfart's consultants apparently accept such locatives from animate nouns — Wolfart (1978:258, 259) cites forms like otēmihk on his horse as acceptable locatives.[3]

Nonetheless, for speakers who reject locatives such as *atimohk, the distribution of the -ihk suffix is not just a matter of its going only with grammatically inanimate nouns and not with animate ones, because of nouns like ospwākan pipe again which are grammatically animate but refer to objects. The locative suffix can be added acceptably to such nouns, e. g. ospwākanihk in the pipe, mīhkwanihk on the spoon. Thus once again, the statement of the distribution of this suffix seems to require reference to a distinction of living versus nonliving nouns, whether grammatically animate or inanimate. In particular, -ihk occurs most readily with nouns whose denotata are nonliving, and may be dialectally restricted in its ability to be added to nouns whose denotata are living.

Besides this possible dialectal variation, one further note of caution

regarding the use of -ihk is needed. Some speakers, when confronted with a locative like ospwākanihk in the pipe, went so far as to suggest an inanimatizing force for the suffix -ihk,[4] saying that ospwākan, although generally animate, may be inanimate in this use.[5] In that case, i. e. if -ihk makes a noun grammatically inanimate, then one might suppose that the nonliving specification mentioned above in the statement of the distribution of -ihk might be redundantly implied by this secondarily-acquired grammatical gender. However, even if -ihk has such a force, the thrust of the argument given here for the validity of the distinction between living and nonliving in Cree grammar is not vitiated, for one would still have to ask why -ihk cannot impart inanimate gender to a living animate noun like atim dog, for many speakers, as easily as it does to nonliving animate nouns like ospwākan pipe. Thus the best descriptive statement regarding -ihk would still be that it is best with nonliving nouns, and for some speakers may be restricted only to use with nonliving nouns, even if grammatically animate.

The facts of the distribution of -ipan and -ihk, then, suggest that Cree does make a distinction in its grammar between living and nonliving things, since this feature seems necessary for an adequate statement of the use of these two suffixes in the dialects described. As noted earlier, the distinction between living and nonliving nouns cuts across the grammatical gender opposition of animate and inanimate so widespread in the language. Although the living-nonliving distinction is not as pervasive in the grammar as the animate-inanimate one, still it is linguistically significant in Cree for the statement of certain generalizations concerning these suffixes. From this, it may be concluded that at some level, the distinction between living and nonliving things is relevant for Cree semantic space.

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NOTES

1. The dialect described here is the Plains Cree spoken by my consultants in Edmonton — all are either from Edmonton or from the surrounding area, and seem to agree in most features with the central-southern Plains Cree described by Wolfart (1973).

2. This does not imply, though, that all living nouns will necessarily be able to occur with -ipan; other factors may interfere.

3. It is tempting to link the possible dialect variation noted here for -ipan and -ihk with that reported by Darnell and Vanek (1976:164-165) regarding the assignment of grammatical gender (animate-inanimate) to nouns. Since no clear correlations can be drawn on the basis of available data, it is clearly an area for further research.

4. This notion of an 'inanimatizing force' for -ihk is attractive, in view of the fact that the locative marker is mutually exclusive with obviation markers (cf. Wolfart (1973:31)) just as inanimate nouns are not marked for obviation, and also the fact that locatives participate covertly in obviation just as inanimate nouns do (cf. Joseph (1980)). However, it is hard to make this notion explicit, and it must await further investigation.

5. Although such introspective statements are of a nonindigenous sort, it should be noted that the consultant who made this remark is a university-educated woman who teaches Cree to native children. Hence she is attuned to such terminology as animate versus inanimate and to linguistic concerns in general; in those respects, then, she is not a naive consultant.