

# A first look at copular verbs in Niitsi'powahsin (Blackfoot)

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## 1 Introduction

The learner of languages such as Spanish (Hengeveld 1986) and Mandarin Chinese (Hengeveld 1990) needs to understand which of two copulas to use in which type of non-verbal construction. The learner of Niitsi'powahsin (Blackfoot; Algonquian; ISO: BLA) has even more options to choose from. A cursory glance at the most comprehensive modern grammar and dictionary provides a bewildering number of options. In this contribution to the festschrift for Kees I take my inspiration from his early work on copulas and non-verbal predication (Hengeveld 1992) to begin to investigate copula constructions in Niitsi'powahsin.

My modest goal is to make a first inventory of copular expressions, in preparation for planned fieldwork. Section 2 briefly describes what we find in the most recent grammar and dictionary. In Section 3 I attempt to summarize that information. In Section 4 I discuss each copula in turn. Section 5 concludes by noting the limitations of this work and directions for future fieldwork research.

## 2 Major sources

Frantz's *Blackfoot Grammar* (2017; henceforth BG) is the most up-to-date comprehensive recent treatment of the grammar of Niitsi'powahsin. It does not contain a separate section on non-verbal predication or on copular verbs. Pertinent information is sprinkled throughout.

The two principal lexical sources are *Blackfoot dictionary of stems, roots and affixes* (Frantz & Russell 2017; henceforth F&R) and *Online Blackfoot Dictionary* (Frantz & Genée n.d.; henceforth F&G). The learner who uses the English Index in F&R (335-6) to look up *be*<sup>1</sup> finds references to no less than 15 verb stems. F&G yields the same 15 verbs plus five elements labelled *fin.aff*

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<sup>1</sup> One can dispute this as a method for finding copular verbs. After all, not everything that translates as 'be' is necessarily a copula. The existence of a copula in Blackfoot is denied in Darden (1969). However, one has to start somewhere, and this does not seem unreasonable.

(derivational affixes belonging to the category of Algonquian “finals,” stem-final elements that create a verbal or nominal stem). On closer inspection, several of the verbs can be excluded. I am giving all remaining entries here below in (1) (in alphabetical order, with the translation as given in F&R):<sup>2</sup>

- (1) Verbs<sup>3</sup> with meaning ‘be’  
 (a)*anistaiisi* (VAI) ‘be so, happen’  
 (a)*anistapii* (VII) ‘be (identity)’  
 (a)*anistá’pii* (VII) ‘be a way, happen’  
 (a)*anistsii* (VII) ‘be so, come true’  
*ami* (VAI) ‘be’  
*apii* (VII) ‘be’  
*apssi* (VAI) ‘be’  
*a’pami* (VAI) ‘be’  
*a’paissi* (forms VAI) ‘be at a location, spend time’<sup>4</sup>  
*a’pii* (VII) ‘be in a specified way’  
*a’pssi* (VAI) ‘be in a specified way’  
*inaa* (VAI) ‘be a colour’  
*inaatsi* (VII) ‘be a colour’  
*imi* (VAI) ‘be a colour (said of animals)’  
*itstsii* (VTI) ‘be, exist’  
*niitsii* (VII) ‘be so, be true, be the case’  
*niitsiitapi* (VAI) ‘be amount (people)’  
*niitsimm* (VAI) ‘be amount’  
*niitso* (VII) ‘be amount’  
 (wa)*ami* (VAI) ‘be (the one that is identified)’

### 3 Interim summary

The list in (1) is somewhat overwhelming. How many copulas are exactly in existence? The following considerations allow us to reduce the list; the results are presented in Table 1.

<sup>2</sup> All verbs in Blackfoot belong to one of four animacy/transitivity classes: VAI = Intransitive Verb with Animate S; VII = Intransitive Verb with Inanimate S; VTA = Transitive Verb with Animate P; VTI = Transitive Verb with Inanimate P. All A arguments must always be animate.

<sup>3</sup> I call these elements “verbs,” but I am agnostic as to their exact status. Some of them are verb stems, but others are probably not full stems, but may be what is called “finals” in Algonquian linguistics. I will not pursue this matter further here.

<sup>4</sup> A related inanimate verb stem *a’paisii* ‘it pass (said of time)’ is also given (F&R: 21).

1. The requirement that all verbs be specified for animacy almost doubles the number of total stems, since most verbs need to have an animate and an inanimate form.
2. A few stems given separately in the dictionary can clearly be considered different presentations of the same stem.
3. The basic stem form is not always identical between the dictionary and the grammar, in which case I have chosen the representation that seems to me to best conform to the data.
4. Some verbs are expansions of other verbs given separately.

**Table 1:** Verbs with meaning ‘be’, version 2

	ANIMATE	INANIMATE	UNSPECIFIED	SECTION
Verbs	aanistapssi	aanistapii		4.2
	aanistaissi	aanistsii / niitsii		4.3
	aanista'pssi	aanista'pii		4.4
	apssi	apii		4.2
	a'paissi	(a'paisii)		4.5
	a'pami			4.6
	a'pssi	a'pii		4.7
	inaa / imi	inaatsi		4.8
		itstsii		4.9
	niitsimm / niitsitapi	niitso		n/a <sup>5</sup>
	waami			4.6
Verbalizers			-yi	4.10
			-ayi	4.11
			-ao'ka	4.11

## 4 Copula constructions

In this section I consider the main contexts in which each of the elements given in Table 1 are used. We begin with an option that does not appear there, the zero copula.

### 4.1 Zero copula: identity or location of human being

Zero copula occurs in questions questioning the identity (2) or location (3) of a human being.

<sup>5</sup> Due to lack of useable data I will not include the counting verbs *niitsim* / *niitsitapi* / *niitso* ‘be (amount)’ in the remainder of this paper.

- (2) *Takaa kiisto?*  
 who Ø you.SG  
 ‘Who are you?’
- (3) *Ann-wa Ø kit-ohkiimaan-wa.*  
 DEM-AN.SG/3SG/? Ø 2-wife-3SG  
 ‘Where is your wife?’ (BG: 153)

Questions concerning the location of a human being use the distal demonstrative *ann*, inflected with an ending *-wa* whose interpretation is not entirely clear, as in (3-5). A non-affirmative clitic pronoun may appear on the demonstrative, as shown in (4). Since these clitics normally appear on verbs, Frantz suggests that “this is apparently a specialized use of the demonstrative *ann*, [which] evidently functions as a verb, at least in so far as it may take a non-affirmative ending [i.e. non-affirmative pronoun, IG]” but he notes that “it does not agree with the human nominal in number” (BG: 153), as shown in (5), where the pronoun is singular but the subject is plural.

- (4) *Ann-wa=atsiksi Tsaani.*  
 DEM-AN.SG/3SG/?=NAFF.PRO.SG Johnny  
 ‘Where is Johnny?’ (BG: 153)
- (5) *Ann-wa=atsiksi k-oko’s-iksi*  
 DEM-AN.SG/3SG/?=NAFF.PRO.SG 2-child-AN.PL  
 ‘Where are your kids?’ (BG: 153)

#### 4.2 *aanistapssi / aanistapii ‘be (identity)’: identity of non-human individual*

These verbs occur in identifying constructions with inanimate (6-7) and non-human animate (8) subjects.

- (6) *Tsa aanistapii-wa=atsiksi?*  
 what *aanistapii*(VII)-3SG=NAFF.PRO.SG  
 ‘What is it?’ (F&G s.v. *aanistapi*)
- (7) *Tsa aanistapii-wa kit-aak-ohpommaa-hpa?*  
 what *aanistapii*(VII)-3SG 2-FUT-buy(VAI)-NAFF  
 ‘What do you want to buy?’ (lit. “What is it (that) you will buy?”) (F&G s.v. *aanistapi*)

- (8) *Tsa aanistapssi-wa=atsiksi?*  
 what *aanistapssi*(VAI)-3SG=NAFF.PRO.SG  
 'What is it?' (reference to a non-human animate gender entity) (BG: 150)

The verbs *apssi* and *apii* are given in F&R with the meaning 'be' and a note that a preverb is required, but the one example given is in fact of *aanistapii*. I have not encountered forms of this verb with preverbs other than *aanist-*. Further research is needed to determine if these verbs truly are to be taken as separate forms.

#### 4.3 *aanistaissi / aanistsii 'be so, be true, happen': reality/time of event, truth of proposition*

These verbs are used in reference to events. This can be seen from the possibility of adding perfect aspect in (9) and from the eventive subject *kitaakitomatapoohpa* in (10).

- (9) *Akaa-aanistaissi-wa.*  
 PRF-*aanistaissi*(VAI)-3SG  
 'It has happened.' (lit. "It has been so/true.") (F&R: 3)
- (10) *Tsa aanistsii-si kit-aak-it-omatap-oo-hpa?*  
 what *aanistsii*(VII)-3.SBJV 2-FUT-LOC-start-go(VAI)-NAFF.SG.N3  
 'When are you leaving?' (lit. "What is it (i.e. the time) that you will start to go?") (F&G s.v. *aanistsii*)

Reference to propositions is also attested for *aanistsii* (initial form *niitsii*), as shown in (11-12).

- (11) *Niitsi-wa.*  
*aanistsii*(VII)-3SG  
 'It is/was true.' (F&R: 159)
- (12) *Iinao 'k-it-aanistsii-wa iik-oka 'p-itapi-wa.*  
 however-there/then-*aanistsii*(VII)-3SG very-bad-person-3SG  
 'But, it is also the case that (s)he is a very bad person.' (F&R: 159)

#### 4.4 *aanista'pssi / aanista'pii 'be a way, happen': manner of event(?)*

Only one example is given in F&R of this verb, and I have found no references to it in BG. The translation in F&R and the one example given (13) suggests it may refer to events.

- (13) *Tsa aanista'pii-wa=atsi(ksi)?*  
 what *aanista'pii*(VII)-3SG=NAFF.PRO.SG  
 'How is it?' (i.e. 'How is it going, how are things?')

#### 4.5 *a'paissi* 'be at a location, spend time': location of event

This verb, of which only an animate form appears to exist,<sup>6</sup> is used for the specification of the location of an event. It always occurs with locative *it-*, as in (14), or another locative expression, such as *ohpok-* in (15). Both examples have human subjects and the translation given in the dictionary as well as the apparent absence of an inanimate form of this verb suggest that this verb may be specified for human subjects.

- (14) *Tsima kit-it-a'paissi-hpa?*  
 where 2-LOC-*a'paissi*-NAFF.SG.N3  
 'Where were you?'/ 'Where have you been?' (F&R: 22; F&G: s.v. *a'paissi*)
- (15) *Nit-aisskahs-a-ohpok-a'paissi:-m-a-innaan-wa.*  
 1-always-DUR-with-*a'paissi*(VAI)-TA-DIR-1PL-3SG  
 'We were always with her.' (Russell & Genée 2014: 24)

#### 4.6 *a'pami* / (wa)ami 'be (the one identified)': identification of individual

*ami* and *waami* are clearly the same verb, with the *w-* deleted word-initially and following a consonant and a variable length vowel, and hence *a'pami* can be seen to be composed of *a'p+waami*. The examples show that both occur in identifying constructions. The single example of *a'pami* occurring in F&R is given in (16), and examples with *waami* are given in (17-19). Example (18) is included to show that the subject is not necessarily human, but can also be non-human animate.

- (16) *Aahk-ikkam-a'pami-wa.*  
 might-if-*a'pami*(VAI)-3SG  
 'It might be him.' (F&R: 22)
- (17) *Nit-ami.*  
 1-*waami*(VAI)  
 'I was the one (identified).' (F&R: 287)

<sup>6</sup> The VII *a'paisii* 'it pass (said of time)' is clearly related.

- (18) *Aami-wa.*  
*waami*(VAI)-3SG  
 'It was the thing [animate gender] identified.' (F&R: 287)
- (19) *Ni-maat-ami-hp=aatsiksi.*  
 1-NEG-*waami*(VAI)-TH=NAFF.PRO.SG  
 'I am not the one.' (F&R: 287)

#### 4.7 a'pssi / a'pii 'be (in a specified way)': property assignment to individual

These verbs are used for property assignment to animate and inanimate subjects, as shown in (20-22).

- (20) *Iih(a)-(w)a'pssi-wa.*  
 PST.lucky-*a'pssi*(VAI)-3SG  
 'He was lucky.' (F&R: 28)
- (21) *N-ikaa-(i)ksist-a'pssi.*  
 1-PRF-finish-*a'pssi*(VAI)  
 'I have finished, I am done.' (F&G: s.v. -*ap'ssi*)
- (22) *Iik-ssok-a'pii-wa.*  
 very-good-*a'pii*(VII)-3SG  
 'It is very good.' (F&R: 22)

#### 4.8 inaa / imi / inaattsi: property assignment to individual (colour)

This specialized set of verbs is used for the assignment of colour as a property, with the additional specialization of a separate form *imi* for the assignment of colour to animals (cp. (23) with (25)).

- (23) *Sik(s)-inaa-mm-a.*  
 black-*inaa*(VAI)-TH-3SG  
 'It (animate non-animal) is/was black.' (BG: 26)
- (24) *Aapoyi-inaattsi-wa.*  
 brown-*inaattsi*(VII)-3SG  
 'It is/was brown.' (F&R: 17)
- (25) *Sik-imi-wa.*  
 black-*imi*(VAI)-3SG  
 'It (animal) is/was black.' (F&R: 249)

#### 4.9 *itstsii* ‘be, exist’: existence or location of individuals or events

This is the only transitive verb in our collection. It is a VTI, with no matching VTA. Its meaning and function can perhaps be compared to expressions such as Dutch *Je hebt ...* or French *Il y a ...*, in which the individual or event whose existence is stated is the Goal of the existential predicate and a dummy Subject appears to fill the grammatical requirement for a sentence to have a subject. F&R (2017: 123) note: “subject always unspecified, object inan[imate] sg. ‘silent dummy’.” This verb occurs in existential predications with reference to individuals (26) or events (27) and in locative expressions (28).

- (26) *Maatsitstsii’pa nitsitsaapihpinnaani.*  
 maat-itstsii-’pa nit-it-yaapi-hpinnaan  
 NEG-*itstsii*(VTI)-NAFF 1-LOC-see(VAI)-1PL  
 ‘There was nothing that we saw.’ (Russell & Genée 2014: 20)

- (27) *Amo-hka itstsii-wa isskoohtsi-ka.*  
 DEM-INVS *itstsii*(VTI)-3SG long.ago-MT  
 ‘This was (i.e. happened) in the past.’ (Russell & Genée 2014: 24)

- (28) *Tsima itstsii-wa it-a-sinaaki-o’p-a.*  
 where *itstsii*(VTI)-3SG LOC-DUR-write(VAI)-21-AN.SG  
 ‘Where is the band office?’ (F&G: s.v. *itstsii*)

#### 4.10 *NOUN+yi*: classification of individuals

Nouns can be used as predicates with the addition of a verbalizing morpheme *-yi*. Frantz (2017: 118) treats this morpheme as derivational, Pustet (2003: 42) uses the term “affixal copula,” and Zúñiga (2022: 2) calls it “predicative affixation.” The resulting constructions can be used for status assignment (29) or classification (30) of individuals.

- (29) *Kit-aak-(s)inaa-yi.*  
 2-FUT-chief-*yi*  
 ‘You will be chief.’ (BG: 26)

- (30) *Nit-aakii-yi-hpinnaan.*  
 1-woman-*yi*-1PL  
 ‘We are women.’ (BG: 26)



With third person subjects the morpheme *-yi* may be absent, resulting in what looks like a true verb-less clause on the surface, as shown in (31) (cf. Section 4.1).

- (31) *Atsikin-Ø-i=aawa.*  
 shoe-Ø-3PL=PRO.3PL  
 'They are shoes.' (BG: 26)

#### 4.11 DEMONSTRATIVE/PRONOUN+*ayi/ao'ka*: identification of individuals

Verbalizing suffixes *-ayi* and *-ao'ka* can be added to demonstratives to create "equative and existential clauses without a verb" (BG: 74), as shown in (32-33).<sup>7</sup>

- (32) *Ann-iks-ayi nit-aak-ohpomm-a-y-aawa.*  
 DEM-AN.PL-*ayi* 1-FUT-help(VTA)-DIR-3PL=PRO.3PL  
 'Those are the ones I'll help.' (BG: 74)

- (33) *Am-ao'ka n-iksisst-a.*  
 DEM-*ao'ka* 1-mother-AN.SG  
 'This is my mother.' (F&G s.v. *iksisst*)

*-ao'ka* can also be added to pronouns in similar constructions, as shown in (34).

- (34) *N-iisto-wa-ka-ao'ka*  
 1-PRO-3SG-MT-*ao'ka*  
 'I'm the one.' (BG: 74)<sup>8</sup>

## 5 Concluding remarks

I will conclude this preliminary inventory with some remarks concerning limitations and directions for future work which will guide my fieldwork.

The main limitations are related to the fact that data are gleaned from a restricted number of written sources, and no original fieldwork has yet been undertaken. This means, *inter alia*, that some construction types, such as possessives, are not represented at all, that examples for certain verbs are restricted to specific sentence types, and that examples with all theoretically possible kinds of subjects are usually not available. Some verbs are given in the

<sup>7</sup> See Schupbach (2013: 73-79) for a detailed discussion of these constructions. Zúñiga (2022: 5) treats *-ayi* as a focus marker and *-ao'ka* as a predicative marker.

<sup>8</sup> This can also be used to introduce oneself when followed by a name, as in: *Niistówakao'ka Kees*. 'I am Kees.'

dictionary as separate lemmas but do not have examples at all. The definitions given in the headings of the subsections of Section 4 must therefore be seen as tentative.

Many of the copular verbs discussed in the preceding sections clearly have internal morphological structure with separable elements that recombine in various ways. Several verbs have the element *aanist-* ~ *niit-*, which is given in the dictionary with the meaning ‘manner’ and/or the element *a’p-*, which is given with the meaning ‘about, around’. The exact contribution of these elements to the semantics of their constructions remains to be investigated.

Even from the limited data presented here we can derive some promising directions to guide future fieldwork. The following tendencies will need to be confirmed and where needed corrected or expanded:

1. Entity type: Some verbs appear to be specialized for use with first, second or third order argument, while others are more flexible in that respect.
2. Entity animacy: Some verbs appear to be subclassified for more than the expected grammatically animate or inanimate argument, and are specified for such entities as humans, non-humans, or animals.
3. Predicative restrictions: Some verbs appear to occur only with specific properties, such as colour or number assignment.
4. Predication type: Some verbs appear to be specialized for particular predication types, such as existential, locative, identifying, classifying, or equational predications.

### Uncommon abbreviations

AN	animate
DIR	direct
INVS	invisible
N3	non-third person
NAFF	non-affirmative
TH	theme
MT	motion toward anchor (Schupbach 2013: 65-69)
VAI	animate intransitive verb (animate S)
VII	inanimate intransitive verb (inanimate S)
VTA	transitive animate verb (animate P)
VTI	transitive inanimate verb (inanimate P)

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