

Low “From” Applicatives in Kanien’kéha

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Kanien’kéha is a polysynthetic Northern Iroquoian language spoken in Ontario, Québec, and upstate New York. Previous research has unambiguously established the presence of a high applicative head in the language (e.g., Coon 2023). Given Pylkkänen’s (2000) famous distinction between *high* and *low* applicatives, the following question (which remains unexplored) arises: Does Kanien’kéha also exhibit a low applicative? I argue that the answer to this question is *yes*.

The high applicative is achieved simply by adding an applicative morpheme and switching from subject to transitive agreement (e.g., *ke-’níkhon-s* 1SG-sew-HAB ‘I sew’ > *khe-’níkhòn:-se-s* 1SG>3SG.F-sew-APPL-HAB ‘I sew for her’). Only animate arguments are marked on verbs. With most transitives, this means that shifting from subject to transitive agreement indicates that not only the subject, but also the object, is now animate (*kenòn:we’s* ‘I like it’ > *khenòn:we’s* ‘I like her’). With some transfer-of-possession verbs, however, this introduces a new “source” argument:

<p>(1) <i>ke-nénhskwa-s</i> 1SG-steal-HAB ‘I steal it’</p>	<p>(2) <i>khe-nénhskwa-s</i> 1SG>3SG.F-steal-HAB ‘I steal it from her’</p>
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Some argue that such verbs inherently lexically project an extra source argument (Michelson 1991: 757). However, this predicts that this argument is always at least implicitly present, which is unverified: In the absence of transitive agreement, as in (1), this argument is not present at all.

Following DM (Halle & Marantz 1993), I thus reject this lexical view, and instead propose a structural account: Verbs like *-nenhskwa-* ‘steal’ are simple transitives, and the third argument is introduced by a *low* phonologically unrealized Appl head (Pylkkänen 2000). Its availability need not be lexically specified, as it is semantically restricted to transfer-of-possession verbs; which is characteristic of low applicatives. I further argue that this head is of the FROM rather than TO flavour (Cuervo 2020), given the introduction of a *source* (as opposed to a goal) applied argument.

Further evidence for this structural analysis comes from the anti-causative marker *-at(en)-* (e.g., *kia ’tóhares* ‘I wash it’; *katia ’tóhares* ‘I get washed’). When added to *-hninon-* ‘buy’, which can also take the low Appl_{FROM} head, as in (3), it results in the new meaning ‘sell’, as in (4):

<p>(3) <i>khe-hní:non-s</i> 1SG>3SG.F-buy-HAB ‘I buy it from her’</p>	<p>(4) <i>k-aten-hní:non-s</i> 1SG-ANTICAUS-buy-HAB ‘I sell it’</p>
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My analysis provides a straightforward account of this pattern, which was unexplained so far. The verb *-hninon-* ‘buy’ is a regular transitive selecting a theme, and merging under VoiceP where a goal is introduced. We can also add a third source argument by merging a low Appl_{FROM} inside the vP. Anti-causativizing this structure will remove the goal, leaving us with only the source and the theme. The source is now the highest and only animate argument, and it will thus be marked on the verb as the subject. As the subject is now the source and not the goal, the transfer-of-possession relation is reversed from ‘selling’ to ‘buying’, so that (4) literally means ‘(One) from me buys it’.

We therefore have within a single language a contrast between a high and a low applicative. While Kanien’kéha follows cross-linguistic trends in morphologically realizing only its high Appl head, it is surprising that speakers have grammaticalized an Appl_{FROM} but no Appl_{TO} head, which tends to be more common across languages (Cuervo 2020). This may be because the high Appl structure often lends itself to pragmatic enrichment towards a low Appl_{TO}-like reading when used

with transfer-of-possession verbs, which pre-empts the functional motivation for a distinct Appl_{TO} head. Finally, I argue that the patterns analyzed here support the existence in Kanien'kéha of some notion of argument structure; contra Koenig & Michelson (2015), who argue for its inexistence.

References

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