

Agree to disagree: comitative agreement mismatches in Kanien'kéha

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1. Introduction

In Kanien'kéha¹ (Northern Iroquoian), comitative constructions are expressed through a non-canonical agreement pattern, exemplified below.

- (1) Wári iontiaterennó:tahkwe'
Wári ionti-aterennot-a-hkwe
M 1.EXCL.DUP-sing-HAB-REM.PST
'Mary and I were singing'/'I sang with Mary'

In these constructions, there is only one overt singular NP, but the verb demonstrates agreement for first-person dual (in **bold**).

- Kanien'kéha lacks a word for 'with', or a comitative applicative morpheme.

Sentences like (1) are called 'disagreement constructions' in the literature (Baker 1992) due to these mismatches in agreement. These constructions are discussed in the literature as being equivalent to their fully agreeing counterparts (exemplified below) (Baker 1992).

- (2) i:'i tánon Wári iontiaterennó:tahkwe'
i:'i tánon Wári ionti-aterennot-a-hkwe
I and M 1.EXCL.DUP-sing-HAB-REM.PST
'Mary and I were singing'

However, recent elicitation shows that despite attested truth-conditional equivalence, (1) and (2) are not appropriate to use in all of the same contexts.

This raises several puzzles about the syntactic relationship between the overt NPs and their corresponding verbal agreement morphemes.

Research Question 1:

When is it possible to use (1) versus (2)?

- Previous work (see section 2) has assumed free variation between disagreement constructions and their fully agreeing counterparts.

¹Also known as Mohawk

- This project finds that alternations between disagreeing and fully-agreeing NPs are conditioned by a variety of information-structural phenomena
- These findings motivate a wider question, namely:

Research Question 2:

What does this tell us about the syntax of Kanien'kéha, and our theoretical model as a whole?

Completely answering this question is beyond the current scope of the project, but in this presentation I will

1. provide novel data showing that previous analyses cannot completely account for the variation between disagreement constructions and their fully-agreeing counterparts
2. posit a preliminary structure for disagreement constructions and discuss implications for the greater model of clause structure in Kanien'kéha

2. Background

Kanien'kéha features morphologically complex verbs and highly flexible word order (Baker 1996, Mithun 2017). Any of the following word orders (and more!) are possible in the appropriate contexts.

- (3) a. Sak akoatiá'tawi ranón:we's SOV
Sak ako-atia'tawi ra-nonhwe'-s
S FL.P-dress MSGA-like-HAB
b. Sak ranón:we's akoatiá'tawi SVO
Sak ra-nonhwe'-s ako-atia'tawi
S MSGA-like-HAB FL.P-dress
c. Ranón:we's Sak akoatiá'tawi VSO
ra-nonhwe'-s Sak ako-atia'tawi
MSGA-like-HAB S FL.P-dress
'Sak likes her dress' (Baker 1996:10)

'Free word order' is one of the phenomena which has led researchers to attribute a wide variety of unique structural characteristics to Kanien'kéha.

1. Baker (1996) proposes that all nominals in Kanien'kéha are clause-external adjuncts
2. Koenig and Michelson (2015) argue that Iroquoian has no syntactic argument structure at all, and that arguments in Iroquoian languages are not in fact selected by their verbs.

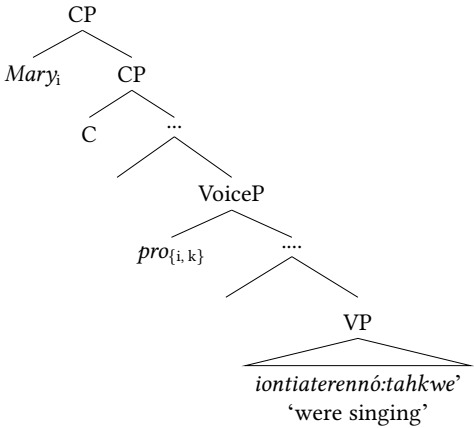
Disagreement constructions have also been used as evidence to motivate both of the claims above.

There are two primary discussions of how disagreement constructions relate to greater clausal structure.

1. Baker (1992, 1996) uses disagreement constructions as further evidence for the proposal that all overt NPs in Kanien’kéha are clause-external adjuncts.

- sentences like (1) can appear without violating fundamental principles of agreement and nominal licensing due to their status as adjuncts.
- important claim: (1) and (2) are judged to be truth-conditionally equivalent
- we therefore expect them to have identical syntactic structures
- posits that (1) would have the structure $Mary_{\{i\}}[CP\ pro_{\{i,k\}}\ sang]$, where the adjunct NP *Mary* receives a **subset** of the agreement morpheme’s indices.

- (4) a. Wári iontiaterennó:tahkwe’
[Wári] ionti-aterennot-ahkwe
M 1.EXCL.DUP-sing-REM.PST
‘Mary and I were singing’/‘I sang with Mary’
b.

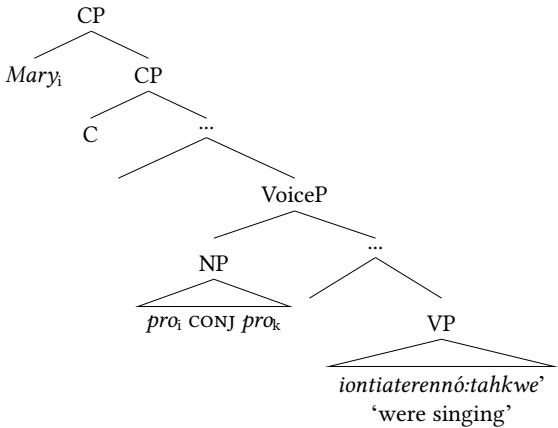


2. Barrie (2018, 2022) argues against Baker, claiming that nouns in fully-agreeing sentences (like (2)) are in internal argument positions.

- this is motivated by distributional patterns of disagreement constructions in Cayuga (Northern Iroquoian).
- Disagreeing and fully-agreeing NPs are shown to display different intonational patterns, as well as different behaviour with regards to *wh*-movement
- posits a null coordination structure for disagreement NPs, so that (1) would have the structure

$Mary_i [CP\ pro_i\ CONJ\ pro_k\ sang]$.

- (5) a. Wári iontiaterennó:tahkwe’
[Wári] ionti-aterennot-a-hkwe
M 1.EXCL.DUP-sing-HAB-REM.PST
‘Mary and I were singing’/‘I sang with Mary’
b.



In the following section, I will present data which demonstrates that neither analysis above is entirely capable of capturing the full behaviour of disagreement constructions.

3. Data

The following data were collected over the course of five elicitation sessions at the Kanien’ kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitióhkwa Language and Culture Centre (KORLCC), and on zoom. I worked with four Kanien’kéha language experts, representing both the Akwesáhsne and Kahnawà:ke dialects.

Niawenkó:wa

I would like to thank community language experts Mary Onwá:ri Tekhawáhkwen McDonald (Akwesáhsne), Akwiratékha’ Martin, Konwaronhiá:wi Norton, and Katerí Deer (Kahnawà:ke) for contributing their time, effort, and language knowledge.

3.1. Truth-conditional inequivalencies

Recent elicitation has shown that disagreement constructions are not as equivalent as they may seem, in two ways:

1. Collectivity:

- Baker (1992) justifies equivalencies between disagreeing sentences and fully agreeing sentences by stating that both can receive collective or distributive readings.

- My recent elicitations show that at least in some contexts, disagreement constructions have an obligatorily collective reading:

- (6) Mary and Bokai are participants in a dance contest. We're talking about Mary and Bokai's solo routines, which they performed separately (but at the same time).
- a. Bokai tánon Wari skatshon tsi wa' thninonniahkwe'
 Bokai tánon Wari skatshon tsi wa'-t-hni-nnonniahkwe-e'
 Bokai and Mary individually FACT-DUP-MDU-A-dance-PUNC
 'Bokai and Mary danced separately'.
- b. iah skathne tha'tehotinonniahkwen ne Bokai tánon Mary
 iah skathne tha'-te-hoti-nnonniahkwe-n' ne Bokai tánon Mary
 neg together CONTR-DUP-MDUP-dance-STAT.PST NE Bokai and Mary
 'Bokai and Mary danced separately'
- c. # Mary wa'thnnonniahkwe'
 Mary wa'-t-hni-nnonniahkwe-e'
 Mary FACT-DUP-MDU-A-dance-PUNC
 'He danced with Mary'

2. Information structure

- The acceptability of a disagreement construction changes depending on which constituent is focused.
- Specifically, disagreement constructions are not acceptable in contextual environments when the entire subject NP is focused.

- (7) Q. 'who was singing?'
- a. i:i tanon Watyana'li:yo iontaterrennotahkwe'
 i:i tanon Watyana'li:yo iontia-terennot-a-hkwe'
 I and W 1.EXCL.DUA-sing-HAB-REM.PST
 'Watyana'li:yo and I were singing'
- b. #Watyana'li:yo iontaterrennotahkwe'
 Watyana'li:yo iontia-terennot-a-hkwe'
 W 1.EXCL.DUA-sing-HAB-REM.PST
 (int'd): 'Watyana'li:yo and I were singing'

When a subset of the individuals referred to by the subject NP are focused, disagreement constructions are acceptable, with fully agreeing constructions disallowed.

- (8) Q. 'who were you singing with?'
- a. # i:i tanon Watyana'li:yo iontaterrennotahkwe'
 i:i tanon Watyana'li:yo iontia-terennot-a-hkwe'
 I and W 1.EXCL.DUA-sing-HAB-REM.PST

- 'Watyana'li:yo and I were singing'
- b. Watyana'li:yo iontaterrennotahkwe'
 Watyana'li:yo iontia-terennot-a-hkwe'
 W 1.EXCL.DUA-sing-HAB-REM.PST
 (int'd): 'Watyana'li:yo and I were singing'

Taken together, these data show that Baker's (1992) claim of equivalency between disagreement constructions and their fully agreeing counterparts is not entirely borne out.

- this hints that disagreement constructions may have a different underlying structure than their fully agreeing counterparts

3.2. A'-movement and clausal embedding

Kanien'kéha is established to demonstrate canonical A'-movement of *wh*-words and relative clause heads (Baker 1996)

- we find that disagreement constructions are capable of participating in conventional A'-movement operations, like *wh*-movement and relativization:

- (9) ónhka senirennó:tahkwe'?
 onhka seni-rennó:t-a-hkwe'?
 who 2DUA-sing-HAB-REM.PST
 'who were you singing with?' *wh-question*
- (10) Onhka wa'eron' ne Varya wa'thnnonniahkwe' ne Bokai
 Onhka wa'-e-ron-' ne Varya wa'-t-hni-nnonniahkwe-' ne Bokai
 Who FACT-FLA-say-PUNC NE Varya FACT-DUP-MDU-A-dance-PUNC NE Bokai
 'Who did Varya say Bokai danced with?' *long-distance wh-question*
- (11) hen, tsi niká:ien Bokai skathne wa'thnnonniahkwe' é:so tsi kanonniaweienhen
 hen, *pro* tsi nika:ien Bokai (skathne) wa'-t-hni-nnonniahkwe-' eso tsi
 yes *pro* which B (together) FACT-DUP-MDU-A-dance-PUNC really C
 ka-nnonniaweienhen
 N/FZSGA-dance-be.able.make.STAT
 (lit.): 'yeah, the person who Bokai danced with really knows how to dance'
 (int'd.): 'yeah, the person who Bokai danced with is really talented' *relative clause*

Note that relative clause heads are often null in Kanien'kéha.

We also find that disagreement constructions can be embedded.

- (12) Hannah wa'kènrɔn (tsi) Mary wathninonniakhwe
Hannah wa'-ken-ron-' [(tsi) Mary wa'-t-**hni**-nonniakhwe-']
H FACT-FZ.SGA-say-PUNC C Mary FACT-DUP-MDUA-dance-PUNC
'Hannah said that he danced with Mary'

Sentences where disagreeing NPs precede the complementizer are judged to be ungrammatical.

- (13) *Hannah wa'kènrɔn Mary tsi wathninonniakhwe
Hannah wa'-ken-ron-' [Mary tsi wa'-t-**hni**-nonniakhwe-']
H FACT-FZ.SGA-say-PUNC Mary C FACT-DUP-MDUA-dance-PUNC
(int'd): 'Hannah said that he danced with Mary'

The data discussed in this section demonstrate that the attachment point of the disagreement NP must be clause-internal, so that it can:

- undergo A'-movement for relativization and question formation
- follow the complementizer in an embedded clause

4. Towards an analysis

Interim summary

We have found that disagreement constructions behave differently than what previous analyses predict, in two main ways:

1. they are not equivalent to their fully agreeing counterparts
2. they can participate in conventional A'-operations, demonstrating that they start out in clause-internal positions.

Recall the two structural analyses of disagreement presented in section (2):

1. a high-adjunction analysis (Baker 1992)
2. a null-coordination analysis (Barrie 2022)

The data provided in the previous section demonstrates that neither of these analyses is completely correct:

4.1. Against a high-adjunction analysis

A high-adjunction account of clause structure is unable to capture the difference in focus data.

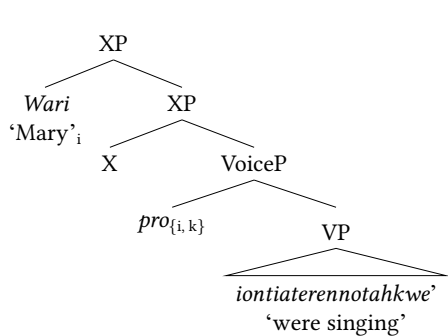
- because disagreeing and fully NPs are assumed to be equivalent, this analysis predicts that a disagreeing answer should be fine to answer both:
 - A question that focuses the entire subject NP: 'who was singing?'
 - A question that focuses a subset of the individuals referred to by the subject NP: 'who were you singing with?'
- the plural pronominal prefix (in **bold** above) should be able to completely identify the unnamed discourse participant, without the need for an extra overt pronoun
- yet, disagreeing answers are disallowed in contexts where both discourse participants are unknown

A high-adjunction account also predicts that disagreeing NPs should not be able to participate in A'-extraction.

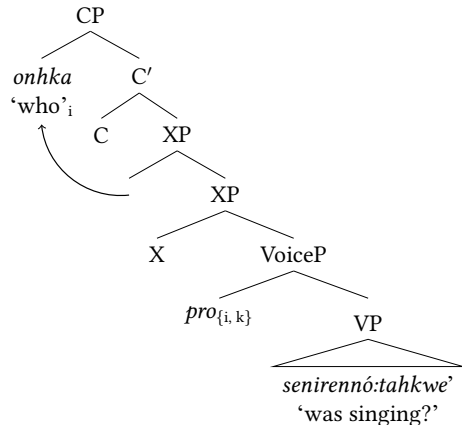
- this is because the adjunction point of the disagreeing NP would be above any A'-movement landing site.

In order to account for these issues, I argue that disagreeing NPs are generated comparatively low in the structure, as shown in the following trees:

(14) information-structure-neutral disagreement construction



(15) disagreeing wh-question



- this adjunction point allows disagreeing NPs to be (partially) co-indexed with the null pronoun

merged in spec-VoiceP

- while being low enough to undergo A'-movement operations for question formation/information-structure/relativization purposes.
- the exact label of the projection where the disagreeing NP is adjoined is not crucial to the analysis, I have chosen to label it 'XP'.

4.2. Against a null-coordination analysis

A null-coordination analysis predicts that A'-movement should cause coordinate structure constraint (CSC) effects in disagreement constructions, which is not borne out by the data

- [Barrie \(2022\)](#) finds that in Cayuga, disagreeing *wh*-questions are disallowed.
- He attributes this to a coordinate structure effect, which motivates his posited null-coordinations structure. (repeated here: Mary_i [_{CP} *pro*_i CONJ *pro*_k sang].)

Kanien'kéha is established to demonstrate coordinate structure constraint effects, as demonstrated by the following example:

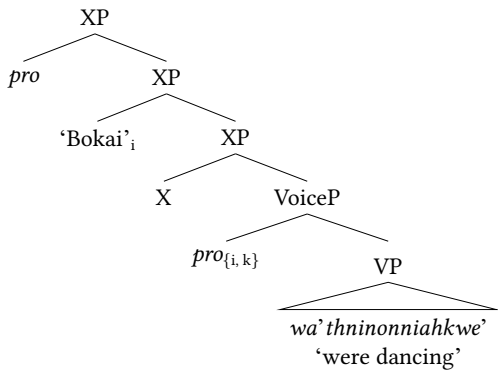
- (16) **ónhka tánon i:se senirennó:tahkwe'?*
onhka tanon ise seni-rennó:t-a-hkwe'?
who and you 2DUA-sing-HAB-REM.PST
(lit:) 'who and you were singing?' (int'd:) 'who were you singing with?'

In particular, a coordinate structure account of disagreement constructions predicts that disagreeing relative clauses should be disallowed.

- (11) hen, tsi niká:ien Bokai skathne wa'thnonniahkwe' é:so tsi kanonniaweienhen
hen, *pro* [_{RC} tsi nikaien *Bokai*] (skathne) wa'-t-hni-nonniahkwe-'] eso tsi
yes *pro* which B (together) FACT-DUP-MDUA-dance-PUNC really C
ka-nonnia-weienhen
N/FZSGA-dance-be.able.make.STAT
(lit:) 'yeah, the person who Bokai danced with really knows how to dance'
(int'd:) 'yeah, the person who Bokai danced with is really talented'

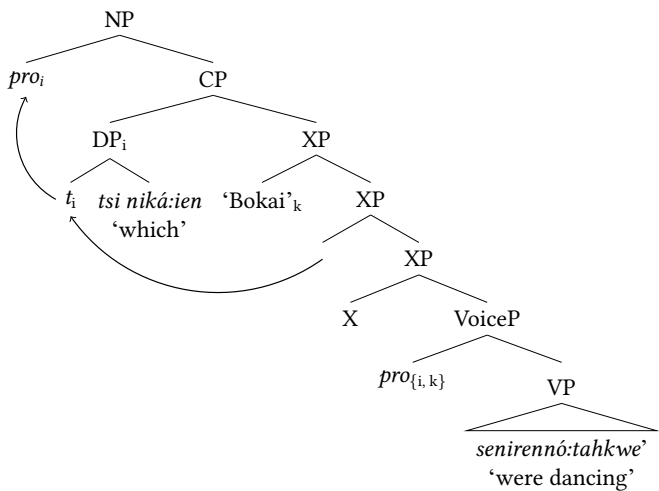
In this example, 'Bokai' and the null head of the relative clause are both licensed by the dual agreement on the verb.

(11') Structure of (11) pre-movement



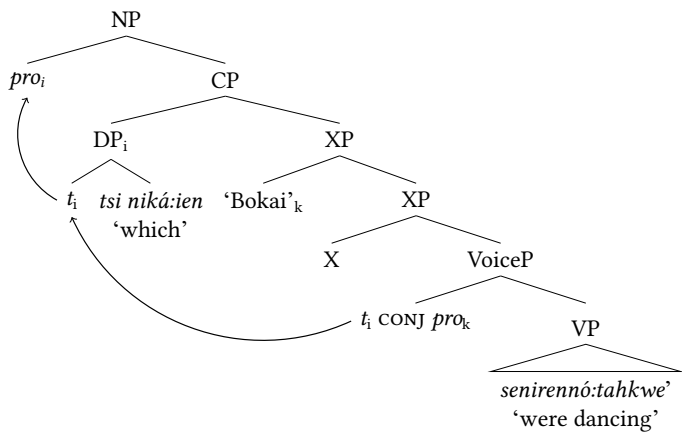
in order for 'Bokai' to remain licensed in the lower CP, a *pro* must also remain below in the lower CP.

(11'') Structure of (11) post-movement



If this *pro* was originally coordinated with the *pro* head of the relative clause, this makes the incorrect prediction that sentences like (11) would violate the CSC.

(11'') Structure of (11) post-movement, under a null-coordination analysis



5. Implications, applications, and issues for future work

Following recent work (DeCaire et al. 2017, Flaim 2025, Coon 2026), the findings of this project have several implications for our theory of clause structure in Kanien’kéha:

- demonstrates that we need some level of articulate clause structure
 - all NPs in Kanien’kéha cannot be high adjuncts
 - structure of the clause in Kanien’kéha cannot be completely flat
- demonstrates that apparent optionality is not in fact optional

What’s next?

- A key area for future work on ‘disagreement’ relates to the issue of obligatory collectivity.
- How do we capture this in the semantics?
- Could any part of it be computed in the syntax?

Selected References:

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