Deconstructing Kanien’kéha Kinship Terms

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LING 411: Structure of an Indigenous Language

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Abstract

In Kanien’kéha and other Northern Iroquoian languages, kinship terms are structured in a way that may appear unintuitive to second language learners from English or French backgrounds. Unlike English or French, which typically use a possessive pronoun followed by a familial noun (e.g. my father), a kinship term in Kanien’keha roughly includes a transitive pronominal prefix, a kinship stem, and a diminutive suffix (Koenig and Michelson 2010). This morphological structure comprises elements of both nouns and verbs, resulting in a word form that does not neatly fit into either category. In short, this paper, I go over the unique properties of Kanien’kéha verbs, nouns, and kinship terms, offering a basic framework for understanding how these terms can be categorized within the language's lexical system. To assist second language learners, I propose the Seven Families Kinship Terms Game, a pedagogical tool I designed to help L2 learners implement the morphological properties discussed, especially the use of pronominal prefixes. The game is made up of 42 printable cards, the script and instructions for which are included in section 5.

1 Introduction

In English, terms such as 'father,' 'mother,' 'daughter,' 'cousin,' or any other noun that specifies a familial relation are considered to be kinship terms. They are preceded by a possessive pronoun, like 'my,' 'your,' 'his,' or 'our,' which encodes person (first, second, or third), number (singular or plural), and sometimes a gender in the case of 'his' and 'hers.' In the phrase 'my father,' the pronoun 'my' marks ownership, while the kinship term itself specifies the type of relationship. Native speakers of English, for the most part, are not conscious of these operations that go into forming an utterance like 'my father.'

Because kinship is so intuitive in one's native language, it can be difficult to get a grasp of a system which functions in a completely different way, like that of Kanien'kéha, Oneida, and the other languages of the Northern Iroquoian family. In these languages, kinship terminology makes up its own part of speech, with a specific internal structure. For example, *ake'nisténha*[1] in Kanien'kéha translates to 'my mother' in English, but in addition to expressing the first person possessor and the kinship stem, it conveys a relation in which 'my mother' is a female family member who is older than me (Koenig and Michelson 2010).

As will be explored later in this paper, the term is structured like a transitive verb in that it identifies both an agent (subject) and a patient (object) in the family relation, so that the older member is the agent and the younger is the patient. The term's verbal structure suggests a meaning where 'mother' is performing the action of being an older female family member onto 'me.' While the pronominal prefix *ake-* clarifies both the third person singular agent and first person singular patient, *-'nisténha* identifies the mother in the relationship (Koenig and Michelson 2010). In English, this structure can be roughly replicated as '[she-to-me] - mother,' where 'she to me' is prefix *ake-* and *-'nisténha* is 'mother.'

In this paper, I will break down how Kanien'kéha and Oneida kinship terms carry this information with the help of both verb-like and noun-like linguistic properties. Section 1 will focus on how the two languages use pronominal prefixes to specify the person, number, gender, and role of an argument. In section 2, I will describe the structure of verbs in Northern Iroquoian languages, centering around the verbal characteristics that also apply to kinship terms. In section 3, I will introduce noun-like morphology, and section 4 will tie all of these aspects together in a specific analysis of kinship

[1] My sincere thanks to Wári McDonald for sharing her knowledge of Kanien'kéha terminology, and her general guidance in developing this project. Thank you also to Jessica Coon for her help and advice.

terminology. Section 5 is dedicated to the explanation and instructions of the Seven Families Kinship Terms game, a set of 42 printable cards for learners of Kanien'kéha to visualize the patterns that surface in kinship terms and how they can vary depending on context.

2 Pronominal Prefixes

Oneida and Kanien'kéha use a set of 58 pronominal prefixes to encode information about the arguments of a verb, which match up with possible combinations of person, number, gender, and role. In terms of this last category, role prefixes differentiate transitive verbs, which take two arguments, from intransitive verbs, which take only one (Michelson 2016). In English, these two types of verbs are differentiated by whether they take only a subject or both a subject and an object. In Oneida, the verb *katkétskwas* 'I get up' takes one argument, the subject, which is expressed by the first person agent *k-* prefix (Michelson 2016), rather than an independent pronoun like 'I', as shown in (1). In general, the first-person agent prefix is usually *k-* and the first-person patient prefix is usually *wak-* (Mithun 2010).

(1) ***k****atkétskwas*
k-*atkétskw-as*
1SG.AGENT-get.up-ASPECT
'**I** get up'
(Michelson and Doxtator 2002)

Nouns also contain pronominal prefixes similar to the ones on verbs. If the noun is unpossessed, such as 'the chair' or 'a chair' in English, the prefix only indicates the gender of the noun. On possessed nouns, like English 'my chair,' the prefix indicates the person, number, and gender of the possessor (Mithun 2010).

The roles that pronominal prefixes play on verbs and nouns both show up in kinship terms. The contrast between a first-person agent prefix like *k-* and a first-person patient prefix like *wak-*, then, is used to differentiate the older family member from the younger one.

3 Verbal Properties

In English, the arguments of a noun are marked as separate nouns or pronouns. Much like kinship terms, English intransitive verbs with one semantic argument take one pronoun; 'She danced', for example, has the pronoun 'she' to mark the subject of 'dance'. A transitive verb like 'she hugged him',

meanwhile, takes independent pronouns for both the subject and the object (Koenig and Michelson 2010).

In Kanienk'éha and Oneida, the pronominal prefixes on kinship terms pattern with the ones on verbs. Kinship terms take transitive pronominal prefixes, where the older family member is expressed as the agent and the younger member is expressed as the patient.

Example (2) shows a morphological gloss for the kinship term s*hakotléha*, 'his granddaughter,' where the glossed 'grandchild' is underlined to indicate the family member referenced by the term. In this case, the possessor of the relation (he) is older than the referent (the granddaughter). The term *shakotléha*, then, implements a transitive relation with a singular male agent and a singular female patient. Example (3), meanwhile, shows a morphological gloss for the verb phrase *wa?shakohnútlane?*, 'he caught up to her,' which similarly illustrates a transitive action with a singular male agent and a singular female patient. The relevant information in these examples is the transitive pronominal prefix *shako*, glossed as 3MASC.SG>3FEM.SG, which distinguishes the transitive relation present in both examples.

(2) **s*hako*-*tléha***
3MASC.SG>3FEM.SG-grandparent-grandchild
'his granddaughter'
(Koenig and Michelson 2010)

(3) *wa?-**shako**-hnútla-ne?*
FACTUAL.MODE-**3MASC.SG>3FEM.SG**-catch.up.to-PUNC.ASP
'he caught up to her'
(Koenig and Michelson 2010)

4 Nominal Properties

Despite patterning like transitive verbs in their realization of arguments, Oneida and Kanien'kéha kinship terms share a few characteristics with the structure of nouns. Phonologically speaking, the sounds in the prefixes that occur on kinship terms are more noun-like than verb-like (Koenig and Michelson 2010). The diminutive suffixes that often follow kinship stems also pattern with noun morphology, and the negation of a kinship relation follows that of nouns (Koenig and Michelson 2010).

As discussed in Section 1, the semantic arguments of nouns and verbs in Northern Iroquoian languages can be expressed as an agent, patient, transitive, or a possessive pronominal prefix. Although the possessive prefixes on nouns are similar in structure to those of intransitive arguments on verbs, they are more similar to nominal prefixes in that they lack an initial glide, like /w/ or /j/. Their verbal counterparts, on the other hand, begin with the glide. Example (4) shows the morphological gloss for Oneida *aksótha, '*my grandmother,' which encodes a first-person patient because the grandmother is the older family member. Example (5), on the other hand, shows a morphological gloss for Oneida *waknuhwáktanihe?* 'I am sick,' in which the first person 'I' is also the patient. Though both examples require the same prefix form, the first-person patient pronominal prefix in (4) lacks the initial /w/ that surfaces in (5).

(4) ***ak****sótha*
**(w)*ak*-*hsotha*
3ZOIC.SG>1SG-grandparent-grandchild
'my grandmother'
(Koenig and Michelson 2010)

(5) ***wak****nuhwáktanihe?*
wak-*nuhwaktani-he?*
1SG.PAT-become.sick-ASP
'I am sick'
(Michelson and Price 2011)

Another similarity between kinship terms and nouns is characterized by the diminutive nominal morpheme which surfaces as *-ha* or *-a?.* This suffix is typically interpreted as an integral part of the noun on which it occurs, which makes it hard to pinpoint its meaning (Michelson and Price 2011). Example (6) is a gloss for Kanien'kéha *raksótha,* 'grandfather,' which ends in diminutive *-ha.*

(6) *rakhsót****ha***
*rak-hsot-****ha***
3MASC.SG>1.SG-grandparent-grandchild-**DIM**
'my grandfather'
(Mithun 2010)

In Northern Iroquoian languages, nouns and verbs follow different negation paradigms. To negate a verb in Oneida, for example, the verb must be preceded by the independent particle *yah* and prefix *te-*. This pattern is shown in (7), a morphological gloss for *yáh teʔwakataʔkalité*, 'I'm not feeling well.' Nouns follow a different pattern: while they also take the particle *yah*, they take a separate word *té·kʌ* after the noun (Koenig and Michelson 2010). Example (8), a gloss for the equivalent of 'She's not my mother in fact,' demonstrates how kinship terms follow the latter negation pattern.

(7) ***yáh*** ***teʔ-****wak-ataʔkali·té*
NEG **NEG-**1SG.PAT-feel.well-STAT.ASP
'I'm not feeling well'
(Koenig and Michelson 2010)

(8) ***yáh*** *kiʔ* *né·* *ak-nulhá* ***té·kʌ***
NEG EMPHATIC ASSERTION 3ZOIC.SG>1SG-mother-child **NEG**
'She's not my mother in fact'
(Koenig and Michelson 2010)

5 Kinship Terms

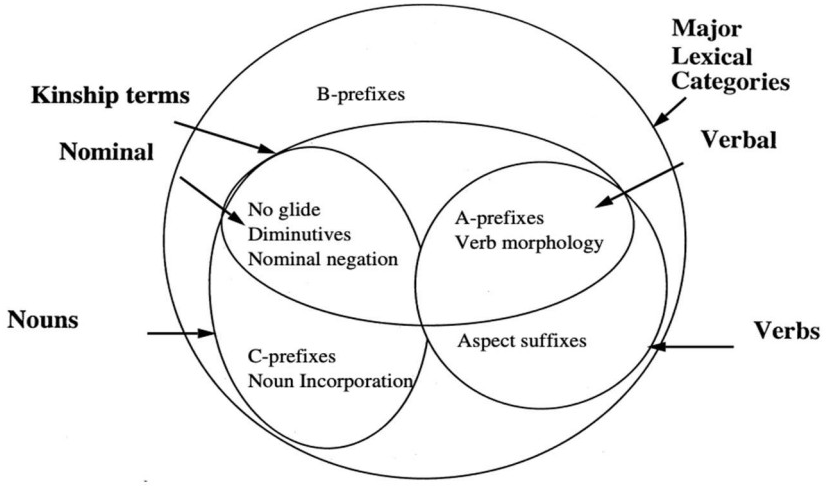
The two preceding sections detail some verbal and nominal properties that exist within kinship terms, leading us to an analysis that must combine these characteristics. Karin Michelson describes kinship terms as an independent part of speech in her 2016 paper on Iroquoian languages. She argues that, much like nouns and verbs, kinship terminology makes up an independent class of words that carry some type of inflection (Michelson 2016). The representations in (9), (10), and (11) compare the internal structures for verbs, nouns, and kinship terms, respectively. In these generalized representations, which I have simplified from Koenig and Michelson 2010, 'V/N neg' stands for whether the word would take verbal or nominal negation, 'pro' stands for pronominal prefix, and the verb (V), noun (N), or kinship (K) stem is followed by the appropriate suffix for that word class.

(9) Verbs: [V neg [*glide* + pro(transitive/intransitive) - V stem] - ASPECT]
(10) Nouns: [N neg [pro(intransitive/possessive) - N stem] - NOUN SUFFIX, DIMINUTIVE]
(11) Kinship terms: [N neg [pro(transitive) - K stem] - DIMINUTIVE]

The above representations summarize the relevant properties of kinship terms as they relate to verbs and nouns in Northern Iroquoian Languages. Like verbs, kinship terms must mark all arguments that they are semantically referencing through their pronominal prefix. Unlike verbs and like many nouns, they lack an initial glide, take a diminutive suffix, and use noun-like negation.

With this in mind, kinship terms can be considered to exist somewhere at the intersection of the noun class and the verb class. Koenig and Michelson suggest the Venn diagram in (12) and propose an analysis in which nouns are defined as [+N, -V], or the presence of a nominal feature and the absence of a verbal feature. By contrast, verbs would be defined as [-N, +V], and kinship terms as [+N, +V]. These 'nominal' and 'verbal' features do not encompass all properties of verbs and nouns but rather describe properties that, aside from the category of kinship terms, are specific to their verb or noun category.

(12)



(Koenig and Michelson 2010)

6 The Seven Families Kinship Terms Game

The Seven Families Kinship Terms game is made up of a set of 42 cards, where each card is specific to a Kanien'kéha kinship relation. In creating this game, I based the gameplay on the *Jeux des Sept Familles*, a go fish-style game that I loved playing as a child. I remember playing with classmates in a French immersion program, and I find games to be a fun and helpful pedagogical tool. Adapting this

game to such a different kinship term system was an interesting project, and I hope that it can help learners of Kanien'kéha practice the many kinship relations and integrate them into a dialogue with peers.

In my version of the game, any given card has a visual representation of the two members referenced in the relation, as well as two terms, one from the first person perspective and one from the third person perspective (McDonald 2024). The first-person kinship terms and the third-person kinship terms correspond with two gameplay options, allowing players to practice both sets of terms.

Among the cards, there are 7 families with 6 members each. Each of the 7 families contains kinship terms that are centered around one main family member - the younger sister, the older brother, the mother, the father, the grandmother, the grandfather, or the uncle. Players can then visualize the variation of pronominal prefixes in relation to one constant family member, based on the ages and genders of the second family member. Each of these families is represented by a unique clan, in this case, the Bear, the Wolf, the Turtle, the Snipe, the Beaver, the Deer, and the Hawk clans. The clans are meant to serve as a visual aid, and the table below shows the respective central family member for each clan. Along with getting familiar with the structure and the prefixes of Kanien'kéha kinship terms, the goal of the game is to collect the most families.

Clan name	**Central family member**
Bear clan	Younger sister
Wolf clan	Older brother
Turtle clan	Mother
Snipe clan	Father
Beaver clan	Grandmother
Deer clan	Grandfather
Hawk clan	Uncle

6.1 Reading the Cards

Each card features one black-and-white character and one in colour. The black-and-white character represents the constant family member, while the colour character determines the kinship term.

For example, in the bear family, every card has the little girl character in black and white, and the realization of the kinship term is based on the colour character beside her. The 7 characters look the same in each family, and the relationships between them are shown in the family tree included in the game. Each character's clan is shown beside them in the family tree. The arrow between the characters indicates age: it points up if the referent is older and down if they are younger.

To differentiate the first-person terms from the third-person ones, first-person terms are shown in speech bubbles to indicate the perspective of the black-and-white character. The term at the top of each card is in the third person, representing the outsider's perspective.

6.2 Instructions for Option 1 (Third-Person Gameplay)

In Option 1, players ask for members of a family in the third person.

1. Each player is dealt 5 cards (the game is best played with 3-6 players). The rest of the cards make up the "draw pile."

2. Player 1 asks any other player (for example, player 2) for a specific family member using the kinship term at the top of each card, with the goal of completing a family in their hand. A player must already have a member of a family in their hand in order to ask for another member of that family.

3. If player 2 has the requested card, they must turn it over to player 1. Player 1 can then ask for another card. If player 2 does *not* have the requested card, player 1 must draw a card from the pile. If player 1 draws the card they had asked for, they can ask for another card.

4. Players take turns clockwise, repeating steps 2 and 3. Players can ask any other player for a card regardless of order.

5. When a player has collected all members of a family, they must put the family face up in front of them.

6. The game ends when all families have been completed or when there are no more cards in the draw pile, and no player can ask another player for a card.

7. The player who has collected the most families at the end of the game wins.

6.3 Instructions for Option 2 (First-Person Gameplay)

In Option 2, players ask for a member of a family in the first person, as if the kinship terms referred to their own family members.

1. Before the game begins, one card from each clan is taken out of the pack. Each player must draw 1 of these 7 cards to determine their assigned clan, which they must keep secret. Once everyone knows their assigned clan, the cards are mixed back in with the pack. Each player is in charge of collecting all the members of their assigned family, acting as though they are the main character of that family, asking for family members in the first person.

   In this version, players must bluff and ask for family members who are secretly not part of their assigned family in order to keep their assignment a secret. Players each have two chances to guess one other player's family. If they guess correctly, that player is OUT.

2. The game proceeds by repeating steps 2 and 3 from option 1. Instead of asking for a card, a player may use their turn to make one of their two allowed guesses.
3. The first player to collect all members of their assigned family - without blowing their cover - wins.

6.4 Suggested Script

Below is a script that players can use to ask each other questions when playing the game. In the present version of the script, I have not yet developed a way for players to include the name of a clan in the dialogue. Although most terms in the deck are unique because of their specific relationship, a few overlap and will need a reference to their clan to help differentiate between them.

To ask player 2 for a card, player 1 can use *Sá:ien ken ne* 'Do you have' without noun incorporation or *Sahiatonhserá:ien* 'Do you [card] have' with noun incorporation. For the second option, *-hiatonhser-* is the incorporated stem for *kahiatónhsera* 'paper card.' Player 2 can also choose to answer with or without noun incorporation. If they have the card, they can answer with *Hen wákien ne* 'I have' or *Wakhiatonhserá:ien* 'I [card] have.' If they don't have the desired card, they can choose between *Iah tewákien* 'I don't have' and *Iah tewakhiatonhserá:ien ne* 'I don't [card] have.'[2]

[2] I would like to thank Wishe Mittelstaedt for developing this script with me, his knowledge was invaluable to creating this game.

Player 1:

Sá:ien ken ne (insert kinship term)*?* OR *Sahiatonhserá:ien ne* (insert kinship term)*?*

IF YES

Player 2: *Hen wákien ne* (insert kinship term)*!* OR *Wakhiatonhserá:ien ne* (insert kinship term)*!*

IF NO

Player 2: *Iah tewákien ne* (insert kinship term). OR *Iah tewakhiatonhserá:ien ne* (insert kinship term).

7 Conclusion

While kinship terms are one of the simplest units for second-language speakers to learn in European languages, the same cannot be said about Northern Iroquoian Languages such as Kanien'kéha. As a base, it can be helpful to understand the breakdown of noun-like and verb-like properties as a point of comparison. The nominal negation, transitive pronominal prefixes, kinship stem, and nominal diminutive suffix set kinship terms apart from other word classes. In general, I hope that pedagogical tools can help learners to visualize, memorize, and practice certain aspects of the language that are more daunting and complex. What I was able to develop of the Seven Families Kinship Terms Game is only a start, and it doesn't include all of the possible kinship combinations in Kanien'kéha. While it could use further development, it demonstrates the morphemes described in the paper above and shows a visual depiction of some of the possible variations that exist.

The card game can be accessed by scanning the QR code below:

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