Martin Renard   University of Toronto

The Implications of Idiomatic Noun Incorporation Expressions for L2 Kanien'kéha Revitalization

Kanien'kéha (Mohawk) is an Iroquoian language spoken in 6 communities across Ontario, Quebec, and New York (Mithun 1999:424). Like most Indigenous languages of North America, it is severely endangered, with fewer than 2,000 speakers remaining and a rapidly decreasing number of elderly L1 speakers (Green 2018). This has led to the creation of various revitalization projects, many of which target young adults in an effort to create L2 speakers who could potentially raise L1-speaking children, thereby re-establishing inter-generational transmission after its destruction by the residential school system (Gomashie 2019). A good example is the Onkwawén:na Kentyóhkwa adult immersion school in Ohswé:ken, Ontario (Green and Maracle 2018).

However, the L2 revitalization of Kanien'kéha faces many challenges, and in particular the issue of authenticity: English-speaking L2 Kanien'kéha learners find it very difficult to achieve an 'authentic' proficiency level (DeCaire p.c.). What constitutes 'authentic' Kanien'kéha is an issue in itself (Hinton and Ahlers 1999, Holton 2009), but it helps to think of native-like performance as a starting point. L1 and L2 speech thus often significantly differ, for instance with respect to prosodic and discourse patterns (Mithun 2021); although what is arguably most challenging for L2 learners to acquire in order to sound truly 'authentic' is the massive inventory of idiomatic noun incorporation (NI) constructions found in Kanien'kéha (Bonvillain 1989, Mithun 2011), such as *tewakatene'konhrekstha'tsheriià:kon* "I am bankrupt" (lit. "my hammer is broken") (Brant 2017).

This leads us to the following question: What are the implications of such idiomatic NI expressions for the revitalization of Kanien'kéha as an L2? This issue can be decomposed into 5 more specific research questions: (1) What is the importance and function of idiomatic NI expressions in L1 speech?; (2) What role do they play in the construction of 'authentic' Kanien'kéha? (and what is that?); (3) What challenges do they present to L2 learners?; (4) How can we facilitate the teaching and acquisition of these constructions?; and (5) How do the perspectives of L1 and L2 speakers differ with respect to these questions? In order to address these issues, I conducted a focus group with 6 Kanien'kéha speakers, namely 2 L1s and 4 fluent L2s.

All speakers agreed that idiomatic NI expressions play a crucial role in L1 speech, as highly frequent discursive devices which are constantly exploited for their humorous potential (e.g. double meanings involving the literal vs idiomatic interpretation of these noun-verb compounds); and that they are therefore paramount in the maintenance of 'authentic' Kanien'kéha, as they form part of the 'essence' of the language, setting it apart from others. According to the participants, the reason they are so difficult for L2 learners to acquire is that, beyond the challenge of rote-learning a massive inventory of non-compositional constructions, they require the parallel acquisition of the different cultural worldview in which they are embedded (cf. Whorf 1940 [2012]). In order to mitigate this problem, the participants suggested that revitalization programs need to strike an appropriate balance between taking a 'grammar-translation' approach, which successfully teaches the complex polysynthetic morphosyntax of Kanien'kéha but ignores culture-based idiomatic patterns, and a 'holistic' approach, which focuses on embedding the language in its cultural context at the expense of effective grammar teaching. Interestingly, the 6 participants did not significantly differ in most of their opinions, except perhaps in that L2 speakers were slightly less conservative than L1s, and emphasized the importance of accepting inevitable changes in L2 speech.

Overall, then, this study usefully clarifies the issues involved in effectively teaching idiomatic NI expressions to L2 learners of Kanien'kéha, and suggests promising solutions for concretely contributing to bridging the proficiency gap between 'new' L2 speakers and 'traditional' L1 speakers in the quest for 'authentic' Indigenous language revitalization.

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