"Bleeding" Condition C in Kanien'kéha*

Chase Boles
McGill University
chase.boles@mail.mcgill.ca

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1 Introduction

- The appearance of R-expressions has long been assumed to be governed by Condition C of Binding Theory, based on the notion of c-command (Chomsky 1981; Reinhart 1983).

(1) *Binding*
Nominal A binds another nominal B iff A c-commands B and A and B are covalued.

(2) *Condition C*
An R-expression must be free (i.e., unbound).

- Binding shows a large amount of stability cross-linguistically, suggesting universality (Reuland 2011; Grodzinsky and Reinhart 1993; Reinhart 1983).[1]

Problem: Work on a variety of languages has shown varied behavior with regards to Condition C.

- We can create a descriptive typology of clause-internal Condition C behavior:

		Non-violations	
		Accept	Reject
Violations	Reject	English	Warlpiri (Legate 2002), Basque (Marácz and Muysken 1989)
	Accept	Kanien'kéha (Baker 1996)	Chuj (Royer 2025)

- More intriguing: some languages appear to fill several cells (e.g., Malayalam, Mohanan 1983; Hungarian, Marácz and Muysken 1989; Choe 1989; Passamaquoddy, Bruening 2001).

- Notably, Condition C violations appear to be highly restricted, even in languages showing them (e.g., Legate 2002; Hoonchamlong 1991; Larson 2006).

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[1] This also applies to coreference, when this is analyzed as separate from binding proper (Grodzinsky and Reinhart 1993).

➢ This has resulted in a concerted effort to derive the apparent violations in Condition C from other properties: object shift (Legate 2002; Royer 2025), anticataphora (Mohanan 1983; Royer 2025), accidental coreference (Reinhart 1983; Bruening 2001), anaphoric islands (Legate 2002), complex indices (Chaiphet and Jenks 2021), ...

- Working with Kanien'kéha (Mohawk), Baker (1996) suggests another property that languages may have, allowing them to show unexpected Condition C effects: sentence-level adjunction of all overt nominals.
  - This property is a by-product of a deeper difference in the language faculty: Baker's Morphological Visibility Condition (MVC; the "Polysynthesis Parameter").
  - Baker specifically cites the Kanien'kéha Condition C data as evidence for high adjunction of overt nominals in languages obeying the MVC.

Proposal: Kanien'kéha exhibits Condition C effects across the board (as argued by Baker 1996). However, contra Baker, **structural ambiguity** is the culprit behind apparent Condition C violations in Kanien'kéha.

→ Condition C effects remain universal, without requiring all nominals to be high adjoined in some languages (i.e., without an appeal to macroparametric differences).

Roadmap:

Section 2: Background on Kanien'kéha.

Section 3: Condition C in Kanien'kéha and Baker's (1996) account.

Section 4: My main proposal and evidence from conjoined possessed objects.

Section 5: Diffusing some of Baker's arguments.

Section 6: Conclusion.

2 Kanien'kéha at a glance

- **Kanien'kéha** (Mohawk) is an Iroquoian language in the Five Nations group of the Northern branch, traditionally spoken in Upstate New York and Southern Québec (Mithun 2017).
  - Now spoken in six communities in Upstate New York, Southern Québec, and Southern Ontario.
- Severely endangered, EGIDS 8a (Moseley 2010; Lewis and Simons 2010). Speaker numbers vary; DeCaire (2023) estimates ~500 L1 speakers, mostly elders.
- Fast-growing L2 population due to successful adult and child immersion programs (DeCaire 2023; Stacey 2016).
- Often taken as a prototypical "polysynthetic" language.
  - ✧ Agglutinating with some degree of fusion in the pre-pronominal prefix domain (see Martin 2023 and Blackburn 2025).

- ✧ Highly head-marking. Verbal agreement marks the subject and the primary object (in the sense of Dryer 1986) if one exists. Possessed nominals display agreement with their possessors.
  - ∗ Transitive agreement morphemes are largely treated as portmanteaux indexing the features of both arguments. Intransitive agreement is "split-S," with an agent and a patient set of agreement morphemes.
- ✧ **Robust *pro*-drop.** Available for all verbal arguments as well as possessors.
- ✧ **Flexible word order.** All six orderings of subject, object, and verb attested in texts and accepted by speakers. Typically analyzed as being discourse-configurational (Mithun 2020; Flaim 2025).

- All uncited data comes from my elicitation work in Montréal and Ahkwesáhsne with my L1 collaborator Mary Onwá:ri Tekahawáhkwen McDonald, with a few additional judgments from Maureen Benedict, Hilda King, and Lyle Lazore. Unmarked examples are in the Ahkwesáhsne dialect, while cited examples marked with K. represent the Kahnawà:ke dialect.

3 Finding Condition C in Kanien'kéha

- Baker (1996) suggests that Condition C effects exist in Kanien'kéha based on an asymmetry between adjunct and complement clauses (replicated by the author).

- *Pro*-dropped pronouns (evidenced by verbal agreement) in matrix clauses may corefer with R-expressions in sentence-level adjunct clauses.[2]

(3) a. *Wa'ewennahnó:ton ohén:ton ne Katerí: aonsaionhtén:ti.*
pro$_i$ wa'-ie-wennahnoton [ohenton ne **Kateri**$_i$ aonsa-ion-ahtenti]
FACT-FIA-read[PUNC] before NE Kateri OPT.REP-FIA-go[PUNC]
'She$_i$ read it before Katerí:$_i$ left.' (SUBJ *pro* = adjunct R-exp.)

b. *Ia'kheiatewennáːta'ahse'* *ohén:ton ne onkiá'tshi*
ia'-khei-atewennata'-a-hs-e' *pro*$_i$ [ohenton ne **onki-a'tshi**$_i$
TRANS.FACT-1SG>FI-call-JR-BEN-PUNC before NE 1DUP-female.friend
akhenatarhé:na'se'.
a-khe-natarhena-'s-e']
OPT-1SG>FI-visit-BEN-PUNC
'I called her$_i$ before I visited my friend$_i$.' (OBJ *pro* = adjunct R-exp.)

- Conversely, *pros* in matrix clauses may *not* corefer with R-expressions in complement clauses.

(4) a. *Wa'è:ron tsi Sosén: teiekahrí:ios.*
pro$_{*i/j}$ wa'-ie-ihron [tsi **Sosen**$_i$ te-ie-kahr-iio-s]
FACT-FIA-say.PUNC C Sosen DUP-FIA-eye-good-HAB
'She$_{*i/j}$ said that Sosén:$_i$ has nice eyes.' (SUBJ *pro* ≠ CP R-exp.)

[2] I follow Leipzig conventions with the following additions and alterations: CIS = cislocative, C = complementizer, DUP = duplicative, FACT = factual, FI = feminine-indefinite, JR = joiner, NSF = noun suffix, OPT = optative, PUNC = punctual, Q = polar question particle, REP = repetitive, TRANS = translocative. Agreement morphemes are glossed as follows: transitive agreement portmanteaux are represented as X(NUM)>Y(NUM), where X and Y represent the person/gender features of the higher and lower arguments, respectively. Third persons are not glossed with a 3, but instead with their gender feature (as gender is not distinguished for local persons). Number is included for each argument if a number distinction is made for that person and gender specification. Intransitive agreement morphemes are glossed X(NUM)A or X(NUM)P, where X stands for the person features of the argument, and A or P represents agent set or patient set. Again, number is only marked if a distinction is made for a certain person/gender combination. I gloss "possessor set" agreement as patient agreement; see Boles (2024) for arguments.

b. *Wahiri'wanón:tonhse'* *ónhka Tié:r wahshakonatarhé:na'se'.*
wa-hi-ri'wanonton-hs-e' *pro*$_{*i/j}$ [onhka **Tier**$_i$ wa-hshako-natarhena-'s-e']
FACT-1SG>MSG-ask-BEN-PUNC who Tier FACT-MSG>FI-visit-BEN-PUNC
'I asked him$_{*i/j}$ who Tié:r$_i$ visited.' (OBJ *pro* ≠ CP R-exp.)

- This asymmetry directly follows from standard definitions of binding (e.g., Chomsky 1981; Reinhart 1976, 1983).
  - Adjuncts adjoined to the sentence level are attached too high for matrix *pros* to bind into, meaning the adjunct-internal R-expression is free. → No Condition C violation; coreference allowed.
  - All matrix arguments c-command complement clauses, thus matrix *pros* can bind into them. → Condition C violation; no coreference allowed.

Condition C is operative in Kanien'kéha.

- Kanien'kéha shows more expected Condition C behavior, assuming the subject asymmetrically c-commands the object: *pro* objects can corefer with R-expression possessors of subjects.

(5) *Warisó:se akotshé:na* *è:rhar wahshakoká:ri'.* *pro*$_i$
Warisose$_i$ ako-itshena ehrhar wa-hshako-kari-'
Josephine FIP-domesticated.animal dog FACT-MSG>FI-bite-PUNC
'Josephine$_i$'s dog bit her$_i$.'

- **Potential issue:** Baker argues that subject *pros* can corefer with R-expression possessors of objects.

(6) *RBChne* *thá:iens* *ne Wíshe* *raohwísta'.*
RBC-hne *pro*$_i$ t-ha-ien-s ne Wishe$_i$ rao-hwist-a'
RBC-LOC CIS-MSGA-lay-HAB NE Wishe MSGP-money-NSF
According to Baker: 'He$_i$ keeps Wíshe$_i$'s money at RBC.'

- The parse should be ruled out by Condition C if the subject c-commands the object (as is crosslinguistically standard) in Kanien'kéha. Instead, objects appear able to occur outside of the c-command domain of subject *pros*.

  ⇒ Baker (1996) takes this as evidence that Kanien'kéha does not have standard argument structure.

Baker's more specific proposal

- All argument positions are filled by *pros*.
- Overt nominals are high-adjoined to the sentence, licensed by the *pros* in argument position.
- This follows from his Morphological Visibility Condition (the Polysynthesis Parameter): "A phrase X is visible for θ-role assignment from a head Y only if it is coindexed with a morpheme in the word containing Y via: (i) an agreement relationship, or (ii) a movement relationship." (Baker 1996:17).

- In being high adjuncts, overt nominals are always adjoined higher than the *pros* that occupy argument position. → Overt nominals can always escape c-command by a coreferent *pro*, ergo **no Condition C effects** for overt nominals.[3]
  - This proposal effectively means overt nominals have the same status as adjunct clauses. As shown, adjunct clauses don't show Condition C effects, therefore it's not surprising that overt nominals don't either.
- Condition C effects appear in complement clauses because these must be in argument position. They cannot be licensed by a *pro* because they do not share the same category features as *pros*.
- Nevertheless, the Condition C data only supports such a split from standard argument structure proposals if the parse in (6) is the correct one. That is, this only follows *if the R-expression is truly within the object constituent...*

4 A structural ambiguity analysis

- Given the adjunct-complement clause asymmetry, I follow Baker (1996) in suggesting that Kanien'kéha does exhibit Condition C effects.
- However, I propose a different analysis for apparent Condition C violations in the language.

My proposal

Structural ambiguity is the culprit behind apparent Condition C violations in Kanien'kéha. This structural ambiguity arises as a by-product of *flexible word order* and *robust* pro-*drop*.

- Multiple acceptable orderings of overt nominals as well as the widespread use of phonologically null pronouns often leads to many strings that are ambiguous between a parse that obeys Condition C and one that violates it, creating the illusion of accepted Condition C violations.
- Explicitly, I propose (7) is ambiguous, with both a Condition C-violating parse (8a), which Baker adopts, and a Condition C-abiding parse (8b).

(7) *RBChne thá:iens (ne) Wíshe raohwísta'.*
RBC-hne t-ha-ien-s ne Wishe rao-hwist-a'
RBC-LOC CIS-MSGA-lay-HAB NE Wishe MSGP-money-NSF
'Wíshe$_i$ keeps his$_i$ money at RBC.' (According to Baker: 'He$_i$ keeps Wíshe$_i$'s money at RBC.')

(8) a. *Violating parse (Baker's)*
RBChne [pro$_i$]$_{\text{SUBJ}}$ *thá:iens* [(*ne*) *Wíshe$_i$ raohwísta'*]$_{\text{OBJ}}$

b. *Non-violating parse*
RBChne thá:iens [(*ne*) *Wíshe$_i$*]$_{\text{SUBJ}}$ [pro$_i$ *raohwísta'*]$_{\text{OBJ}}$.

- **Speakers accept coreference with the second parse in mind.**

[3] However, Baker later claims that overt nominals in Kanien'kéha are clitic left-dislocated. He shows that, as expected of CLLD nominals in, e.g., Romance, overt nominals must reconstruct into argument position in certain cases. This should mean that overt nominals should also reconstruct for Condition C, falsely predicting Condition C to hold in examples like (6). He suggests that the reason this does not happen is that possessed nominals in Kanien'kéha are relative clauses, since material inside of relative clauses does not reconstruct for binding purposes (e.g., Lebeaux 1989). Nevertheless, the argument is not strong, with the only good evidence for this claim being the Condition C data itself and the behavior of other languages that obey the MVC.

- Structural ambiguity can "bleed" Condition C effects in this way because **ambiguous strings are always parsable in a Condition C-abiding way**.

  ⇒ Speakers will always accept coreference readings for these strings when asked in elicitation.

- A few repercussions:

  ❶ Condition C remains universal: violations can be chalked up to surface properties.

  ❷ Another crosslinguistic "tool" to "bleed" Condition C.

  ❸ The Condition C data is **not** evidence for all nominals being high adjoined, contra Baker (1996).

  ❹ Condition C cannot always be reliably tested with simple sentences (see also Legate 2002; Royer 2025).

4.1 Evidence from conjoined objects

- The structural ambiguity analysis makes a **strong prediction**: in cases where structural ambiguity with respect to R-expressions does **not** arise, Condition C effects should operate as expected of standard argument structure in which the subject asymmetrically c-commands the object.

- I show that this is the case with novel data from conjoined possessed objects.

- Possessors may both precede or follow their possessa in both elicitation and natural contexts, though there is a strong preference for possessors preceding possessa in both cases.

(9)

Wahiientéhrha'ne'	*ne*	{*Warisó:se akóhskare.*	/ *akóhskare*	*Warisó:se.*}
wa-hi-ientehrha'n-e'	ne	Warisose ako-hskar-e'	ako-hskar-e'	Warisose
FACT-1SG>MSG-meet-PUNC	NE	Josephine FIP-partner-NSF	FIP-partner-NSF	Josephine

'I met Josephine's boyfriend.'

- Turning to conjoined objects, there is an asymmetry of allowed **coreference** between a subject and an (apparent) R-expression possessor of an object conjunct **based on ordering** of the putative possessor and its possessa.

- Coreference between a subject and a possessor of a conjunct is disallowed when the possessor appears either *after the first conjunct or before the second conjunct*.

(10) a.

	Wahó:ti	*ne*	*raonhotónkwa*	*Kó:r*	*tánon'*	*raò:sere.*
pro$_{*i/j}$	wa-ho-ati	ne	rao-nhotonkwa	**Kor**$_i$	tanon'	*pro* rao-'sere
	FACT-MSGP-lose[PUNC]	NE	MSGP-key	Kor	and	MSGP-car

'He$_{*i/j}$ lost Kó:r$_i$'s keys and his car.'

b.

	Wahó:ti	*ne*	*raonhotónkwa*	*tánon'*	*Kó:r*	*raò:sere.*
pro$_{*i/j}$	wa-ho-ati	ne	*pro*$_{*i/j}$ rao-nhotonkwa	tanon'	**Kor**$_i$	rao-'sere
	FACT-MSGP-lose[PUNC]	NE	MSGP-key	and	Kor	MSGP-car

'He$_{*i/j}$ lost his$_{*i/j}$ keys and Kó:r$_i$'s car.' (SUBJ ≠ OBJ poss'r)

- On the other hand, coreference is allowed when the possessor appears *before the first conjunct and after the second conjunct*.

(11) a. *Wahó:ti* *ne* *Kó:r* *raonhotónkwa* *tánon'* *raò:sere.*
pro$_i$ wa-ho-ati ne **Kor**$_i$ rao-nhotonkwa tanon' *pro*$_i$ rao-'sere
-MSGP-lose[PUNC] NE Kor MSGP-key and MSGP-car
'Kó:r$_i$ lost his$_i$ keys and his$_i$ car.'

b. *Wahó:ti* *ne* *raonhotónkwa* *tánon'* *raò:sere* *Kó:r.*
pro$_i$ wa-ho-ati ne *pro*$_i$ rao-nhotonkwa tanon' rao-'sere **Kor**$_i$
FACT-MSGP-lose[PUNC] NE MSGP-key and MSGP-car Kor
'Kó:r$_i$ lost his$_i$ keys and his$_i$ car.' (SUBJ = OBJ poss'r)

- The pattern is that if the R-expression is on the "inside" edge of one of the conjuncts, coreference does not obtain, while when the R-expression is on the "outside" edge, coreference is accessible.
- The pattern follows from **structural ambiguity.**

(12) ✗ Subject and possessor of object coreference
a. lose [[keys **Kó:r**] and [car]]$_{\text{OBJ}}$
b. lose [[keys] and [**Kó:r** car]]$_{\text{OBJ}}$

(13) ✓ Subject and possessor of object coreference
a. lose [**Kó:r**]$_{\text{SUBJ}}$ [[keys] and [car]]$_{\text{OBJ}}$
b. lose [[keys] and [car]]$_{\text{OBJ}}$ [**Kó:r**]$_{\text{SUBJ}}$

In more detail

The first pair (10): The string is *not* structurally ambiguous. The R-expression can only be parsed as a possessor because the conjoined objects must be parsed together.

- Forces a *pro* subject, which c-commands the R-expression ⇒ **Condition C violation! No coreference!**

The second pair (11): The string *is* structurally ambiguous as to the identity of the R-expression. These have both a Condition C-violating and Condition C-abiding parse.

- R-expression can be parsed separately from the conjoined objects as the subject. This **parse does not violate Condition C**, hence allows coreference readings.

✻ This is the parse speakers use when allowing coreference in these sentences.

The R-expression could be parsed as object possessor (giving a Condition C violation), but **the existence of a parse for (11) that does not violate Condition C renders Condition C effects irrelevant.**

➢ The apparent violation is accepted by speakers because they **reparse** it in a Condition C-abiding way.

As predicted, when the location of the R-expression is not ambiguous, **Kanien'kéha shows standard Condition C behavior.**

4.2 Some important results

- **A cautionary tale:** In some languages, strings can be ambiguous as to whether they violate Condition C or not—all based on the parse.

  ⇒ Important to test Condition with more than just basic configurations: more complex configurations (e.g., conjoined possessed objects, relative clauses, adverbials) often offer less structural ambiguity and hence more reliable behavior. (See also Legate 2002; Royer 2025 for variations on this same point.)

- **Condition C universality:** Kanien'kéha appears to allow Condition C violations. ⇒ This is an accident of parsing, due to the superficial properties of flexible word order and *pro*-drop. Importantly, when ambiguity does not arise, Condition C is respected.

  ⇒ Condition C remains a universal. Structural ambiguity is another way that languages can "bleed" Condition C crosslinguistically.

- **Argument structure:** The conjoined possessed object data only follow if the subject asymmetrically c-commands the object. Otherwise, it is unclear why trapping the R-expression inside the object results in no coreference with the subject, while parsing the R-expression as a subject restores the coreference.

  ⇒ The Condition C data are not evidence that all overt nominals must be high adjoined; instead, it argues for *standard* argument structure. (See also Flaim 2025; Coon 2025).

In short, structural ambiguity (due to surface properties) allows apparent violations of Condition C without requiring languages to differ at a fundamental level.

5 Against Baker's (1996) tests

- Baker (1996) goes through a sequence of tests to confirm that the R-expression in sentences like (6) is part of the object constituent. → Tests against the parse I suggest
- **These tests are inconclusive.**

5.1 Polar questions

- Polar questions in Kanien'kéha involve a fronted constituent as well as the polar question particle *ken*.
- Baker (1996) shows that *ken* is a second position element, following the fronted constituent.
- Using this, he suggests that in sentences like (14), the R-expression *Onwari* must occupy an object-internal possessor position.

(14) *Onwá:ri akóhskare'* *ken* *wa'thonwanoronhkwánion'?*
Onwari$_i$ ako-hskar-e' ken *pro*$_i$ wa't-**honwa**-noronhkwanion-'
Onwari FIP-partner-NSF Q FACT.DUP-FI>MSG-kiss-PUNC
'Did she$_i$ kiss Onwá:ri$_i$'s boyfriend?' (Baker 1996:46, K.)

- Under the assumption that this is A'-movement of the object (DeCaire et al. 2017) and that A'-movement reconstructs for Condition C (Barss 1986; Chomsky 1995; Fox 1999), the R-expression should reconstruct under an subject *pro*, resulting in an expected violation.

Problem: Third-position *ken* is attested, specifically when there is a topicalized element and a focused element (Flaim 2025).

(15) *Katya só:ra ken én:ieke'?*
Katya sora ken en-ie-k-e'
Katya duck Q FUT-FIA-eat-PUNC
'As for Katya, will she eat the duck?'

- This means that (14) may involve a high-adjoined topic *Onwari*, which creates no problems for Condition C.
  - Unclear of what to make of data like this in Baker (1996), since there are no contexts or prosodic data.

5.2 Complex NPs

- Baker (1996) additionally suggests that subject *pros* can corefer with R-expressions in complex NP objects.
- This should be bad if the subject asymmetrically c-commands the object in Kanien'kéha: subject *pro* should bind into the complex NP and thus lead to a Condition C violation.

Problem: This test is not replicable; judgements differ between those collected by Baker and those collected by me.

(16) *Kaná:takon wa'(e)tshisení:ken' í:se' tánon' Sá:k raóhskare'.*
ka-nat-a-kon *pro* wa'-(e)tshiseni-ken-' ise' tanon' Sak rao-hskar-e'
NA-town-JR-in.LOC FACT-MSG>2DU-see-PUNC 2PRO and Sak MSGP-partner-NSF
'He$_i$ saw you and Sá:k$_i$'s girlfriend in town.' (Judgments from Baker)
'He$_{*i/j}$ saw you and Sá:k$_i$'s girlfriend in town.' (Judgments from me)

5.3 Demonstrative-headed objects

- Baker (1996) argues that R-expression possessors inside an object DP headed by the demonstratives *kiken* 'this' and *thiken* 'that' can corefer with the subject *pro*.

Problem: These judgements are difficult and not clear cut (see also Bruening 2001). Not enough to support a claim that all nominals are high adjuncts.

(17) a. *Wa'e'níkhon' ne thí:ken Arísawe ako'wháhsa'.*
pro$_{*i/j}$ wa'-ie-'nikhon-' ne thiken Arisawe$_i$ ako-'whahs-a'
FACT-FIA-sew-PUNC NE that Arisawe FIP-skirt-NSF
'She$_{*i/j}$ sewed that skirt of Arísawe$_i$'s.' (✗ coreference)

b. *Wahará:ko' ne thí:ken Wíshe raotó:ken.*
pro$_i$ wa'-ha-rakw-' ne thiken Wishe$_i$ rao-atoken
FACT-MSGA-choose-PUNC NE that Wishe MSGP-axe
'He$_i$ picked that axe of Wíshe$_i$'s.' (✓ coreference)

- **These tests do not rule out a parse like I suggest.**

6 Conclusion

- Kanien'kéha exhibits Condition C effects **across the board**.
- Structural ambiguity, caused by flexible word order and robust *pro*-drop, allows strings with both Condition C-obeying and Condition C-violating parses, with two important effects:

  (i) Condition C remains universal

  (ii) Contra Baker (1996), Kanien'kéha does not require all nominals to be high adjuncts.

➢ In sum, the Condition C data allows us to maintain the universality of Condition C without requiring a deep, fundamental difference between Kanien'kéha and other languages.

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