

**The partitive prefix and exclamatives in
Kanien'kéha:
support for a degree account of
exclamativity**

Willie Myers

McGill University
willie.myers@mail.mcgill.ca

NELS 56
New York University
October 17, 2025

Background

EXCLAMATIONS are speech acts performed by the speaker to express surprise at the content of the utterance.

- (1)
 - a. You have big eyes!
 - b. What big eyes you have!
 - c. Boy do you have big eyes!

Background

For a subset of exclamations, surprise is not just expressed by how the utterance is performed but also by its syntactic form.

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- (2) a. ~~You have big eyes!~~
- b. What big eyes you have!
- c. Boy do you have big eyes!

⇒ These are called EXCLAMATIVES.

Background

Across languages, the unique syntactic forms of exclamatives give rise to a unique exclamative semantics.

- (3)
- a. ~~You have big eyes!~~
 - b. What big eyes you have!
 - c. Boy do you have big eyes!
- Normal exclamations → express surprise at proposition
 - Exclamatives → **surprise at exceptional degree!**

Puzzle

How does the unique syntax of exclamatives give rise to their unique semantics?

What big eyes you have!



I'm surprised by the unexpected degree to which your eyes are big!

Two approaches

- (1) **QUESTION APPROACH** (Gutierrez-Rexach 1996; Zanuttini & Portner 2003; Taniguchi 2018)

Exclamatives = **questions** that you know the answer to.

- Question-like morphosyntax
- Factive

- (4) a. How tall Paul is!!
 b. [[*how tall*]₁ [FACT [*Paul is t₁*]]]

Question approach: Z&P 2003

- (5) $[[\text{How tall is Paul?}]] = \{ 5'5'', 5'6'', \dots 6'0'' \}$
→ question about Paul's height

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- (5) $\llbracket \text{How tall is Paul?} \rrbracket = \{ 5'5'', 5'6'', \dots 6'0'' \}$
→ question about Paul's height
- (6) $\llbracket \text{How tall Paul is!} \rrbracket = \{ 5'5'', 5'6'', \dots 6'0'', 6'6'' \}$
→ exclamative about Paul's unexpected height

Two approaches

(2) **DEGREE APPROACH** (Villalba 2003; Castroviejo 2006; Rett 2011)

Exclamatives are **degree constructions** that you exclaim.

- Obligatory degree reading (and sometimes degree morphology!)
- Similarity with amount free relatives

- (7) a. How tall Paul is!!
 b. [*how* [DEG-OP-*tall*]₁ [*Paul is t₁*]]

Degree approach: Rett 2011

- (8) $\llbracket \text{how tall Paul is} \rrbracket = \lambda d. \text{TALL}(P,d)$
→ amount free relative denoting a degree property

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(8) $\llbracket \text{how tall Paul is} \rrbracket = \lambda d. \text{TALL}(P,d)$

→ amount free relative denoting a degree property

(9) $\llbracket \text{How tall Paul is!} \rrbracket \rightsquigarrow \exists d' \text{ such that the speaker had not expected that } \text{TALL}(P)(d')$

→ exclamation about a degree property

Two approaches

As linguists have looked at exclamation marks in more and more languages, both approaches have found support.

1 QUESTION APPROACH

Gutiérrez-Rexach 1996 (Spanish), Zanuttini & Portner 2003 (English, Paduan), Liptak 2006 (Hungarian), Chernilovskaya 2010 (English), Taniguchi 2017 (English), Myers 2025 (Kirundi)

2 DEGREE APPROACH

Castroviejo 2006 (Catalan), Burnett 2010 (Quebec French), Rett 2011 (English), Wood 2014 (English), Badan & Cheng 2015 (Chinese), Kim 2022 (Korean)

Goal of this talk

Bring new data from Kanien'kéha (aka Mohawk; Iroquoian) to bear on this debate

Why Kanien'kéha?

Kanien'kéha exclamatives don't look like previously documented exclamatives. . .

N-a'te-hs-kahr-owá:n-en-'s!
 PART-DUP-2SGA-eye-be.big-STAT-DISTRIB
 'What big eyes you have!'

- No **question** morphosyntax
- No sign of **relative clause** structure
- No **degree** adverbs/quantifiers

Why Kanien'kéha?

Instead, exclamation marks are marked by...

- (10) a. Te-hs-kahr-owá:n-en-'s.
 DUP-2SGA-eye-be.big-STAT-DISTRIB
 'You have big eyes.' (Declarative)
- b. **N**-a'te-hs-kahr-owá:n-en-'s!
PART-DUP-2SGA-eye-be.big-STAT-DISTRIB
 'What big eyes you have!' (Exclamative)

⇒ a "partitive pre-pronominal prefix"!

Central question

What is the **partitive pre-pronominal prefix**???

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What is the **partitive pre-pronominal prefix**???

- Is it a question morpheme? Is it a degree morpheme?
- Determining its contribution is key to unpacking exclamation in Kanien'kéha.

In this talk...

- Document Kanien'kéha exclamatives
- Diagnose what the partitive prefix is
- In doing so, propose an analysis of exclamation in Kanien'kéha

Main claims

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- ⇒ Kanien'kéha exclamatives must be degree constructions.
- ⇒ Kanien'kéha provides **overt** empirical evidence in favor of the degree approach to exclamativity!

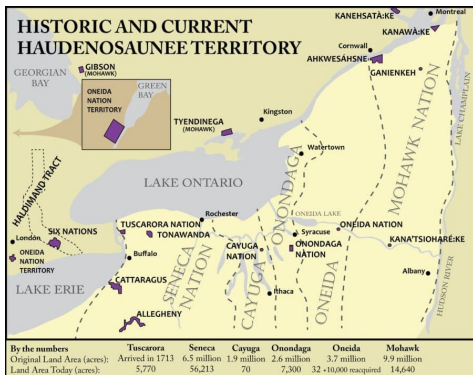
Outline

- ① Exclamatives in Kanien'kéha
- ② Diagnosing the partitive
- ③ Deriving exclamativity with the partitive
- ④ Conclusion

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- ① **Exclamatives in Kanien'kéha**
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Kanien'kéha (aka Mohawk)



- Spoken by ~600 people in Quebec, Ontario, and New York state (DeCaire 2023)
- Most speakers are L1 elders but growing number of L2 speakers (Stacey 2016)
- Fieldwork since 2022 in collaboration with elders Mary Onwá:ri McDonald, Katerí Deer, and Konwaronhiá:wi Helen Norton

Basic verb form

Kanien'kéha verbs minimally contain three elements:

PRONOMINAL PREFIX – [VERB STEM] – ASPECT

(11) K-atá:wen-s.
1SGA-swim-HAB
'I swim.'

(12) Ro-ienthókw-en.
MSGP-harvest-STAT
'He has harvested.'

Properties of exclamatives

This unique syntactic form gives rise to the standard semantics of exclamatives.

- ⇒ Exclamatives express surprise at an extreme degree
- Obligatory degree reading
 - Obligatory evaluativity

(e.g., Michaelis and Lambrecht 1996; Zanuttini and Portner 2003; Brandner 2010; Rett 2006, 2008, 2011)

Degree reading

Exclamatives “express surprise that a set of *degrees* has a particular degree property, but not that a set of *individuals* has a particular individual property” (Rett 2008).

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- (14) Context: You know that Benny speaks one Romance language in addition to English. Because his mother speaks French, you assume it is French. But you discover it is Spanish. (adapted from Rett 2008)
- a. Benny speaks English and Spanish! (Indiv.)
 - b. #What languages Benny speaks! (Degree)

Degree reading

(15) Context: You go to a buffet with your vegetarian friend Paul and others. Paul never eats meat but today he has one piece of steak.

- a. Ra-'wà:r-a-ks!
 MsgA-meat-JR-eat-HAB
 'He's eating meat!' (Individual)
- b. #Ni-ha-'wà:r-a-k-s!
PART-MsgA-meat-JR-eat-HAB
 'Boy is he eating meat!' (Degree)

Evaluativity

Exclamatives don't just express surprise at any degree; they express surprise that a degree is unexpectedly high.

The degree must surpass a contextual standard based on the evaluation of the speaker.

Evaluativity

(16) **Ni**-ka-nonhs-owá:n-en!

PART-N.A-house-be.big-STAT

'What a big house!'

✓ You've only lived in a one-story house. This is your first time in a two-story house.

✗ You've only lived in three-story houses. This is your first time in a two-story house.

Source of exclamativity

Despite being interpreted in the same way, Kanien'kéha exclamatives don't *look* like previously documented exclamatives in other languages.

- (17) **N**-a'te-hs-kahr-owá:n-en-'s!
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- No clear question morphosyntax
- No clear relative clause morphosyntax

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- No clear relative clause morphosyntax
- **It all comes down to PART...**

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Where does PART appear elsewhere?

- ① If exclamatives are like QUESTIONS, PART should appear in *other* constructions with question/alternative semantics
- ② If exclamatives are like DEGREE constructions, PART should appear in *other* constructions related to degrees

PART in a question approach

Prediction: PART should appear in constructions that give rise to alternatives.

- Wh-questions
- Polar questions
- Focus constructions

Wh-questions

While PART does appear in some wh-questions, it's not present in all of them.

- (18) a. Tó: **ni**-ha-hnen:ies?
 how PART-MsgA-be.tall?
 'How tall is he?'
 b. Oh **ni**-wa-hsohk-ò:ten?
 which PART-N.A-color-be.a.kind?
 'What color is it?'
- (19) a. Ónhka ra-atáwen-s?
 who MsgA-swim-HAB
 'Who is swimming?'
 b. Kátke s-a-nakerá:ton?
 when 2sgA-be.born.STAT
 'When were you born?'

Wh-questions

And when PART does appear in a question, it must co-occur with a wh-word.

- (20) a. *(Tó:) **ni**-ha-hnen:ies?
how PART-MsgA-be.tall
'How tall is he?
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⇒ PART is not a critical part of wh-questions

Polar questions

PART is never required in polar questions.

- (21) a. Ra-hnén:ies ken?
MsgA-be.tall Q
'Is he tall?'
b. Kó:r ken ra-tá:wen-s?
Paul Q MsgA-swim-HAB
'Does Paul swim?'

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'Does Paul swim?'

⇒ PART is not related to more general question semantics.

Focus constructions

In Kanien'kéha, focus is marked by word order via a pre-verbal focus position (Flaim 2025).

- (22) Óhnka ra-hnén:ies?
 who MsgA-be.tall
 'WHO is tall?'
- a. **Kó:r** ra-hnénies.
 Paul MsgA-be.tall
 'PAUL is tall.'
- b. #Ra-hnénies ne **Kó:r**.
 MsgA-be.tall NE Paul
 'Paul is tall.'

Focus constructions

If PART was some sort of degree focus element, we might expect the PART-marked predicate to always occupy the focus position but this is not the case.

- (23) a. **Ni**-ha-hnén:ies ne Shawátis!
 PART-MsgA-be.tall NE John
 'How tall John is!'
- b. Kó:r **ni**-ha-hnén:ies!
 Paul PART-MsgA-be.tall
 'How tall PAUL is!'

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 Paul PART-MsgA-be.tall
 'How tall PAUL is!'

⇒ PART is not related to focus alternatives.

Assessing question approach

- PART is not required in questions
- PART is not required in focus constructions

⇒ No clear evidence for question approach in Kanien'kéha

Predictions of a degree approach

Prediction: the partitive should appear in degree constructions.

- Measure phrase
- Degree question
- Comparative standard
- Amount free relative

(Beck et al. 2009, Bochnak et al. 2020)

Measure phrases

PART is always in measure phrases.

- (24) Ià:ia'k **ni**-ka-nónhs-a-ke.
 six **PART**-N.A-house-JR-number
 'There are six houses (the houses number six).'
- (25) Ken' **ni**-ha-hnén:ies ne Kó:r.
 this **PART**-MsgA-be.tall NE Paul
 'Paul is this tall.'

Degree questions

PART is always in degree questions.

(26) Tó: **ni**-ha-hnén:ies ne Kó:r?
how **PART**-MsgA-be.tall NE Paul
'How tall is Paul?'

(27) Tó: **ni**-ka-nó:ron?
how **PART**-N.A-be.expensive
'How much does it cost?'

Comparative standards

PART is always in the comparative standard.

(28) Kó:r sénha ra-hnén:ies...

Paul more MsgA-be.tall

'Paul is taller...'

a. tsi ní:-io-ht ne Shawátis.

C PART-N.P-be.a.way NE John

'than John.'

(Individual)

b. tsi ní:-io-ht tsi ka-nákt-es.

C PART-N.P-be.a.way C N.A-bed-be.long

'than the bed is long.'

(Clausal)

Amount free relatives

PART is always in amount free relatives.

(29) Wak-aterièn:tare-'. . .

1sgP-know-STAT

'I know. . .'

a. tsi **ni**-ha-hnén:ies ne Kó:r.

C **PART**-MsgA-be.tall NE Paul

'how tall Paul is.'

b. tsi **ni**-ka-nákt-es.

C **PART**-N.A-bed-be.long

'how long the bed is.'

Assessing degree approach

- PART is found in all of these degree constructions, including commonly accepted degree abstraction contexts.
 - Measure phrase
 - Degree question
 - Comparative standard
 - Amount free relative

⇒ PART IS related to degrees!

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Proposal: PART = degree operator

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- **Semantics:** an identity function on degree predicates
 - $\llbracket \text{PART} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle d,t \rangle}: P$
- **Syntax:** operator movement to the left edge of CP
 - Like *covert* degree abstraction in comparative standards (Chomsky 1977, Heim 2001)
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⇒ Explains presence of PART in all of the above degree constructions!

How does this work?

Gradable predicate = relation between individual and degree
(Cresswell 1976, Kennedy & McNally 2005, and many others)

$$(30) \quad \llbracket hnenies \rrbracket = \lambda d \lambda x. TALL(x, d)$$

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$$(30) \quad \llbracket hnenies \rrbracket = \lambda d \lambda x. TALL(x, d)$$

PART abstracts over degree variable, creating degree property

$$(31) \quad \begin{array}{ll} \text{Syntax:} & [_{CP} ni_1 [_{CP} 1 [_{CP} \text{Paul is } d_1\text{-tall}]]] \\ \text{Semantics:} & \lambda d_1. TALL(P, d_1) \end{array}$$

How does this work?

PART clauses can combine with a degree argument or a wh-word.

(32) **Measure phrase**

[_{DEGP} this [_{CP} *ni*₁ [_{CP} 1 [_{CP} Paul is *d*₁-tall]]]]
 \rightsquigarrow TALL(P, *d*_{this})

(33) **Degree question**

[_{DEGP} how [_{CP} *ni*₁ [_{CP} 1 [_{CP} Paul is *d*₁-tall]]]]
 \rightsquigarrow $\lambda p. \exists d_1 [p = \text{TALL}(P, d_1)]$

(Same for comparatives and free relatives but skipping for time!)

PART in exclamatives

Nothing saturates the degree argument of the PART clause → denotes a degree property which can then be exclaimed.

(34) **Exclamative**

$[_{CP} ni_1 [_{CP} 1 [_{CP} \text{Paul is } d_1\text{-tall}]]]$

$\rightsquigarrow \lambda d_1. \text{TALL}(P, d_1)$

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⇒ Exclamatives are degree constructions too!

⇒ And this is EXACTLY what is predicted by the degree approach!

Revisiting the degree approach

The syntax and semantics of Kanien'kéha exclamation is just what Rett 2011 proposes for English exclamation with two differences.

- Semantically null wh-word
- Realization of DEG-OP

- (35) a. **Rett exclamation**
 [*how* [DEG-OP₁ [1 [*Paul is d₁-tall*]]]]
- b. **Kanien'kéha exclamation**
 [*ni*₁ [1 [*Paul is d₁-tall*]]]

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Summary

- Kanien'kéha exclamatives have the standard exclamative reading but a novel syntactic form.

PART + verb

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PART + verb

- The distribution of PART suggests that the morpheme is related to degrees.

PART = degree abstraction operator

- Kanien'kéha exclamatives are degree constructions with the exact syntax and semantics of exclamatives proposed by a degree approach.

PART = transparent morphological support

Areas for future research

- More documentation and analysis of exclamatives cross-linguistically, especially in understudied languages like Kanien'kéha.

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- Overt degree abstraction in other languages?
- Cross-linguistic variation in exclamative degree abstraction:
 - Wh-movement
 - Focus movement
 - Relativization

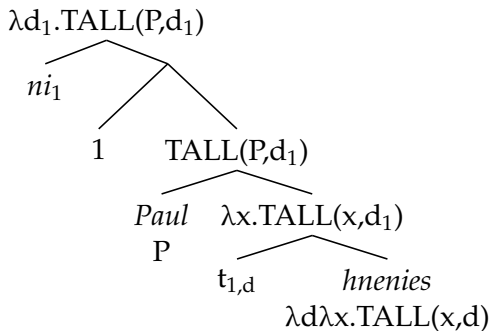
Niawenhkó:wa!

- Katerí Deer
- Konwaronhiá:wi Helen Norton
- Mary Onwá:ri Tekahawáhkwen McDonald
- Akwiratékha' Martin
- Tsowén:te Cross
- Alan Bale & Luis Alonso-Ovalle
- Katya Morgunova, Terrance Gatchalian & Anne Bertrand
- Jessica Coon
- Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitíohkwa Language and Cultural Center

PART clause structure

Every PART construction is a degree-denoting relative clause.

- (36) Syntax: $[_{CP} ni_1 [1 [_{CP} Paul\ is\ d_1\text{-tall}]]]$
 Semantics: $\lambda d_1.TALL(P,d_1)$



Exclamations in Kanien'kéha

They can also appear with expressive particles.

- (38) **Á:ke** / **oh** / **nió** (tsi) ió-hskats kí:ken!
 geez / oh / wow C N.P-be.beautiful this
 'Wow, this is beautiful!'

One E-Force operator

The same E-Force operator can take in a CP that denotes a proposition or a degree.

- (39) **Á:ke tsi** ra-hnén:ies!
 wow C MsgA-be.tall
 'Wow, he is tall!' (Surprise at proposition)
- (40) **Á:ke tsi** ni-ha-hnén:ies!
 wow C **PART**-MsgA-be.tall
 'Wow, is he tall!' (Surprise at degree)

Same word order as relative clauses

- (42) áhsen **ní**-kón:-ti érhar
 three PART-FZ.P-number dog
 'three dogs'
- a. érhar áhsen **ní**kón:ti (3>PART)
 b. áhsen érhar **ní**kón:ti (3>PART)
 c. *érhar **ní**kón:ti áhsen (*PART>3)
 d. ***ní**kón:ti áhsen érhar (*PART>3)
 e. ***ní**kón:ti érhar áhsen (*PART>3)

Accounting for non-gradable predicates

(43) Na'-k-karèt-shera-k-e'!
 PART.FACT-1sgA-cookie-NMLZ-eat-PUNC
 'How I ate cookies!'

- ① Amount: Boy did I eat a lot of cookies!
- ② Manner: How fast/intensely I ate the cookies!

Analysis

In the spirit of Rett 2011 and Nakanishi 2007, there is a covert measure operator (M-Op) which modifies the event predicate and introduces a degree variable.

- (44) [E-Force [PART₁ [I [t₁ M-Op ate cookies]]]]
 ↗ surprise at the unexpected degree of some
 property (frequency, speed, intensity) of my
 cookie-eating