

Searching for the unsearchable: A study of English NP inversion

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This paper outlines the methodological challenges of undertaking a corpus investigation of English NP inversions, such as (1).

- (1) A particularly striking feature of the report is the growth in coverage in manual operations (ICE-GB)

Here, the initial indefinite noun phrase seems to be predicated of the postverbal NP (the logical subject); and the sentence is also specifying (identifying) in function. Thus, this construct is relevant both to work on full inversion, in which subject and complement are inverted (as in (2), involving a preverbal locative expression), and to accounts of specificational copular sentences, like (3), which contain preverbal definite NP subjects.

- (2) In the radio car is Sir Geoffrey Johnson-Smith (ICE-GB)
(3) The lead actress in that movie is Ingrid Bergman (Mikkelsen 2005:1)

Indefinite NP BE NP sentences have held a marginalised position in data-oriented studies of inversion. The difficulty in reliably distinguishing which NP is subject and which complement has led some authors to exclude this sentence type from corpus analysis (e.g. Dorgeloh 1997); it also calls into question their representation in collections of inversion sentences drawn from opportunistic encounters in everyday reading (e.g. Birner 1996; Chen 2003). Certainly, in many studies, there is evidence of inconsistency in the criteria used to include or exclude individual NP BE NP tokens. Part of the problem seems to be that authors often discuss indefinite NP inversion without considering its relationship to specificational sentences. Prado-Alonso (2011: 29) notes simply that these constructions have "sometimes been confused".

However, there are many theoretical accounts of specificational sentences as instances of inversion (rather than as identity structures). Their challenge is to explain why inversion is almost always possible for sentences with definite NP predicates, but is often ungrammatical for sentences with indefinite NP predicates, shown in (4). These accounts very rarely engage with empirical studies of English inversion constructions.

- (4) *A doctor is John (Mikkelsen 2005: 154)

In Author (2016), I claim that the acceptability of indefinite NP inversions depends both on the discourse status of the initial noun phrase – as being anchored to the prior text (see Mikkelsen 2005; Birner 1996) – and on the distinctiveness (or narrowness) of the description in characterising the logical subject. This is consistent with their treatment both as specificational copular sentences and as inversion constructions.

In this study, I use electronic corpus data to test this theory – a task which presents numerous methodological challenges. Searching for NP BE NP structures produces vast amounts of unwanted tokens which exhibit the canonical, non-inverted configuration. As a fully parsed corpus, the ICE-GB is designed to allow for the simple extraction of inversions, through either the INVOP function or INV/PRECS clause structure. However, upon investigation, I find that this subjective annotation is attached to relatively few viable instances of NP inversion in the corpus. This calls into question the frequencies and conclusions drawn from this approach (employed in Prado-Alonso 2011).

An alternative option is to specify the make-up of the initial NP in the form of a detailed search string (as employed by Kreyer 2006). However, since the focus of interest here is the complexity and variety of the initial description, such an approach has obvious limitations. In this paper, I discuss my attempt to achieve total accountability in relation to the corpus (McEnery and Hardie 2012). My approach combines a series of exploratory searches on syntactic structure with a careful manual sorting and selection process.

Upon obtaining a comprehensive data set from the ICE-GB, I focus on the formal and semantic characteristics of the initial indefinite noun phrase, and find that the construction shows a preference for modified NPs that provide a distinctive (if not inclusive) description of the logical subject. In some instances, this serves to override the principle of end weight, which is often called upon to explain inversion phenomena.

My data also point to the existence of subtypes of indefinite NP inversion which have construction-specific properties. Adopting the framework of construction grammar, I situate these constructs within a network of related constructions, focusing in particular on recognised points of difference between full inversion and specificationals, such as the subject status of the preverbal and postverbal NPs. My analysis clarifies the relationship between these constructions, having implications for both fields of study.

References

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