

Getting your ducks in a row: inversion matters

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Buenos Aires Herald - Educational Supplement, 1992

Article archived at <http://www.eayrs.com/articles>

All learners of English will have at some stage come up against the problem of inversions, that is cases where the subject of a sentence changes place with a verb or auxiliary verb. Some of these constructions can be a little tricky, and I shall detail some examples below.

1. * **The minister claimed that on each occasion had help been forthcoming from the government.**

As a single, complete sentence this does not work. There seems to be a confusion here between inversion and conditional forms. It is true that sentences beginning with the words *On no occasion* . . . usually require an inversion of the subject and the verb or its auxiliary, but here we have an affirmative form, using the word *each* rather than *no*. (It is of course quite correct to say . . . *on no occasion had help been forthcoming*. . .)

If we view the sentence as incomplete, with a comma after the word *occasion*, then the above example would be fine. We might imagine the sentence continuing: *The minister claimed that on each occasion, had help been forthcoming from the government, it could have been possible to avoid any substantial damage to property*. This usage is of course nothing more than an elegant conditional - compare the more prosaic . . . *if help had been forthcoming* . . .

2. * **The police admitted that seldom had they had to . . .**

Here we have another example of a word (*seldom*) that when used at the beginning of a sentence usually requires an inversion. For example, we can say ***Seldom does the temperature fall below zero in Mandanga City***. This inversion is an optional variant, however, very formal, and it is equally possible to say *The temperature seldom falls* . . . , which is much more neutral in formality. Here the word *seldom* is not at the beginning of the sentence, nor in the example above, and therefore the correct, non-inverted, form is **The police admitted that they had seldom had to . . .**

3. The expression **by no means** is an interesting expression insofar as it requires an inversion, depending on which position it occurs in a sentence. Compare the two sentences *She is by no means happy with her present job* and *By no means is she happy with her present job*. Here, the second form requires the inversion, a change of position between the subject and the verb, because it occurs at the beginning of the sentence. However, when it occurs after the verb *is*, the inversion is not necessary. Notice also that if we put the verb in the negative, we have to change the word *no* to *any*; we would in this case say *She isn't happy with her present job by any means*. *Any*, as you will remember, is obligatory when the verb is in the negative.

4. A similar thing occurs with the word **only**. Look at the sentence *On a few occasions I have been able to get through to my BBS in less than ten attempts*. Here, there is no inversion involved. Look what happens, however, if we add the word *only*. This obliges us to use a construction with an inverted form and in this case we would say *On only a few occasions have I been able to get through* Just as the position of the expression *by no means* in the earlier example conditioned whether to use an inversion or not, in this case the presence or absence of the word *only* is equally relevant.

5: * **James goes to School and so Peter does .** * **James doesn't like spinach and neither Peter does.**

The verb *does* here is sometimes called a pro-form, and is used to avoid needless repetition. The pro-form (or 'operator') carries person and tense; it provides a trace of the full verb or verb phrase. Students often find inversions involving *so* and *neither* confusing. The simple rule in English is that when one of these (and the word *nor* too) comes first in the clause, the grammatical subject must follow the operator. So the correct sentences should read *James goes to School and so does Peter* and *James doesn't like spinach and neither does Peter*.

6. **Susan has more charm and poise than (does) anyone else in the whole of the lakeside community.** This sentence is correct, although may appear strange to some advanced learners.

The use of *does* is however optional, and occurs in comparative constructions like this one when the second element being compared is relatively long.

A posting on a recent TESL-L list attributed to W. S. Fowler, a British Council teacher in Barcelona with whom I once worked, a taxonomy of inversions into nine different categories (the title source was not given):

Interrogative:	<i>Did you play?</i>
Imperative:	<i>Do come in.</i>
Exclamatory:	<i>How dreadful is this place!</i>
Hypothetical:	<i>Were I Brutus, and Brutus Anthony.</i>
Balance:	<i>Among the guests were A, B, C, . . . Z.</i>
Link:	<i>Next comes the question of pay.</i>
Signpost:	<i>By strategy is meant something wider.</i>
Negative:	<i>Never was a decision more abundantly justified.</i>
Metrical:	<i>As pants the hart for cooling streams.</i>

Teachers of more advanced students may find it productive to get their students to make up examples analogous to these.