

REDESIGNING SENTENCES

A11

A11.1 Word order in English

English is said to be an SVO language. That is, transitive clauses tend to have the basic order of SUBJECT – VERB – OBJECT. Other languages are the same, but other basic word orders are common: SOV, VSO. (When we say O here, we are also thinking about predicative and adverbial clause elements, which, like the object, typically follow the verb.)

Think of a language you know well. What is its basic word order?

Activity A11.1 ★

We should not forget either that there are many other word order rules in English that we have seen throughout this book, for example, the rule that adjectives precede the noun they modify, or that prepositions come first in prepositional phrases (because there are some languages where they come last and are called ‘postpositions’).

Compared to other languages English is said to have a fixed word order, but this is not entirely true. This section looks at a number of situations where clause elements are rearranged, where there is a difference from the basic word order. We have already seen a number of situations where the word order in English is different:

- passives (although strictly speaking the order is still S-V)
Your question will be answered soon.
- yes/no* interrogatives (questions), where the verb phrase is split up so that the first auxiliary can invert with the subject, as in
Will you answer my question?
- relative clauses, where the object relative pronoun may be first in the clause
(... *the question*) *that no one could answer* ...
- interrogatives and nominal clauses, where a *wh-* word may represent the object or adverbial of the clause:
What were you thinking?
How are they feeling?
What you did is unforgivable.

Inversion

The inversion of subject and auxiliary (with the use of *do* if needed) is not exclusive to interrogatives. It is also used in negative constructions when the negative word or phrase is placed at the start of a sentence (= 'fronted' – see below):

Not only did we win, we also played well.

Nowhere else can you find such beauty.

I haven't paid my rent. Nor have we.

You would not say 'Not only we won . . .', but an unfronted version is possible without inversion: *We not only won . . .*

Inversion also applies with words that have a negative idea, such as *seldom* (= 'almost never'):

Seldom have I seen such bravery.

Another formal situation where subject/auxiliary inversion occurs is in sentences indicating a hypothetical conditional idea:

Had I known, I wouldn't have come.

Were he to come, he would not be welcome.

Should you change your mind, there would be a financial penalty.

They can be paraphrased as 'If I had known . . .', 'If he were to come . . .' (or 'If he came . . .'), and 'If you should change . . .' (or 'If you changed . . .'). *Were* after *he* is another example of the subjunctive (see A5). These are all formal constructions.

Another clause-initial element that leads to subject/auxiliary inversion is *so*:

So disappointing have the results been that. . .

There is another type of inversion in English, where the subject changes places with the whole verb phrase after another element has been fronted. It is most common when an adverbial of place has been fronted:

In the middle was situated a large table.

Opposite him sat the Queen.

(not *Opposite him did the Queen sit* with subject/auxiliary inversion.) Both examples are AVS. Such inversion allows the arrangement of sentences to fit the information principle (see below). 'Uninverted' (SVA), unfronted versions are of course also possible:

A large table was situated in the middle.

The Queen sat opposite him.

as are fronted versions without inversion:

Opposite him the Queen sat.

Such when fronted also triggers subject/verb inversion:

Such has been the demand for our products that. . .

This kind of inversion is also found in some reporting clauses when the object quote has been fronted:

'Don't sit down' said the teacher. (see B12 for more on quoting)