

English Predicate Inversion: A Corpus-based Investigation

English employs the so-called ‘predicate inversion (PI)’ attested by corpus examples like (1):

- (1) a. Stuck to the other side of it are ten alien eggs.
- b. To the right was another hallway.
- c. More notable are food and agricultural processors.

This paper aims to chart the grammatical (distributional, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic) properties of the PI construction in which the subject is postposed whereas a dependent to the copula is preposed (Dorgeloh 1997, Chen 2003).

To get a better understanding of how the construction is used in real-life, we have searched the corpus COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) with 560 million words of American English. We have identified a total of 570 relevant tokens for a quantitative and qualitative investigation of the construction. The syntactic categories of the preposed expression involves VP[ing], VP[en], PP, AP, and NP, whose frequencies are in order. In terms of information structure ordering of the preposed and postposed expressions, there are three possible ordering patterns: (A) discourse-old and discourse new, (B) discourse-new and discourse-new, and (C) discourse-old and discourse-old. As supporting the previous literature (e.g., Birner and Ward 1998, and Huddleston and Pullum 2004), the pattern A is dominant in the corpus (502 tokens, e.g., *Putting wire mesh over a few bricks is a good idea*), but we also identified 68 tokens of the pattern B (e.g., *But a fly in the ointment is inflation*) and the pattern C (e.g., *Racing with him on the near-side is Rinus*). We, however, identified no tokens with the pattern of discourse-new and discourse-old. This implies that the only discourse condition is that the preposed expression cannot be more discourse-newer. This generalization is supported by the definiteness and heaviness of NPs in the postposed position. There is no big difference between the indefiniteness (264 tokens) and definiteness (297 tokens) of the postposed NPs, but we found a statistical difference of the two in terms of the NP’s heaviness: the heavier expression is dominant in the postposed expression (506 tokens).

As a way of reflecting our corpus findings, we sketch a Construction-Grammar approach to account for the data (Golderberg 1995). The analysis assumes that the PI exists as an independent, base-generated construction with its own constructional properties while inheriting canonical inversion properties from its super-type and general ‘inversion’ constructions. A corpus search of the attested PI examples also proves the supposition of the PI as an independent construction is on the right track.

Selected References

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