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Inversion or Operator Fronting? How to Teach Grammar more Effectively?

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Abstract

The paper aims at offering a possible way to throw a bridge between modern syntactic theory and the teaching of grammar in the English classroom to intermediate and advanced adult students. It reveals how the widely used term inversion in the English descriptive and pedagogical grammars, as well as in most of the teaching materials, causes false overgeneralizations and clashes with common linguistic sense. The analysis focuses on language data including the direct general and special questions in the English interrogatives containing a simple and a complex predicate. Special attention is paid to the so called “reversive inversion” in reported questions and to the so called “negative inversion”. It is suggested that the explanation in the classroom should be provided by introducing the term “operator fronting” instead of “inversion”. The whole description follows Ockham’s Razor methodological principle of economy to reach the effect of using minimal means of description to cover the most possible language facts.

Keywords: *inversion, movement, operator, operator fronting, negation fronting, visibility*

Introduction

The term *inversion* has been widely used in the English grammars for years when the formation of general (Y/N) questions and special (WH) questions is concerned. It is used as an explanation for the changes in the word order from the very beginning of the learning process and continues to be used at very advanced levels when structures such as reported questions and negative inversion are introduced.

However, even on the lower levels of teaching English inversion fails to explain the formation of questions in clauses where the lexical verb is in present or past simple tense.

Instead, most grammars postulate that instead of inversion a *do (did)*-insertion is required to create grammatically well-formed interrogatives. Moreover, on the same initial level of acquisition, the technique of inversion fails to explain why it does not occur in WH questions to the subject in the clause, either. These two cases need introducing new rules, contradicting to the already introduced notion of inversion that need memorizing on the part of the learners and which make the structures seem exceptions to the general inversion rule.

The situation worsens on intermediate and advanced levels of English learning. Having already acquired and automated the inversion in interrogative sentences the learners face the obligatory re-inversion in reported questions and are later introduced to the obligatory inversion in the emphatic negative constructions. Those structures need two new separate rules to be memorized and strictly applied in order to produce grammatically correct sentences. These cases show that inversion is neither universal nor it provides an explanation of how English works.

What this article claims is that despite the long-lasting tradition of its usage in describing the changes of the word order commonly used in pedagogical grammars and textbooks of English, inversion appears to be useful for beginners and young learners of English for its simplicity and seemingly unexceptional applicability. However, inversion fails to be an explanatory tool for intermediate and advanced learners and especially for adult ones for its failure to explain a number of cases where it does or does not take place. This means that from a theoretical viewpoint *inversion* turns to be a deceptive term implying either false or no interpretations at all of how English syntactic rules work. This incites the need of a different approach to the phenomena related to the changes in word order traditionally falling under the umbrella term *inversion*.

The examples analyzed in this article present an empirical material involving mainly the formation of interrogatives, the formation of reported questions and the so called *negative inversion*. In order to reach valid generalizations, the formation of WH-questions to the subject in the clause as well as the structure of questions containing verbs in simple tenses are also analyzed to be used as arguments against the use of *inversion*. Instead, a possible solution provided by the tools used in the generative grammar framework are suggested.

A note to be made in advance is that grammatical inversion should be differentiated from other transpositions affecting the canonical word order of the subject preceding the verb (SVO). For example, the changes in the word order resulting in subject-verb transposition caused by the fronting of adverbs and adverbial phrases (AdvP), noun-phrases (NPs) and prepositional phrases (PPs), which are referred to as *front-focus* or *preposing* (Nordquist, 2017). Examples of preposing are cases such as:

- (1) [**PP** In the corner] stood another man of the law. (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 595)
- (2) [**PP** On a hill in front of them] stood a great castle (Swan, 1994, p. 346)
- (3) [**P** Up] walked a policeman (Swan, 2005, p. 303)

Topicalization is another fronting type of word order transposition but it is of a different nature compared to classical grammatical inversion as it allows to move phrases originating in a post verbal position to the front of the clause without affecting the TP¹ (Radford, 1992, p. 530). This is shown in the following examples by Edmonds (1976, p. 31), where the original position of the moved element in the deep structure is marked by “Ø”:

- (4) [NP These steps] I used to sweep Ø with a broom.
 (5) [NP Our daughter] we are proud of Ø.

Literature Review

It was the traditional pedagogical descriptions that have defined *inversion* in English and thus, in turn, informed most of the dictionary definitions. Most often inversion is defined as “a reversal of position, order, form or relationship: such as a change in the canonical SVO word order; especially: the placement of a verb before its subject” (Merriam Webster Dictionary).

Another definition states: “Inversion happens when we reverse (invert) the normal word order of a structure most commonly the subject-verb word order. For example, a statement has the subject (S) before the verb (V), but to make question word order, we invert the subject and the verb, with an auxiliary (AUX) or modal verb (M) before the subject (S) (Cambridge Dictionary On-line).

Sometimes inversion in questions is explained as “a change of the places” of the auxiliary verb and the subject or as “a switch” of the subject with the auxiliary (Perfect English Grammar; Inversion (linguistics)).

Conventionally the formation of questions is explained as inversion of the subject and the first auxiliary in both Y/N questions and WH-interrogatives and grammatical descriptions simply state the rule that in questions the first auxiliary must precede the subject (Swan 2005; Crystal 1999) without any explanation.

The question formation in clauses where the main verbs are in simple tenses, the question formation rule is the following: “Wherever there is no auxiliary *be*, auxiliary *have* or *modal* verb already present, auxiliary *do/does/did/* is used.” (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 534). In the same section Carter and McCarthy add that: “Where there is more than one auxiliary verb or a modal verb plus auxiliary verb(s), only the first auxiliary or the modal verb precedes the subject.” (ibid). In this way, two additional rules to the general one of inversion are introduced.

As seen from the above, the deviations from the general rule of inversion are described as exceptions, requiring additional rules to explain them.

In emphatic negative structures, when a clause starts with a negative adverb (e.g. *never*) or a negative adverbial phrase (e.g. *not only*), an inversion of the canonical subject-verb word order in English is required to form a grammatically correct sentence. In pedagogical grammars and

¹ TP is the position in the deep structure where the first auxiliary is placed. In this discussion it is replaced by OP (operator slot) for convenience.

English language textbooks this phenomenon is generally referred to as “negative inversion” (Camus, 2018; Horner, 2014).

Methodology

Pedagogical Considerations: Advanced and/vs Adult Learners’ Needs

Inversion seems to work successfully as a technical explanatory tool with young learners and absolute beginners. However, it seems to fail with adult learners and with advanced learners, and especially with higher education students of English language who take theoretical courses in Modern English grammar.

The notions *adult* and *advanced* learners in ELT although overlapping on several occasions, are still different. *Adult* refers to the learners’ biological age, while *advanced* refers to the level of learner’s competence in the acquisition of English as a foreign language. For example, an adolescent learner, which is the case with most undergraduate students, may possess an advanced level of competence as a result of intensive long-year schooling on the one hand, and, on the other, an adult individual may for different reasons need to start learning English on a beginner’s level.

In the case of FLT, *adult learners* are supposed to be those aged 16 and above². Normally, they are individuals who have sufficient life experience and whose cognitive abilities have been strengthened through the schooling system. It is supposed that when confronted with new knowledge or experience, such learners are able to cognitively construe new meanings based on their life experiences and their more developed brains, which is untypical for children. (Merriam et al, 2007).

Christopher Pappas (2013), the founder of eLearning Industry’s Network, lists eight basic traits of adult learners, of which six are particularly important for the profile of the adult Bulgarian learners of English. These are: self- direction, result orientation, resistance to change, slower learning but yet more integrative knowledge, motivation to learn, and last but not least, high expectations. Self-direction requires that more options be given to adult learners to choose the most convenient instruments of learning according to their individual preferences. Adults need information that is explanatory enough so as to reduce possible exceptions of which natural languages are abundant and which prompt additional memorizing. Adult learners are more resistant to change, which makes them rigid and internally opposed to learning more, if they can do with less. Moreover, if new concepts are in compliance with the already acquired knowledge and skill they can add to their integrated knowledge. The right, thought-provoking ideas that stimulate the mind and confront conventional wisdom may result in an increase of their motivation. Finally, the adults’ high expectations indicate that they need to be taught such relevant issues that are immediately applicable to their practical needs of producing well-structured utterances in the foreign language.

² In American pedagogy *adult* learners are people aged 25 and more. However, this age limit is discussed within university education and does not correspond to the situation concerning foreign language teaching.

Kolos Esztergályos (2017) states that “with the spread of English as a global language there seems to be a renewed interest in research into teaching adults.” As OUP consultant he has had numerous meetings and shared many ideas with teachers who have classes with adult learners. He brings to the fore the teachers’ opinion that it is very important to bear in mind that adult learners need to develop specific skills and that the motivation with them is different from secondary school goers and young learners. As a result he summarizes the specifics of English adult teaching in five points of which the last point of the teachers’ views is especially important for this study, namely that: “Abstract thinking enables seeing language as a system of grammar” He goes on arguing that “the need for useful language does not contradict the capacity to treat language as an abstract system”. So his advice is to make use of abstract notions “if they can help the adult learner understand how a system works.”

Such observations are quite convincing and agreeable. They lead to the assumption that having already developed some abstract thinking (even at a beginner’s level), adult learners of English would be able to use the theoretical linguistic tools provided by generative linguistics to analyze, comprehend and internalize more easily a number of complex syntactic structures in the foreign language.

As far as the notion *advanced* learners is concerned it has to be noted that since the 1980s there have been numerous publications dealing with the term. In his extended study Tomáš Gráf (2015) points out that there are two basic influential models of describing language proficiency. One is the competence-based model advocated by researchers like Canale and Swain (1980); Canale (1983); Bachman (1990); Bialystok (1994); Bachman and Palmer (1996); Douglas (2000); Purpura (2004); Hulstijn (2015), to mention just a few. The competence-based model underlies the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe 2001).

The other model, backed by scholars like Skehan (1996); Pallotti (2009); Housen et al. (2012), which has been well-established in applied linguistics for years, is based on the combination of complexity, accuracy and fluency, known as the CAF triad. In essence CAF presents an attempt to provide for measuring learners’ performance to give insights about the underlying proficiency³.

Rachel Appleby (2009), an expert in teaching advanced learners, comments on their attitudes noting that they need to see the language “in a new light”. This fully complies with my own observations that after having mastered most of the basic structures (and vocabulary) advanced learners need to be challenged by being faced to more abstract explanations about how language works and why it does so, an approach that they will most possibly appreciate and give them confidence in their acquired competence. Such an approach will also add to their motivation to master their language abilities.

³ The teachers’ proficiency is most often measured by “the proximity of their competence to that of native speakers” (Coady, J. and T. N. Huckin 1997, p. 161), which is not valid for the learners.

Theoretical Considerations: Description and Explanation of Language Facts

The need of ad hoc rules to explain inversion and the cases of deviation from the general rule in the language classroom can be eliminated by adopting the universal Ockhamist parsimony methodological principle widely used in science and philosophy which postulates that: “It is useless to do with more what can be done with less” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). The parsimony is commonly referred to as *Ockham’s Razor*. As Ockham says in *Sent.* I, dist. 30, q. 1: “For nothing ought to be posited without a reason given, unless it is self-evident (*literally*, known through itself) or known by experience or proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture.” Putting aside the mention of the Sacred Scripture, the Razor can be further generalized as: “Don’t multiply entities beyond necessity.” (cited in Spade & Panaccio (2016)).

The generalized Ockham’s Razor principle is used in generative grammar descriptions presupposing two possible outcomes. One, the aim of scientific analysis is to explain maximum empirical facts with minimal effort, and two, when there are two competing rules that make the same predictions, the simpler one is better. It needs mentioning, however, that the principle of simplicity does not make assumptions about which theory is true, the Razor only claims that the simpler explanation (theory) is more likely to be true. Ockham’s Razor’s principle underlies the generative approach to language facts in modern linguistics and makes it possible to provide a single solution that has a strong explanatory power and helps avoid the ad hoc rules.

In this article it is claimed that *inversion* is not a good explanation of the word order shifts in questions and negative inversion structures as it does not cover the exceptional cases. It is suggested that there is a simpler rule encompassing all cases of inversion, non-inversion and re-inversion in the Standard English that is taught as a second or foreign language worldwide.

This claim needs to provide an answer to the following questions: Can it be suggested that all types of inversions, including “re-inversion”, should be due to one single syntactic rule? If so, can this rule account for all exceptions? And finally, what is the real nature of inversion and what triggers or blocks it?

It is the author’s belief that possible answers to these questions can be provided by the theoretical principles underlying the classical generative approach to describing and explaining the shifts in word order commonly known in pedagogical grammars as *inversion*.

Discussion In this section the theoretical presumptions of generative description are provided together with suggestions how they can be simplified in order to guarantee a comprehensive understanding on the part of the learners. First, some preliminary concepts of description need to be introduced⁴. In this section the theoretical presumptions of generative description are provided together with suggestions how they can be simplified in order to guarantee a comprehensive

⁴ The analysis is not conducted in any concrete version of Generative syntax such as Phrase Structure Grammar, Government and Binding Theory or Minimalism. It is used simply as a general framework to explain the phenomena provided by the empirical language material.

understanding on the part of the learners First, some preliminary concepts of description need to be introduced⁵.

The first principle concerning the theory of language is the determination theoretical generalizations to strive for the highest possible descriptive and explanatory adequacy. Descriptive adequacy “specifies the observed data [...] in terms of significant generalizations that express underlying regularities in the language” (Chomsky 1964, p. 63)⁶. In line with Ockham’s Razor explanatory adequacy entails that only one rule among many is the correct choice and this is the one that possesses a predictive power. According to Rizzi (2016, pp. 1-2) explanatory adequacy is more oriented towards the rules underlying the concept of Universal Grammar, while descriptive adequacy refers to specific language rules.

The second concept that needs outlining is the one of *deep structure*. It should be explained that every clause or sentence has a deep structure which contains all “logical relationships of the elements of a phrase or sentence” (Oxford Dictionary On-line 2016) The notion of deep structure is defined in Collins English Dictionary (2014) as “a representation of a sentence at a level where logical or grammatical relations are made explicit, before transformational rules have been applied.” What is important for the learners to be pointed out is the conjecture that the deep structure contains all possible syntactic elements and thus holds positions for all possible elements in the clause/sentence. These elements might be either visible or invisible in the ‘real’ sentence. In real sentences (on the surface structure) most English tense forms contain visible (overt) auxiliaries. An exception are the non-emphatic declarative clauses with a verb in present or past simple tense where the auxiliaries are invisible (covert). However, all elements of the verb phrase (VP) including both overt and covert auxiliaries are always present in the deep structure.

Next, all questions and negative sentences are surface structures derived from declarative clauses in the deep structure. The change from a deep into a surface structure is called transformation which is realized through the mechanism of *movement*.

There are two important movement principles to be mentioned. One is that movement always follows right to left directionality (from the sentence end to the beginning)⁷, and can be thus referred to as *fronting*. Two, an element can be moved if and only if there is a place at the beginning of the clause where it can land, known as a landing site (place).⁸ Movement causes changes of the word ordering on the surface structure. One important change is that covert

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⁶ Compared to observational adequacy descriptive adequacy presents a higher level of abstraction as it formulates rules for all observed data according to which all and only grammatically well-formed sentences in a language are produced.

⁷ From the right to the left periphery.

⁸ A good explanatory metaphor can be: What will happen to a plane that takes off the ground, but has no airport to land?

auxiliaries in the deep structure necessarily become visible on the surface structure when affected by movement.

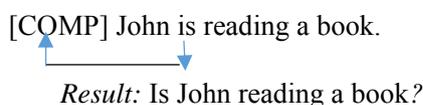
Finally, it needs pointing out that only the first auxiliary within the VP is free to move to the beginning of the clause into what is known as complementizer slot (COMP). This property of the first auxiliary makes it different from all other auxiliaries (and lexical verbs) and gives it a special status. In generative grammar it is termed operator and its movement to the front to form questions is named *operator fronting*.

I strongly believe that such simplified principles are comprehensible to all those learners, who have already developed conceptual thinking including advanced and adult learners⁹. Then, the subject-verb transposition, traditionally called *inversion*, can be replaced by *operator fronting* by means of which a number of changes (or no-change) of the subject-predicate word order can be explained.

After the preliminary concepts are introduced, the learners can be asked to analyze the following simple examples of question formation using the newly introduced concepts with the help of the instructor:

Y/N Questions Formation

Explanation: General questions with overt operator are formed by one-step movement stating simply: move the operator into the COMP slot. So, the Y/N question of the clause *John is reading a book* can be presented as follows:



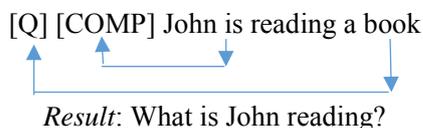
WH-Questions Formation

Explanation: WH questions with overt operator involve movement of 4 steps.

Step 1. Replace *a book* with WH-word, then move it to the front.

Step 2. Move the WH-word around the operator and attract it.

Steps 3 & 4. Drop the operator into the COMP slot, keep moving the WH-word to the Q-slot and drop it there.

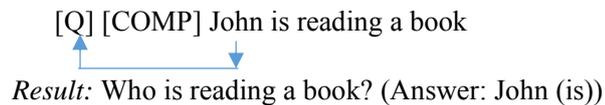


Later in the teaching process other four arguable cases which inversion fails to explain can be presented and examined.

⁹ The difference between advanced and adult learners is explained in the conclusions.

Case 1. Subject Questions

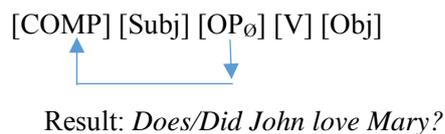
Explanation: Subject questions with overt operator are formed by a two-step movement stating simply: replace the subject with a WH-word and move it into the Q-slot. As shown below the WH-word does not affect the operator as it does not go around it, it cannot attract it, so the operator *is* remains in situ.



In order to illustrate the consequences of moving an element around the operator slot [OP] a clause with two animate nouns both requiring a replacement by the WH-word *who* can be used and the difference between the formation of subject and object questions be discussed. Examples like: *John is kissing Mary.* can be useful. The subject question is *Who is kissing Mary?* (Answer: *John (is)*), where operator fronting does not happen as the movement of WH-word does not go around the operator slot and thus cannot trigger operator fronting. On the contrary, the movement of the WH-word from the end of the clause to the Q-slot at the beginning triggers the operator fronting movement resulting in *Who is John kissing?* (Answer: *Mary*).

Case 2. Questions in Simple Tense Clauses

Explanation: Simple present or past tense clauses contain covert operators on the surface structure. However, they exist in the deep structure. As questions are a result of operator fronting, the movement itself makes them visible (overt). If the clause *John loves/loved Mary.* is considered, then the Y/N question will be formed by simply moving the operator from the deep structure into the COMP slot on the surface structure. The result of the movement is that the operator in the question becomes visible (overt).



The question to the subject involves the movement of only the WH-word replacing the subject and, as already shown, and as it does not affect the operator, the latter remains in situ.

Result: *Who loves Mary?* (Answer: *John (does/did)*)

In WH-questions to elements following the verb the moved WH-word necessarily goes around the OP-slot, which makes the operator visible. Next, it attracts the visible operator and then drops it into the COMP-slot, while the WH-word moves further to the Q-slot. The second step of the mechanism repeats the procedure of the formation of WH-questions with overt operators:



Result: Who does/did John love?

The internalization of the questions could be facilitated by practicing them in a game *Who loves who? Who does who love?* A quadrangle with four names, two male and two female, is drawn on the board, e.g.:

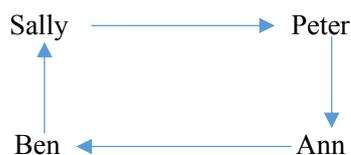


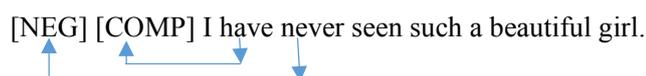
Fig.1

Then the students are divided into two teams and are instructed to ask their peers to ask one of the two who-questions randomly. Every correct answer is scored and the team who scores more is the winner.

Case 3. Negative Inversion

Negative inversion applies to numerous clauses (though not to all), where negative adverbs and prepositional and negative quantifiers such as *never*, *seldom*, *if only*, *under no circumstances*, *(a) few* etc. come first in the clausal structure causing a shift of the subject-operator positions.

Explanation: Along the lines of Ockham's parsimony it can be supposed this 'inversion' is also a result of an operator fronting triggered by the fronting of the negative element analogous to WH-fronting. It can be illustrated as follows:



Result: *Never have I seen such a beautiful girl.*

In conformity with the *operator fronting* the phenomenon is termed "negative fronting". Negative fronting makes the covert operator in simple tense clauses become visible as the NEG-element necessarily goes around the operator on its way to the NEG, which causes its visualization and attraction before landing in the COMP-slot. Consider:



Result: *Seldom did (does) John buy presents for Mary.*

Case 4. Reported Questions

When reported questions are concerned, pedagogical grammars expectedly simply postulate that the once inverted direct questions word order with the operator (auxiliary) preceding the subject should undergo a backshift to the canonical declarative SVO order.

My teaching experience shows that this new rule comes as a shock to the learners especially when the learners' mother tongue (such as Bulgarian) does not have such a rule and cannot support acquisition.

What is more, when reported questions are first introduced, this is ultimately long after the beginner's stage. Learners have to ignore *inversion* ruling the formation of direct questions in English which is already internalized and even automated. This new "re-inversion"-rule often inhibits the production of grammatically well-formed reported questions even with experienced users of English including teachers, who often produce structures retaining the inverted word order sequences such as: **He asked me when did John come*. My observations on the production of Bulgarian learners and English teachers show that re-inversion causes problems and I believe that if an explanation is provided when reported questions are introduced for the first time, there are many chances to facilitate the process of internalization of the structure throughout the teaching-learning process.

The prerequisites allowing *operator fronting* provide a reasonable explanation why there is no "inversion" in such structures. The most important among them is the requirement of available landing place for the moved element. If there is no such a place, the operator fronting movement is blocked and the operator remains in situ. Indeed, this is the case with reported questions.

Explanation: On this stage of learning English learners are already (I believe) well aware of the fact that all reported questions are two-clause sentences – a main clause CP₁ and a dependent clause CP₂. The dependent clauses, which contain the original direct question, must contain an introductory word such as *if, where, unless* etc., whose place in the deep structure is in the COMP slot by default. Thus the abstract structure of any reported question is the following:

$$[[CP_1] [[COMP] [CP_2]]]$$

The mechanism of reported questions formation entails the following steps: The WH-word from the direct special question moves to the COMP-slot of the dependent clause CP₂. In the case of Y/N questions the introductory words *if* or *whether* are inserted in the CP₂ COMP-slot. The students should be made sure that if the introductory word in the COMP slot is omitted, the sentence turns ungrammatical, e.g.:

**I asked [COMP₀] John is reading a book?*

From the declarative SVO sentence *John is reading a book*, three possible questions can be formed as already discussed: *Is John reading a book? Who is reading a book? What is John reading?*

The three possible reported questions using *I asked* as a prototypical clause for CP₁ are as follows: *I asked if John is reading a book.*; *I asked who is reading a book.*; and *I asked what John is reading.* The general structure of reported questions can be expanded as follows:

[CP₁ – I asked] [[CP₂ [COMP (if/wh-word)] [John is reading (a book)]]].

The plausible explanation is that due to the fact that the COMP slot in the question clause CP₂ is necessarily occupied by an introductory word, there is no landing place remaining for the operator to move into and this is the reason why it remains in situ. Thus an occupied COMP slot necessarily blocks the operator fronting.

As a generalization the following can be stated: Operator fronting in reported questions is always blocked for the lack of a landing place, thus the dependent clause containing the original question necessarily retains the original declarative SVO word order.

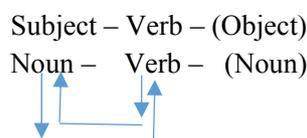
Conclusions

The conclusions fall into two separate, but mutually related sections: a theoretical and a practical one.

Theoretical Implications Concerning the Use of *Inversion*

The generalizations above give an elegant theoretical answer why *inversion* in traditional descriptive grammars of English is an inappropriate explanation of how language works. Its replacement by *operator fronting* eliminates the need of additional *ad hoc* rules to explain exceptions, on the one hand, and offers a powerful explanatory tool for the description of language structure, on the other.

It is axiomatic in syntactic theory that particular parts of speech can take a limited set of particular syntactic positions. Without the notion of deep structure, *inversion* implies that the subject (NP) and the predicate (VP) simply swap their positions. Such a simplification violates basic linguistic principles in the science of language such as parts of speech, functions and distribution (Lyons, 1968; Jespersen, 1924). By definition *inversion* suggests verbs can replace nouns and vice versa, which is a linguistic nonsense contradicting all well-established throughout years differences between nouns and verbs as it implying that a verb can take the position of a noun and vice versa:



If this were true, then it could be predicted that questions like *Love you me?* are grammatical, which obviously contradict the language facts.

Even if inversion in its linguistic sense differs from inversion as an abstract concept, the empirical language facts disclose that it cannot be universally used as it fails to explain a number of cases when it does not apply and which, in turn, leads to the creation of several *ad hoc* rules to

be memorized by learners as exceptions to the general inversion principle. This is why a suggestion has been made to replace the use of *inversion* in the English classroom by *fronting* at the very beginning of language teaching.

Together with *fronting* the term *operator* should be also introduced so that to make clear to the learners that only the first verb in the sequence can move while the rest of them together with the subject never leave their positions. A difference between covert and overt operators should be drawn, even if the notion deep structure is not presented. On a later stage the terms *negative fronting* and *blocking the operator fronting* can be introduced as an explanatory tool for the traditionally known “negative inversion” and “re-inversion” (“backshift”) of the word order in reported questions.

The following theoretical generalizations in the form of simple rules to be applied at different stages of English language teaching are suggested. Such generalizations give an elegant theoretical answer why *inversion* in traditional descriptive grammars of English is an inappropriate explanation of how language works and can facilitate the teachers’ work in the long run. These are the following:

1. All operators necessarily undergo fronting whenever a movement goes around the OP-slot
2. Every movement crossing the OP of a clause necessarily causes visualization of covert operators.
3. The absence of a suitable landing place blocks the operator movement by default.

Should the notions of *operator*, *operator fronting* and *deep structure* be introduced, they will help achieve the highest possible descriptive adequacy and a sufficient explanatory one when ‘inversion’ is concerned. I strongly believe this will help reach an elegant and exception-free theoretical explanation thus eliminating the ad hoc rules each of which needs to be stored in the learner’s memory separately.

Pedagogical Implications

My long year experience shows that the explanatory power of *fronting* works perfectly well with adult learners (over 16 year-olds) as it corresponds to their need to find a logical explanations and avoid the need of memorizing several ad hoc rules. The introduction of operator fronting instead of inversion to advanced learners seems to be able to foster their interest in why language works in this particular way and thus reinforce their motivation to enlarge their knowledge about language.

In this way, the use of *inversion* may appear a suitable descriptive and explanatory technique for only young learners and adult absolute beginners before the Y/N and WH-questions in clauses containing simple tensed verbs are introduced. When simple tense questions are introduced, inversion should be replaced by operator fronting so that to facilitate the understanding of the negative fronting mechanism and the canonical SVO order in reported questions later on.

To summarize, once the learners have developed some kind of conceptual thinking, which is typical for adult (and often for advanced) learners, the introduction of the concept of *fronting* will facilitate to a high extent the acquisition of the principles in the English word order providing them with a good predictive power so as to help them produce grammatically well-formed sentences.

Other areas that may be of interest for further research from the viewpoint of English language teaching with expectedly rewarding results, are these of *not*-insertion which visualizes the operators in simple sentences, the gerund as a specific noun-phrase in Modern English etc., where pedagogical grammars fail to provide a principle explanation of the language facts.

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