

1

Word Order**More on Adverbs of Frequency**

All languages have their peculiarities, and English is certainly no exception. One case in point is the strange phenomenon that occurs if we place the following negative adverbs of frequency at the start of a sentence for emphasis:

Seldom does it snow in Vancouver.

Rarely will he complain about anything.

Never have I seen such a beautiful sunset!

What do you see happening in the sentences above? Give your answer by completing this sentence:

If these adverbs of frequency are placed in initial position,

.....

In case you haven't hit upon this particular way of looking at what's happening, think about the phenomenon this way: **If those adverbs of frequency are placed as the first word of a sentence, the pattern for a yes/no question follows** (. . . does it snow . . . / . . . will he complain . . . / . . . have I seen . . .), which, by the way, creates a more formal air. Moreover, there's a good general rule of thumb that works for this particular point and many others, and that is, **when you change any element of a typical English sentence, the change is likely to set off other changes.**

There's another interesting observation to make about those frequency adverbs: Keep in mind that **only those adverbs that have a negative connotation, i.e., those that mean "less than 50% of the time," are normally fronted.**

We've dealt with negative adverbs of frequency which create this change in word order when they appear in initial position, but this phenomenon of English isn't limited to them alone. Notice how the same change, creating a yes/no question pattern, occurs when the following words are fronted:

- barely:** *Barely had they left the building when the fire started.*
hardly: *Hardly had she finished cleaning the house when company arrived.*
neither: *He can't cook a decent meal. Neither can he bake well.*
nor: *They have no children, nor do they want any.*
scarcely: *Scarcely had he completed the test when the bell rang.*

More Observations about Word Inversion

There are five more observations I'd like to show you. Consider these sentences:

*The cake was so delicious that we didn't leave a crumb.
 He was such a good boy that everyone loved him.*

Here's an alternative form for these sentences, although this takes on a much more formal air:

*So delicious was the cake that we didn't leave a crumb.
 Such a good boy was he that everyone loved him.*

Note how these inverted forms continue to contain the inverted word order for a yes/no question (“... was the cake ...”/ “... was he ...”). This pattern is the common thread found in all of these unusual forms.

Next we have a sentence that contains a correlative conjunction (two pairs of words that work together):

He not only wrote the music, but he also wrote the lyrics.

With this sentence construction, you can opt for an inverted word order:

Not only did he write the music, but he also wrote the lyrics.

Moving right along, we come to a sentence like the following:

They've considered our proposal only recently.

In this case, you can front the adverbial part (beginning with the word *only*) and end up with this sentence order:

Only recently have they considered our proposal.

Here are two more examples of this occurrence:

*Only now does he admit his errors.
Only by sheer luck was his life spared.*

Then we have sentences which invert the word order when their prepositional phrases are fronted. Look what happens with these two examples, but note that when prepositional phrases are fronted, we have word inversion that follows, but not the creation of yes/no questions:

*The bicycle I wanted was behind the house. →
 Behind the house was the bicycle I wanted.*
*The town where I live lies beyond those mountains. →
 Beyond those mountains lies the town where I live.*

Finally, there's the matter of some specific exclamations. Once again, I'll use the word order common in yes/no questions to create these statements:

Boy, was it hot this afternoon!

Can I make a wonderful spaghetti sauce or what!

Wow! Did they mess up!

I'd like to ask you a question, not dealing with word order, about these three example exclamations, but before I do that, I'd like you to do something. Set your eyes on a sentence anywhere on this page. Say that sentence out loud, but in a monotone. It's very important that you use a monotone.

I'm sure you think you sounded a little strange using that monotone, right? Well that is "strange" if you don't normally speak in a monotone yourself. But it wasn't anything highly noticeable, I bet.

Okay, now go back to those three example exclamations above. Say each one of them out loud in that same monotone you've already used.

Wow! Did they not sound really weird in that monotone? In fact, didn't they seem to lose meaning either partially or completely? The need to use stress and intonation, which are autosegmental features, elements that we must have in English for clear, verbal communication (see Chapters 17 and 18 and Appendix 3), is an amazing and fun characteristic of the English language besides being very important for reinforcing all sorts of emotional release.