

snippets

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Subject-Auxiliary inversion in interrogative complex NPs

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Subject-auxiliary inversion in English has canonically been taken to be possible only in main clauses (Emonds 1970). A growing body of more recent literature, however, documents inversion in a variety of non-main clause contexts (McCloskey 2006; see also Green 1996, Goldberg and Del Giudice 2005, Dayal and Grimshaw 2009, Woods 2016). For example, McCloskey (2006) documents attested examples like (1), where inversion occurs in a clause embedded under *wonder*. The occurrence of inversion here depends on the embedding verb: interrogative verbs like *wonder* and *ask* can permit inversion in embedded clauses, while non-interrogative counterparts like *discover* and *find out* do not (McCloskey 2006).

- (1) I wondered [**was he** literate].

This snippet identifies another context where embedded inversion can occur: complex NPs.

- (2) It's really [a question of [_{CP} **what should** we do]].

The example in (2) shows inversion in an embedded clause contained within a nominal headed by *question*. Judgements about these structures vary, but they commonly occur in natural contexts. The examples in (3-5) below were produced spontaneously by native American English speakers in text or speech. (3) shows inversion of *are* in an embedded wh-question; (4) shows inversion of *have* in a yes/no question; (5) shows *do*-support.

- (3) It's really a question of [**what are** the rules].
(4) It really is a question of [**have they** put in place the institutional mechanisms to control it].
(5) They never resolved the problem of [**do you** allow friends and next of kin].

Some speakers intuit that examples like (3-5) are quotations, but they do not have the properties of direct quotations. Pronoun reference illustrates this clearly. First-person pronouns in direct quotations refer to the speaker of the quoted utterance – the quotee, not the quoter. But the pronoun in the embedded clause of (6) must refer to the speaker, not the person who asked the question. This embedded clause does not behave like a quotation.

- (6) Let me_j now respond to Leslie's question of [how did I_{j/*k} collect the data].

The availability of inversion in complex NPs parallels the asymmetry between verbs like *wonder* vs. *discover*. Inversion is possible in clauses embedded after *question* (cf. Woods 2016:424), and other nouns that have a similarly interrogative flavor (7). Inversion is unacceptable with nouns that are definitively non-interrogative (8). (Many speakers find both (7) and (8) bad; all English speakers I have consulted find forms like (8) discernably worse.)

- (7) The {**question/query/problem/puzzle**} of [how does an MRI work] is quite complicated.

- (8) The {***discovery/*answer/*explanation/*result**} of [how does an MRI work] is quite complicated.

The generalization that only interrogative nouns allow for inversion in complex NPs is problematic for selection-based analyses of embedded inversion. For example, McCloskey (2006) analyzes inversion as T-to-C raising to check a [Q] feature; inversion happens in embedded clauses because verbs like *ask* select for a [Q] C head. But in complex NPs like (7), there is no selectional relationship between *question* and the embedded clause: the embedded CP is not the complement of *question*, being contained inside of a PP. The availability of inversion in these cases cannot be attributed to some quirk of *of* as the P head (e.g. it is not sufficient to say that selection can happen across *of*). The examples in (9) and (10) show that nouns permit inversion in clauses embedded under other P heads, and even other non-P expressions.

- (9) Jane posed a question {**about/on/concerning**} [what does the theory actually stipulate].
(10) It's really a puzzle {**about/regarding**} [what are the rules].

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