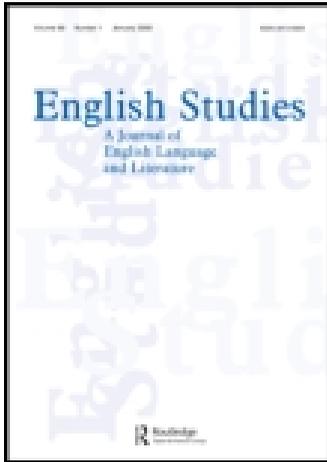


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Verb Phrase Inversion in Fictional and Non-Fictional Written English

Carlos Prado-Alonso

In the last decades, full inversion constructions in which the subject follows the entire verb phrase in a declarative clause, as in “Beside him was a table full of well-known books”, have been the subject of extensive research from a functional perspective. This paper is a further contribution to this line of research and offers a corpus-based analysis of a particular type of full inversion, namely verb phrase inversion (for example, “Standing grim and alone was the hulking eyesore of the territorial prison”), in written English texts.

In recent work on inversion, there does not seem to be complete agreement as regards the distribution of verb phrase inversion in fiction and non-fiction. On the one hand, works by Heidrum Dorgeloh, David Denison and Douglas Biber et al. suggest that the construction is more frequent in fiction. On the other, studies by Rong Chen and Rolf Kreyer argue the opposite. This study will cast light on the lack of consensus regarding the distribution of verb phrase inversion in written fictional and non-fictional texts. It will be shown that fiction and non-fiction do not differ strongly in the number of verb phrase inversions but rather in the different types of verb phrase inversion used and in the pragmatic function that these constructions serve in discourse.

1. Introduction

A *full verb inverted* clause is a declarative clause where the subject occurs in a postposed position while some other dependent of the verb is preposed as in “On the near corner was *Herb’s Gas Station*” or “Also working against the treaty are *anaemic national economies*”.¹ In recent years, this type of construction, as one instantiation of a large variety of non-canonical word-order phenomena, has been a favourite topic of research in English linguistics from a functional perspective.² This study is a further contribution to this line of research and offers a corpus-based analysis of one type of full verb inversion, namely *verb phrase inversion*. The analysis seeks to cast light on the distribution

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¹Cf. Huddleston and Pullum, 1385.

²See Chen; Cornish; Kreyer; Prado-Alonso; and Webelhuth, among others.

and pragmatic functions of this construction in written fictional and non-fictional English texts.

Verb phrase inversions, also known as *part-inversion* (from “participle”³) or *-ing and -ed fronting predicate constructions*,⁴ are syntactic constructions in which the clause-initial constituent is a present or past participle form, as illustrated in (1)–(2).

- (1) Included in the list are his seldom-seen and highly twisted essays in impressionism and the crude jokester works he called his vache (cow) paintings done during the late '40 s in occupied Brussels. (FROWN,⁵ reportage. A38)
- (2) Standing before a curtained window in the study room was his father. (Brown,⁶ general fiction. K06).

Despite the above-mentioned body of research on inversion, there does not seem to be complete agreement as regards its distribution in fiction and non-fiction. Some studies suggest that the construction is more frequent in fiction;⁷ Douglas Biber et al., for instance, argue that “inversion is more frequent in the written register than in conversation, with the highest frequency in fiction. Subject-verb inversion is more common in fiction particularly for the description of settings, where inversion is a natural choice”.⁸ Conversely, in studies such as that of Rolf Kreyer it is argued that full inversion is much rarer in fiction than in scientific texts.⁹ This lack of consensus is apparent even in the arguments supporting such contradictory claims. Thus, whereas Kreyer attributes the high proportion of inversions in academic prose texts taken from the *British National Corpus* to the fact that academic prose is complex from a structural point of view,¹⁰ Heidrum Dorgeloh uses the very same argument to explain the low proportion of inversion in the academic prose of her corpus sample.¹¹

In order to clarify whether verb phrase inversion is more frequent in fictional or non-fictional English, the present study, provides a description of the distribution of the construction in different textual categories taken from written corpora. Clearly, skewed statistical differences, arrived at for merely descriptive purposes, are of little interest here. Yet such statistics may allow us—or even oblige us—to formulate more appropriate questions in the analysis, and, in doing so, to reach a deeper understanding of the pragmatic functions that verb phrase inversion serves in written English discourse.

³Cf. Kreyer, 7.

⁴Cf. Biber et al., 926.

⁵*Freiburg-Brown Corpus of American English* available in Hofland, Lindebjerg, and Thunestvedt.

⁶*Brown Corpus of American English* available in Hofland, Lindebjerg, and Thunestvedt.

⁷See Green, “Colloquial and Literary Uses of Inversion”; Dorgeloh; and Denison.

⁸Cf. Biber et al., 926.

⁹Cf. Kreyer, 122.

¹⁰Cf. *Ibid.*, 186.

¹¹Cf. Dorgeloh, 62.

The data for this study are taken from four computerised corpora of British and American Present-day English written texts dating from the 1960s and 1990s: the *Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen Corpus of British English* (LOB; compilation date: 1961), the *Brown Corpus of American English* (Brown; compilation date: 1961), the *Freiburg-Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen Corpus of British English* (FLOB; compilation date: 1991) and the *Freiburg-Brown Corpus of American English* (FROWN; compilation date: 1992).¹² Each corpus comprises 500 samples of approximately 2,000 words each, thus totalling 1,000,000 running words organised into fifteen textual categories, of which the following have been selected for the present analysis: *Adventure and Western*; *Mystery and Detective fiction*; *Science fiction*; *Romance and Love story*; *General fiction*; *Science*; *Press reportage and Official documents*. These categories have been further grouped into fictional and non-fictional texts. A total sample of 2,168,000 words was analysed, distributed as indicated in Table 1, below. Since the categories of fictional (468 samples, 936,000 words) and non-fictional texts (616 samples, 1,232,000 words) differ in size, frequencies have been normalised following Biber's feature frequency normalisation procedure.¹³ As Biber notes, "raw frequency counts cannot be used for comparison across texts when they are not at all of the same length", since in this case longer texts would tend to have higher frequencies simply because there is more opportunity for a feature to occur within them.¹⁴ Using Biber's procedure and comparing the frequency per 100, 1,000, 10,000 or 100,000 words—depending on the frequency of the feature under investigation—this possible bias is eliminated. In the present study, given that verb phrase inversion is considered a relatively rare syntactic construction compared to unmarked subject-verb-object (SVO) word-order,¹⁵ normalised frequencies are computed by dividing absolute frequencies by the total number of words of each category. The total is then multiplied by 100,000. Hence, if the *Science* category of the corpora contains 27 examples of verb phrase inversion, the normalised frequency will be as follows: $27 \text{ instances} / 640,000 \text{ words} \times 100,000 = 4.2$.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 offers some preliminaries, such as a classification of inversion types and a description of the structural patterns of verb phrase inversion. Section 3 analyses the overall distribution of the construction in the fictional and non-fictional categories. Section 4 presents a pragmatic analysis and section 5 offers some concluding remarks.

2. The Structural Patterns of Verb Phrase Inversion

Most studies of English inverted constructions base their classifications on the preliminary distinction between two main types of inversion: *full inversion* and *subject-operator*

¹²All available in Hofland, Lindebjerg, and Thunestvedt.

¹³Cf. Biber, *Variation across Speech and Writing*.

¹⁴Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵See Biber et al., 926.

Table 1 Sources and Distribution of the Corpus Texts from LOB, FLOB, Brown and FROWN

Fictional categories	Subcategories	Samples	Words	Non-fictional categories	Subcategories	Samples	Words
Adventure/ Western	Novels Short stories	116	232,000	Science	Natural sciences Medical sciences Mathematics Social behavioural science Political Science/law/education Humanities Technology/engineering	320	640,000
Mystery/ Detective	Novels Short stories	96	192,000				
Romance/ Love story	Novels Short stories	116	232,000				
General fiction	Novels Short stories	116	232,000	Press reportage	Political newspapers Sports newspapers Society newspapers Financial newspapers Sport news newspapers Cultural newspapers	176	352,000
Science fiction	Novels Short stories	24	48,000	Official documents	Government documents Industry house organs University catalogues Foundation reports Industry reports	120	240,000
TOTAL		468	936,000			616	1,232,000
				1084 samples / 2,168,000 words			

inversion.¹⁶ Full inversion denotes all those constructions in which the grammatical subject follows all of its verb phrase, that is a full (lexical) verb or copular *be*,¹⁷ as illustrated in (3). It is therefore distinguished from subject-operator inversion, which refers to those syntactic structures in which “the subject is preceded by the operator rather than by the main verb or a full verb phrase”,¹⁸ as shown in (4):

- (3) Beyond were the huge ranches and a smattering of stately southern home.
(FROWN, romance and love story)
- (4) Not only can the raw human mind be equipped very quickly to do one set of skilled manufacturing processes in one trade, but he can be switched to a different industry. (LOB, press editorial. B05)

Two main types of full inverted constructions can be distinguished in English: *verb-first inverted* and *verb-second inverted constructions*. Verb-first inverted constructions are those full inversions in which the verb is the first syntactic constituent in the clause, as in (5). This includes inversions in *conditional clauses* (6), inversions in *exclamative* (7) and *independent and dependent interrogative clauses* (8)–(9), inversions after a *negated verb* (10), inversions in *appended clauses* (11) and *quotation* inversions (12). Verb-second inverted constructions, by contrast, are those inversions in which the verb is placed in second position in a declarative clause and is followed by the subject, as in (13).

- (5) *Were it not for war and revolution*, I would have never strayed from my home in the North China plain. (FROWN, belles-lettres, biographies, essays. G58)
- (6) *Had I not stumbled into mine in Colorado*, I would have been a lesser man. (FROWN, belles-lettres, biographies, essays. G39)
- (7) What a goal did he score!
- (8) Was it a bomb? Was contraband inside? (FLOB, press reportage. A13)
- (9) Sarah said would we like her cake.
- (10) Didn't nobody teach me this.¹⁹
- (11) He's a complete idiot, is John.²⁰
- (12) “This is a poor boy's bill”, said Chapman. (Brown, press reportage. A02)
- (13) Before the court with Clarke was Mark Moore, 19, of Cusack Crescent, who also admitted two charges of handling stolen goods. (FLOB, reportage. A43)

On the basis of the kind of phrasal category occurring as clause-initial constituent, five different types of verb-second full inversions have been distinguished in the literature:

¹⁶Cf. Quirk et al.; Birner; and Kreyer.

¹⁷Cf. Dorgeloh, 23.

¹⁸Cf. Biber et al., 911.

¹⁹Quoted from Green, “Colloquial and Literary Uses of Inversion,” 128.

²⁰Quoted from Quirk et al., 1310.

prepositional phrase, adverb phrase, noun phrase, adjective phrase and *verb phrase* inversion, as illustrated in (14)–(17), respectively.

- (14) Here were kept the English crown jewels pawned to the Templars in 1260 by Henry III. (FLOB, adventure and western. N25)
- (15) A key connection was Frank O'Hara. (FROWN, science. J66)
- (16) More significant is the pattern of change in these regional infant mortality rates. (FLOB, science. J31)
- (17) Fixed on their faces were anger, fear, and torment (Brown, general fiction. K09)

Verb phrase inversion, which is the concern of this study, takes place when the clause-initial constituent either consists of a present or past participle form, or an adverb followed by a present or past participle form, as shown in (18)–(19).

- (18) Looming above them were the hulls of two Altan stock boats. (FROWN, general fiction. K17)
- (19) Also included in the entourage are dog in a black sweater, Frankie and Peter. (Brown, press reportage. A40)

The preverbal present or past participle in verb phrase inversion can display a gradation of verbalhood because, as Ronald Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum aptly state, the central idea in the traditional concept of a participle is that “it is a word formed from a verb base which functions as or like an adjective”.²¹ In this sense, it has been shown that some participles have lost part of their verbal meaning.²² For instance, some past participles can denote a state hence being more adjective-like, as shown in (20) where the dynamic nature of the verb *enclose* is completely lost and only a stative interpretation is available to the reader. Others, by contrast, are more verbal in nature, as illustrated in (21) where the presence of the direct object *the minister* is a clear indicator of the verbal force of the preverbal present participle.

- (20) Enclosed are several abstract proposals for the conference. (FLOB, science. J77)
- (21) Accompanying the minister were Air Chief Marshal Sir Edmund, Vice-Chief of Air Staff, Sir Maurice Dean. (LOB, reportage. A42)

Similarly, it has been argued that this verb phrase inversion may qualify as verb-first word-order inversion (VSX) rather than as second word-order inversion (XVS). Nevertheless, as will be seen, this very much depends on the syntactic analysis adopted. To briefly illustrate this issue, it seems worth referring to examples (22a) and (22b) below. A widespread view is to consider that the constituent *is reading*

²¹Cf. Huddleston and Pullum, 78.

²²Cf. Birner, 36.

Table 2 Normalised and Raw Distribution of Verb Phrase Inversion in the Corpora

Fiction	Raw	Normalised	Non-fiction	Raw	Normalised
Adventure/Western	14	6	Science	27	4.2
Mystery/Detective	11	5.6	Press reportage	27	7.6
Romance/Love story	13	5.6	Official documents	13	5.4
General fiction	17	7.3			
Science fiction	3	6.2			
TOTAL	58	6.1		67	5.4

forms a syntactic unit where the auxiliary *is* depends on the lexical verb *reading*, which is the head of the verb phrase (cf. 22a).²³ By contrast, other scholars suggest a different approach based on the nature of auxiliaries as verbs that take non-finite complements.²⁴ According to them, *reading the newspaper* is regarded as a non-finite complement of the verb *is* (cf. 22b). Following this approach, inverted structures of this kind are clear instances of verb-second position (cf. 22c) given that the grammatical subject *John Kerry* is displaced out of its unmarked position, which is now occupied by the constituent *reading the newspaper*, which precedes the verb *is*.

- (22) a. John Kerry *is reading* the newspaper.
 b. John Kerry **is** *reading the newspaper*.
 c. **Reading the newspaper** *is* John Kerry.

3. The Distribution of Verb Phrase Inversion in Fictional and Non-Fictional Written English Discourse

The analysis of LOB, Brown, FLOB and FROWN has yielded a total of 125 verb phrase inversion instances (cf. Table 2, above). Such a limited number of instances is not surprising, given that previous studies have already shown that the majority of English declarative clauses do not contain postverbal subjects but typically exhibit a canonical SVO word-order pattern.²⁵ English is a SVO word-order language in which departures from the canonical order are uncommon, and for this reason the frequency of verb phrase inversion and other marked constructions can be expected to be limited overall. The data show that verb phrase inversion is slightly more frequently attested in fictional discourse (58 instances/normalised frequency per 100,000 words: 6.1) than in non-fictional discourse (67 instances/normalised frequency per 100,000 words: 5.4). As illustrated in Table 2, with the notable exception of *Press reportage* (7.6), frequency of occurrence is consistently higher in fictional categories than in

²³Cf. Quirk et al.

²⁴Cf. Huddleston and Pullum, 104.

²⁵Cf. Birner; and Kreyer.

non-fictional categories, with *General fiction* (7.3), *Science fiction* (6.2), and *Adventure and Western* (6) showing the highest frequencies.

Beyond these statistical differences, fictional and non-fictional texts differ significantly in the structural pattern of the preverbal constituent which triggers the inversion. In the fictional textual categories analysed here, which contain substantial reference to past time and places,²⁶ the preposed constituent very often contains a locative prepositional or adverb phrase attached to the present or past participle form, as in (23)–(35) below, which normally reports a spatial position in a given context.

- (23) Sitting in this bed and staring straight at me was Honor. (LOB, general fiction. K15)
- (24) Standing behind them is the music teacher, a gentleman of noble appearance in his early fifties. (FLOB, adventure and western. N22)
- (25) Arrayed on the tray were plate and napkin, a glass of orange juice, two parts of butter on a saucer, and a rose the color of a coral in a crystal vase. (Brown, general fiction. K05)
- (26) Neatly ranged against the rock walls were all manner of chests and trunks. (LOB, mystery and detective. L08)
- (27) Strung along East Amarillo Boulevard are cheap motels, strip joints, bars and similar establishments. (FROWN, mystery and detective. L23)
- (28) Standing before me is a knight clad in armor similar to Ardinay's. (FROWN, science fiction. M05)
- (29) Immersed in the Dinas Advertiser was the Rev. Edwards. (LOB, science fiction. M04)
- (30) Sunk right into the rock was a modern safe. (LOB, mystery and detective. L08)
- (31) Peering round her were Ginetti and one of the boys. (LOB, adventure and western. N08)
- (32) Pointing straight at me was a long-barrelled Luger. (LOB, adventure and western. N08)
- (33) Resting against the opposite wall were a row of pictures and gilded frames turned towards the wall. (LOB, adventure and western. N09)
- (34) Hanging from the ceiling was an airy Mother Goose Mobile, spinning slowly in the breeze. (Brown, romance and love story. P15)
- (35) Standing with her back to it was a woman. (LOB, romance and love story. P21)

This is also the case in *Press reportage*, as illustrated in (36)–(39). The use of adverbial and locative prepositional phrases attached to the present or participle form in these types of texts is justified because reportages also include narrative-text portions with physical or temporal descriptions.²⁷

²⁶Cf. Biber, "A Typology of English Texts."

²⁷Cf. Biber, *Variation across Speech and Writing*, 191.

- (36) Embedded in the north wall of this church were found remains of the original Norman church and some direct evidence of the central. (LOB, press reportage. A34)
- (37) Moving past the presidential viewing stand and Lafayette Square will be at least 40 marching units. (Brown, press reportage. A08)
- (38) Applauding on the river banks at Leningrad were thousands. (LOB, press reportage. A06)
- (39) Keeping the east of the county to the fore among the girls was Zoe Fisher, who competed at both levels and claimed two second places. (FLOB, press reportage. A32)

In the other non-fictional textual categories, by contrast, the clause initial present or past participle inversion does not normally include a locative prepositional phrase attached and typically reports a particular state that exists between entities as illustrated in (40)–(46). This is due to the fact that, with the exception of *Press reportage*, the non-fictional textual categories analysed here include fewer spatial and temporal descriptions, which are the contexts in which locative prepositional phrases tend to occur.²⁸ They are not so much concerned with the arrangement of objects in physical space, as with the arrangements of usually non-physical concepts, ideas or arguments.

- (40) Accompanying the Strategy are lists of definitions and acronyms in common usage throughout the document, and general references. (FROWN, official documents. H15)
- (41) Underlying the benefit estimates are increases in the numbers of retirement and invalidity pensioners and unemployment benefit recipients. (FLOB, official documents. H05)
- (42) Corresponding to each flat connection is the operator D.A. (FROWN, science. J19)
- (43) Adding to the debate is the fact that eight of nine justices now pool their clerks for the initial screening of cases. (FROWN, press reportage. A06)
- (44) Also working against the treaty are anaemic national economies. (FROWN, reportage. A04)
- (45) Also appointed to the Foundation's staff is Mr J. Kellum Smith, and Mr Smith, like the present Secretary. (Brown, official documents. H25)
- (46) Underlying India's dismal productivity growth performance are structural and intrasectoral distortions. (FROWN, science. J38)

Recent research has demonstrated that full inversion with a preposed locative constituent is the most common type of full inversion in written English, and indeed is the prototypical form.²⁹ Both prepositional and adverb phrase full inversions have

²⁸Cf. *ibid.*, 138.

²⁹See Dorgeloh; Chen; and Kreyer, among others.

traditionally been considered the best examples of so-called “locative inversions”.³⁰ Nevertheless, as the corpus-based results demonstrate, verb phrase inversion can also convey a locative meaning in discourse. Since, as tested by Biber,³¹ fictional discourse is more locative-oriented than non-fictional discourse, and locative inversion is the prototypical form in written English, it comes as no surprise that verb phrase inversion with its locative orientation is more common in fiction than in non-fiction. In what follows (cf. section 4), it will be shown that, beyond these statistical differences, the different structural patterns of the preverbal constituent in verb phrase inversion entail important differences in the pragmatic use of the construction in fictional and non-fictional texts. In other words, it will be made clear that fiction and non-fiction do not only differ in the number of verb phrase inversions used, but most importantly, in the function that these inversions serve in both types of discourse.

4. The Pragmatics of Verb Phrase Inversion in Fictional and Non-Fictional Written English Discourse

As pointed out above, fictional and non-fictional texts differ in their distribution of verb phrase inversion and in the structural patterns of the verb phrase inversions attested in both text-styles. With the exception of *Press reportage*, the verb phrase inversions attested in the non-fictional texts typically lack a locative phrase attached to preverbal present or past participle. By contrast, since locativity is inherent to fiction,³² the fictional texts make a frequent use of verb phrase inversion with an attached locative constituent and the construction occurs in contexts where a physical or spatial arrangement is described and where there is a need for a regular introduction of new scenes with their internal topography.

Over the last few decades, many linguists have come to support the view that language is closely interrelated with human cognition and perception.³³ It has been argued that in spatial descriptions the distribution of information in locative inversion reflects how the scene is observed.³⁴ The fronted constituent points to a particular location, which represents given information, and guides the addressee’s focus of attention in that direction. Once the location expressed by the fronted element is established, the addressee can focus more easily on the postposed subject, which introduces the new information. Starting from this assumption, the analysis of LOB, FLOB, Brown and FROWN makes it clear that, in fiction, the use of verb phrase inversion is related to the *Principle of experiential iconicity* postulated by Nils Erik Enkvist.³⁵

³⁰See Bresnan; and Coopmans.

³¹Cf. Biber, *Variation across Speech and Writing*, 191.

³²Cf. Herman.

³³See Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar I*; Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar II*; Croft; Ungerer and Schmid; and Tomasello.

³⁴Cf. Dorgeloh; Chen; and Kreyer.

³⁵Cf. Enkvist, “Experiential Iconicism in Text Strategy.”

This principle is derived from Charles S. Peirce's notion of "icon" and has to do with the ordering of the elements within a linguistic unit which reflects experiences of the physical world.³⁶ According to Enkvist, the text "becomes a portrait of our experience of the world".³⁷ This fact is also observed by Joseph Harold Greenberg, who claims that "the order of elements in language parallels that in physical experience",³⁸ and by Michael A. K. Halliday who argues that the experiential function concerns the clause in "its guise as a way of representing patterns of experience".³⁹ In his taxonomy of signs, Peirce distinguishes three types of iconicity: *images*, *diagrams* and *metaphors*.⁴⁰ According to Peirce, an iconic image is a single sign which resembles its referent with respect to some characteristic. Clear examples of this kind of iconicity are photographs, statues and so forth. An iconic diagram is a systematic arrangement of signs, none of which necessarily resembles its referent, but whose relationships to each other mirror the relationships of their referents. Examples of this type of iconicity are a football line-up and a radio circuit. Finally, metaphors are signs representing a parallelism in something else, according to Peirce.

In later work on iconicity in language, notably that of John Haiman, two types of diagrammatic iconicity are distinguished: *isomorphism* and *motivation*.⁴¹ The former codes the tendency for there to be a one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning. The latter is related to the reflection in linguistic structure of some aspect of the structure of reality. Enkvist's experiential iconicity must be understood as a type of diagrammatic motivation in Haiman's sense.

Enkvist distinguishes three major types of experiential iconicity in language: temporal, social and spatial as illustrated in (47)–(49) respectively:⁴²

- (47) Salt and pepper each breast. Dip in melted butter and roll in flour. Place side by side in a 2-inch deep baking pan and bake slowly about one hour until lightly brown. (Brown, press reportage. A29)
- (48) I now pronounce you husband and wife.
- (49) On the right of the gap, where the track left the main road, stood a dilapidated signpost which had once said, Private Road to Forrest Hall. Then, on the left was a new and solid-looking stand for milk-churns, which bore a beautifully-painted legend, white scar. (LOB, mystery and detective. L09)

In (47) the elements in the clause are ordered in the same way as their referents in the world of things and the temporal world of events; the addressor is temporally

³⁶Cf. Peirce.

³⁷Enkvist, "Text Strategies," 207.

³⁸Cf. Greenberg, 103.

³⁹Cf. Halliday, 106.

⁴⁰Cf. Peirce.

⁴¹Cf. Haiman, "The Iconicity of Grammar," 516–17.

⁴²Cf. Enkvist, "Experiential Iconicism in Text Strategy."

instructing the reader first to *salt and pepper the breast* then to *dip it in melted butter and roll in flour* and finally *place it in a baking pan* and *bake it about one hour*. Similarly in (48), the linear of the elements in the noun phrase *husband and wife* reflects a social order of convention by which men are mentioned before women in wedding events. Finally in (49) the writer indicates the order of operations in different spaces; through the use of thematisation he moves the addressor's attention from one place to another and implies "first take a look at the right of the gap to see the signpost and then look left to see the solid-looking stand". Through this *mimetic or experiential order* the text becomes an icon of experience.⁴³ On the basis of LOB, Brown, FLOB and FROWN, the verb phrase inversions found in fiction are clear examples of spatial experiential iconicity. The process of perception in real life functions in such a way that viewers perceive the salient entities first, and only afterwards do they focus on particular entities or particular parts of these salient entities.⁴⁴ However, this is done in a spatial context which is not only essential in the interpretation of the figure but is also normally experienced or shared in the knowledge of both addressor and addressee. In fictional descriptions, conversely, this shared knowledge about the context does not necessarily exist and the importance of the context is conspicuously mirrored in the syntax by the writer through the iconic fronting of locative adverb and prepositional phrases and the postponement of the subject, as shown in (50)–(51) below.

- (50) Then I went over to the lamp, bent to blow it out. The sooner I made contact now with Farrel the better. From behind me in the doorway I heard the slither of footsteps. I had forgotten Seona. I turned to see what she was doing and I froze. **Standing in the doorway**, her nose wrinkled in disgust at the smell in the room, was the woman Jeronimo had called Elsa. **Peering round her** were Ginetti and one of the boys, surprise on their faces, and **pointing straight at me** was a long-barrelled Luger. (LOB, mystery and detective. L08)
- (51) It looked safe enough to him to let go of the door, but just in case, he looked round for something to prop against it so that it could not shut, and then, for the first time, he realised that he was actually in the treasure chamber. **Neatly ranged against the rock walls** were all manner of chests and trunks. Some were comparatively modern, some, Simon thought. It would have been tempting to investigate the contents of the chests, but there was something else which intrigued Simon even more than they did. **Sunk right into the rock** so that only its door showed was a modern safe, and a glance showed that it had a combination lock. (LOB, mystery and detective. L08)

In (51), for instance, every time the narrator introduces new features of the place being described, a spatial theme is selected and attached to the preverbal present

⁴³Cf. *ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁴See, among others, Reinhart; and Talmy.

participle form (signalled in bold in the text). Each locative prepositional phrase which is attached provides a background for a new micro-event. The succession of spatial themes is the linguistic realisation of a global spatial strategy chosen by the writer to guide the reader throughout the text, where he provides him with the physical schema needed to anchor the specificity of the events. In this sense, the writer creates an adequate spatial framework to locate the reader, before providing him with all the information about the particular place which is described, making—in Enkvist’s terminology⁴⁵—the text mimetic with the way viewers experience the importance of spatial context in real life. The verb phrase inversions reflect the structure of the perception of a particular setting as someone experiencing the fictional world might, since the context is provided first. As a consequence, what is being communicated is made transparent for the reader, because, as Talmy Givón notes, “a coded experience is easier to store, retrieve and communicate if the code is maximally isomorphic to the experience in the real world”.⁴⁶ Under these circumstances, then, the verb phrase inversions used in fictional texts can be considered markers of spatial experiential iconicity in discourse: the order of the constituents iconically resembles the importance of the spatial context in the interpretation of what is being described. Focusing on the context first is essential for contextualising the figure. The importance of the spatial context in the interpretation of the utterance can be further noted in that it is rather the location contained in the prepositional phrase attached to the participle which is the main property ascribed to the subject. In example (52a), for instance, the information conveyed by the present preverbal participle is of less importance than the information conveyed by the locative phrase. As the modified version in (52b) shows, the spatial experiential iconic function of the construction is not disturbed even if the participle is removed from the preposed constituent and inserted after the form of *Be*. In other words, in (52) it is not that significant that the *music teacher* is *standing*—as opposed to, for instance, sitting or resting—but rather that he is located behind *them* [a young man and a woman].

- (52) a. A young man and a woman are seated either side of a table covered by an Ottoman carpet. *Standing behind them is the music teacher, a gentleman of noble appearance in his early fifties.* (FLOB, adventure and western. N22)
- b. A young man and a woman are seated either side of a table covered by an Ottoman carpet. Behind them is standing the music teacher, a gentleman of noble appearance in his early fifties.

The spatial experiential iconic use of verb phrase inversion in fiction has also been attested in *Press reportage*. As Biber demonstrated,⁴⁷ reportages are concerned with

⁴⁵Cf. Enkvist, “Experiential Iconicism in Text Strategy,” 101.

⁴⁶Cf. Givón, 189.

⁴⁷Cf. Biber, *Variation across Speech and Writing*, 161.

news analyses but also involve the description of settings and physical entities, which justifies the experiential iconic use of verb phrase inversion in these types of texts, as illustrated in (53) below:

- (53) The priory was again modified early in the 15th century when the east window was remodelled in the Perpendicular style. **Embedded in the north wall** of this church were remains of the original Norman church and some direct evidence of the central tower which before had been known only from the medieval description. **Lying in the centre of the chapel** was a great stone-built tomb, probably that of Sir Bartholomew Burghersh, who died in 1369, and a smaller stone coffin was perhaps of the last canon in charge before the Dissolution in 1539. (LOB, press reportage. A38)

In this example, the addressor describes the spatial structure of a church, and in clearly marked steps directs the reader's attention to different spatial contexts, namely *the north wall* and *the centre of the chapel*, and only afterwards are the figures introduced. It seems clear that this description is a precise linguistic representation of the way viewers would approach the scene in real-life perception, where the spatial context is always available and allows us to focus better on the object or entity being introduced in discourse. The different verb phrase inversions can therefore be considered ground-promoting structures which are used to anchor the events in the spatial descriptive process and it is the XVS syntactic arrangement with a fronted locative constituent attached to the preposed present or past participle form that contributes to such a process.

The texts in categories *Science* and *Official documents*, by contrast, make less consistent use of verb phrase inversion as a marker of spatial experiential iconicity in the sense discussed above, mainly because these texts are less concerned with spatial or physical descriptions. As a consequence, the writer is in less need of matching his linguistic representation to the way of presenting the physical perception of reality, and thus fewer verb phrase inversions with an attached spatial clause-initial constituent are found in these texts. As illustrated in (54)–(55), below, in *Science* and *Official documents*, verb phrase inversion also conveys an iconic meaning, but this differs from that discussed for fiction. As has been proposed by a number of linguists, one of the universal principles motivating word-order is that old information comes first whereas new information comes later in an utterance.⁴⁸ In this sense, the verb phrase inversion in (54) is iconic in that the temporal order of the constituents in the utterance reflects the temporal order of the introduction of information in discourse. In other words, the inversion serves to place the old information—*that gratitude*—in clause-initial position, and to link it to the new information—*the realization that we are living in a crucial time*—which is introduced for the first time in discourse and placed in clause-final

⁴⁸See Haiman, *Iconicity in Syntax*, among others.

position. This linking function of inversion is also noted in other functional work on the topic. Biber et al., for instance, point out that examples such as those mentioned below “generally contain anaphoric links with the preceding text”.⁴⁹ Georgia M. Green argues that in inverted constructions “the preverbal phrases ... perform a connective function for the individuals or entities to be named in the postposed subject”.⁵⁰ Similarly, Betty Birner argues that these types of inversion “serve an information-packaging function linking relatively unfamiliar information to the prior context via the clause-initial placement of information which is relatively familiar ... in the current discourse”.⁵¹ Finally, Kreyer considers that these inversions perform a text-structuring function and allow the efficient integration of new information by preposing a constituent that contains a link to the previous discourse.⁵² The verb phrase inversions retrieved from the corpus-based analysis certainly support these claims but, in the non-fictional texts, they do not contain the locative and spatial experiential iconic meaning found in the fictional texts.

- (54) The Lord has shown time and time again His love for us. We have only to compare the liberty and high standard of living we enjoy in this great country with the oppression and frugality of other nations to realize with humble gratitude that God’s Providence has been with us since the very beginning of our country. And yet, *accompanying that gratitude is the realization that we are living in a crucial time.* (Brown, official documents. H08)
- (55) The present discussion is the strategic corridor system identified by the Task Force to Study Highway Needs. The first segment is a list of highways which currently provide adequate access to the Commonwealth. *Following that list is a discussion of highways which the Task Force identified as needing improvement in order to provide access to all regions of the Commonwealth.* (FROWN, official documents. H04)

5. Concluding Remarks

The present corpus-based analysis has sought to shed light on the distribution and pragmatic behaviour of a particular type of inverted construction in Present-day written English, namely verb phrase inversion. This construction is a word-order changing device which specifically rearranges the order of the initial and final constituents in the clause.

The analysis has shown that, in terms of frequency, there are not significant differences in the distribution of verb phrase inversion in fictional and non-fictional text-styles. What rather distinguishes fictional and non-fictional texts is the type of

⁴⁹Cf. Biber et al., 914.

⁵⁰Cf. Green, “Some Wherefores of English Inversions,” 583.

⁵¹Cf. Birner, 72.

⁵²Cf. Kreyer.

verb phrase inversion used and the pragmatic function the inversion serves in discourse. In fiction, the preposed constituent in verb phrase inversion very often contains a prepositional or adverb phrase attached to the present or past participle form, which reports a spatial position in a given context. In non-fiction, the clause initial constituent does not normally include any locative prepositional or adverb phrase attached to the present or past participle form and typically reports a particular state that exists between entities.

The verb phrase inversions found in fiction commonly serve a spatial and temporal function and occur in fictional contexts where a physical arrangement is described. The corpus-based analysis has shown that they can be considered markers of spatial iconicity in fictional discourse.⁵³ This iconicity is found in literary descriptions imitating in their structure the process of real-life visual experience where viewers perceive salient entities first and only subsequently do they focus on particular entities or specific parts of the salient entities. Nevertheless, this is done in a spatial context which is not only essential in the interpretation of the figure but is also normally experienced or shared in the knowledge by both addressor and addressee. In fictional setting descriptions where this shared knowledge about the context does not necessarily take place, the importance of the context is conspicuously mirrored in the syntax by the writer through the iconic fronting of locative adverb or prepositional phrases attached to the present and past participle form and the postponement of the subject. The use of this type of verb phrase inversions as devices which create spatial experiential iconicity thus provides a means of shaping a descriptive discourse that follows the sequence of perceptual experience, and is a common way of organising narrative discourse.

Non-fictional discourse, with its less locative orientation, makes less frequent use of verb phrase inversions as markers of spatial experiential iconicity. In this type of discourse, the fronted constituent in verb phrase constructions represents discourse old information and thus serves to integrate the new information represented by the post-verbal constituent into the already existing discourse.⁵⁴ The inversions, however, do not normally contain locative phrases and do not perform a spatial experiential iconic function.

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⁵³Cf. Enkvist, "Experiential Iconicism in Text Strategy."

⁵⁴Cf. Birner, 147.

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