

The Unaccented Pronoun Constraint in English*

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1. **The problem.** It has long been known that unaccented personal pronouns are unacceptable in certain positions in English, as in the (b) sentences below.

- (1) a. We took in the unhappy little mutt right away.
b. *We took in hĭm right away.
- (2) a. Martha told Noel the plot of *Gravity's Rainbow*.
b. *Martha told Noel ĭt.
- (3) a. { Across the plains } came the Twentieth Century
Down Limited.
b. { *Across the plains } came ĭt.
Down
- (4) a. Posing on the couch was Henry Kissinger.
b. *Posing on the couch was hĕ.
- (5) a. "Gee whillikers!" exclaimed Oona with great feeling.
b. *"Gee whillikers!" exclaimed shĕ with great feeling.

The accent condition is crucial, since accented personal pronouns are acceptable in such cases:¹

- (6) They took in hĕr, and we took in hĭm.
- (7) "Gee whillikers!" exclaimed shĕ, of all people.

Pronouns other than personal pronouns bear some inherent accent, and as a result the constraint will not apply to them; compare (8)-(11) below with the (b) examples in (1)-(5).

- (8) We took in someone.
- (9) Noel told Martha a dirty story, and then Martha told Noel one.
- (10) Across the plains came something.
- (11) Posing on the floor was one former Secretary of State, and posing on the couch was another.

Also, since coordinations of personal pronouns bear some accent, the constraint does not apply to them either:

- (12) We took in him and her.

Clearly this constraint is phonological at least to the extent of referring to accent.

2. **A discourse structure explanation?** One plausible hypothesis about the data in (3) and (4) above is that the function of the complement+verb+subject construction in them is to introduce, or present, objects or persons new to a discourse; Bolinger (1971, 584) speaks of the "adverbial inversion that characterizes the type of sentence that might be called presentational, in which the referent of the subject is introduced on the scene". Another plausible hypothesis is that the position of the subject after the verb in (3) and (4) reflects this function, since sentences tend to be structured with new information following old. And a third plausible hypothesis is that such a postponed subject could not therefore lack accent, since it neither conveys old information (does not refer to something already given in the discourse or assumed in the context) nor describes something new but of little consequence to the discourse. That is, on this account the postponed subject in (3) and (4) **must** bear accent, because it is too important to its discourse not to.

Though I am sympathetic with attempts at discourse structure explanations of apparently grammatical phenomena, I believe that this particular instance of such an explanation does not cover all the data. To begin with, the constructions of (1) and (2) are not presentational in function; the direct object in (1) and (2) can quite easily refer to established topics. To see this, compare the (invented) discourses in (13) and (14) with those in (15) and (16).

(13) We saw the unhappy little mutt as it shivered on the corner.
We walked up to the unhappy little mutt, and it
pathetically licked our hands. We took in the unhappy
little mutt right away.

(14) Martha told Peter the plot of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Martha
told Oliver the plot of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Martha told
Noel the plot of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

(15) ?The Twentieth Century Limited left New York on a bright
September morning. Thousands cheered the Twentieth Century
Limited as it left Chicago a day later. Across the plains
came the Twentieth Century Limited.

(16) ?Primping before the mirrors was Henry Kissinger. Stripping
off his clothes was Henry Kissinger. Posing on the couch
was Henry Kissinger.

Moreover, the construction in (5), which does have a postponed subject as in (3) and (4), is not basically presentational:

(17) Oona carefully poured the nilotic acid into the vat. Visions
of El Dorado and sugar-plum fairies swam before Oona's eyes
as the mixture foamed wildly. "Gee whillikers!" exclaimed
Oona with great feeling.

In fact, even the postponed subjects in (3) and (4) can be coreferential with an NP already introduced, so that they cannot be seen as *invariably* supplying new information:

- (18) The committee sat anxiously around the oak table, waiting for Ronald to arrive and hoping he would agree with their decision. Into the board room stróde Rónald, and they all stood up to greet him.
- (19) Henry Kissinger had always been one of my heroes. For years I had hoped I would meet Henry Kissinger. Then one day I arrived at the studio and found a great surprise there. Posing on the couch wás Hèny Kìssinger.

(Note that while *Ronald* and *Henry Kissinger* are not without accent in the last sentences of these discourses, they are nevertheless subordinated in accent to a neighboring constituent.)

Finally, sentences like (10) above and (20) below show that the information supplied by postponed subjects can be minimal.

- (20) Posing on the couch was someone.

I conclude that the discourse structure account sketched above could address itself only to (3) and (4), and that even for these cases it is seriously flawed. I turn next to one style of grammatical account for the data.

3. A rule-particular constraint? It was traditional in transformational grammar to see the constraint illustrated in (1)-(5) as one applying to particular rules of English². On this view, what blocks (1b) is a condition on Particle Movement that makes the rule obligatory when the direct object is an unaccented personal pronoun; compare

- (21) We took hĭm in right away.

And what blocks (2b), on this account, is a condition on Dative Movement that prevents it from applying when the direct object is unaccented personal pronoun; compare

- (22) Martha told ĭt to Noel.

And what blocks (3b), on this account, is a similar condition that prevents Presentational Inversion from applying when the subject is an unaccented personal pronoun; compare

- (23) { Across the plains } ĭt came.
 { Down }

Example (4b) is a bit more complex, since Presentational Inversion is obligatory with *be* — 3

- (24) *Posing on the couch Henry Kissinger was.

I will assume that the noninverted clauses like (25) have a binary, NP+VP, structure, while the corresponding inverted construction is ternary, comprising V (a form of *be*), nonfinite VP, and (subject) NP; the order of these constituents must be VP+V+NP, as in (4a) versus (24). Presumably what blocks (4b), then, is a special constraint that requires VP+NP+V order for the Presentational Inversion construction when the subject NP is an unaccented personal pronoun.

(25) Henry Kissinger was posing on the couch.

Finally, (5b) is just like (3b): Quotative Inversion must be inapplicable when the subject is an unaccented personal pronoun; compare (26).

(26) "Gee whillikers!" shē exclaimed with great feeling.

Even if all the subject-verb inversions can somehow be collapsed into one rule, there are still three separate rules of English subject to a phonological constraint, at least in the standard view of the matter. Moreover, the cases have nothing in common--in two cases, Particle Movement and Dative Movement, the constraint involves the direct object (though in the former case the rule is made obligatory, while in the latter the rule is prevented from applying), yet in the remaining inversion cases, the constraint involves the subject. There are then two problems: Not only do these cases apparently involve a violation of the Principle of Phonology-Free Syntax (Zwicky and Pullum 1986), but they also apparently share no element of structure. If there can be rule-specific constraints of this sort, then there could be a language just like English except that the constraint on Dative Movement referred to indirect object rather than the direct object, and another language just like English except that the constraint on Dative Movement prevented it from applying instead if requiring it to apply. And so on.

Despite the disparities among these conditions, they seem to be related to one another, and the fact that they have been stated as (at least) three independent conditions means that standard descriptions of English repeat what is essentially one condition.

4. **A syntactic filter analysis.** The first attempt in the generative literature to subsume the Particle Movement and Dative Movement facts under a single generalization was made by Ross (1967, sec. 3.1), who proposed a single 'Output Condition on Post-Verbal Constituents' designed to cover not only these facts but also the preference for the (a) variants over the (b) variants in examples like (27) and (28).

(27) a. I passed up all the alternatives that had been offered to me.
b. ?I passed all the alternatives that had been offered to me up.

(28) a. I sent to Robin every message that had come across my desk in weeks.
b. ?I sent every message that had come across my desk in weeks to Robin.

Ross' syntactic filter does not cover the examples involving subjects (Presentational Inversion and Quotative Inversion), however. And I believe that any attempt to combine the 'length and complexity' constraints illustrated in (27) and (28) with the unaccented pronoun constraint illustrated in (1) and (2) is misguided. The length and complexity constraints are manifested in a complex pattern of graded judgments of relative (un)acceptability--that is, as a set of stylistic (dis)preferences on the part of speakers--whereas the unaccented pronoun constraint is manifested in sharp grammaticality judgments.

I am not denying here that the length and complexity constraints and the unaccented pronoun constraint might arise from the same general 'functional' motive, namely to avoid the sequence of a long, heavy constituent followed by a short, light constituent at the end of a sentence. What I am claiming, however, is that this functional consideration has been grammaticized in English in one class of cases, involving unaccented personal pronouns (but remains only as a stylistic preference in the other cases).

5. **A prosodic filter analysis.** A satisfactory solution must begin with the exhibition of some thread common to the various cases. To achieve these, I will scrutinize cases where unaccented personal pronouns are acceptable.

The most obvious environments are subject pronouns in subject position and direct object pronouns in object position (immediately following a verb or preposition with which the pronoun is in construction):

(29) *Shě destróyed hĭm becáuse óf Īt.*

(30) *Hě hăd táken Īt fróm thĕm.*

(These examples show, incidentally, that it cannot merely be sentence-final or postverbal position that determines ungrammaticality, as might be thought from a hasty examination of (1)-(5).)

Both subject and object pronouns are fine unaccented and in construction with a following quantifier:

(31) *Wě bóth adore penguins.*

(32) *Gary took it from thĕm áll.*

Unaccented indirect object pronouns are acceptable not only with the preposition *to* or *for*, but also following the verb:

(33) *We offered a walnut quince pie tó hĭm.*

(34) *We óffered hĭm a walnut quince pie.*

Unaccented possessive pronouns are acceptable in construction with a following noun:

(35) Hĭs aunt and hĕr uncle were yŏur cousins.

The pronouns in examples (29)-(35) do have a common property: all are prosodically attached to adjoining material to form a prosodic phrase with it, that is, all are *leaners*, in the sense of Zwicky (1982). Subjects are attached to the following verb, direct objects and 'moved' indirect objects to the preceding verb, prepositional objects to the preceding preposition, pronouns in construction with a following quantifier to that quantifier, possessives to a following noun. In (29')-(35') I indicate prosodic phrasings for (29)-(35) by means of square brackets; these are not, of course, the only possible phrasings (in general, a sentence can have a number of acceptable phrasings).

- (29') [Shĕ destrŏyed hĭm] [becáuse ŏf ĭt].
- (30') [Hĕ hĕd táken ĭt] [frŏm thĕm].
- (31') [Wĕ bóth] [adŏre pénguins].
- (32') [Gáry tŏok ĭt] [frŏm thĕm áll].
- (33') [Wĕ ŏffered] [ă wálnut quĭnce píe] [tó hĭm].
- (34') [Wĕ ŏffered hĭm] [ă wálnut quĭnce píe].
- (35') [Hĭs áunt] [ănd hĕr úncle] [wĕre yŏur cúusins].

An attached pronoun is not necessarily adjacent to the head of its phrasal constituent. Pronouns can, for instance, attach to modified phrases—subjects to phrases beginning with adverbs, as in (36a). And possessives can attach to nominal phrases beginning with adjectives, as in (37a), or numerals, as in (38a). The (b) examples have nonpronominal NPs in place of the pronouns in the (a) examples.

- (36) a. [Shĕ nearly] [destroyed him].
b. [The angel] [nearly] [destroyed him].
- (37) a. [Hĭs elder aunt] [is a doctor].
b. [Robin Smith's] [elder aunt] [is a doctor].
- (38) a. [Hĕr two kangaroos] [are in the zoo].
b. [Kelly Robinson's] [two kangaroos] [are in the zoo].

Turning now to subject-verb inversions other than those in (3)-(5),⁴ I observe that attached pronouns are acceptable throughout. This is so for the inversions in questions--

- (39) Was hĕ posing on the couch?
- (40) When did shĕ learn that pigs can't fly?

and in various tags--

- (41) He isn't dangerous, is hĕ?

(35)-(38), is relatively unproblematic, although pronouns must be barred from attaching to following sentence adverbials in examples like (1b) and (5b). Assuming, as in (49), that prosodic structure generally follows syntactic structure, the only examples that require special comment are those like (29) and (30), among others, where subject pronouns attach to their following VPs. This attachment possibility is specifically allowed by condition (50). Notice that neither (49) nor (50) would permit attachment of pronouns to following sentence adverbials.

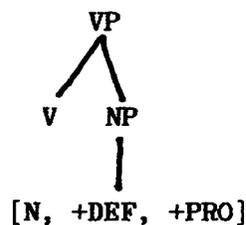
(49) Syntactic phrases are prosodic phrases except as stipulated otherwise.

(50) A personal pronoun subject can form a prosodic phrase with the VP following it.

In this discussion I am thus assuming some variant of the proposal in Gee and Grosjean (1983), in which prosodic organization is built up on the basis of syntactic structure; (49) corresponds to their Syntactic Constituent Rule and (50) to a subcase of their Verb Rule. The question is now what the conditions are on the attachment of personal pronouns to preceding material.

6.2. Attachment to the left. The paradigm of such attachment is the case of objects, whether direct or indirect, attaching to an immediately preceding verb. The configuration here, omitting irrelevant surrounding material and an actual lexical verb, is that in (51). There are three aspects of this configuration I will take to be crucial in determining attachment possibilities: (a) the constituent to which the pronominal NP is attached--its prosodic host (PH), as I shall call it here--is a lexical category (in (51), it is a V); (b) the PH is a sister of that NP; and (c) the PH governs the case features on the NP. These clauses are generalized in the attachment condition in (52).

(51)



(52) A personal pronoun NP (PPNP) can form a prosodic phrase with a preceding PH only if the following conditions are satisfied:

- a. the PH and PPNP are sisters;
- b. the PH is a lexical category;
- c. the PH is a category that governs case-marking.

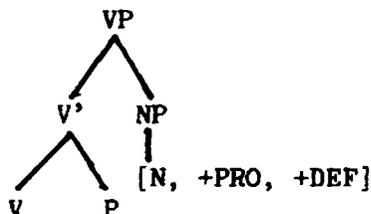
This formulation immediately generalizes from V+object examples of the form in (51) to P+object examples, as in (29) and (30), and A+object examples, as in (53) and (54), since V, P, and A all govern case-marking.

(53) I think I'm nearer them than you are.

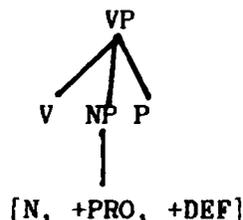
(54) That photograph isn't very much like hěr.

6.3. **Blocked attachment.** What of the original cases in (1b)-(5b), where attachment is blocked? In (1b), the VP configuration is as in (55); compare the ternary structure of the Particle Movement construction, in (56). In (55) V' cannot be a PH for the PPNP, because it is not lexical, and P cannot be, because it is not a sister of the PPNP. In (56), on the other hand, V satisfies all three of the requirements in (52).

(55)

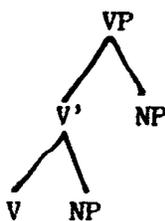


(56)

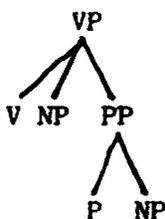


The case of Dative Movement, in (2), involves VPs of the form V+NP+NP, which I assume to have the internal structure in (57). If the direct object, the second NP here, is a PPNP, then it cannot be attached to its preceding sister, because that sister is not a lexical category; the indirect object, the first NP in (57), can of course attach to its sister V. The prepositional alternative construction, with VPs as in (58), allows either object to attach to the left--the direct object to its sister V, the indirect object to its sister P.

(57)

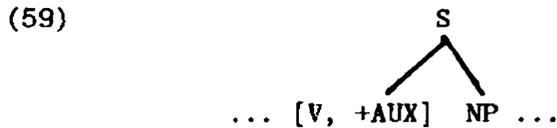


(58)



Examples (3)-(5) are inversion constructions, all three exhibiting what Green (1985) refers to as 'inversions over "V"'--over motion verbs in (3), the verb *be* in (4), verbs of saying in (5)--in contrast to the inversions over a single auxiliary V, illustrated above in

(39)-(45). Inversions over a single auxiliary V yield substructures like the one in (59), in which the subject NP is a sister of the preceding V, so that the three conditions in (52) are satisfied and a PNP can attach to the V.



The examples in (3)-(5) are different, in that the inversions there aren't necessarily limited to a single word; a modal or an adverb can move along with the verb, as in (60) for Presentational Inversion with a motion verb, (61) for Presentational Inversion with *be*, and (62) for Quotative Inversion.⁶ The inverted verbal material in these examples is underlined.

(60) { Across the plains } would come the train every few days.
 Down

(61) Posing on the couch will be a handsome mailman.

(62) "Gee whillikers!" suddenly exclaimed Oona with great feeling.

Given these facts, I assume that what is inverted in these constructions is not just V but actually VP (which might of course have a single daughter, V), so that the relevant substructures are as in (63) rather than (59). In (63), if the subject is a PNP it cannot attach to VP (which is its sister, but is a phrasal rather than lexical category) or to V (which is a lexical category of the right sort, but is not a sister of the subject NP), and so it must remain unattached--and by the UPC, (46), must be accented.



6.4. **Summary.** I have now worked through all the cases enumerated at the beginning of this article. Two pieces of descriptive apparatus are involved: a constraint on pronoun attachment in English, stated in (52), and a prosodic filter for the language, stated in (46). No rule-particular constraint is involved, much less any such constraint involving the phonological feature of accent.

On this analysis, accents can be distributed freely on constituents, subject to restrictions resulting from the meanings and/or functions of the accents themselves, and subject to parochial constraints like (46).

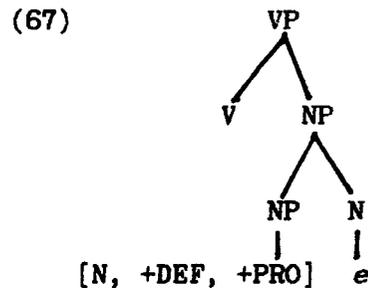
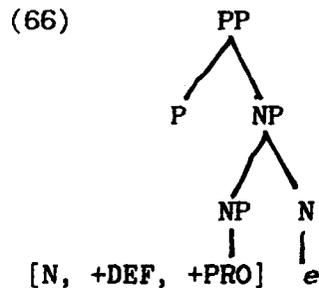
6.5. **Further data.** The analysis makes some predictions beyond these original data. In particular, it predicts that an 'orphan'

personal pronoun--one functioning as part of a larger construction, the remainder of which is empty--cannot occur without accent. What I have in mind are examples like (64) and (65), with isolated possessives.

(64) Stephen offered me a wrench, but I insisted that he give me *twó* of his.

(65) Tanya told me that all the horses had passed the half-mile mark in a bunch, but there was so much dust we could scarcely *sée* hers.

In both examples the sentence-final pronouns must bear some accent (though not of course as much as the preceding emphatically accented words do). And in neither example is the only eligible PH (the P of in (64), the V see in (65)) a sister of the possessive NP; the configurations are at least as complex as the structures in (66) and (67), for which (52) will not license a reattachment of this NP to the left.



(The problem is not that the pronouns are followed by empty or anaphoric constituents, as can be seen by comparing (64) and (65) with the accusative+infinitive and accusative+gerundive constructions in (68) and (69).)

(68) Ursula was sure the monkeys would soon finish typing out *Finnegan's Wake*, but Viola really didn't expect them to.

(69) Walter believes that Jane Austen wrote erotic novels under a pseudonym, but no one else can imagine her.

One further issue concerns multiple attachment. There is, somewhat surprisingly, a contrast between on the one hand the ungrammatical examples in (70) (=2b) and (71), with an accented independent indirect object pronoun, and on the other hand the grammatical examples in (72) and (73), with two unaccented objects.

(70) *Martha told Noel *ĭt*.

(71) *Martha told hĭm *ĭt*.

(72) Martha told hĭm *ĭt*.

(73) Aaron showed hĕr *thĕm*.

The question is how these data are to be described. If (52) affects a lexical PH (of category *C*) by attaching a PPNP to it, in a literal sense of 'attach', then the result of attachment should also be a unit of category *C*, and further attachment should be possible. Just this seems to be what happens in examples like (72) and (73)--which suggests that (52) should assign syntactic categories to prosodic phrases and should be able to apply to its own output.

Finally, there is evidence, originally put forth by Wasow (1975) and discussed at some length by Jacobson (1982, sec. 2), that a trace intervening between a verb and a personal pronoun object can block the attachment in (52). The judgments are subtle ones, involving a contrast between the imperfect (b) examples in (74) and (75) below and the ungrammatical (c) examples.

- (74) a. It's hard to tell those children the stories.
b. ?Those children are hard to tell the stories.
c. *Those children are hard to tell them.
- (75) a. John gave someone the book.
b. ?Who did John give the book?
c. *Who did John give it?

The constructions involved are Tough Movement in (74) and WH Movement in (75). A trace condition on (52) would be no surprise, given the fact that traces seem quite generally to block phonological rules of external sandhi (Rotenberg 1978) and cliticizations (Bissantz 1985).

7. **An alternative prosodic analysis.** A somewhat different, though still prosodically based, proposal, is made by Selkirk (1984, sec. 7.2.2.4). The first prong of this analysis is that personal pronouns are subject to generalizations about monosyllabic function words in English, generalizations having the following effect: 'If they are not phrase-final, then they should distress.' (Selkirk, 392)

Systematic exceptions to these generalizations must be made for auxiliaries, as in (76), as well as for some instances of personal pronouns. The generalizations then cover prepositions, which must be accented when stranded, as in (77), and determiners and conjunctions/complementizers, which for the most part do not occur phrase-finally for syntactic reasons. It is not clear to me that these generalizations cover enough ground to be valid.

- (76) They must hæve.
- (77) *Who did you give it tð?

I also believe that I made a good case above that phrase-final position is not the relevant variable for determining the grammaticality of unaccented personal pronouns in English. Among other things, the occurrence of a final monosyllabic adverb like *then* or *now* makes no difference to the grammaticality of unaccented pronouns:

- (78) a. Down the river the big ships came (then).
b. Down the river came the big ships (then).

- (79) a. Down the river they came (then).
b. *Down the river came they (then).

The second prong of Selkirk's analysis copes with the fact that unaccented pronouns do in fact occur phrase-finally; this is a 'syntactic restructuring' rule 'encliticizing pronouns to a preceding verb or preposition' (393) and so having some of the same effects as my (52). I have two disputes with this treatment: (a) I see no reason to posit a syntactic rule of attachment; and (b) I see no reason to think that the unaccented pronouns are in fact clitics. With reference to (a): Selkirk's evidence for a syntactic rule is that the conditions on the rule refer to syntactic structure--but conditions on the syntax-prosody pairing surely refer to syntactic structure as well, and (52) is just such a condition. With reference to (b): Though I know of nothing that would actually speak against the assumption that the unaccented pronouns are clitics, I also know of nothing that would specifically speak for the idea--and I believe that it takes positive evidence to assume clitics, since these are special, marked morphosyntactic entities (in contrast to leaners, which are commonplace).

Notes

*The bulk of this paper (couched within the framework of transformational grammar, as might still be detectable in the current version) was completed at the University of Sussex in the autumn of 1977, under the auspices of a Fulbright Research Fellowship in the Laboratory of Experimental Psychology. My thanks to the Fulbright staff in Washington and London, to my sponsor Christopher Longuet-Higgins and other colleagues at Sussex, and to members of audiences at Sussex, Cambridge, and Lancaster, on whom I tried out earlier versions of the ideas reported here. Geoffrey K. Pullum's contributions were considerable, but I am taking the credit, and the blame, nevertheless. This version was lightly edited and amended in April and May 1986.

¹I have given no examples with accented *it*, to correspond to (2b) and (3b), because for a great many speakers these examples are ungrammatical--but for a reason that has nothing to do with the point at issue here. These speakers (including, among the linguists of my acquaintance, James Thorne and Jorge Hankamer) simply find all occurrences of accented *it* ungrammatical, even contrastive cases like *The dog ate its chicken, and then the cat ate its*.

²Thus Chomsky (1957, sec. 7.4) makes Particle Movement obligatory when the direct object is a pronoun, a treatment taken over by Jacobs and Rosenbaum (1968, 106), who also stipulate (145) that Dative Movement is blocked when the direct object is a pronoun. The observation that what I have here called Presentational Inversion is blocked when the subject is a pronoun first appeared in the literature on generative grammar (to my knowledge) in Green (1974, 169), where it is attributed to Fred Lupke.

³Examples like (24) are grammatical as instances of Topicalization, in which case they can be produced with a comma intonation at the end of the topicalized constituent (*Posing on the couch, Henry Kissinger was*), but they are not grammatical as instances of Presentational Inversion.

⁴A convenient inventory of the various types of subject-verb inversions in English has been provided by Green (1985).

⁵I owe the germ of this proposal to David Stampe.

⁶For reasons I do not understand, Presentational Inversion is blocked for adverbs--**Across the plains quickly came the train--* while Quotative Inversion is blocked for modals--**"Gee whillikers!" would exclaim Oona whenever she saw a toad.* These complications do not directly affect the argument based on (60)-(62), since what is involved is not the inversion of V rather than VP, but the blocking of any inversion at all.

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