

Structure of the Danish phrase

The key to the understanding of the Danish phrase is the relative position of verb (in present or past), **v**, subject, **s**, and adverbs like "ikke" (not), **a** in the first part of the phrase. The far end of the phrase is less important – in the following it will be treated as "the rest", **r**, unless otherwise indicated.

Jeg spiste ikke kippers til morgenmad den dag på hotellet

s v a ----- r -----

(I did not have kippers for breakfast that day at the hotel)

Danish phrases have three possible sequences of **v**, **s** and **a**. The sequence conveys the function of the phrase and the structure of the period.

Subordinate clause and main clause (ledsætning og helsætning)

main clause

subordinate clause

main clause

(1) Jeg taler altid dansk, (3) når jeg ikke er i skole.

s v a

s a v

(3) Når jeg ikke er i skole, (2) taler jeg altid dansk.

v s a

(whatever)

A subordinate clause is a phrase that serves as an element in the main clause – as phrase 3 serves as the time element in 1 and 2 above. It may also serve as object or a describing element:

- I still live in the town **where I was born** (**description of place**)
- He said **that he would come** (**object**)
- The man, **who wore a gun**, made me calm down. (**description of person**)

Thus a subordinate clause is a phrase, which is part of a phrase. In opposition to the main clause a Danish subordinate clause does not change much, it always has the structure: Subject, adverb, verb: **s a v**.

The main clause is the framework of a period – top of the sentence hierarchy. And like in English, the elements of the main clause can change place dependent of focus:

- I have bought my hat in London.

s v

- In London I have bought my hat, in Paris my shoes.

s v

Inversion

In Danish, however, any change that involves the first field (**the whatever field**) of the main clause will change the word order. The word order of the main clause is either: (1) **sva** or (2) **whatever - vsa**: A Danish phrase has room for only one element before the verb: either subject, **s**, or **whatever** other element: time or place or a subordinate clause or an object . See table below.

Whatever	v s a
I morgen (time)	har vi igen fri.
I København (place)	er alting () dyrt.
Opvasken (object)	tager vi bare i morgen

Like in English the structure of a phrase carries meaning and function:

1. You were there. (statement)

s v

2. Were you there? (question)

v s

3. I asked you if you were there. (question referred)

s v

4. She wanted me to leave. So I did. (= I therefore left)

s v

5. She wanted to leave. So did I. (= I wanted to leave too)

v s

As you see, the meaning of these phrases changes with the sequence of the subject, **s**, and the verb in present/past, **v**. The first three examples follow general generative principles of the English language – as of the Danish. The last example is a freak in English, but shows a general principle of Danish called inversion: The word order is like that of a question: **v s**, but the phrase is no question. The changed word order describes how the two sentences are connected in the text. As far as I know, sentence # 5 is the only example in English where not inverting would ruin the meaning. Another, more harmless, example of inversion you would find in old literature:

6. - Come with me, said he, - I will show you my stamp collection.

v s

7. - Come with me, he said, I will show you my stamp collection.

s v

In English, the difference between phrase #6 and #7 is merely one of style; both phrases are correct. But in Danish only #6 would be correct. For a Danish native speaker, interchanging of **v** and **s** in #6 would be as confusing as interchanging in #4 and #5 would be for an English. In Danish you would have to say:

- Kom, sagde han, jeg vil vise dig min frimærkesamling.

v s

Inversion – a spoken comma

Many learners find inversion annoying. But actually it makes sense if you regard it as a spoken comma. The introductory element of a phrase is the foundation or point of view from which the rest of the phrase is to be understood. The inversion shows where the core of the phrase starts. In written English, you would in most cases find a comma where Danes invert:

Desværre **havde min nabo** spist mine sko

(inversion)

Unfortunately, my neighbour had eaten my shoes.

(comma)

In Danish, you'll find a comma in that position only if the introductory element is a full subordinate clause:

Hvis du vil, kan du låne mine sko. (If you want, you may borrow my shoes)
(Intro.)