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## The 'X does Y's head in' construction

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## 9. The ‘X does Y’s head in’ construction

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Only two of my teachers have managed to provide a visual metaphor so striking that it has stuck with me to the present day. The first was Patrick Boyde at Cambridge who, after a lecture on Dante’s *Commedia*, circulated a hand-written sheet of A4 detailing how best to conceive of Paradise. I remember it well, he advised us to ‘imagine a cornfield seen not from the ground, but from the sky’; only then would the concentric crop circles, analogous to the structure of Paradise, become visible. The second was Arie. In his Construction Grammar and Evolutionary Linguistics class, he described the paths that emerge in the grass between two places, such as buildings on a university campus, when people choose to take (more efficient) shortcuts. This highly salient visual metaphor represents, of course, the emergence of constructions; through repeated usage constructions become codified.

It is in the spirit of such visually striking constructions that I am presenting the ‘it does my head in’ construction, expressible in more general terms as ‘X does Y’s head in’, common to Northern British English (NBE) varieties amongst others. NBE, in contrast to Southern varieties, can be characterised on phonological (e.g. the presence of [ʊ] rather than [ʌ] in words such as *butter*, no differentiation between the vowels in *foot* and *strut*), lexical (e.g. *mucky* for *dirty*, *owt/nowt* for *anything/nothing*, *badly* for *ill*), and grammatical grounds (e.g. negated modal contraction, definite article reduction and -s agreement for verbs in all persons) (Wales 2006).

The ‘it does my head in’ construction has entered common vernacular usage, as evidenced by its inclusion in the

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Cambridge Online Dictionary, where it is defined as 'to make someone feel confused or unhappy', e.g. 'getting up at four o'clock every morning was doing my head in'. But what interests me here is what elements can fill the X and Y slots in this schematic multi-word construction, i.e. what or who can do whose head in?

As such, I searched for the construction (unspecified for tense and person) in the British National Corpus (BYU-BNC), a corpus of over 50 million words of text from the web, categorised into a variety of spoken and written registers. This search yielded only 13 results, of which one was not an example of the construction. The remaining 12 all expressed unhappiness or stronger emotions of anger or frustration, such as 'He done my head in so I shot him in it.' Eight examples were from spoken text, three from prose fiction and one from a tabloid newspaper. Of the written examples, two are direct quotes, one is free indirect speech and the final one is prefaced with 'in twentieth century slang', indicating the age of either the narrator, the construction, or both!

The dictionary examples all use the present tense; the corpus examples, however, display greater variation. Four instances of the simple present occur, but there are also three instances of 'done my head in' (where two appear with the present perfect auxiliary *have*), three of the present continuous, two of the past continuous, and one gerundive complement. In terms of person, the corpus reflects the dictionary definitions, with a preference for the possessor of the head being done in to be 1SG, although two instances each occur for 2SG (*your*) and 3SG (*his/her*). The subject of the construction (i.e. the 'do-er in' of the head) is overwhelmingly in the third person (8/12 instances), roughly equally split between *he*, *it* and *this*; one instance each is also noted of 1SG, 2SG, 3PL and a gerundive complement clause. Most common,

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then, are sentences from spoken discourse such as this: 'He comes over ours at Christmas and he does my head in cos he keeps on kicking me at the dinner table!'

Whether or not this construction is particular to NBE is subject to debate, but more research into typically NBE constructions – at the single and multi-word level – is nonetheless necessary.

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