

Ask about English

No sooner/ than



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BBC Learning English – Ask about English

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Michael asks:

My question is about 'no sooner' and 'than' requiring the semi-inversion. Most of those sentences sound like 'no sooner came John to the station than the train arrived'. And my question is, how can I make two sentences of this one sentence, in order to understand better the way it functions?

Prof Michael Swan answers:

OK, yeah, that's a good and interesting question. And let's make it clear first of all what order things happen in. If I say "no sooner had I arrived at the station than the train came in", we need to be clear what happened first. Does it mean, the train came in and then me, or I came in and right after me the train? Well, my experience is actually that I arrive at the station, and then the train doesn't come in for hours.

But, to answer your question, if I say "no sooner had I arrived at the station than the train came in", it means, I came in, and right after me the train. I got there first... just! I'll give you another couple of examples:

"No sooner had I put the phone down than it rang again".

"No sooner had I finished the meal than I started feeling hungry again".

It's actually a rather literary construction. I'd expect to read it, maybe write it, but I probably wouldn't say it. Instead I think I'd say something like this:

"The train came in just after I got to the station", or "I had only just got to the station when the train came in"...or something like that.

Hardly and scarcely

There's two similar structures, also rather literary, that have got the same meaning, with 'hardly' and 'scarcely'. You could say "hardly had I arrived at the station when the train came in", or "scarcely had I arrived at the station when the train came in".

Same meaning: I got there just before the train. It's a slightly different structure to the one with 'no sooner', because with no sooner we use 'than' – after a comparative, sooner – with 'hardly' and 'scarcely' we say "when": "hardly had I arrived when the train came in".

Trains are actually a bit unreliable in Britain today as I've suggested. I was on one recently on the way to London, we were moving extremely slowly, and the driver made an announcement over the loudspeaker saying "we apologise for the slow running of the train, but we have been moved onto a branch line because of engineering works, and we are likely to stay there for the foreseeable future!".

I was pretty upset, because it was my birthday and I really didn't want to spend it on a train between Oxford and London! However, no sooner had he made the announcement than we started going faster again – so I had my birthday at home after all. So thanks for your question, Michael!

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