
**MANCHESTER**  
 1824

## A just so story: Explanatory *so* as turn-introducer

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New perspectives  
on language change and variation  
in the history of English

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## Plan

- Introduction
- *So* in sentence grammar
- *So* in discourse grammar
- Corpus data
- Origins
- Public reaction
- Envoi

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## INTRODUCTION

## Explanatory *so*

A. Why do you live in Manchester when your fellowship is in Bristol?

B. So my girlfriend lives here. [...]

(att. DD 2019)

- Initial hypothesis: this *so* is used in explanations.
  - Explanation is principal context of occurrence, not function.

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## Examples from BBC R4 *Today*

• Chris Skidmore, 12 Jun 2019

• Sachin Oza, 17 Jun 2019




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## ‘Initial’ *so*

- Concentrate here on
  - **clause**-initial uses where *so* is a conjunction
  - **turn**-initial *so* (in speech) as discourse marker
- Still ‘turn-initial’ if preceded by interjection, up to 2 words of assent or disagreement:
  - Yes, so, there is a broader context within UK energy policy, we [...]

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## Reaction

So I am beginning this sentence with a word that is so irritating when it's used at the start of a sentence that I would understand if you were to rip out this column, screw it into a tight ball and hurl it at the radio the next time you hear my voice coming from it. But better to horde [sic] your anger and unleash it against the growing band of linguistic vandals, who use this absurd construction routinely – especially when they are asked a question.



(John Humphrys in *Waitrose Weekend*)  
quoted in *Mail Online*

Creighton (2015)

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## SO IN SENTENCE GRAMMAR

## Purpose clauses

We booked early so (that) we could be sure of getting good seats.

So (that) we could be sure of getting good seats, we booked early.

Huddleston & Pullum (2002)

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## Result clauses

The airline had overbooked, so (that) two of us couldn't get on the plane.

There was a bus strike on, so we had to go by taxi.

We know her well, so (that) we can speak to her on your behalf.

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## Wholly irrelevant initial so

So cruelly did he treat them, that ...

So I believe.

So long as you insist on ...

(The mill could be sold off,) so providing much-needed capital.

- So can belong to a number of word classes, and is sometimes unclassifiable.

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## SO IN DISCOURSE GRAMMAR

## Discourse functions in general

- Initial position important in speech.
- Linguistic items may
  - make connections between adjacent utterances
  - organise different sections of a text
  - express speaker attitudes
  - negotiate interpersonal relations between speaker and hearer
- Not mutually exclusive, and schemes vary.
  - Classification of Buysse (2012) adopted.

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Type of relation	Discourse marker function	
Ideational	Indicate a result	Result so is a discourse function (as well as syntactic) because semantically and syntactically optional.
Interpersonal	Draw a conclusion	yeah so she was born in forty-three
	Prompt	but erm so
	Hold the floor	so so that 's that so but not much else has really happened
	Introduce an invited explanation [explanatory so]	So, I did a little research on what the conditions are like in the mines
Textual	Introduce a summary	so they 're not free [...]
	Introduce a section of the discourse	so did you guys have a good week ? [out of the blue]
	Indicate a shift back to a higher unit of the discourse	so what time is the flight tomorrow ? [discussed earlier]
	Introduce a new sequence	so I was like oh my god I have to get this for her like [continuing a narrative]
	Introduce elaboration	so that was brilliant you know cos [...]
	Mark self-correction	So I had to <- -> [...] yeah, so I did have to guess a great deal

Buysse (2012), Halliday & Matthiessen (2004)

Type of relation	Discourse marker function	Abbreviated corpus example
Ideational	Indicate a result	[Cos mummy made the tea ...] so daddy does the washing up.
Interpersonal	Draw a conclusion	yeah so she was born in forty-three
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Explanatory so has interpersonal as well as textual functions.

## CORPUS DATA

## Where to look for data

- Explanatory *so* is a spoken phenomenon.
  - **Conversation** is basic reservoir of speech.
  - Anecdotally, explanatory *so* is characteristic of **academic** usage and **TV/radio** interviews.
- Want data before and after advent.

	before	after
conversation	Spoken BNC (1992)	BNC2014 (2012-16)
academic usage	BASE	—
TV and radio	TV Corpus	TV Corpus

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## Turn-initial *so* in two BNC corpora

	Spoken BNC1994DS	Spoken BNC2014
Total tokens (incl. punctuation)	5m	11.4m
Turn-initial <i>so</i>	8,743	42,007
Frequency per million tokens	1,743.49	3,677.53

- Hits randomly thinned, assigned to discourse classes (or rejected) until 100 examples of turn-initial **discourse** *so* found in each corpus.

Hardie (2013)

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	BNC1994DS	BNC2014
Indicate a result	2	1
Draw a conclusion	18	11
Prompt	0	0
Hold the floor	10	20
Introduce an invited explanation [explanatory <i>so</i> ]	0	0
Introduce a summary	6	4
Introduce a section of the discourse	3	1
Indicate a shift back to a higher unit of the discourse	11	3
Introduce a new sequence	30	16
Introduce elaboration	14	42
Mark self-correction	2	0
Unclassified	4	2
Subtotal	100	100
Total hits examined	120	122
Precision in sample examined	83%	82%

## Two examples

- Unclassified (BNC1994DS)

Jane Which reminds me you still haven't written to Geoffrey and Jean to thank them for your birthday money <-|-> have we?

David <-|-> So mum, I know <-|-> I haven't.

Jane <-|-> Or have <-|-> you, which is more to the point.

- Explanatory *so* (BNC2014, not sample)

A: but do you put the water inside the ball ?

B: yeah so you put all the potatoey stuff in and then you just fill up the rest of it with the tamarind water [...]

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## Turn-initial *so* in BASE

- British Academic Spoken English corpus
- Lectures and seminars (1.6m tokens) recorded at 2 British universities 1998-2005
- 313 hits for turn-initial *so*, 190 pmw
  - rate far lower than in BNC corpora

Nesi & Thompson (2000-2005)

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	BASE
Indicate a result	2
Draw a conclusion	10
Prompt	0
Hold the floor	6
Introduce an invited explanation [explanatory <i>so</i> ]	0
Introduce a summary	22
Introduce a section of the discourse	1
Indicate a shift back to a higher unit of the discourse	9
Introduce a new sequence	19
Introduce elaboration	29
Mark self-correction	0
Unclassified	2
Subtotal	100
Total hits examined	106
Precision in sample examined	94%

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## Which discourse function(s)?

A: yes but you are advising

B: so so we we we tell you what our opinion is and you can modify your proposal if you wish [...]

(two staff members)

- Shift to higher unit?
- No, primarily holding the floor.

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## Which discourse function(s)?

A: yeah we all decided [...] we decided that we can't judge yet the the Cuban Revolution because # it hasn't finished yet it's still running [...] that's the point so continue

B: okay so basically we decided that according to the initial aims that we thought the revolutionaries had when they first came into power in nineteen-fifty-nine # seems to have been a failure [...]

(two students in a group presentation)

- Introducing elaboration, or even explanatory *so*?
- No, primarily introducing a new sequence.

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## TV Corpus

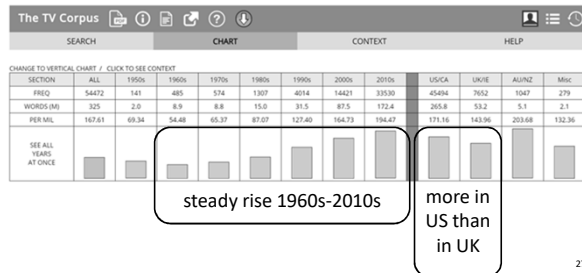
- Dialogue in TV episodes 1950s-2010s in six regions (325m words)
- No marking of speakers, turns or even scene changes
- Searched for string '? So' as very crude proxy for context where explanatory *so* might occur
- 54,472 hits, most of which are discourse *so*, but overwhelming majority **not** explanatory *so*

Davies (2019)

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## String '? So' in TV Corpus

- Proxy for utterance-initial (including turn-initial) discourse *so*



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## British TV example

- A. And you're getting these things up to what sort of height ?
- B. So, we're interested at the height of about 10km, but they continue on up to about 25-30km.

(2016 BBC TV *Horizon*, episode 'Ice Station Antarctica')

Davies (2019)

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## North American media usage

- Striking decrease from the 1970s to 2018 in *well* as a marker of spontaneous new topics (50% to 16%), with a corresponding increase in *so* (25% to 66%)
- Utterance-initial *so* is being extended 'primarily by young women' into marking new turns and new topics.
- 'The same uses [...] are apparently metalinguistically salient to members of the [Canadian] speech community'.

Schlegl (2018: 30, 36-7)

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## ORIGINS

## How old is explanatory *so*?

not confined to explanatory *so*,  
but may include it

- Not in Schiffrin (1987) or any of the 3 grammars
- Not (precisely that usage) yet in *OED*
- US: Bolden gave at least 4 conference papers (2003-) on turn-initial *so* in American conversation.
- In *Language Log* (2010), where Liberman tries to test for the Recency Illusion.
  - In the comments, Canadian usage figures prominently.
- UK: *Daily Mail* (2015), *The Times*, *The Guardian*, BBC *R4 Feedback* (all 2017)
- Probably 21st century, second decade in UK

Schiffrin (1987), Quirk et al. (1985), Biber et al. (1999), Huddleston + Pullum (2002), Bolden (2003a, 2003b, 2008, 2009), Liberman (2010)

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## A 'Just so' story?

"When a computer programmer answers a question, he often begins with the word 'so.'" (Michael Lewis, 1999)

As to how this came about, it is thought that given the international composition of the typical Silicon Valley work site, where a large number did not speak English as their first language, it became the simple "catchall" word of transition. Over time and frequent usage, it eventually became like a tic and just part of the common speech pattern of those in that industry and then spreading beyond.

Blevins (2015)

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## Open questions

- No good evidence yet on whether or not
  - explanatory *so* in UK was borrowed from North America
  - use has been initiated by computer people
  - use has been led by academics
  - use is being led by young women
- All possible
- None necessary for explanation

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## Possible internal origin

- Explanatory *so* takes elements from three existing functions of turn-initial discourse *so*:
  - **Introduce a new sequence** (16-30% in corpora) contributes step within an exposition
  - **Introduce a section** (1-3%) contributes opening gambit
  - **Hold the floor** (up to 20%) extended to accept invitation to take the floor
- Whole complex of functions comes to be associated with giving of explanation.

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## Explanatory *so*

- Turn-initial *so* on long-term trajectory of increase.
- *So* has advantage of not sounding vague (cf. *well*), instead briskly suggesting logical basis for what follows.
- Academic fashion for explanatory *so*

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## PUBLIC REACTION

## What makes a peever peevish?

- Both 1 and 2 must be satisfied:
  1. The potentially offending usage must be noticed.
  2. a. They (think they) remember being taught that it's an error  
or  
b. They can use those words themselves, but not with that meaning or function.
    - An unfamiliar word would satisfy 1 but not 2.  
Less likely to be complained about?

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## Zwicky's warnings

- Recency Illusion
  - the belief that things YOU have noticed only recently are in fact recent.
- Frequency Illusion
  - once you've noticed a phenomenon, you think it happens a whole lot, even "all the time".

Both are selective attention effects.

Zwicky (2005)

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## Critical reaction

- Support for rant by John Humphrys:

It's not being used as a conjunction to join things up, which is how it should be used. I think someone started doing it and then other people have begun slavishly copying it, it becomes fashionable. It's just carelessness, it doesn't have any meaning when used this way.

(Dr Bernard Lamb, 2015  
President of the Queen's English Society)

Creighton (2015)

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- Satisfies my 1 and 2b:  
'I do use this word, but not like that'.

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## Paired cause-result clauses

He was bored, so he went for a walk.

cause result

He went for a walk because he was bored.

result cause

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## Variants of our causal clause

A. Why do you live in Manchester when your fellowship is in Bristol?

cf. well, actually, etc.

B. Because/The reason is, my girlfriend lives here.

B. My girlfriend lives here

Well/You see/Actually/... , my girlfriend lives here.

So my girlfriend lives here.

This so plays no part in cause/result semantics

Cf. He was bored, so he went for a walk

cause cause cause cause result

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## Speech vs. writing

- Peever applies conventions of formal writing.
- But speech is different
  - typically less formal
  - discourse functions more important and different
- NB. *so* from interviewer is of long standing and probably acceptable:
  - So are we are we talking er do you see this as a as a as a launch pad? (BNC)

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## Linking *because*

- Used by UK radio interviewers:  
Wh- why d'you think it's turning now, though, (cos those things have been true for quite a long time, haven't they? (Dominic O'Connell, *Today*, 12 Jun 2019)



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## Linking *because*

And I've got to ask, what do we learn from the composer's own recordings here, because we're going to hear one of them next, aren't we?



(Andrew McGregor, BBC R3 *Record Review*, 6 Jul 2019)



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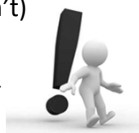
## Linking *because*

- Very little causality.
- Metatextual or discourse-oriented, if any: 'the reason I am asking is'.
- Main function: enhances fluency and continuity?
- Mid-sentence, mid-turn, hence not very salient.
  - Probably fails my condition 1.
  - Probably satisfies condition 2b.
- Doesn't (AFAIK) provoke listener complaints.

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## Why is *so* so salient?

- Imagine an advanced speaker (who has explanatory *so* in repertoire)
- Conservative hearer (who doesn't)
- Explanatory *so* grabs attention – typically very first word uttered
  - or after initial signal of (dis)agreement
- Interpreted as misuse of result *so*.



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## Initial *so* is acceptable in writing

- He was bored, so he went for a walk.
- Clear result meaning, clear syntactic function, subordinate clause can't be fronted:
  - \*So he went for a walk, he was bored.
- But *so*-clause can be fronted in purpose sense:
  - We booked early so (that) we could choose good seats.
  - So (that) we could choose good seats, we booked early.

sentence-initial, and could be turn-initial

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## In speech, more opportunities

So, how've you been?

- What does *so* mean here?
- In isolation, very little.
- Has organising functions in dialogue:
  - announces that speaker is 'taking the floor'
  - makes opening of utterance less abrupt
  - ?implicitly refers to shared knowledge and reason for utterance (e.g. that interlocutors haven't seen each other for a while)

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## Explanatory *so*

- Follows invitation to take the floor,
  - interviewer asking question
  - host introducing academic speaker
- Signals polite acceptance of invitation.
- In some contexts, perhaps recognises that one's expert knowledge has been solicited.

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## Recognised but resented?




- Hunter Thurman recommended avoidance of initial *so* in business presentations:

That little head cock, slight furrowing of the brow, and set-up with "so" says to your audience, "I'm trying to dumb this down so someone like you may have at least a chance of comprehending the importance of what I do."

Thurman (2014)

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## No longer a safe assumption

- Is this explanatory *so*?  
- A. [...] but what does it set up, what does Stravinsky say about the opening?
- B. So this is as it were 'spring awakening' [...]
- In non-academic conversation, turn-  s
- more commonly just a topic introduction
- It carries no sense of intellectual superiority.

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**ENVOI**

## Linking meaning of initial *so*

- Ranges from logical sequence of propositions [result *so*, purpose *so*] to vague 'in the light of our shared knowledge of the preceding context [explicit or implicit], it's appropriate for me to start (or continue) speaking as follows'.
  - and any stages in between
  - often more than 1 sense/function at same time

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## Is explanatory *so* 'a thing'?

- Yes,
- but it is one of many overlapping discourse uses of initial *so* in dialogue,
- made artificially prominent by its salience to more conservative speakers.

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## Thank you

slides and references are on my downloads page:

<http://tinyurl.com/DD-download>

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