

So, let's talk about *so*

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Plan

- Explanatory *so*?
- Cause and result
- Dating
- Historical development
- Conclusion

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EXPLANATORY *SO*

Explanatory *so*

- Why do you live in Manchester when your fellowship is in Bristol?
 - So my girlfriend lives here. [...]
- 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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Straw poll

- Do you use explanatory *so* yourself?
- Is it noticeable when used by others?
- Is it objectionable?



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Critical reaction

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)

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CAUSE AND RESULT

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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Our causal clause

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

B. Because my girlfriend lives here.

Well/You see/Actually/The reason is/... , my girlfriend lives here.

My girlfriend lives here. This so plays no part in cause/result semantics

So my girlfriend lives here.

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

cause cause cause cause result

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Other uses of so (and *because*)

- So has many uses – not just as subordinating conjunction indicating result.
- Can belong to a number of word classes, and is sometimes unclassifiable.
- Can help organise a discourse.
- Even *because* is not always used as subordinating conjunction indicating cause.

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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)

- Perhaps to enhance fluency and continuity?
- If any causal sense, it is metatextual or discourse oriented ('the reason I am asking is').
 - Mid-sentence, mid-turn, hence not very salient
 - Doesn't (AFAIK) provoke listener complaints



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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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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



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What makes a peever peevish?

- I speculate that these conditions are necessary:
 1. The 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.
- Notice that *so* from an interviewer is probably acceptable: So are we are we talking er do you see this as a as a as a launch pad? (BNC J9X 460)
- Doesn't trigger peevish, as it looks like result *so*.

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.

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DATING

How old is explanatory *so*?

- No later than 2015 in UK:

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 by Sam Creighton in *Mail Online*

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How old is explanatory so?

not confined to explanatory so,
but may include it

- Anonymous leader in *The Times* (2017), David Sheatmadari in *The Guardian* (2017), Heike Pichler on BBC R4 *Feedback* (3, 10 Nov 2017).
- Turn-initial *so* discussed earlier in US.
- In *Language Log* (2010), where Mark Liberman tries to test for the Recency Illusion.
 - In the comments, Canadian usage figures prominently.
- Galina Bolden gave at least 4 conference papers from 2003 on turn-initial *so* in American conversation.

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How old is explanatory so?

- Not in path-breaking study of discourse markers by Schiffrin (1987), which includes other uses of *so*.
- Not recognised in any of standard reference grammars (Quirk et al. 1985, Biber et al. 1999, Huddleston & Pullum 2002).
- Not (precisely that usage) yet in *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- Largely a 21st-century development?

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Desert Island Discs

- Corpus 1962-2005 provided by Nick Smith. No explanatory *so* among the turn-initial *so*'s.
- Topic resumption:
<Guest> But I fell in love and I'm afraid that going abroad er <,> was stopped
<Interviewer> Yes
<Guest> So I fell in love and <,> got married (1984)

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Desert Island Discs

- Result and/or topic resumption:
<Guest> It's a frightening responsibility <,> because you've got to remember when you're doing a sitting or when you're <,> doing a public appearance that person you're talking to is believing every word you say
<Interviewer> Mm
<Guest> So <,> it's a big responsibility (1985)

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Possible origin

“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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Possible origin

- In Canada, Schlegl (2018) gives evidence that young women are primary users of utterance-initial *so*.
- No good evidence yet on whether or not
 - UK explanatory *so* was borrowed from North America
 - use has been led 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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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

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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Sentence grammar isn't everything

- Some words and phrases serve to organise discourse (including written) or conversation.
- Discourse markers may have conventional grammatical and semantic functions at the same time, but not necessarily.
- Elizabeth Traugott has shown that discourse (textual, procedural) functions often grow out of propositional meaning.

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Progression to discourse

- *fairly* 'in a fair manner' > 'somewhat' (speaker judgement)
- *as far as* spatial > textual reference
- *I must keep to time* > *I must be running out of time*
- *while* 'during period that' > 'although'
- *now* 'at this moment' > 'next topic'

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Unscripted conversation

- Normal people signal continually to their interlocutors by intonation, facial expression, body language and words, for showing attention ('uh-huh', 'mmm'), turn-taking, etc.
- For example, take the floor to disagree:
 - Hang on!
 - Oy, just a minute, ...
 - With the greatest respect, ...
 - (That's) rubbish!

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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 (2014):

That little head cock, slight frowning 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."

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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 it?
- B. So this is as it were 'spring awakening' [...]
- In non-academic conversation, turn-
more commonly just a topic introduction 
- It carries no sense of intellectual superiority.

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New topic so in BNC2014

S0032: so you guys have played Jungle Speed right ?
yeah
S0021: they have Jungle Speed they introduced me to
Jungle Speed
S0032: it 's such a terrible game (.) it 's so so dangerous
S0021: I 'm quite excited about the new version though
you know
S0032: >> so dangerous

(text S23A)

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New topic so in BNC2014

S0653: so in my lesson today to the adults that I
teach we were looking at similes and
metaphors have you guys done those at
school yet ?

S0654: yeah

S0655: >> I do n't even know

S0654: but I 've forgotten

(text S24D)

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New topic so in BNC2014

S0315: see how you get on with the towel and if you do get
too warm you can always then

S0255: >> yeah

S0315: throw it off ca n't you ? so [4 turns omitted]

S0315: so er let me just

S0255: >> --UNCLEARWORD

S0315: unveil your feet

S0255: yes

S0315: and we 'll just have a bit of a consultation first

S0255: okay

S0315: about everything (...) --UNCLEARWORD get the spray
out cream we 'll use a bit of cream on your feet today

(text S28F)

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New topic *so* in BNC

Unknown speaker 28 I bet she won't be.
Unkn. spkr. 29 No, I bet.
Unkn. spkr. 30 She'll be in the penny farthing then.
D94PS000 31 Well, I will then have to ring her won't I?
Unkn. spkr. 32 Mm.
D94PS000 33 **So** will you all get round to your
limerick's please ladies.
Unkn. spkr. 34 <unclear> .
D94PS000 35 Thank you all very much.
Unkn. spkr. 36 Thank you.
Unkn. spkr. 37 Elsie, oh.

(D94 28)

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CONCLUSION (PROVISIONAL)

Linking meaning of initial *so*

- In dialogue, ranges from logical sequence of propositions [result *so*, purpose *so*] to vague 'in the light of our shared knowledge of the preceding context [\pm linguistically explicit], it's appropriate for me to start 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'?

- Perhaps not. Is it merely one of many overlapping discourse uses of initial *so* in dialogue,
- made artificially prominent by its salience to more conservative speakers?

Dual origin of explanatory *so*?

1. Academic fashion for explanatory *so* highly salient
 - possibly imported from North America
 - explanation is not the **function** of *so*, merely context
2. Fertile ground in UK, given probable medium-term rise of other turn-initial *so* barely noticed

New topics raised spontaneously in speech are marked decreasingly by *well* (falling from 50% in the 1970s to 16% in 2018) and increasingly by *so* (rising from 25% in the 1970s to 66% in 2018) over time. (Schlegl 2018)

in North America; will do frequency comparison of BNC and BNC2014 to see if new-topic *so* also on rise in UK 42

MANCHESTER
1824

The University
of Manchester

Thank you

slides and references are on my downloads page:

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

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