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
Paris 3 4 October 2019

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• Introduction
• So in sentence grammar
• So in discourse grammar
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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.

Examples from BBC R4 Today

• Chris Skidmore, 12 Jun 2019
  • Sachin Oza, 17 Jun 2019

‘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 [...]
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

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.


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.

SO IN DISCOURSE GRAMMAR

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.

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 Buyse (2012) adopted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of relation</th>
<th>Discourse marker function</th>
<th>Original corpus example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercalary</td>
<td>Indicate a result</td>
<td>Do mummy made the tea... so Daddy boss the washing up.</td>
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<td>Introduce an invited explanation</td>
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**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.

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<th>after</th>
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<tr>
<td>conversation</td>
<td>Spoken BNC (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic usage</td>
<td>BASE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV and radio</td>
<td>TV Corpus</td>
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Turn-initial so in two BNC corpora

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BNC1994DS</th>
<th>BNC2014</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total tokens (incl. punctuation)</td>
<td>5m</td>
<td>11.4m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn-initial so</td>
<td>8,743</td>
<td>42,007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency per million tokens</td>
<td>1,743.49</td>
<td>3,677.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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- Hits randomly thinned, assigned to discourse classes (or rejected) until 100 examples of turn-initial discourse so found in each corpus.

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 […]

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

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.
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 to 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.

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

String ? So in TV Corpus

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

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’.

ORIGINS
How old is explanatory so?

- Not in Schiffrin (1987) or any of 3 grammars
- Not (precisely that usage) 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.
- Probably 21st century, second decade in UK

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.

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 academicians
  - use is being led by young women
- All possible
- None necessary for explanation

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.

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

PUBLIC REACTION

Denison, ‘A just so story’
Denison, ‘A just so story’
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)

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)

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)

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.

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.

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.
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)

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.

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.”

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 more commonly just a topic introdu
- It carries no sense of intellectual superiority.

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

ENVOI
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.

Thank you

slides and references are on my downloads page:

http://tinyurl.com/DD-download
References


Creighton, Sam. 2015. SO wrong! Why John Humphrys is in a rage at such a little word after it invades everyday speech [19 Jun 2015]. Mail Online.

Davies, Mark. 2019. TV Corpus. Brigham Young University.


