

Prosody, grammar, and clause combining: *so* in American English

Sandra A. Thompson  
Ryoko Suzuki

Abstract for Workshop on “Tight and Loose Grammar”, TUFSS, Nov. 29-30, 2014

The use of *so* in English interactions has attracted the attention of several scholars. Schiffrin’s (1987) chapter on *so* investigates its use as a marker of ‘result’. Bolden (2006, 2008, 2009) investigates *so* used to “launch conversational topics” in various contexts. Raymond (2004) looks at the “stand-alone *so*” as a practice for prompting action, while Local and Walker (2005) discuss the way in which prosodic features of the production of the stand-alone *so* affect its use in projecting a next action. Barth-Weingarten and Couper-Kuhlen’s (2011) paper on *and*, whose uses overlap to a considerable extent with those of *so*, also informs our study.

In our paper, we extend this research by examining the use of *so* in English conversation specifically as a ‘connector’ in terms of the ‘tightness’ or ‘looseness’ of its connection. We investigate the relationship between its prosodic environment and its function in relating a ‘result’, ‘tie-back’, or ‘upshot’ to more local or more extended levels of activity. Our data consist of about 30 hours of telephone and video-recorded conversations among friends and family members speaking American English.

We find three types of ‘connection’ that *so* engages in:

(A) When *so* is serving strictly as a connector of two **clauses**, it has a ‘through-produced’ prosody, and a ‘local’ result/purpose<sup>1</sup> interpretation. We consider this a relatively tight connection.

(1) Michelle: well scoot in though **so** they can see you.

(2) Ava: we’re gonna see a picture o:n on something good tomorrow in that class anyway  
**so** it’s no hassle

However, the great majority of instances of occurrences of *so* in our data are prosodic-unit-initial and are connecting its clause back to previous material which is something ‘larger’, more distant, and more amorphous than a previous clause. There are 3 environments in which this can be seen, each one calling for a different type of inference on the part of the recipient, and each one revealing a different type of ‘looseness’.

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<sup>1</sup> A *so*-clause is interpreted as ‘result’ if its mood is realis, and as ‘purpose’ if it is irrealis (as in (1) and (2)).

(B1) *So* initiates a new turn and a new prosodic unit, with pitch reset, where its job is to tie its clause back to distant previous talk requiring inferencing to make the connection.

- (3) Ava: I have a lot of tough courses  
                                    [83 lines later, with talk unrelated to courses]  
Bee:                  (0.4)  
                  **so**, I got some lousy courses this term too.

(B2) The *so*-clause introduces an ‘upshot’ of previous talk, what it is an ‘upshot’ of is indeterminate and left to recipients’ inferencing.

- (4) [Bee has been talking about friends’ healthy new baby]

Bee: she had gai:ned about forty pounds anyway. they said she was tremendous.  
                  (0.5)  
                  **so** I’m sure they’re happy about that.

(B3) A *so*-clause projects an ‘upshot’ of preceding talk, but this time the upshot is unexpressed, i.e., left ‘hanging’; this is similar to Raymond’s ‘stand-alone *so*. Here recipients are required to infer what kind of upshot the speaker might be projecting but not stating.

- (5) Laura: OakRidge Boys are kind of an (.) older band.  
                                  (0.2)  
                  to begin with, **so**,  
                                  (0.5)

(C) A sub-type of (B3) has become a fixed expression and taken on a life of its own: in this usage, *so* introduces an ‘upshot’, but the speaker claims no knowledge of what that ‘upshot’ is. In our pilot-study collection of about 60 *sos*, 10% of the occurrences of *so* are found in the fixed expression *so I don’t know*.

- (6) [Bee has been talking about how uncertain her grandmother’s upcoming surgery is]

Bee: she wasn’t home by the t-you know when I left for school today.  
Ava: mhm.  
Bee: hh **so** I don’t know, (0.3)

In spite of all the inferential work required of them, co-participants nevertheless routinely treat these various ‘connecting’ functions of *so* as unproblematic.

Based on our data and findings of the researchers mentioned above, we argue that:

- a. These uses are all related, though the researchers mentioned above treat them as independent.
- b. For each of these uses, the combination of the prosody together with the position of *so* in its larger environment allow a characterization in terms of ‘tightness’, but thinking in terms of a linear ‘continuum’ of ‘Tight >> Loose’ will not capture the connecting and inferencing

complexities involved. Rather, we must envision a multi-dimensional 'tight' vs. 'loose' grammar space.

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