

THE PARTICLE *SO* IN ENGLISH

by
Bruce Fraser

In a series of books and articles, Anna Wierzbicka has dealt with particles, the little words of language. In an edited volume of the *Journal of Pragmatics* in 1986 she wrote:

Particles - little words like *well*, *why* or *even* - are what distinguishes human language from the languages of robots. Well, perhaps not just particles - there are also interjections, swearwords, and a number of other 'irrational' devices, lexical as well as grammatical, which make human speech distinctly human. But there can be no doubt that small words and expressions such as *well*, *just*, *also*, *as well* and *but*, to mention only those used in this paragraph... pertain to the very essence of human communication.

She then explains why there has been so little work done on these items, after which she presents 13 perspectives from which particles may be studied.

Following her eclectic spirit, the present paper is an attempt to examine one of her particles: *so*. The paper does not fall properly into any of the 13 perspectives, but falls rather into several of them, since it is an attempt to treat the English word *so* in all of its roles. Accordingly, I am interested in describing and when possible accounting for the presence of *so* in sentence such as those in (1a-k).

- (1) a) He has said things that simply are not *so*.
- b) A: Is he here? B: I think *so*.
- c) Sit down, and do *so* right away.
- d) John can throw the ball, and *so* can I.
- e) If he is a criminal, it's his parents who have made him *so*.
- f) A: You can't do that. B: I ca:n *SO*.
- g) You are *SO* vain.
- h) He left early *so* (*that*) he could avoid traffic.
- i) A: I was tired. B: *So*, you left.

- j) She moved the handle like *so* before it broke.
- k) I am feeling just *so-so* today.

In what follows I will treat the function of *so* in six categories: 1) **Denotative *so***, as in (1a), in which *so* has a denotative meaning; 2) **Anaphoric *so***, as in (1b-e), in which *so* replaces identical lexical material in S2 which is identical with material in S1; 3) **Emphatic *so***, which in (1f) serves to emphasize disagreement with the content of the first proposition while in (1g), it serves to emphasize the sense of a constituent; 4) **Discourse Marker *so***, as in (1h-i), in which *so* specifies how the sentence with which it is associated is to be understood relative to the previous sentence; 5) **Combined *so***, as in (1j) in which *so*, in combination with another formative, carries a meaning which neither formative carries alone; and 6) **Idiomatic *so***, as in (1k), in which *so*, in combination with one or more formatives, functions with a specific but non-compositional meaning.

Some of the descriptive material found in this paper is drawn from Quirk et al. (1985). I make no claim that any of the material on *so* is original, or that I have treated all possible variations of the function of the particle *so* that I have identified, or even that I have treated all senses of this particle. What I have intended to do is to gather most of the facts about *so* in one place in an interesting and insightful way, thereby hopefully suggesting some new avenues to pursue.

1. Denotative *so*

There are only two cases of *so* in which it functions as a lexical item with a denotative content. One case is illustrated in (2); a second is treated under Emphatic *so*, below.

- (2) a) He said things that simply were not *so*. [true]
- b) Is that *so*?
- c) A: It's hot today. B: This is *so*.
- d) A: I've won. B: It's *so*; you have won.
- e) Say it isn't *so*.
- f) This must be *so* because he is always right.

So here is synonymous with *true* or *the case*, and it must occur after the verb *to be* or a verb like *seem* or *appear*, which follows from the fact that it replaces the adjective *true*. However, this *so* cannot replace *true* when it functions as a nominal modifier, for example, *true love* or *true statement*. Interestingly, in sentences like 'I knew he was going to be late, and *so* he is,' and 'A: It's starting to snow. B: *So* it is,' the *so* appears to be replacing the sequence *it is true* rather than simply *true*.

2. Anaphoric *so*

Here, I consider four distinct cases in which *so* occurs in the second of two sequential sentences, perhaps conjoined. These take the canonical form,

$$(3) X1-Y1-Z1_{S1} - X2-Y2-Z2_{S2},$$

where Y1 and Y2 are identical lexical strings, with *so* replacing Y2 in S2. The *so* in these cases has no independent meaning and serves only as an indicator of the deleted material.

The first anaphoric case is illustrated by the examples in (4).

- (4) a) Did he leave yet? B: I think *so*.¹ [he left already]
- b) I think the Celtics will win. All my friends say *so*.
- c) It was a disaster, or it seemed *so*.
- d) If you want to go, (then) just say *so*.
- e) A: Do you think he will win? B: I don't think *so*, I know *so*.
- f) He is far too considerate, if I may say *so*.
- g) Are you ready? If *so*, then let's go.
- h) A: It's hot in there. B: Even *so* [if it's hot in there], I will not leave.
- i) A: You have to leave now. B: Why *so*?

In these cases, *so* replaces a full proposition contained in S2 which is identical with a S1 proposition, with the further requirement that the S2 proposition occur after one of a small number of verbs such as

afraid, appear, assume, be, believe, fear, figure, guess, hope, know, say, seem, and think. For some of these verbs (e.g. *believe, think*) the negated S2 still takes *so*, as in (5a), while for others (e.g. *afraid, hope*) the lexical item *not* must occur in place of *so*, as in (5b).

- (5) a) A: Is he here? B: I believe *so*/I don't believe *so*.
 b) A: Is he here? B: I hope *so*/*I don't hope *so*/I hope *not*.

There is an alternative form of this use of *so*, namely, where the *so* inverts with what precedes it, as long as S2 is a positive, declarative sentence, as in (6a-c).

- (6) a) Did he leave yet? B: *So* I think.
 b) I think the Celtics will win. *So* all my friends say.
 c) It was a disaster, or *so* it seemed.
 d) *If you want to go, *so* (then) just say.
 e) *A: Do you think he will win? B: *So* I don't think, *so*, I know.
 f) *He is far too considerate, *so* if I may say.
 g) *Are you ready? *So* if, then let's go.
 h) A: *It's hot in there. B: *So* even, I will not leave.
 i) A: *You have to leave now. B: **So* why?

The second case of anaphoric *so* is illustrated by the examples in (7).

- (7) a) A: Did you speak with Ned? B: I *did so* yesterday. [I spoke with him yesterday]
 b) A: When has he been singing? B: He has been *doing so* off and on for two days.
 c) I request that you sit down, and *do so* right away.
 d) You can walk, but I wouldn't *do so* at this time.
 e) One should not eat and swim. To *do so* is foolish.
 f) Harry disagrees with the results, and Sue *does so* too.
 g) Mark is painting his house because Tom *did so* last year.

- h) Not only does Jane have too much to do, but *so, too*, does Harry.

In these cases, where *do it* is usually (though not always) equivalent to *do so* (see (7f,h)), the *do so* replaces the S2 verb and its object(s) as long as S1 and S2 are positive, active sentences with identical action verb (and objects). This can be seen from the examples in (8).

- (8) a) *John won't sing and Mary won't *do so*, too. [non-positive sentence]
 b) *The ball was thrown by Harry and it was *done so* by John. [non-active sentence]
 c) *A: Peter likes work. B: Bob *does so* too. [non-action verb]
 d) *Mark swims the mile and Mike *does so* the half mile. [not identical objects]

However, only the verbs plus object(s), if they exist, need to be identical, as (9) shows.

- (9) a) He will sing, and Mary might *do so* too. [different modals]
 b) He will sing today and Mary will *do so* tomorrow. [different time adverbials]
 c) I admit to cheating and Harry *does so* too/also. [first verb is performative]
 d) Tom telephoned to Francis but he didn't tell Mary that he had *done so*. [different auxiliaries; negated higher verb]²

The third case is illustrated by the examples in (10).

- (10) a) John can throw the ball, and *so* can I. (throw the ball).
 b) John has been asked to the party, and *so* has Harry (been asked).

- c) A: I promise to go. B: So does Harry (promise to go).
 d) Jack doubted/disagreed with her and so did I (disagree with her).

Here, the *so* is not directly replacing repetitive lexical material, as above, but is actually replacing *too*, as the following example shows:

- (11) a) John can throw the ball, and I can throw the ball too.
 b) John can throw the ball, and I can too.
 c) John can throw the ball, and so can I.

For this *so* to occur, S1 and S2 must both be explicitly positive, active, declarative sentences and totally identical except for the subject. These restrictions can be seen from the following examples.

- (12) a) *Mary didn't believe Sarah, and so didn't I. [non-positive]
 b) *Sarah was believed by Mary and so was I. [non-active]
 c) *I will talk to Mary, and so can John.
 [non-similar modals]
 d) *John comes here, and so does Harry. [non-declarative]
 e) *When can John come, and so can Harry. [non-declarative]

The fourth anaphoric case is illustrated by the examples in (13).

- (13) a) A: Prices seem (to be) reasonably stable.
 B: I would guess that they will probably remain so. [stable]
 b) If he's a criminal, it's his parent who have made him so.
 c) Brett's work is not yet consistent, but it will no doubt become so.
 d) The plants appear healthy, but I wonder how long they will remain so.
 e) Cairo was hot but Luxor was even more so.
 f) I was exhausted but Harry was less so.

Here the *so* occurs in place of a predicate nominal or predicate adjective in S2, if it is identical with a constituent in S1.³

3. *Emphatic so*

We find here two distinct cases where the function of *so* is to provide emphasis. The first case of emphatic *so* is illustrated by the examples in (14), where the emphatic *too* (but not *also*), may be substituted for the heavily-stressed *so*.

- (14) a) A: You won't go. B: I will *SO/TOO* (go).
 b) A: He can't have been doing it. B: He can *SO*.
 c) He doesn't seem well. He does *SO*.
 d) He doesn't weigh even 95 pounds. He does *SO*.
 e) Mark hasn't been seen by anyone. B: He has *SO*.
 f) A: Don't stop printing. B: I will *SO* stop printing.

In these emphatic cases, *so* does not have any denotative meaning. Its function in (14) is to emphatically assert the state of affairs negatively posited in S1, where the verb is only optionally absent. In this case, S1 and S2 must be identical declarative or imperative sentences, except that S1 must be explicitly negative, the modals *may*, *might*, or *must* may not occur in S1 or S2, and, contrary to the previous cases, S1 and S2 must be spoken by different speakers.⁴ That these restrictions apply can be seen by considering the following examples.

- (15) a) *A: You can't go tomorrow. B: I can *SO* go today.
 [different adverbials]
 b) *A: You must not leave. B: I must *SO*. [modal *must* is present]
 c) *A: Discontinue printing. B: I will *SO* continue (printing). [not explicitly negative]
 d) *A: That is impossible. B: It is *SO* possible. [not explicitly negative]

Similar to earlier cases, when S1 is positive, the emphatic *not* occurs rather than *so*, for example,

- (16) a) A: You can do it. B: I can NOT (do it).
b) A: Keep running. B: I will NOT (keep running).

The second case of emphatic *so* occurs when *so* (or the alternative forms *so much* or *so many*) modifies a constituent with a concomitant intensification of the sense of the modified constituent. Note that with positive sentences, the vowel of *so* must be lengthened if it directly modifies an adjective, as in (17a), but not if an adverbial is interposed, as in (17b).

- (17) a) You're **so**: vain.
b) You're **so** very/terribly vain.
c) You're not **so/that** vain.
d) He talks **so much**.
e) Mark tried **so** hard to succeed, but he failed.
f) I'm not feeling **so/that** good today.
g) I love him **so (much)**. [note abbreviated form]
h) Why does everyone tease you **so (much)**?
i) Don't obsess about it **so (much)**.
j) Why did he bring **so much** candy to the party?
k) Don't buy **so many** dolls in China.
l) A: I got a fish. B: So you have.

Interestingly, when interrogative sentences containing this *so* are negated, as (17f, k), *so (much)* may be replaced by *that much*. On the other hand, imperative sentences with this *so* typically occur only in the negated form but do not acceptably occur in the positive version (*'Leave so early').⁵

A rather interesting thing happens when the sentences of (17) are followed by a discourse marker such as (*with the result*) *that*, *consequently*, *as a result*, or *so that*, introducing a second sentence, as in (18).⁶ The meaning of *so* shifts from an emphasis marker to a denotative meaning, synonymous with *to the extent* or *sufficiently*.

- (18) a) You're **so** vain, (*with the result*) **that** you think this song is about you.
b) You're not **so/that** vain. **Consequently**, you can tolerate a little criticism.
c) He talks **so much so that** he never hears what others are saying.
d) Mark tried **so** hard to succeed **that as a result** he eventually succeeded.
e) I'm not feeling **so/that** good today. **As a result**, I'd better go home.
f) I love him **so (much)** **that** I just can't describe it.
g) Don't obsess about it **so much so that** you get sick.
h) Don't buy **so many** dolls in China **that** you get taxed by customs.

There is an alternative form of the positive, conjoined version of these sentences, as the following show.

- (19) a) **So** vain are you **that** you think this song is about you.
b) **So** hard did he try (*with the result*) **that** he finally succeeded.
c) **So** lost in thought was she **that (as a result)** I couldn't rouse her.

4. Discourse Marker *so*

Discourse markers are lexical expressions which signal the relationship between the sentence they are a part of, S2, and the prior sentence, S1. They are not part of the propositional content of the sentence with which they are associated, S2; they carry a procedural rather than a representational meaning; and they typically introduce S2, although this is not necessary. There are well over 100 discourse markers in English, including *after all*, *however*, *in contrast*, *and*, *but*, *so*, *furthermore*, *on the other hand*, *consequently*, *thus*, and *in addition* (cf. Fraser, forthcoming a, b).

Some discourse markers relate only the semantic reality (the 'facts') of the two sentences while others, including *so*, may, in

addition, relate sentences on a logical (epistemic) level and/or a speech act (pragmatic) level. This was pointed out by Schiffrin (1987) who wrote:

A fact-based causal relation between cause and result holds between the idea unit, more precisely, between the event, state, and so on, which they encode. A knowledge-based cause relation holds when a speaker uses some piece(s) of information as a warrant for an inference (a hearer-inference). An action-based causal relation holds when a speaker presents a motive for an action being performed through talk – either his/her own action or an interlocutor's action.

and later by Sweetser (1990) who wrote:

Causal conjunctions [which include *so*] in the speech-act domain, then, indicate a causal explanation of the speech act being performed, while in the epistemic domain a causal conjunction will mark the cause of a belief or conclusion, and in the content [semantic] domain it will mark 'real-world' causality of an event.

Turning now to the particulars of the discourse marker *so*, there are two cases which function on the semantic level. The first is illustrated in (20), where the *so* signals the speaker's belief that the state of affairs expressed in S2 is facilitated if the state of affairs expressed in S1 is achieved. This sense of possibility accounts for the presence of some variant of *can* or *will* as the modal in S2.

- (20) a) Jack leaves early **so (that)** he can avoid the traffic.
 b) I opened the door, **so (that)/in order that** the cat would be free to go out.
 c) Sit up, **so (that)** I can see you.
 d) Leave early **so (that)** you will have enough time to take a shower.
 e) Why don't you help out John **so (that)** he can leave in time to catch his train.
 f) She moved quickly, **so as** to avoid being caught.
 g) Turn it up, **in order** to drown out his singing.

Here, S1 may occur as a sentence of any form while S2, which is introduced by *so (that)* (or *in order that*, or *so as* or *in order*, in the case with an infinitive in S2) must be a declarative sentence.

Note the conditional flavor of this *so* when S1 is a declarative sentence: 'If Jack leaves/left early, then he can/could avoid the traffic;' 'If I open/ opened the door, then the cat will/would be free to go out.' And in case S1 consists of a negated imperative, such as in (21),

- (21) a) Don't sit up, **so (that/*in order that)** you can remain invisible.
 b) Don't leave late **so (that)/*in order that** you will arrive on time.

the discourse marker can be *so*, but not *in order that*. Also, note that the infinitive form with this *so*, as in (20f-g), permits a permuted form, with the *so as* optionally present, as in (22).

- (22) a) **(So as)** to avoid being caught, she moved quickly.
 b) **(In order)** to drown out his singing, turn it up.

The second function of the discourse marker *so* on the semantic level signals the speaker's belief that the state of affairs expressed in S2 follows from the state of affairs expressed in S1. Consider the sentences in (23).

- (23) a) We will pay him immediately, **so** he will leave without controversy.
 b) A: There was a bee outside. B: **So** you were very careful.
 c) He left early, **so** I didn't have time to talk to him.
 d) I didn't think the lecture was interesting. **So** (as a result) I left.
 e) A: He is yelling. B: **So** I will stay away from him.
 f) The water didn't boil, **so** we can't have tea.

Both S1 and S2 must be declarative sentences. In contrast to the examples in (20), this use of *so* is interchangeable with certain other discourse markers such as *thus*, *with the result (that)*, *that*, *as a result (of that)*, *consequently*, *as a consequence*, *because of that*, and *it follows (from that)*.

It is interesting to note that for the cases in which S1 is a declarative sentence, *because* can occur with both sets of examples, as (24) and (25) show.

- (24) a) **Because** Jack leaves early, he can avoid the traffic.
 b) **Because** I opened the door, the cat would be free to go out.
 c) **Because** she moved quickly, she avoided being caught.
- (25) a) **Because** we paid him immediately, he left contented.
 b) **Because** there is a bee outside, I am being very careful.
 c) **Because** he left early, I didn't have time to talk to him.
 d) **Because** I didn't think the lecture was interesting, I left.
 e) **Because** he is yelling, I will stay away.
 f) **Because** the water didn't boil, we didn't have tea.

As indicated in the quotes given above, *so* functions on the two other levels: the epistemic (logical) and the speech act level. These are represented in (26) and (27), respectively.

Epistemic Level

- (26) a) Susan is married. **So** she is no longer single. (ambiguous)
 b) A: Bill's car is not here. B: **So** he decided not to come after all.
 c) He came, **so** he heard me calling. (Sweetser, 1990, example 5b)

- d) The people have left, **so** the meeting should be over.
 e) The witness is biased, **so** we don't want to take a chance on him.

Speech Act Level ⁷

- (27) a) You've already had your dinner. **So** stop looking like that.
 b) **So**, in closing, I request that you all have a pleasant evening.
 c) A: Turn right at the light. B: **So** I don't go past the school.
 d) [on being confronted by another, but without an utterance] **So**, you found me!
 e) A: My clothes are still wet. B: **So**, put the drier on for 30 minutes more.

5. *So* in Combination

In the cases examined up to this point, the *so* could function by itself, although in some of the cases (e.g., *so much*, *so that*) there was additional lexical material that could be optionally present. Now I want to turn to cases where *so* is in combination with another formative where together they have a meaning which neither has alone.

The first case might be nicknamed the 'deictic *so*,' since both forms require face-to-face interaction so that the appropriate gestures might be observed. One type is illustrated by the examples in (28).

- (28) a) He did it **like so**. (gestures)
 b) She moved the handle **like so** before it broke. (gestures)

For some people, the *so* in (28a) can function alone, without the *like*, but I take this to be a case of ellipsis. Note that the verb in such cases must be a verb of action and that the (*like so*), which is synonymous with *this way* or *thus*, replaces a manner adverbial.

The second type is illustrated by the examples in (29).

- (29) a) He was **about so** tall. (gestures)
b) The rail was **about so** narrow. (gestures)

Here, the expression *about so* must modify an adjective which specifies a physical dimension such as *tall*, *big*, *wide*, *narrow*.

A second case involves sentences such as (30),

- (30) a) He walked **ever so** quietly across the floor.
b) You look **ever so** much better today.

where the combination, which modifies an adverbial, has the meaning of *very*. A similar case is shown in (31),

- (31) a) He comes into the store every **so many** days.
b) He placed markers every **so many** feet.

where the *so many* specifies a periodic time or distance but with the amount left unspecified.

Another case involves the sentences in (32),

- (32) a) **So long as** you are here, try it on.
b) I like ice cream (just) **so long as** it is chocolate.
c) She may go, **so long as** he goes with her.

where the *so long as* is an alternative form for *as long as*, both of which have the meaning *given that*. Similar are the sentences in (33),

- (33) a) **In so far as** I know, it's ready to go.
b) **So far as** I can tell, you are the best person for the job.

in which, analogous to (32), *so far*, *as far as*, both are equal to *to the extent that*.

Similar is *not so...as...*, as in

- (34) a) I didn't **so much** love her **as** admire her.
b) He won't **so much** as deign to speak to her.

Another case is illustrated by (35),

- (35) a) We were confronted by the **so-called** Irish Mafia.
b) This debate is about the **so-called** academic freedom at universities.

where the *so-called* is equivalent to the 'group that some people call,' but I have no evidence that this is the source.

Then we have sentences such as (36),

- (36) a) I've known him for 20 years **or so**.
b) This costs \$10 **or so**

where the *or so* is equivalent to *or thereabouts*, and the sentences

- (37) a) A chisel is hard to use. **So, too**, a saw demands years of practice.
b) Mathematics is difficult. **So, too**, biology requires constant study.

where the *so too* is equivalent to *similarly*.

Finally, we have the combination *in so doing that* as illustrated in (38),

- (38) a) He calculated the amount of dirt needed. *In so doing that, he made an error.*
 b) Mary spoke about his problems. *In so doing that, she was very suave.*

where the *in so doing that* has the meaning of *in the process* and typically takes on a negative implication.

6. Idiomatic Cases

This group is not productive in the sense of the examples just discussed and often, though not always, the *so* phrase suffices by itself as an utterance.

- (39) a) You old *so-and-so*! How the hell are you?
 [good friend]
 b) He is too young, *so-to-speak*. [roughly speaking]
 c) *Be so good* as [Please] to help John.
 d) I'm feeling *so-so*. [not good, not bad]
 e) *So long!* [Good bye.]
 f) *So help me God!* [I put myself at God's mercy.]
 g) *So far so good*. [Up to this point, everything is fine.]
 h) *Ah so!* [I understand now.]
 i) *And so forth and so on*. [It continued further]

Conclusion

On our brief trip surveying the uses of the particle *so* in English, we have seen it used as a lexical item with a denotative content, a marker of deleted lexical material, an emphatic marker, a discourse marker used in combination with other formatives, and lastly, used in idiomatic structures. When I started out on this project to examine

so, I had hopes that most or all the functions of the particle could be analyzed under one or perhaps two meanings. This has not been borne out, and in fact, there appear to be six or seven different meanings of *so*. Whether or not these can be reduced awaits further research.

Boston University
 College of Education
 Boston MA 02215

Notes

1. There are certain adjustments which have to be made, for example, *yet/already, you/I*, etc. and the deletion of *if* in (3h).
2. Note that when *tell* is replaced by *realize* in this example, *the same* can substitute for *do so*, though this is not generally true.
3. I have no doubt that the constraints on the use of *so* are more complicated than stated here.
4. Note that in (14d), the *even* in S1 has no counterpart in S2.
5. Note that when the sentence is of the form, 'A man (who is) *so* difficult is unusual', there is an alternate form, 'So difficult a man is unusual.'
6. See below for a discussion of *so* as a discourse marker. Note that the form of the discourse markers, e.g., *with the result that* vs. *as a result* depends on whether or not they introduce a separate sentence.
7. There are a few forms such as 'So take that!', 'So be it.', 'So they say', and 'So it goes' which fall into this third level of usage. I note, also, that there are utterances like 'So?' or 'So what?' which are elliptical forms of 'So, what follows from that?'

References

- Fraser, B. Forthcoming, a. What are discourse markers? *Journal of Pragmatics*.
 Fraser, B. Forthcoming, b. One "but" in English. In: *Text representation: Linguistics and psycholinguistic aspects*, edited by Ted Sanders et al.
 Quirk, R. et. al. 1985. *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.
 Schiffrin, D. 1987. *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Sweetser, E. 1990. *From etymology to pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.