

## Kibbitzer 10

### The distribution of anaphoric *so* in MICASE Jennifer McCormick and Sarah Richardson (January 2006)

#### Introduction

There are many uses of the word ‘so’ in English; in fact, ‘so’ is the 12<sup>th</sup> most frequently occurring word in the MICASE wordlist, a database that consists of spoken academic discourse. However, it placed as the 65<sup>th</sup> most common word in the Hyland corpus which is composed 24 research articles. From this data it is evident that ‘so’, in its many uses, occurs particularly frequently in spoken English. One use of ‘so’ in English is referred to as the so-called anaphoric *so*—for example, in the phrase *I think so*. According to John Swales, “the heavy restrictions on anaphoric *so* suggest that it may constitute “a local grammar”, i.e. a distinctive sub-grammar that is best treated separately from the language as a whole.” This leads one to wonder: In which types of speech events is it most common, and which verbs occur (and do not occur) in this structure.

#### Uses of *So*

Of the many occurrences of the word ‘so’, there is Deictic *so* which indicates degree or modifies manner, for example, *They’ve done so well*. Another occurrence is Discourse Marker *so* which is the most frequently as a transitional method between topics or speakers, for example, *So most of what we know...* Other uses of ‘so’ are: Initial *so* which marks the relationship between the main and subordinate clauses, for example, *As the temperature increases, so does the humidity.*; *So* as a Connective Adjunct of Reason/Consequence, as seen in the sentence, *There had been a power failure, so all classes had to be cancelled.*; and lastly, Idiomatic *so*, which often forms expressions referring to approximate measurement, for example, *There were about 60 people or so at the party*. Finally, there is the use of Anaphoric *so* as a Pro-clause complement with a finite antecedent, for example, *I think so*.

To determine the frequency of anaphoric *so* a sample of 500 entries was taken from the 16,000 total entries of *so* in the MICASE database. Of these 500 entries, 20 occurrences of ‘so’ were Deictic, 395 were discourse markers, only 3 were Anaphoric *so*, and 82 were other uses of ‘so’. Thus, these results would suggest that the frequency of anaphoric *so* throughout all 16,000 entries would probably average around 1%. This is a rare use then, but still one of considerable interest. (See the pie-chart below.)

#### Anaphoric *so*

The linguistic environment in which anaphoric *so* occurs turns out to be quite restricted. First, it is evident that it cannot be used with all verbs because a speaker cannot say, “\*I like so”. In fact, the environment would seem to be restricted to verbs that express mental states such as: imagine, know, believe, seem, appear, afraid, suspect, suggest, think, say, hope, suppose, guess, assume, presume, fear, reckon, tell, gather, and trust. The focus of this study was to see with which of these verbs anaphoric *so* occurred most frequently and also to see who was using this form of *so* and in which contexts.



Of the 16,000 entries of *so*, the following were the most common mental state verbs that occurred with anaphoric *so*. The only mental state verbs with which it occurred were: *think*, *guess*, *say*, *thought*, *believe*, *hope* and *seem*. The numerical data is given in the table below. In fact, searches for the occurrence of anaphoric *so* with the verbs *assume*, *imagine*, *know*, *suppose*, and *suspect* yielded no results, suggesting that this usage is even more restricted than many would imagine.

Verb	occurrence #
Think*	152
Guess	10
Say	10
Thought	6
Believe	4
Hope	3
Seem	2

\*This includes the three entries of the conditional verb tense, *I would think so*.

### Think so

With the use of anaphoric 'think *so*' being much more common than any other verb in MICASE, it was used as the basis for the remainder of the study. Of the 152 entries of anaphoric 'think *so*' in MICASE there was not a significant difference in the frequency of negated and non-negated entries (80 non-negated and 72 negated). Also, as to be expected, the majority of the entries 140 occurred in 1<sup>st</sup> person singular; 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular occurred in 7 entries; 2 occurred in 1<sup>st</sup> person plural; and 3 occurred as in ellipsis. There were no examples of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural.

It was hypothesized that there would be a higher frequency of occurrence in less formal and more interactive speech events such as study group meetings, labs, and discussion sections. The results from the corpus are as follows:

Key:

ADV- Acad. Advising	COL- Colloquia	DEF- Dissertation Def.	DIS- Discussion Section
INT- Interview	LAB- Lab	LEL- Large Lecture	LES- Small Lecture
MTG- Meeting	OFC- Office Hours	SEM- Seminar	SGR- Study Group
SVC- Service Encounter	TOU- Tour	TUT- Tutorials	STP- Student Presentation

Speech Event	occurrence # *
LAB	4.9
INT	3.1
SGR	2.9

SVC	2.8
ADV	1.7
LES	1.4
DIS	1.3
SEM	1.25
MTG	1.1

\* occurrence per 10,000 words

The above table shows all the speech event types in which *I think so* had one or more occurrences per 10,000 words. The table thus suggests that anaphoric *so* occurs more frequently in informal dialogic speech events, such as study groups.

### Translation Equivalents of Anaphoric *so* in other languages

Finally, when looking at the use of anaphoric *so* amongst native and non-native speakers of English, it was first necessary to look at the structures that exist in other languages which express the same meaning as ‘I think *so*’.

French: *Je pense que oui.*  
[I think[I] that yes]  
/I think so./

*Je pense que non.*  
[I think[I] that no]  
/I don't think so./

German: *Ich denke ja.*  
[I think[I] yes]  
/I think so./

*Ich denke nicht.*  
[I think[I] no]  
/I don't think so./

Japanese: *Sō to omou.*  
[(About that topic) I think]  
/I think so./

*Sō to omowanai.*  
[(About that topic) I do not think]  
/I don't think so./

Swedish: *Jag tror det.*  
[I think it]  
/I think so./

*Jag tror inte det.*  
[I think not it]  
/I don't think so./

This use of anaphoric *so* seems to be rare in other languages. For example, in the languages exemplified above, *I think so* is typically translated by *I think it* or *I think yes* and the opposite for the negated structures. Whether this difference between English and other languages constitutes a problem for non-native speakers of English is a question that needs further research.

### Conclusion:

The results of this study show that the use of anaphoric *so* occurs in a specific environment and is less frequent in comparison to the other uses of *so*. Of all verbs that express mental condition, ‘think’ most commonly occurs with anaphoric *so* and its primary occurrence is in events in which speech participants speak in a more informal manner. It is also likely that, while non-native speakers understand the concept of anaphoric *so*, they may be less inclined to use it when speaking in English if their first language uses a different formula.