# Investigating the Spread of "so" as an Intensifier: Social and Structural Factors

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## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 The Structural Evolution of "so" as an Intensifier*

The initial research problem and the structural evolution of "so" have been articulated by Zwicky (2000). "So" has a well-established use as an intensifying adverb that modifies adjectives (example 1).

(1) That is so cool!

Speakers in some groups seem to be at various stages in the process of extending the use of "so" to modify verbs. Patterns of use attested so far can be better understood by observing that adverbs such as "really" may provide a model for this change. When an adjective immediately follows "really", the adverb can be interpreted as modifying the adjective (example 2a). However, "really" in this context can also be interpreted as modifying the verb that precedes it. The status of "really" as a verb-modifying adverb then explains its ability to occur in other contexts (2b).

(2) a. That is really cool.
b. That really is cool.

Similarly, it becomes possible for "so" to modify elements other than adjectives (examples 3-4) and to occur before the verb (examples 5-6).

(3) I am so going to flunk this test.

(4) It is so not a nugget.

(5) I so need a nap.

(6) I so don't like you right now.

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Tagliamonte and Roberts (2004) reported on occurrences of “so” (among other intensifiers) used to modify adjectives in scripted speech on television, but research on natural interaction is still needed to determine how far along “so” is in its evolution: in what order do the new structural environments of “so” emerge for individual speakers and for groups, who are the speakers adopting and spreading the change, and how do social factors influence the process?

For a discussion of intensifiers and processes of grammaticalization and the history of particular intensifiers, see Ito and Tagliamonte (2003).

*1.2 Gender, Age, and “so”*

Intensifying “so” seems to be perceived as a characteristic of female speech. It is not clear to what extent this perception is accurate. In Bradac, Mulac, and Thompson’s (1995) study of 58 male and 58 female students 18 to 25 years of age, men averaged 0.8 intensifiers per 100 words, while women produced 1.1 intensifiers per 100 words on average. The difference is statistically significant. Some intensifiers, including "really" and "so", were more likely to be used by women. Others, including "very" and "real", were more likely to be used by men. The participants also rated their partners on sociointellectual status (high social status/low social status, rich/poor, white collar/blue collar, literate/illiterate) and aesthetic quality (beautiful/ugly, pleasant/unpleasant, nice/awful). Interestingly, speakers who used the forms favored by men tended to receive lower ratings , while speakers using female forms, such as “really” and “so”, tended to receive higher ratings.

On the other hand, Fahy’s (2002) analysis of transcripts of electronic communication showed that men used intensifiers more than women did. “So” did not emerge among the most commonly used intensifiers among the participants.

Bauer and Bauer’s (2002) questionnaire data suggest that "so" is the most widespread intensifier among young New Zealanders (248-49); it is suggested that young speakers in New Zealand use “so” in a variety of non-traditional contexts, such as “That is so not cool”.

*1.3 Goal*

This paper reports on exploratory research for the purpose of generating hypotheses for more systematic research. Labov (1990) outlines social factors that influence the spread of language change; much research exists on processes in changing sound systems, so it is of interest to consider how these factors play out in a process of syntactic change. Verb-intensifying “so” is a case worth considering, as it seems to be mildly stigmatized for some speakers, while others may not even notice it, so long as use is infrequent. In research on sound systems, certain social groups have been found to reject linguistic innovations after there is social awareness of the new feature. Therefore, it would be of interest to investigate whether the development of “so” is influenced by speakers’ awareness of it, their attitudes towards it, and its association with female speech in popular perception.

## 2. Method

Two kinds of data were collected. Between 2001 and 2003, 97 examples of intensifying “so” were observed in spontaneous interaction and recorded in writing by native speakers of English who were enrolled in an undergraduate grammar course at Ball State University, in Muncie, Indiana. The speaker’s gender and age were noted for 65 of these examples. No attempt was made to include speakers of all ages in the study, or to document non-occurrence of intensifying “so”. The purpose of the observation was simply to begin documenting the range of structures in which “so” currently occurs.

I then used the observational data to compile a list which included all structures in which "so" had been attested so far. In order to investigate whether non-occurring uses of “so” were possible, but absent from the database simply by accident, I modified some observed utterances to place “so” in some non-attested structures. The following list of 37 sentences was the result.

(7) [BE + so + (not) + adjective]
- a. That is so cool!
- b. You are so funny!
- c. That is so not cool!
- d. I'm so not ready for this.
- e. She is so fired!
- f. You are so busted.
- g. I’m so not fired. (not attested)
- h. You are so not busted. (not attested)
- i. I am so here. (not attested)
- j. I am so not here.

(8) [BE + so + (not) + noun phrase]
- a. That was so the worst movie that I have ever seen.
- b. That is so the ugliest couch in the whole world!
- c. That is so not my motto.

(9) [Auxiliary BE + so + (not) + verbal material in –ing form]
- a. I am so going to take a long nap today.
- b. I am so going to flunk this test.
- c. You are so gonna get it.
- d. You are so going to leave the room right now.
- e. You’re so lying right now.
- f. Oh, he is so getting out of my car!
- g. You are so not talking to me!
- h. I'm so not going to date HIM / HER.
- i. I am so not going with you to the party.

(10) [Auxiliary HAVE + so + (not) + verb]
- a. You have so got to see this.
- b. I have so flunked this test. (not attested)
- c. You have so not got to see this. (not attested)
- d. I have so not flunked this test. (not attested)

(11) [Modal + so]

a. Whoa--I can so relate!
b. I could so date him / her.

(12) [Subject + so + (not) + verb]
a. You so rock!
b. I so totally relate to you.
c. I so need a nap.
d. You so think you are the bomb.
e. I so do not look good in green.
f. You so did not just say that.
g. You so didn't wash the dishes.
h. I so don't like you right now.
i. I so don't think he's / she’s cute.

The students mentioned above read this list with appropriate intonation in informal settings to 46 participants, and, for each sentence, asked them to indicate whether they might say it. As is well known, such judgments are not necessarily evidence of how people actually speak, particularly in the case of such an artificial task of judging the naturalness of a very long list of similar items. (See Schütze 1996 for an excellent discussion of methodological concerns related to judgment data.) Still, the information collected provides a useful starting point in generating hypotheses at this very early stage of investigating “so”.

Of the participants providing judgment data, 28 were women, 18 men. Most of the participants (39) were in the 19-25 age range, and might be expected to use intensifying “so” in a variety of structures, or at least to be familiar with it. The ages of the remaining participants ranged from 27 to 51.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### *3.1 Observed Use of Intensifying “so”: Structures*

Some interesting patterns which emerged in the observed uses of intensifying “so” give more specificity to our initial expectations about how the use of “so” may be spreading from one structure to another.

Not surprisingly, intensifying “so” occurred most frequently with a BE verb; this was the case in 69 (71%) of the utterances recorded. Of these, 39 featured a BE verb as a copula. Twenty-six of these non-auxiliary BE verbs were followed by adjectives--that is, these occurrences are indistinguishable from the traditional adjective-intensifying use of “so”.

(13) Oh my God, that is so eighties.

Less frequently (in eight cases), noun phrases followed the BE verb. In these structures, it seems less feasible to view “so” as intensifying, and forming a constituent with, the material that follows it; rather, it seems that “so” becomes more closely connected to the BE verb that precedes it.

(14) That is so a fashion faux pas.

Another result of the connection between “so” and BE is that “so” can be combined with auxiliary BE as well. Since it is a characteristic of the structure of English that BE verbs tend to pattern similarly (most notably, in question and negation formation), whether the BE verbs are auxiliaries or not, it is not surprising to see that this extension is easily made in the case of intensifying “so” in the observed data. We see a substantial set of 30 instances of “so” combined with auxiliary BE, illustrated in examples 15-16.

(15) You are so not talking to me.

(16) You are so going to get it.

Once “so” is distanced from its adjective-intensifying function, we also expect it to occur with auxiliaries other than BE. This does happen in the observed data, although not frequently: eight (8%) of the utterances featured modals.

(17) I could so do without the sarcasm.

Also, the occurrence of intensifying “so” does not require an auxiliary verb at all. Twenty (21%) of the utterances featured a verbal element with no auxiliary (example 18), or with only DO-support for negation (example 19). It would seem that structures with modals, such as example 17, would be an earlier stage of the evolution of “so”, and therefore more frequently observed; it is surprising that “so” combined with non-auxiliary verbs so much more frequently than with modals.

(18) I so bombed that quiz.

(19) I so don’t have anything to wear tonight.

In addition to the ability to be preceded by verbs other than BE, and to be followed by material other than adjectives, we can expect the spread of “so” to be manifested in its ability to move to other positions in the sentence. When we consider the relative order of “so” and the verbal material in the sentence, an interesting pattern emerges: “so” consistently follows the auxiliary verb, whether that auxiliary is a modal, as in examples 20-21, or a form of BE, as in example 22 (and, as is usual in the structure of English, non-auxiliary BE patterns as if it were an auxiliary, as in examples 23-25), unless negation occurs and the negative particle is contracted onto the auxiliary. In this case, “so” precedes the auxiliary, as seen in examples 26-27.

(20) I could so date him.

(21) That will so not be fun.

(22) I was so falling asleep in Econ today.

(23) That is so not cool.

(24) You’re so not right.

(25) That was so not what I was talking about.

(26) That so isn’t true.

(27) I so shouldn’t have eaten those beans.

In contrast, sentences in which there is no auxiliary, or only DO support for negation, only partly follow this pattern. For this structure type, “so” does precede the verbal material when the negative particle is contracted onto DO, but it also occurs in this position when the negative particle is not contracted and when negation does not occur at all, as examples 28-30 show.

(28) You so rock.

(29) I so do not want to go to this class.

(30) I so didn’t mean to do that.

To summarize, we have seen two ways in which “so” can shift into the position directly following the subject. This happens either when a negative particle is contracted onto an auxiliary (or a non-auxiliary BE), or when no auxiliary is present.

The infrequent occurrence of some of the structures under discussion should be noted. As mentioned, only eight instances of modals with “so” were observed. Also, the set of observed data considered here includes a single example of “so” with a negative particle contracted onto a BE verb (example 26, above), and a single example of “so” occurring with auxiliary HAVE. All observed uses of “so” fit the pattern described above, but obviously it will be of interest to investigate whether the pattern will still hold in a larger data set.

### *3.2 Observed Use of Intensifying “so”: Speakers*

Among the users of “so” whose age and gender were recorded, there were 40 female speakers whose ages ranged from 14 to 36. There were 25 male speakers with ages ranging from 19 to 28[1].

There is no clear gender pattern in the observational data: the same structures were attested in the speech of both men and women, with roughly similar frequency. However, an age-related trend was observed. Teenagers were more likely to combine BE with “so” than speakers of other ages were, and all modals occurring with “so” in the observed data were produced by speakers no older than 21. In contrast, speakers 22 or older were more likely to use “so” with a non-auxiliary verb other than BE, as well as with negation. While age is certainly expected to emerge as a factor while change is in progress, this particular age pattern defies explanation as a reflection of change: use of “so” with non-auxiliary verbs by the slightly older group would indicate that this structure is an early development, but the less frequent use of the same structure by the group of even younger speakers contradicts this conclusion.

[1] Among the male speakers, there was one 37-year-old who produced one instance of intensifying “so”, but he did so for the purpose of ridiculing users of “so” (example 31). The attitude evident in this example is not surprising, given the negative perceptions mentioned in section 3.4.

(31) You so did not just say that.

*3.3 Judgment Data*

In terms of general patterns, the most widely accepted sequences were of the "BE + so + Adj" type. Many speakers accepted such structures as possibly occurring in their own speech. In particular, 32-33 received positive responses from a majority of participants.

(32) That is so cool!

(33) You are so funny!

Other sentences with similar structures were accepted by far fewer respondents, so it is evident that being followed by an adjective is not a sufficient condition for making “BE + so” acceptable. Still, as a group, structures of this type were accepted by more participants than any other structure.

The acceptability data underscore the same finding as in the observed data that use of “so” is easily extended to use with auxiliary BE. Examples 34-35 were accepted by the majority of respondents.

(34) You are so gonna get it.

(35) You are so lying right now.

There is also added support for the previous observation that the spread of “so” from “BE + so + Adj” to the structurally more similar “BE + so + NP” is not as far along. Sentences of this type, illustrated by example 36, were among the least acceptable.

(36) That is so the ugliest couch in the world.

The acceptability data show a connection between gender and "so". Considering respondents in the 19-25 age group, women accepted twice as many sentences on average as men did.

As might be expected while change is in progress, there is considerable variation in how the use of “so” is perceived. We should therefore consider what individual patterns in judgments may tell us about how use of “so” spreads. Since participants did not judge all sentences of the same type of structure similarly (for example, “You so did not just say that” was more frequently accepted than the structurally very similar “You so didn't wash the dishes”, and “I am so going to take a long nap today” was more popular than “You are so going to leave the room right now”), individual patterns were identified by grouping together structurally similar sentences, and, for each group, identifying the participants who accepted most sentences of that structure.

In keeping with the widely accepted status of “so” occurring in a more traditional structure, 11 of the 46 participants tended to accept “so” followed by an adjective, but in none of the other structures. It was also found that participants who tend to accept auxiliary BE with “so” also tend to accept “so” followed by an adjective; similarly, participants who tend to accept “so” followed by a noun phrase tend to accept auxiliary BE with “so”. This may mean that the sequence of events in the evolution of “so” could be

that it spreads initially to be used with auxiliary BE, and then gains the ability to be followed by a noun phrase, or to occur with a non-auxiliary verb.

Given the low frequency of modals in the observed uses of “so”, it was surprising to find that modals might provide an alternate starting place for the spread of “so”. Nearly a third of the participants tended to accept “so” occurring with modals. In fact, four of the participants tended to accept sentences with this structure, but none of the other sentence types—not even “so” followed by an adjective. Furthermore, participants who tended to accept “so” with non-auxiliary verbs also tended to accept “so” with modals.

*3.4 Gender and Age of Speakers: Observed Use and Perceptions*

Intensifying “so” was observed in the speech of speakers in their mid-30s, and some young men were found using it quite frequently. Still, the perception remains that it is a characteristic of younger speakers, and particularly of young women. When participants volunteered comments on stereotypical “so” users, the descriptors used included “preppy” (2 occurrences), “valley girl” (2 occurrences), “juvenile”, and "just stepped off a school bus from Muncie Central".

Among the speakers whose use of intensifying “so” was observed, two women beyond their teenage years (51 and 36) who reportedly like to connect with younger people were found to have adopted some uses of "so". In contrast, one 21-year-old male participant responding to the judgment task claimed he had not even heard any innovative uses of "so". Speakers’ views of intensifying “so” may have an impact on actual use, and we can certainly expect an effect on self-reported use; this emphasizes the importance of observational or corpus-based approaches in future research.

*3.5 Beyond Sentence Structure and Demographics: Additional Factors Potentially Influencing Use of “so”*

Most of the observed uses of “so” occurred with either first person singular (36%) or second person (25%) subjects; also, a few subjects consisted of demonstratives or full noun phrases (21%). It is not surprising that speakers would have reason to be emphatic about themselves or their addressees. It seems fitting that “so” was used to intensify statements in declarative form that function as commands:

(37) You are so going to leave the room right now.

It may be that speakers do not adopt “so” structure by structure, but by means of specific expressions. For example, one respondent reports using intensifying “so” infrequently, but it is a feature of her favorite expression, given in example 38.

(38) You so rock, sister Mary Francis!

The possibility that particular expressions carry structural change in general, beyond “so”, is worth investigating. Intuitively, it seems more likely that collocations and formulaic speech would pose resistance to structural change, so it is interesting to consider under what conditions the opposite effect could occur. In the case of structural changes that have not yet reached the level of awareness in a given speech community, corpus-based approaches should be more helpful than the type of data discussed here.

A pragmatic reason might help explain the near-complete non-occurrence of auxiliary HAVE with “so”: maybe completive aspect is less likely to be used to describe events or feelings that warrant intensifiers.

Negation occurred in 33% of the utterances. It was more likely to occur in structures without BE verbs: half of utterances with modals or with no auxiliary (other than DO) were negated, in contrast to only a quarter of utterances with BE verbs. While there was no clear pattern of negation in general lowering the acceptability of structures, it was interesting that “You are so not busted” and “I’m so not fired” were accepted by only 3-4 participants, although these sentences are highly similar in structure to some of the most widely accepted ones. The acceptability of these utterances may require a conversational context in which the speaker reassures someone who has just expressed worry about being busted or fired.

Sometimes sentences were rejected because of issues unrelated to "so". For example, some speakers reported that they could not imagine themselves saying "You so think you are the bomb", because "the bomb" is yesterday's news. There was also anecdotal evidence that it was more difficult to accept “so” in lengthy utterances.

## 4. Conclusion

We have seen that intensifying “so” was attested most frequently with a BE verb, somewhat less frequently with a non-auxiliary verb, and occasionally with a modal. “So” consistently follows the auxiliary verb, unless negation occurs and the negative particle is contracted onto the auxiliary. In this case, “so” precedes the auxiliary. In sentences without an auxiliary verb, however, “so” occurs before the verb.

Findings suggest an interesting contrast between actual patterns of use and speakers’ perceptions of who users of intensifying “so” are. There is no clear gender pattern in the observational data: the same structures were attested in the speech of both men and women, with roughly similar frequency. Yet, intensifying “so” is associated with the speech of young female speakers.

Given the patterns outlined above, the following research questions seem worth pursuing:

- In a larger data set, will “so” eventually begin to occur before auxiliary verbs even when there is no contracted negative particle? Such a finding could indicate a general tendency for “so” to move into the position immediately following the subject.

- In the observed data, an age difference emerged in the structures in which intensifying “so” occurs. The slightly older group is likely to use “so” with non-auxiliary verbs; since the younger group produces “so” in this structure less frequently, it is difficult to interpret this age-related pattern as a reflection of the direction of change in use of “so”. Would this age difference still be found in a larger data set, and, if so, what would it mean?

- Does the use of “so” vary regionally?

- What is the influence of conversational context on the use of “so”? Data should be collected in context, rather than in terms of isolated utterances, so that this question can be investigated.

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