"So Canoe": On the Expert Deployment of Minimal Linguistic Resources

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Abstract. Some EFL students possess a remarkable ability to interact, despite their limited access to English grammar and vocabulary. This paper will document the way one such novice English user is able to participate in conversation by expertly deploying syntactically simple turns connected by the word *so*. One of the usages he relies on to accomplish a broad range of sequentially situated actions is [so + loanword + gesture]. The study provides evidence to suggest that meaning-making is not reliant on access to language alone, and perhaps not even primarily, and that language learners should therefore be assessed not only on their linguistic proficiency, but also on interactional competence and engagement. The data are taken from a corpus of Japanese learners of English in a discussion test setting.

Keywords: paired discussion testing; EFL interaction; embodiment; engagement

1 Introduction

Goodwin famously documented the way an aphasic man, Chil, was able to successfully interact with those around him despite only having access to three words; *yes*, *no* and *and*, as well as a few non-lexical perturbations (Goodwin, Goodwin & Olsher, 2002). Likewise, even without extensive grammar and vocabulary, some language learners are able to communicate actively. One well-known example is Schmidt's case study of Wes, a Japanese man with minimal English proficiency who nonetheless was able to make himself understood using a vast array of interactional, embodied and environmental resources (Schmidt, 1983). Although their accuracy and complexity may be limited, such speakers generally demonstrate significant interactional engagement (Sandlund & Greer, 2020). This paper investigates the interactional practices of one such learner, particularly in relation to his use of the word *so* in his turn formulations.

2 Previous Research on "so"

The *so*-token has been shown to be used for a variety of different purposes in talk (Dennison, 2020). In her work on discourse markers, for example, Schiffrin (1987) highlights *so*'s capacity for suggesting inferential connections, as it is commonly understood to be marking a result that will follow (e.g., I was hungry, so I ate). Raymond (2004) describes a similar inferential function, noting that *so* is often used as a preface for an upshot that "makes explicit the links between the various components of a larger turn (or series of turns)" (p. 186). Speakers also sometimes produce *so* without ever articulating the upshot in order to prompt some kind of action from the hearer. This type of stand-alone *so* is further analyzed by Local and Walker (2005) who provide an analysis of the prosodic features that enable it to be understood as a trail off, as opposed to other cases in which it is hearable as holding the floor. Raymond (2004) also shows that recipients can preface their turns with *so* to mark them as an upshot of the speaker's talk that demonstrates they have understood the import of a telling.

Another significant function of *so* is the management of topics. In an early but brief analysis of *so*, Howe (1991) describes it as a "marker of connection" (p. 93) that is commonly used as a preface for the beginning of new topics. Bolden (2008, 2009) greatly builds upon these observations by providing a detailed sequential analysis of topic-initial *so* from instances of mundane conversation. She finds that sequence-initial *so* is deployed as a means of tying upcoming talk to a pending interactional agenda as well as to resume abandoned or interrupted courses of action. In short, *so* helps to make clear that a "current utterance is occasioned by something other than the immediately preceding talk" (p. 996).

As these studies illustrate, *so* is used to accomplish and organize many complex aspects of talk-in-interaction by L1 English speakers, particularly in matters of tying and connection. However, to our knowledge no CA studies have examined *so* as a phenomenon in L2 talk. Addressing this gap, our study will explore how one novice EFL speaker uses *so* in ways both similar to and distinct from previously documented cases.

3   Data and Method

This study employs a multimodal conversation analytic approach to provide a detailed description of how participants understand one another during a discussion in their second language. The data come from the Kobe Test of Oral Proficiency (KTOP) corpus, which consists of video-recordings of dyadic conversation tests that were part of a compulsory first-year university EFL course. After being sorted into pairs, the students randomly selected a topic card with a brief prompt written on it, before discussing it for four minutes. The prompts corresponded to topics that the students spent time discussing in class. In the data focal to the current study, the two students have drawn the topic "your hometown" (A sitting left, B right, as shown in Figure 1). The talk was transcribed according to Jefferson's (2004) conventions with multimodal elements rendered using a modified version of Mondada (2008) and the researchers employed a 'why that now?' approach in order to identify the candidate phenomenon before forming a collection of candidates for analysis. The four-minute test yielded 88 candidates, which were then analyzed and subdivided by action type and both syntactic and sequential position.
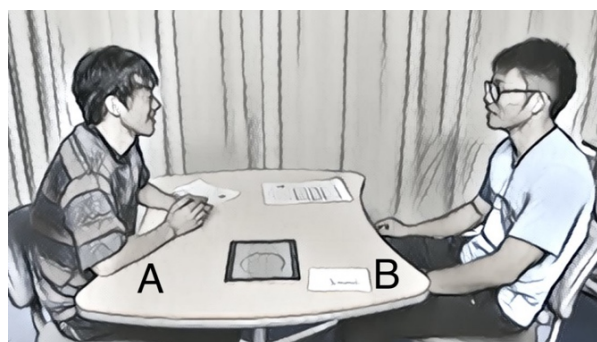

Fig. 1. The seating arrangement during the focal test

3   Analysis

As discussed above, previous research has shown that *so* can be used to establish connections by marking something as a result, an upshot or as tied to a pending interactional agenda. Our focal participant B, often seems to use *so* in similar ways, as shown in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1. So What Your Name?
```
01    B      hello::
02    A      hello
03    B      nice to meet you.
04    A      nice to meet you.
05    B      so what your name?
06    A      my name is matsutani katsuya
```

After some opening greetings (lines 1-2), in the next turn B says "nice to meet you", which might work to close the greeting sequence. However, one thing still left potentially pending is that the participants have not yet introduced themselves. In line 5, B uses a *so*-prefaced turn ("so what is your name") to get back to this business. Excerpt 2 provides further examples.

Excerpt 2. Sports
```
01 B       so (0.9) pt. do you like sports?
02 A       yes
03 B       oh so what sports?
04 A       I like track and field.
```

```
05 B        ohn ohn ohn.
06          so track and field so (0.7) hurdle?
07          (0.4)
08 A        yes I (.) I hurdle (.) I run. I- I'm.u |(1.4)
   a-bh                                            |move
09          >run and.o< jump hurdle.
10 B        ohn ohn ohn ohn. so: (1.0) why do you like
11          so track and field?
```

On some occasions B's uses of *so* seem to hit the mark. It seems quite natural when he uses it in turn-initial topic shifts (lines 1, 10) and next-turn post-expansion to initiate a specification (lines 3, 6). Even the first occurrence in line 6 seems to mark the topic transition by reflecting on what the prior speaker has just said.

At other times though, B uses *so* as a means of tying together turn elements in more novel ways. One noticeable quality is the frequency of its deployment (88 times in 4 minutes vs A's four times). Another is the fact that, while some of his *so* are hearable as conforming to typical and previously described patterns, many are not. In these atypical cases, B uses *so* as a hesitation marker, allowing him to deliver a telling or explanation of some kind while bypassing the need for grammatical or lexical forms to which he may not have immediate access. Nevertheless, this practice does not cause A to initiate repair, which sends an implicit message that A understands B, or at least that he claims to. In retrospect, some of his natural-sounding *so*-tokens may have actually been used to hold the floor; i.e., due to their turn-initial placement they come across as meaningful due to sheer happenstance. The evidence for this in individual cases is perhaps weak, but is strengthened by analysis of his use of *so* across the entire conversation, warranting the consideration of this possibility.

In Excerpt 3, a post-expanding question from A occasions an explanation sequence containing some unique *so* usages.

Excerpt 3. So Canoe
```
01 A        why do you like canoe?
02 B        so:, (0.9) .tch canoe is so (.) tou:gh sports
03 A        ohn.
            yeah
04 B        so: (.) so to:: |(0.9) and so difficult
   b-hd                     |swallows
05          sono |technique.
            that
   b-rh          |small circle in air
06 A        |oh.
   a-hd     |nods

07 B        so and so (.)|making body
   b-bh                  |towards own body
08 A        yes.
09 B        |soh (0.7) so (tch) body:(is) so: (0.4)
             that's right
   b-hd     |nods
10          |very |important.
   b-bh     |R fist into L palm
                  |R fist into L palm
11 A        |oh.
   a-hd     |nods
12 B        mm.
13          (0.5)
14 B        pt. so best sports canoe.
```

In line 1, A solicits an account about B's hobby (canoeing) and in line 2, B begins to give the account: "so canoe is so tough sports." The turn-initial *so* in line 1 seems similar to those discussed by Bolden (2009), indexing B's orientation to the fact that such a reason is overdue, since earlier in the talk A already explained what his hobby is and why he enjoys it. Meanwhile, the *so* that comes before "tough" seems to be functioning as an intensifier.

The *so*-tokens in the first half of B's utterance in line 4 ("so so to"), meanwhile, do not seem to conform to any previously described pattern or function of the word. It does have the feel of connecting what comes next to what came before, but not in a way that marks a clear causal relationship or an upshot. This is also the case with B's

formulation in line 7 "so and so making body," in which *so* is again doing the work of making this turn sound connected to his telling-in-progress, but in a way that is difficult to pin down. His partner A, however, makes the claim that he has understood B by giving him an acknowledgement in line 8 and B continues in line 9 by introducing yet another version of *so*: the Japanese word "soh" which indicates agreement. Then after a 0.7-sec pause, B says "so tch body so" before pausing again for 0.4 sec and saying "very important". While it is possible to interpret these latter *so* as marking an upshot (e.g., canoeing is a tough sport so it is important to build up your body), the many intra-turn hesitations instead make them hearable as hesitation markers. This interpretation is also strengthened by the fact that after receiving a change-of-state token from A in line 11, B gives a sequence-closing so-prefaced upshot saying "so best sports canoe".

We can therefore observe some turn-initial *so* that appear to doing clausal connective work (lines 4, 7, 9), but this may be more an accident of their placement, rather than by design. Is B planning to use them this way, or are we as listeners (along with A) retrospectively hearing them that way? At certain junctions, he seems to self-initiate repair to abandon a *so*-inclusive turn-in-progress (line 4, "so to-"), which the listener might interpret as having been on the way to an account/explanation of some kind, but since it was never produced in full, there is no way of truly knowing if that was indeed the case. Instead, B swallows and produces a somewhat disjunctive turn segment ("and so difficult") in which *so* holds yet a different function, as an intensifier. As the turn unfolds, we are then left to hear the first two *so*-tokens as having been deleted. Line 9 takes a similar path. But what if B has been using *so* as a hesitation marker throughout his talk? In that case it would be that we as listeners are placing meaning on its various occurrences that B was not necessarily intending, and some of them just happen to work.

In addition, there are a number of cases throughout the data when B seems to be using the Japanese word *soh* ("that's right"), which has a very similar sound and meaning to English *so*, and therefore muddies the waters even further. Line 9 is a case in point. It sounds clearly like the Japanese word, and sequentially it comes directly after A's uptake token in line 8, a point in Japanese where a reciprocated acknowledgement is common. The same could be happening in lines 6 and 7, though B's pronunciation of *so/soh* here is ambiguous: it could be Japanese or English.

In short, in addition to more typical uses, B also uses *so* as a kind of hesitation marker when more standard fillers are not immediately available to him. However, because of the connective quality that *so* possesses and the many practices competent members use it to accomplish, B's telling ends up sounding much more coherent and smoother than it otherwise would. This is also aided by the fact that his unique usages of *so* are often surrounded by others that do conform to previously documented patterns, forming a smokescreen that obscures the non-conventional usages (at least until closer inspection).

In Excerpt 4, while providing an explanation of his exercise regimen, B's turns become even more syntactically simple due to the affordance of embodiment.

Excerpt 4. So Press or Pull

```
01    B       so |I'm so |(1.5) °wei-°
      b-rh       |to self
      b-bh                |pushes back and forth from chest
```



```
02            |so press or |pull
      b-bh    |forward----~~|pulls back toward chest
```



```
03            |so (.)      |s:natch
      b-bh    |lifts up    |moves up and down
      a-hd                 |nods
```

```
04      B       o (.) |deadlift¿
        b-bh          |holds up
        b-gz          |to A
05      A       |yes
        a-hd    |nod
06      B       |so: ar::↑m (0.2) |so feet so
        b-lh    |holds forward
        b-rh    |traces L arm
        b-bh                      |traces both legs
```



```
07              |all (h-) (.) body. (.)
        b-bh    |circular motion around torso—
        a-hd    |nod
```



```
08              |↑so make body. (.) |so  strong bo|dy.
        b-bh  ~~|flex pose beat on each word
                                    |circles hands
                                                   |flex pose
```


Each part of his multi-installment explanation (Svennevig, 2018) follows the same pattern: [so + noun phrase/verb phrase + gesture], where the gesture illustrates the noun/verb phrase and the *so* seems to act more like a connective *and*. Examples can be seen in lines 2, 3, 4, 6 and 8. The pattern starts in the first line where B says "so wei-" which is cut off, but sounds as though it was on the way to "weighting", a word that B had used in prior talk to refer to weightlifting. This interpretation is bolstered by the accompanying gesture in which he positions both his hands as though gripping a bar and pushes them outward from his chest. In lines 2-4, B adds several more items to his list saying "so press or pull so snatch so deadlift", with each *so*-token demarcating a boundary for a listed item and his laminated (Goodwin, 2013) gestures fluidly morphing into a depiction of each item as it is

produced. It is also significant that B chooses to try-mark the word "deadlift" since during this extended turn there was no hearable uptake from his partner, which he successfully occasions in line 5, giving him the go-ahead to continue. B then concludes his explanation saying "so arm so feet so all body. so make body so strong body," while producing gestures to accompany each content word. Because of its sequential position as the final element of his telling, the *so*-tokens within "so make body so strong body" seem to (for the first time in this sequence) be marking an upshot that encapsulates the reason for telling, i.e., canoeing involves all these different exercises *so* you get a strong body. It seems clear from B's use of such syntactically simple turn components that he did not have immediate access to all of the necessary linguistic elements to form a more grammatical explanation. However, by deploying key lexical components and embodiment linked together with *so*, he is still able to form a cohesive explanation that gets his point across in a timely manner.

4 Concluding Discussion

The way that this novice English user interacts stood out to us even during the original test. Despite his limited grammar and vocabulary, B is highly engaged throughout the discussion and his contributions are well-timed to the prior talk. Although his use of *so* is idiosyncratic, it helps to facilitate speakership change by leaving little or no gap between turns. Silence and typical hesitations markers, such as English *um* or Japanese *etto*, would make B's responses seem far less fluent, and the inferential and connective functions of *so* allow for the impression that B's tellings are cohesive, thus prompting hearers to infer connections between TCUs (or their components). Interestingly, it can be difficult to discern which connections are the result of deliberate design, since the sheer amount of *so*-tokens B deploys ensures that some will hit their target even though many do not. Like Chil and Wes, this speaker can do a lot with a little. This study thus further evidences that meaning-making is not reliant on access to language alone, and perhaps not even primarily. Language learners should therefore be assessed not only on their mastery of linguistic proficiency, but also on interactional competence and engagement (Sandlund & Greer, 2020).

Finally, we must not forget that a key feature of interactional competence is that it is co-constructed. B is only able to use *so* in this way because A is allowing him to, by acknowledging their use and claiming understanding, rather than initiating other-repair. The study therefore offers potential for research into English as a *lingua franca* as well as interactional engagement in oral proficiency test settings.

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Appendix. Additional transcription conventions

Embodied actions are transcribed according to the following conventions, adapted from those developed by Mondada (2018). The embodied elements are positioned in a series of tiers relative to the talk and rendered in gray.

`|      |`	Embodiment descriptions are delimited between vertical bars
`|--->`	The action described continues across subsequent lines
`---->|`	The action reaches its conclusion
`>>`	The action commences prior to the excerpt
`--->>`	The action continues after the excerpt
`.....`	Preparation of the action
`----`	The apex of the action is reached and maintained
`,,,,,`	Retraction of the action
`~~~~~`	The action moves or transforms in some way
`SAM`	The current speaker is identified with capital letters

Participants doing an embodied action are identified relative to the talk by their initial in lower case in another tier, along with one of the following codes for the action:

`-gz`	gaze
`-lh`	left hand
`-rh`	right hand
`-bh`	both hands
`-px`	proximity
`-hd`	head
`-gs`	gesture