

Evidential positioning in follow-ups in news interviews

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Evidential positioning in follow-ups in news interviews

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Abstract

Evidentials are a typical resource for action formation in argumentative interaction. On the basis of English political interviews, we examine the use of *so*-prefaced constructions as a practice for evidential positioning from an interactional-linguistic perspective: Presenting what follows as inference-based on a local level but also in terms of more global conclusions, such *so*-prefaced constructions serve for interviewees to construct their claims as valid and thus to maintain evidential authority over their line of argument. As regards the interviewers, they may use *so*-prefaced constructions in follow-ups to challenge the interviewee's argument. A deviant case where the inference-based claim projected by *so* is withheld shows the intricate working of *so*-constructions for the construction of alignment and disalignment.

1 Introduction

Follow-ups in political interviews are moves where participants may take a stance and position themselves towards prior talk. In this context, presenting one's claim as based on inferences drawn from previous talk seems to be a relevant resource for action formation. Taking an interactional linguistic perspective (e.g. Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996, Selting and Couper-Kuhlen 2000), the present paper will focus on English *so*-prefaced constructions in follow-up moves, which serve to construct claims made by the interviewer (IR) and interviewee (IE) as inference-based.

A construction of this kind is exemplified in the following example, where the IE uses *so* in order to frame his position (*so (.) we have to (.) go after them*, lines 10-11) as an inference from the facts presented in his previous talk.

Ex. 1 (Obama on O'Reilly Factor, 0:38-0:58 min)¹

1 IR: who is the enemy.
 2 IE: al qaeda,
 3 (-)
 4 the taliban-
 5 (-) a whole host of networks.
 6 uh that are bent on uh attacking america;
 7 who have a distorted ideology,
 8 uh who have perverted uh the faith of islam,
 9 and (.)
 10 **so (.)**
 11 **we have to (.) go after them.**

The present paper is structured as follows: First, semantic and discourse-functional aspects of *so*-prefaced constructions will be discussed (2). It will be argued that the concepts of positioning (3) and evidentiality (4) are specifically relevant to the analysis of *so*-prefaced constructions in political interviews. In what follows, some of the results of a study on *so*-prefaced constructions in English political interviews will be presented (5). Finally, the paper ends with some conclusions (6).

2 English *so* – meanings and uses

Standard grammars of English agree that *so* may convey resultative and/or inferential meaning in discourse (Quirk et al. 1985, Biber et al. 1999). According to Biber et al. (1999), “[I]inking adverbials in the **result/inference** category [e.g. therefore, consequently, thus, as a result, hence, in consequence] show that the second unit of discourse states the result or consequence – either logical or practical – of the preceding discourse.” (ibid: 877, emphasis in the original)² Furthermore, *so* is the “[m]ost common linking [adverbial] in conversation” (BrE and AmE) (ibid: 887, Table 10.17). Here it “[plays an] important [role] in the development of conversational discourse [...], making clear how one event follows from another” (ibid: 886).³

¹ The punctuation marks at the end of a segment stand for final pitch movements: high rise: ? mid-rise: , level pitch: - mid-fall: , low fall: . Missing punctuation marks indicate incomplete segments. Pauses are marked as follows: (.) micro-pause, (-), (--), (---) short, middle or long pauses. Square brackets [mark overlap. Parentheses () indicate unintelligible speech. Lines of special analytic interest are represented in bold. (cf. Couper-Kuhlen and Barth-Weingarten 2011)

² Cf. Buysse (2010) for a comprehensive literature review on *so*.

³ For reasons of space, the terminological confusion as regards the functional meaning of *so* (indicating a result/consequence/inference/conclusion/etc.), which becomes visible here, cannot be discussed in detail in the present paper. Following Buysse (2010), the *sos* examined seem to indicate a conclusive relation between the prior talk and the talk prefaced by *so*. He states:

This high frequency of such kinds of *so* in conversation may account for a notable interest in *so* from a conversation analytic perspective. The functions found in conversation fall into three types: First, *so* may serve to “[preface] other-attentive topics initiations” (Bolden 2006: 661) in both everyday and institutional interaction (cf. also Bolden 2008, 2009). Secondly, *so* may “mark an achievement achieved” on the basis of prior (non-verbal) actions (Koschmann and Zemel 2011: 39). Thirdly and most interestingly, uses of *so* have been observed in *follow-up* turns in interviews and everyday interaction: For example, Leudar and Antaki (1988), drawing on Mead’s (1973) notion of completion, treat a follow-up turn shaped as a *so*-prefaced construction as an example of “cognitive completion” (Leudar and Antaki 1988: 149). The *so*-prefaced construction thus serves to make a claim as to what the implications of the prior speaker’s move are.

In a similar vein, Raymond (2004) and Schegloff (2009) find that *so*-prefaced constructions may project what follows as the upshot of the prior talk in everyday conversation: “‘so’ prefaced upshots typically imply that what had been conveyed inexplicitly, or en passant, has required resuscitation through its explicit articulation *as the import of the speaker’s (prior) talk*.” (Raymond 2004: 188, emphasis in the original). However, “[w]hile such uses of a ‘so’-prefaced upshots may be familiar, speakers can also produce a ‘so’ *but not the upshot it projects* to manage a related set of contingencies.” (ibid: 189, emphasis in the original). In this sense, such so-called “stand-alone [*sos* project] both an upshot and that it will not be produced.” (ibid: 210-211) The observation that speakers may exploit stand-alone *sos* for particular conversational aims is of special interest for the present study: In contrast to Raymond’s (2004) study of everyday interaction, the present investigation of *so*-constructions in political interviews only revealed very few comparable instances of stand-alone *so* which would leave the formulation of the upshot of the prior talk to the interlocutor (see 5.4). It will be argued that this is due to the specific constraints of “the genre of a political interview [which] is defined by the IR’s and IE’s negotiation of validity claims.” (Fetzer 2006: 199) This means that the IE “has the obligation to discuss public discourse and thus postulate further claims” (ibid: 199). In this way, *so*-prefaced constructions provide a powerful tool for IEs (but also for IRs, as will be shown) to construct their view of what the upshot of this prior

a ‘**resultative**’ relation holds between discourse units that denote states of affairs in the world described in the discourse, the first of which causes the second;

a ‘**conclusive**’ relation holds between discourse units if the first provides the grounds that the speaker uses as a basis for a claim in the second. (ibid: 155, emphasis in the original)

While there are clear-cut cases in his data, these two functions may overlap (ibid: 156). Concerning the political interviews analysed in the present paper, it is argued that the semantic fuzziness of *so* is strategically exploited by both the IR and the IE in their construction of claims.

talk is and in this way claim and maintain evidential authority. As will be seen, it may, however, be subject to negotiation of what this upshot may be. For this reason, emerging *so*-prefaced constructions of this kind may be vulnerable to competitive incomings on the part of the IR.

3 Evidentiality

The discussion of previous work on English *so* in interaction has shown that the use of *so* indicates that what follows is based on the speaker's inferences and constitutes the upshot of the prior topical talk. In other words, this prior talk is treated as a "source of information" and common ground from which things are inferred. In typological research, the linguistic marking of inferential processes through which information was obtained has been linked to the grammatical category of evidentiality (Aikhenvald 2004: 3). Sources of information may comprise sensory (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile) experience or inference and hearsay. In contrast to languages where "marking how one knows something is a must" (ibid: 6), evidential expressions in English are optional and commonly expressed through lexical means (which may, however, have entered the process of grammaticalisation). In our view, the study on evidentiality in English must therefore take a functional approach and ask: In which contexts do speakers indicate their source of information and why? Consequently, we will follow Portner (2009), who defines evidentiality "in functional terms as the speaker's assessment of her grounds for saying what she does, and an evidential as a grammatical form which expresses evidentiality" (Portner 2009: 263).⁴ In this sense the *so*-prefaced constructions examined constitute instances of an evidential practice through which the speaker constructs – to borrow Portner's words – her grounds for saying what she does as inference-based. Evidential constructions are furthermore typical of argumentative discourse types (Fetzer 2011, Reber 2012). They may substantiate, authenticate and lend authority to speaker's stance (Couper-Kuhlen 2007, Fox 2001). In this way, evidential constructions are closely connected to speaker's stance-taking and positioning in interaction.

⁴ In a similar approach, Hara (2008) suggests that evidential marking may express an attitude towards what the speaker says. Also, Bednarek (2006: 637) treats evidentiality ("marking evidence") as a subcategory of epistemological positioning, which she defines as "the expression of assessments concerning knowledge" (ibid: 635).

4 Positioning

In the present paper, the notion of positioning involves the content side of the interaction, that is, by taking a certain viewpoint towards the topic of the conversation, speakers position themselves towards that topic and thus align/disalign with their co-participants, i.e. side with their interlocutors/audience or not. This view is closely informed by DuBois's (2007) stance theory and Haddington's (2004) related work on news interviews.

Evidential constructions such as the *so*-prefaced constructions thus may be used as a resource to position oneself towards the topic of discussion and thus as a resource for alignment or disalignment. In this sense producing inference-based claims is a resource for evidential positioning in political interviews. To give a working definition, evidential positioning involves the processes through which speakers position themselves towards the object of debate by making inference-based claims, and in this way align/disalign with their co-participants.

5 *So*-prefaced constructions as a practice for evidential positioning in political interviews

So-prefaced constructions constitute a highly frequent evidential resource in news interviews in that they frame claims and questions built on the interpretation of prior talk as inference-based. A comparison with the other linking adverbials with inferential/resultative meaning as documented by Biber et al. (1999) showed that *so* is (almost) the only linking adverbial of this kind in the interviews examined (cf. Table 1; the linking adverbials marked in grey are combinations/adverbials not mentioned by Biber et al. (1999) but found in the interview data).

The present study is based on ca. 1:12hrs of video recordings of English political TV interviews (cf. Table 2), which contained 47 instances of the linking adverbial *so*. Excluded from the study are cases where the adverbial was used in combination with *therefore* (*so therefore*, 2 instances). With respect to the small corpus used for the present study, it was observed that *so* is more frequently used by IEs than the IR. (cf. Figure 1) This may be explained by the IE's obligation to present his claims as valid and his communicative goal to claim and maintain evidential authority over what is postulated.⁵

⁵ All participants in the interviews examined were male.

In the following sections, it will be shown that *so*-prefaced constructions are a shared practice for inference-based argumentative moves (5.1). They may be deployed both by the IE and the IR to frame their position towards the IE's prior talk as based on inferences (5.2, 5.3). In specific contexts, these inferences projected by *so* may, however, be left unstated (5.4).

5.1 *So-prefaced constructions: a shared practice for inference-based moves*

It was found that *so*-prefaced constructions are a practice for inference-based moves shared by both the IR and the IE. They allow both parties to construct their conclusions of the prior talk and in this sense constitute a practice tightly connected to one of the functions of follow-up moves, that is, to a position towards prior talk. Furthermore, they allow the speaker to claim and maintain evidential authority over the ongoing line of argument. Consider Example 3:

Ex. 3 (Andrew Marr/David Cameron090111; 19:37-20:35min)

1 IR: so what do you say to those in your own party;
 2 who talk about purple plotters.
 3 and and you know (.)centre (.) centrist conservatives and
 liberal democrats;
 4 coming together to create a kind of new elite;
 5 ignoring; (.)
 6 the right wing of the conservative party,
 7 and the left wing of the liberal democrats.
 8 IE: what i say to to everyone is;
 9 try and judge the (.) the government on the
 10 results and on the policies and on what we're doing;
 11 and i think to (.) to to conservatives who want to know you
 know what's this government doing in terms of the conservative
 manifesto,
 12 i would say you know we are dealing with the deficit;
 13 we are introducing uh academy schools,
 14 and free schools,
 15 we're reforming uh the nhs,
 16 we're making some radical changes to welfare,
 17 to make it affordable and to get people uh into work,
 18 you know we are next week introducing legislation so that any
 future government (.) that tries to pass power from
 westminster to brussels (.) has to hold a referendum;
 19 we are having a cap on immigration;
 20 **so i mean i think this go[vernment is delivering for the**
 21 IR: **[so those are things that those in the**
right of the conservative party might be (.) pleased about;

In response to the IR's question (which constitutes a follow-up itself, lines 1-7), the IE lists a number of activities to refute the claim that the Right Wing of the Conservative Party is ignored, as suggested in the IR's question.⁶ The *so*-prefaced construction in line 20 projects a

⁶ The *so*-construction in lines 1-7 will not be analysed in this paper.

inferential/resultative linking adverbials									
interview	<i>so</i>	<i>so therefore</i>	<i>therefore</i>	<i>consequently</i>	<i>thus</i>	<i>as a result</i>	<i>Hence</i>	<i>as a consequence</i>	<i>in consequence</i>
Marr – Cameron	IR: 5 IE: 17	IE: 1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Frei – Bush	IR: 1 IE: 8	0	IE: 1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Williams – Obama	IR: 1 IE: 5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
O’Reilly – Obama	IR: 5 IE: 3	IR: 1	0	0	0	0	0	IE: 1	0

Table 1: Frequency of *so* in comparison with other linking adverbials with inferential/resultative meaning.

IR	IE	length of recording	source and date
Andrew Marr	David Cameron	26:42 min	The Andrew Marr Show, BBC, 09 January 2011
Matt Frei	George W. Bush	15:51 min	BBC World News America, BBC World, 14 February 2008
Brian Williams	Barack Obama	22:36 min	Nightly News, NBC, 29 August 2010
Bill O’Reilly	Barack Obama	07:42 min	The O’Reilly Factor, Fox News, 04 September 2008

Table 2: Overview of interview corpus

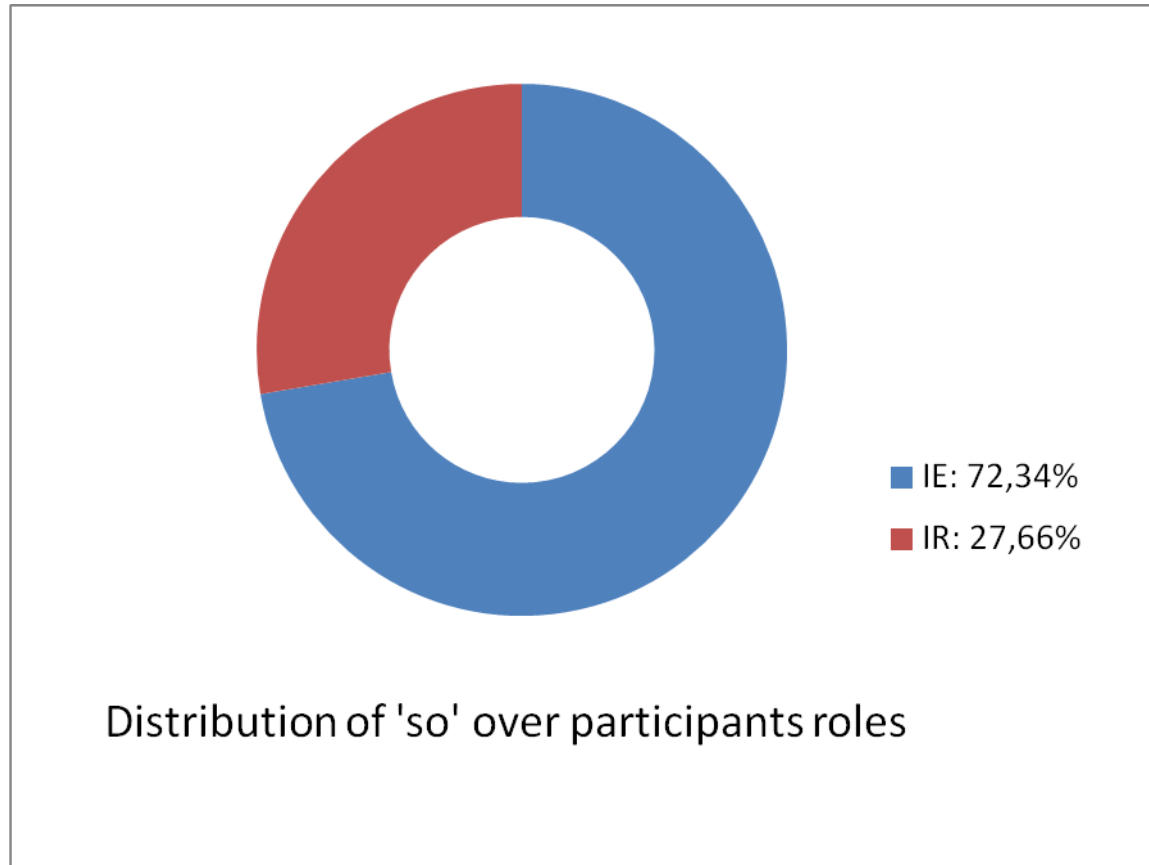


Figure 1: Distribution of instances of *so* over participants roles (IE and IR). $n=45$ instances of *so*

potential turn ending: The semantics of the linking adverbial as well as the function of the subsequent discourse marker *i mean* (Imo 2005: 20) project a conclusion of the speaker's prior talk. However, this conclusion is at the same time delayed by the production of *i mean* and *i think*. In return, the IR comes in in overlap, producing a (somewhat ironic) conclusion of the IE's response himself. In this way, the IR treats the IE's emerging *so*-prefaced construction as a place where a conclusion of the IE's previous talk is potentially forthcoming. Furthermore, the example shows that the completion of such *so*-prefaced constructions is crucial for the IE to maintain the authority over his argument. In this way *so*-prefaced constructions can be treated as a resource to claim and maintain evidential authority over one's line of argument.

5.2 *So-prefaced constructions as an IE's practice*

The following analysis will illustrate *so*-prefaced constructions as an IE's practice in more detail. Example 4 is a particularly good example of this. On the one hand, it shows that such *so*-prefaced constructions may function to present a claim as based on inferences to be drawn from the IE's previous topical talk; on the other, *so*-constructions may relate to larger action sequences and draw on prior conclusions.

Ex (4) Obama on O'Reilly Factor (0:37-1:46min)

1 IR: okay.
 2 let's start with national security-
 3 do you believe we're in the middle of a war on terror.
 4 IE: absolutely;
 5 IR: who is the enemy.
 6 IE: al qaeda,
 7 (-)
 8 the taliban-
 9 (-) a whole host of networks.
 10 uh that are bent on uh attacking america;
 11 who have a distorted ideology,
 12 uh who have perverted uh the faith of islam,
 13 and (.)
 14 **so (.)**
 15 **we have to (.) go after them.**
 16 IR: is iran part of that component;
 17 IE: iran is a major threat,
 18 now i don't think that there is a (.) uh the same uh
 they are not part of the same network;
 19 (you know) you got shi'a and you got sunni;
 20 we gotta have uh the ability to distinguish between these
 groups;
 21 because for example,
 22 the war uh the war in iraq is a good example;
 23 where i believe the administration lumped together,

14 IR: [not could,
15 let's stay now;
16 IE: what what what we can do,
17 IR: yeah.
18 IE: is stay focused on afghanistan;
19 IR: yeah;
20 IE and put more pressure on the pakistanis.
21 IR: like what?
22 IE: well for example,
23 we are providing them military aid,
24 without (-) having enough strings attached;
25 so they're using the military aid,
26 that we use;
27 IR: for nothing;
28 IE: to pakistan,
29 they're they're preparing for war against india;
30 (-)
31 IR: **so [you're going to pull out (and let the islamic**
32 IE: [()
33 IR: **fundamentalists) take them over?**
34 IE: no no no no;
35 what we say is,
36 look;
37 we're going to provide them with additional uh military
support-
38 targeted at terrorists,
39 and;
40 we're going help build their democracy;
41 and provide (.) [the kinds of funding ()
42 IR: [the things that we're doing now;
43 [come on;
44 IE: [()
45 IR: negroponte is over there and he's doing that now.
46 IE: [()
47 we hadn't
48 that's not what we've been doing,
49 we've wasted ten billion dollars;
50 with musharraf;
51 without holding him accountable;
52 for knocking out those [safe havens.
53 IR: [all right.
54 **so you are going to again more diplomacy,**
55 **and we need it,**
56 **absolutely,**
57 **try to convince the pakistani government to take a more**
aggressive approach and [saying if you don't we're going to
58 IE: [and what i will do
59 IR: **pull the funding.**
60 IE: and what i will do is;
61 if we have (.) bin laden in our sites,
62 IR: yeah;
63 IE: we target him,
64 and we knock him out.

The IR's question of interest (lines 31-33) is embedded in a global question-answer sequence typical for news interviews which starts with a topic shift of the IR, dealing with the global question of how the IE is going to handle the situation in Afghanistan (not shown in the transcript). The IE argues that the US *are providing them military aid, without (-) having*

enough strings attached; (lines 23-24). He continues his turn with an inference-based construction, which expresses the consequence of the current US policy (lines 25-29). Similar to its use in Example 4, lines 14-15, it presents a claim as based on mere facts.

In response, the IR produces a question, which is again done in a *so*-prefaced construction (lines 31-33). The use of *so* frames his question as an inference based on the IE's prior claim. The IE responds with a headshake, followed by a repeated production of the negation particle *no*. This strong display of disagreement shows that the IR's question, constructed as an inference, is treated as highly provocative. The proposal it makes potentially constructs the IE as somebody shying away from military conflicts. Moreover, it gains its communicative power from the fact that it is presented as something that can be drawn from the IE's own words. Furthermore, its syntactic form is conducive of a positive response, that is, a confirmation of the IR's proposal.

Line 54 contains a second case of an IR's *so*, placed subsequent to a so-called 'change-of-activity token' *all right*. According to Gardner (2001), tokens of this kind "mark a transition to a new activity or a new topic in the talk" (ibid: 2). This is also the case here: By using the *so*-prefaced construction, the IR shows agreement/confirms the IE's previous claim which suggests a pre-closing of the topical talk on Afghanistan. This move is anticipated by the change-of-activity token. Due to its inferential marking the IR's move can further be treated as doing a summary of the IE's political aims with respect to Afghanistan/Pakistan, directed at the TV audience. Contrary to the *so*-prefaced construction in lines 31-33, the IR's turn does not provoke disagreement on the IE's part. Instead, the IE adds to the contents of the summary in what follows (lines 60-64). This shows that the IR's *so*-prefaced constructions do not always initiate disaligning moves on the IE's part.

5.4 Stand-alone *so*: A deviant case

We have seen above that *so*-constructions are a powerful resource for the IE to claim and maintain evidential authority over his line of argument. They are almost always brought to completion but may be contested by the IE in competitive incomings.

Example 6 shows one rare instance of *so* which projects an inference-based claim which is *not* forthcoming. Instead, the IE's turn-final *so* elicits an uptake by the IR.

Ex. (6): Williams-Obama (0-0:38min)

1 IR: mr. president,
2 you're (.) an american born christian.

3 IE: m-hm,
4 IR: and yet increasing and now significant numbers of americans in
polls;
5 upwards of a fifth of respondents; (-)
6 are claiming you are neither.
7 a fifth of the people just about; (-)
8 uh believe you're a muslim.
9 (--)
10 IE: **keep in mind [those two things;**
11 IR: [this
12 IE: **uh american born and muslim are not the same;**
13 **so;**
14 IR: **but [but**
15 IE: **[but i understand your point.**
16 IR: either or the latter,
17 IE: right;
18 IR: and the most recent number is the latter;
19 this has to be (.) troubling to you;
20 this is of course all new territory (.) for an american (.)
president.

The analysis can be summarised as follows: In lines 1-8, the IR challenges the IE, in presenting some poll results about the IE's citizenship and religious affiliation. In response, the IE does not refute the implications of the IR's move; instead he challenges the validity of the polls presented, ending his turn with a turn-final *so* (lines 10-13). Similar to an example in Raymond (2004), "[t]he "so" projects an upshot that is left for [the recipient] to articulate or, at the very least, acknowledge." (ibid: 196).⁷ In return, the IR takes the floor, his turn-initial *but* projecting another challenge (line 14), which is, however, not brought to completion. In overlap, the IE completes the projected construction himself, reframing it as a concessive move (line 15). So why does the IE not produce the upshot projected by *so*? In our view, an explanation for this lies in the function of *so*-constructions as a resource for evidential positioning: By challenging the validity of the polls, the IE positions himself towards the polls, displaying disalignment not only with the IR who presented the polls but also with the public audience whose opinion is potentially expressed there.⁸ By not making this kind of upshot explicit, the disalignment with the public audience, which is potentially undesirable for a politician, is mitigated. In sum, the example shows that in certain settings, the upshot projected by *so* may be methodically left unstated and thus underspecified, which leads to implicit "validity claims" (Fetzer 2006: 199).

⁷ For reasons of space, the visual-spatial contextualisation of this instance of *so* cannot be discussed here. Cf. Walker (2012) for an analysis of vocal and visual aspects of turn-final *but*.

⁸ Similarly, the IE's completion of the *so*-construction may compromise his own argument.

6 Conclusions

It was shown that in follow-ups, *so*-prefaced constructions are both an IE's and IR's resource for framing a positioning move as based on inferences from the IE's previous talk, however, with different functions. For the IE, such a move is a resource to claim/maintain evidential authority over his line of argument. The IE may both introduce local inferences and more global conclusions, using *so*. As was illustrated, such moves can, however, also be strategically withheld. The IR's *so*-prefaced constructions can serve to perform provocative moves, initiating disalignment on the part of the IE, but they can also lead to aligning responses on the part of the IE. In this way, *so*-prefaced constructions can be treated as a practice for positioning, alignment/disalignment, and the management of evidential authority over the claims made.

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