

# “So What’s Up?”: Using the Discourse Marker *So* to Launch Conversational Business

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In this article, I use conversation analytic methods to analyze interactional junctures in which transitions to the first conversational topic are accomplished. I examine several ways in which parties in ordinary (and especially telephone) conversations coordinate the launching of first “talkables,” focusing specifically on environments in which such moves are delayed. I observed that many such moves are prefaced with the discourse marker *so*, suggesting that it plays an important role at this interactional juncture. In the article, I demonstrate that the underlying meaning of *so* as a marker of “emergence from incipency” serves to characterize the upcoming action as introducing the conversation’s first intended topic—something that was projected by the very act of initiating the contact and oriented to by participants as having been pending or incipient. In addition to mundane telephone conversations, I briefly examine several institutional encounters to explore how *so* gets deployed for introducing institutional agendas.

In this article, I examine turns at talk that accomplish moves out of conversation openings and launch talk on a topic that may have warranted the interaction in the first place. Typically, each party to a social interaction brings to the table certain issues and expectations about what the encounter might entail. Unless the meeting is incidental, the party who initiates the contact will ordinarily be expected to have some warrant for doing so—whether is it for some particular interactional project (such as extending an invitation, offering help, or requesting medical assistance) or

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simply to “catch up” (Button & Casey, 1988–1989). A discussion of any such matters would constitute the conversation’s core activity because of the parties’ shared expectation that at least some such “talkables” will at some point be addressed, an expectation that distinguishes conversation (or “designed” conversation) as a type of talk-in-interaction from a simple exchange of greetings (Schegloff, 1986, 2004).<sup>1</sup> In this article, I examine a number of ways in which parties in social interaction (and especially telephone conversations) coordinate the launching of such first talkables, focusing on the role of the discourse marker *so* in these utterances.

In conversations conducted over the telephone, the warrant behind initiating the contact is prototypically introduced early—immediately after brief openings in what Schegloff (1986) referred to as the “anchor position.” Having dealt with the tasks involved in opening the conversation—such as establishing mutual reciprocity, participant identifications, and greetings—the parties typically move to the “first topic”<sup>2</sup> that commonly constitutes the reason for initiating the contact (Schegloff, 1968, 1986). On occasion, however, the move to this first talkable is delayed due, for example, to a substantial expansion of the opening, external interruptions, and the like.

What happens when the move out of openings and into the discussion of the first conversational topic has been delayed or temporarily derailed? Are there specific practices for navigating this interactional juncture? In this article, I address these—previously uninvestigated—questions by examining the usage of *so*-prefacing in such environments. I start with a few illustrations.

Excerpt 1 is taken from the beginning of a telephone conversation in which the routine introduction of the first talkable has been subverted by a discussion of the study through which this datum was recorded (lines 1–7). Note the *so*-preface on the question that elicits the caller’s reason for the call (line 8):

Excerpt 1: CallFriend Eng 5051

(0:05) About being recorded

01 R: No way man, I’m not- (.) I’m not involved.=I don’t want

02 my- v-v-v voice on this.

03 (0.5)

04 R: Heh

05 (0.8)

06 C: Heh-heh-heh .hhh £You have tah hang u:p.£

07 R: Nah: that’s °alright.°

08 **SO WHAT’S UP.**

09 (0.5)

10 C: Hey! (0.2) U:m: .hhh (1.0) I: uh:- called about

11 uh:- (0.8) some uh:- (1.0) uh:- (1.2) trip- (0.5)

12 the flights up here?

Although in this article, I focus primarily on telephone conversations (for reasons outlined in the Data and Methods section), the practice of prefacing delayed moves to business with *so* is in no way limited to noncopresent talk. In face-to-face interactions, participants may also need to move from some extended preliminary tasks to (what they construe as) the interaction's core activity. In Excerpt 2 from a dinnertime conversation, Dad introduces the first "official" talkable (lines 5–6) once the food has been distributed and everybody has settled down to eat. And in Excerpt 3 from a workplace setting, Alex, a supervisor, introduces his reason for coming down to see Bob (line 14) after closing a nonwork-related chat (lines 3–12):

Excerpt 2: Stew Dinner

(9:10) The stew has just been served and discussed, and Mom and Dad have just sat down to eat. Dad is taking a sip from his glass and addresses the daughter (lines 5–6) after he puts the glass down.

- 01 MOM: Better then- some 'of 'em, ((about the watermelon))  
 02 CIN: hh .hh  
 03 (1.0)  
 04 MOM: Yeah. it's bee[n: (0.2) crockin' (on) th[uh crock pot.]  
 05 DAD: [(glass down)) [ **So** **Ci:** ]n (0.2)  
 06 **tell me about your day.**  
 07 (0.4)  
 08 CIN: Uh:: (.)  
 09 DAD: Wha'd you l:earn.  
 10 (1.0)  
 11 DAD: [ O : : ]:H yeah we went to thuh- (.) we went to uh: (.)  
 12 CIN: [Uh:m]  
 13 CIN: Claim Jumper.

Excerpt 3: WB17-7

(0:10) Alex walks into the lab where Bob is working at his desk.

- 01 Alex: (Good) morning Bob,  
 02 (1.8)  
 03 Alex: You look new an' fresh.  
 04 (1.5)  
 05 Alex: You had hairut? or what.  
 06 (0.2)  
 07 Bob: Yeah,  
 08 (0.2)  
 09 Alex: Oh [I see.  
 10 Bob: [(An') no slee:p.  
 11 (0.2)

- 12 Alex: I see I see ((nodding))
- 13           (3.0) ((Bob looks up and smiles at Alex))
- 14 Alex: **S::o anything new with-with (dinan) antenna?**
- 15           (0.5)
- 16 Bob: U::m:: (0.5) Well I think I know what to order now,

These segments suggest that in a number of different settings *so*-prefacing may be used on turns at talk that accomplish a move to the interaction’s core activity. In this article, I demonstrate that the basic interactional function of *so* as a marker of “emergence from incipency” serves to characterize the upcoming action as introducing the conversation’s first “intended” talkable—something that was projected by the very act of initiating the contact, what parties orient to as having been pending or incipient.<sup>3</sup>

The goals of the article are twofold. On the one hand, I aim to demonstrate that sequence initially, the discourse marker *so* indexes the status of the upcoming course of action as emerging from some *incipient interactional agenda* rather than contingently from the immediately preceding talk. On the other hand, in the article, I set out to show how this meaning of *so* is marshaled as a resource for moving out of extended openings into the conversation’s first talkable. These two goals correspond to the two lines of research I expand on in the article. One has to do with the use of discourse markers in talk-in-interaction in general and the English *so* more specifically. As the following discussion shows, the current understanding of the interactional functions of *so* is limited in a variety of ways. The other line of research has to do with the overall structural organization of the conversation as a unit and the organization of topic talk in particular (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Although quite a bit is known about the opening phase of social interactions (especially on the telephone), the issue of how moves out of openings into the conversation’s first topic are accomplished has not received much attention.

In the article, I proceed as follows. After a review of the relevant literature on the discourse marker *so* and, next, into the organization of telephone conversation openings, I discuss a variety of practices participants in telephone conversations employ to initiate the interaction’s business from delayed positions. First, I analyze telephone call *recipient* practices, and then *caller* practices. Finally, I briefly show how this usage of *so* in everyday conversations extends to copresent talk-in-interaction in institutional contexts.

### SO ... WHAT IS SO?

The word *so* is usually characterized as a *discourse marker*<sup>4</sup>—a class of linguistic devices that includes words and expressions such as *anyway*, *but*, *y’know*, and

*oh* among many others (see, e.g., Fraser, 1999; Jucker & Ziv, 1998; Lenk, 1998; Schiffrin, 1987). Discourse markers have been of substantial interest to researchers studying situated language use because of their important role in demarcating discourse connections. Even though *so* is ubiquitous in almost any genre of English discourse, surprisingly little research has actually been conducted on the topic. Prior investigations have primarily focused on the inferential or causal functions of *so*. Among the most influential are those by Schiffrin (1987) and Blakemore (1988, 2002) who have argued that *so* has the basic meaning of *result* (for Schiffrin, 1987) or *inference* (for Blakemore, 1988, 2002). Raymond (2004) extended these findings to demonstrate how in ordinary conversation, *so* can be deployed as a stand-alone unit to prompt the addressee to produce the next relevant action. Additionally, Local and Walker (2005) investigated how interactional functions of the stand-alone *so* are modulated by its prosodic delivery features.

Yet, *so* does not always function to mark causal connections in discourse as evidenced by the following dictionary entry:

in conversations to introduce a new topic, or to introduce a question or comment about something that has been said. *So how was your day?* (*Collins COBUILD English Dictionary*, 1995, pp. 1581–1582)

In the dictionary example, *so* is used to introduce new topical matters, and such usages of *so* have been documented in naturally occurring interactions as well. For example, Howe (1991) indicated that in topic initial utterances, *so* can function as a “marker of connection,” supposedly to invoke the participants’ shared background knowledge (p. 93). Johnson (2002) described the use of *so* for prefacing questions in police interviews and argued that it is used to focus the participants’ attention on the interview’s agenda. Most recently, Bolden (2006) argued that, when introducing new topics in conversation, *so* can be used to highlight the speaker’s involvement in the addressee’s life world by marking the topic as pending or incipient.

Even though the deployment of *so* for noninferential functions is very common in talk-in-interaction, and especially casual talk in a variety of settings, it has received cursory treatment in the literature. Moreover, there is no generally accepted view of its underlying meaning or interactional functions. In this article, I aim to fill these gaps by demonstrating that when initiating new sequences, *so* is deployed to provide a characterization of the upcoming course of action as having emerged from incipiency. In other words, speakers use the *so*-preface to bring “into current relevance something that was already on the conversational agenda” (Bolden, 2006, p. 666), framing the action thereby launched *not* as contingently emerging from the immediately preceding talk but as having been pending.

MOVING OUT OF OPENINGS

The question of how conversations get launched has received much attention from scholars in several fields (for a review, see, e.g., Lindström, 1994; Schegloff, 2002b). The research in the conversation analytic tradition has identified interactional tasks accomplished during opening phases of social encounters (most commonly telephone calls) and the sequences through which interactants implement them. These tasks are establishing mutual reciprocity (via a summons–answer sequence); accomplishing identifications (via identification or recognition sequences), greeting each other (via an exchange of greetings); and when socially appropriate, inquiring into each other’s state of being (via an exchange of “howareyou?”; Schegloff, 1968, 1986). In addition to the studies that have investigated the accomplishment of these common tasks in English (Coupland, Coupland, & Robinson, 1992; Drew & Chilton, 2000; Hopper, 1989a, 1989b; Hopper, Doany, Johnson, & Drummond, 1990–1991; Hopper & Drummond, 1992; Jefferson, 1980; Sacks, 1975; Schegloff, 1967, 1968, 1979, 1986, 2002a), there has also been significant interest in how openings vary across cultures (Duranti, 1997; Godard, 1977; Greif & Gleason, 1980; Hopper & Chen, 1996; Hopper & Koleilat-Doany, 1989; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1991, 2003; Knuf, 1989–1990, 1990–1991; Lentz, 1997; Lindström, 1994; Sifianou, 1989; Sun, 2004; Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002) and how they get adapted to suit the requirements of particular institutional settings (Clayman, 1991; Heath, 1981; Hutchby, 1996; Robinson, 1998; Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987).

Participants’ practices for moving out of openings and introducing the conversation’s first talkable have not been examined in that much detail, however.<sup>5</sup> Prior research has found that the warrant for initiating a conversation is typically introduced very early: immediately after short openings in the “anchor position” (Schegloff, 1986). Having accomplished the opening tasks, the parties normally move to the first order of business—the first topic that commonly constitutes the reason for initiating the contact. Such turns may be prosodically, lexically (e.g., “I’m just calling to ...”), or otherwise marked to indicate that they launch the caller’s reason for calling (Button & Casey, 1988–1989; Couper-Kuhlen, 2001a, 2001b). An example of a timely move to the first talkable can be seen in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 4: Susan and Marcia

00	((ring))	] summons/answer
01	Susan: H'llo:	]
02	Marcia: Hi: 's Sue there?	] identification/
03	Susan: Yeah, this is sheç	] recognition
04	Marcia: Hi this's Ma:rcia.=	] ] greetings
05	Susan: ↑Hi Marcia, how're you:.=	] ] ]

- 06 Marcia: =Fine how're you?=  
 07 Susan: Fi:ne<sub>i</sub> ] "howareyou"  
 ] exchange
- 
- 08 Marcia: Uh::m: We got the tickets, ] 1<sup>st</sup> topic

In this segment, all of the opening tasks have been accomplished by the end of line 7; and at line 8, Marcia, the caller, launches the first topic in the anchor position, formulating the reason for her call (informing Susan about where the tickets are going to be).

In this article, I am concerned with what happens when the introduction of the first intended talkable is delayed by some extraneous or tangential issues (such as discussing the recording process or dealing with an external interruption). My analysis indicates that the discourse marker *so* is recurrently used to preface utterances that initiate the launch of the conversation's official first matter from a late position—that is, a course of action understood as having been pending from the conversation's start. I refer to these kinds of actions as *moves to business* as an umbrella term for various turns that accomplish a move into the conversation's main activity—an introduction of a talkable that may have prompted the call. This kind of move may launch a sequence in which the reason for the call is discussed or simply initiate "catching up" when no specific warrant for the conversation is expected (as in "no-reason-for-call relationships"; Sacks, 1995, Vol. 2, p. 169).

Depending on a variety of factors (including how exactly the opening unfolds), the reason for the call may be either announced by the caller or solicited by the call recipient (Schegloff, 1986). As I show, when the move to business is accomplished by the call recipient via a solicit (such as "so what's up?"), "so" displays the call recipient's orientation to the possibility that the caller may have had a reason for calling and that its introduction has been delayed by other matters. On the other hand, if it is the caller who launches a delayed move to business, *so* alerts the recipient that the upcoming utterance<sup>6</sup> is initiating a course of action the caller has meant to launch all along—that is, the reason (or one of the reasons) for his or her call. I point out, however, that, as typical of discourse markers, *so* is not an obligatory element in such environments but an optional cue that highlights the speaker's orientation to the status of the upcoming topic as having been incipient (cf. Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994).<sup>7</sup> However, the analysis shows that action trajectories not meant to be taken as moves to business do *not* get prefaced with *so*, which further indicates that the discourse marker is deployed in this position specifically to alert the addressee that an incipient matter is being initiated.

## DATA AND METHODS

In this study, I employed the methodology of conversation analysis, which emphasizes systematic and detailed examination of interlocutors' orientations and understandings of the ongoing talk-in-interaction (see, e.g., Heritage, 1984b;

Sacks et al., 1974). The larger research project on which this article draws (Bolden, 2005) analyzed a corpus of over 100 hr of recorded and transcribed, naturally occurring, casual interactions in American English, both on the telephone and face-to-face, as well as a number of recorded interactions from in a variety of institutional settings.<sup>8</sup> Most examples I present in this article are casual telephone conversations taken from the CallFriend and CallHome corpora collected by the Linguistic Data Consortium of the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup> Overall, I examined approximately 250 conversation openings for this article, and I analyzed over 100 instances of *so* usage.

To better understand the dynamics of the CallFriend and CallHome conversations, several notes about the research protocol are in order. These research projects provide participants with a 30-min, free, long-distance phone call to a person of their choice (typically a friend or a family member) and a small monetary reward for the caller. Callers telephone a central phone number to get connected to their desired destination. In the beginning of the conversation, the participants hear a message that informs them about the conditions of the study. The recording of the conversation starts after the message has been played. Thus, these recordings do not ordinarily contain opening sections (unless the phone has been passed on to another party). On occasion, recorded calls appear to be second calls after an initial contact between the parties has already been made. Such calls, when identified, were excluded from the analysis because topical resumption practices are quite different from what is being considered here (Bolden, 2005; Jefferson, 1972; Mazeland & Huiskes, 2001; Wong, 2000).

The message played in the beginning of these phone calls disrupts the routine movement from the conversation opening section to the anchor position, as parties typically start off by addressing, in some way, the institutional contingencies of the phone call. Thus, the research study becomes the first topic of the conversation, which delays (sometimes quite significantly) the move to the conversation's core activity—a discussion of some possible intended talkables. When the parties do finally close the discussion of the study and initiate a discussion of their reasons for calling, utterances that accomplishes this "move to business" are often prefaced with *so*.

Several caveats about limitations of these data sets are in order. Under the conditions of the study, the reason for a particular call may be rather problematic, and its problematic nature is revealed in some of the calls. One issue is that the call is made for "free" (no long distance charges), which lowers the expectation for having a particular reason for calling (the call may be judged to be made just because it is free). Additionally, because the call is known in advance to be about 30 min in length, parties assume they will be catching up and discussing a variety of topics—and not just one interactional project. Although these contingencies have a significant effect on how the conversation proceeds, it is nonetheless evident (as the data show) that parties are oriented to the presence of the "official business" of the call (i.e., what they will talk about) aside from the institutional conditions under which it was made.

In spite of these limitations, the use of these corpora is advantageous for the analysis at hand. Specifically, it offers a large number of calls (over 200) in which the parties have to deal with the same interactional problem—how to get from the “research discussion” to the first “intended talkable.” Thus, analysts can avail themselves of a large number of examples from very comparable contexts. However, I provide—whenever possible—compatible instances from other telephone conversations that do not have the peculiar features described previously.

In the following sections, I examine how delayed “moves to business” are accomplished and delineate environments for *so* use. I first discuss moves to business initiated by the recipient of the phone call and then those initiated by the caller.

### CALL RECIPIENT-INITIATED MOVES TO BUSINESS

There are different ways of launching a discussion of possible talkables in a telephone conversation. The recipient of the call may initiate such discussions<sup>10</sup> by (a) soliciting the caller’s reason for the call (e.g., “So what’s up?”), (b) proffering a particular topic (e.g., “So how was your day?”), or (c) unilaterally nominating a topic (e.g., “I have to tell you that ...”).

Note that these alternatives are not equal ways of advancing the conversation. *Soliciting* the caller’s reason for the call conveys the call recipient’s understanding that the caller has (or may have) a particular reason for calling. *Proffering* a specific topic invites the caller to discuss a particular issue that is caller regarding (Schegloff, 2006). When a call recipient proffers a topic in the anchor position, it may suggest the recipient’s understanding that both parties have equal rights to the anchor position—either because the caller has no special reason for calling (as in a *no-reason-for-call relationship*) or because the recipient already knows the reason and now proffers it as the first topic. Unilateral topic *nomination* in the first topic position is, again, different, as its design commonly reflects an orientation to this topic as not being the “official order of business” but rather something that call recipient does before they deal with the caller’s reason for the call.

The analysis of recipient-initiated moves to business has shown that the discourse marker *so* is recurrently used to preface topic solicitations and topic proffers but not unilateral topic nominations. In the following discussion, I show what this finding says about the use of *so* as a marker of emergence from incipency and how its deployment helps participants navigate the juncture from extraneous matters to the conversation’s core activity.

#### Reason-for-the-Call Solicitations by Call Recipients

One way to move out of openings and launch the discussion of the conversation’s business is for the call recipient to solicit the caller’s reason for calling.<sup>11</sup> In the

following two examples, the solicitation follows an extraneous discussion and is prefaced with “so.” The use of the discourse marker appears to suggest that the activity now launched has been expected and pending from the conversation’s start and then delayed.

In Excerpt 5 (seen in part as Excerpt 1 previously), the recipient of the call (R) jokes about not being willing to participate in the study (lines 1–4) and then reverses his position (line 7; cf. Schegloff, 2001) and initiates the move to the business of the conversation by soliciting the caller’s reason for calling (line 8):

Excerpt 5: CallFriend Eng 5051<sup>12</sup>

- (0:05)
- 01 R: No way man, I’m not- (.) I’m not invo:lved.=I don’t want  
 02 my- v-v-v voice on this.  
 03 (0.5)
- 04 R: Heh  
 05 (0.8)
- 06 C: Heh-heh-heh .hhh £You have tah hang u:p.£
- 07 R: Nah: that’s °alright.°  
 08 **SO WHAT’S UP.**  
 09 (0.5)
- 10 C: Hey! (0.2) U:m: .hhh (1.0) I: uh:- called about  
 11 uh:- (0.8) some uh:- (1.0) uh:- (1.2) trip- (0.5)  
 12 the flights up here?
- 13 R: Yeah.  
 14 (1.0)
- 15 C: .hh A:n it looks like that it works out pretty good.

The solicitation question at line 8 is launched at the place where the first action trajectory (dealing with the study contingencies) is possibly complete. In response to this topic-solicitation question, the caller (C) states his reason for calling, which has to do with planning the call recipient’s upcoming visit (starting from line 10). The topic solicitation question indicates the speaker’s orientation to the presence of some pending business that prompted the call and treats the first topic of the conversation (the research study) as *not* constituting the official business of the conversation.

The discussion of the research project may not be the only sequence that delays the move to the conversation’s core activity. In Excerpt 6, the introduction of the reason for the call is also delayed by an external intrusion—the ringing of another phone—and the incidental sequence (Schegloff, 2006, p. 237) that emerges from that. So although the conversation is from the same corpus, the delay here is due to a reason that has nothing to do with the peculiarities of the research design, which shows that *so* is used similarly in a variety of contexts. The conversation is between Adam, the caller, and his fiancée, Berta:

## Excerpt 6: CallFriend Eng 5435

(0:00)

01 AD: You heard that right,

02 BE: Hm-hmm,

03 (0.2)

04 AD: .hh hhh .hh [hSo::h

05 BE: [tk.hh Yup.

06 (2.5)

07 AD: °So keep in mind that [this is b-°

08 BE: [O(h)h my pho:ne's ringing

09 upstairs now.=too\_

10 (0.2)

11 AD: Does it matter?

12 BE: Nope-.

13 (1.8)

14 BE: I don't care.

15 (.)

16 BE: ↑So what's up↓ honey.

17 AD: {2.0}/{.hhh}

18 AD: Oh ma:n last night the phone rang, at- three thirty,

19 (.)

20 BE: In the morning?

21 AD: Yeah.

22 BE: .hhh You're kidding.

((a friend called with some very bad news))

In the beginning of the call, Adam and Berta briefly discuss the study (lines 1–7), but then Berta remarks that another phone in her house is ringing (line 8–9). Adam's uptake (at line 11) implies that the other phone should be ignored, and Berta agrees (lines 12–14). Having brought this incidental sequence to closure, Berta then launches an inquiry into Adam's reason for calling (line 16), prefacing it with "so." In response, Adam starts a telling about a family friend who had just had a terminal brain aneurism—a topic Adam had arguably intended to talk about and that gets discussed at length.

The use of *so*-prefacing in topic solicitations is position sensitive in that only delayed solicitations may receive the preface. When the reason-for-the-call discussion is not preempted by extraneous matters that divert routine openings, the discourse marker is *not* used as illustrated by the following segment:

## Excerpt 7: SF2

((two rings))

01 BOB: Hello,

02 (0.3)

- 03 MAR: hhhh Hello is this Mister: Bob Rigalatto?  
 04 BOB: This certainly i:s, hhh [hh  
 05 MAR: [‘hhhh This i:s uh((v))hhhmhhhMark  
 06 Hubert here,=  
 07 MAR: =[hhh  
 08 BOB: [hOh Mister Hu:bert. ‘n how’s evrything.  
 09 MAR: hOh just fine’n dandy,hh  
 10 BOB: That’s good tuh hear. Good tuh hear my ma:n, **What’s up.**  
 11 MAR: ‘hh- ‘hhhhh We:ll I talked to: JoAnne Rogers uh:hh  
 12 long distance last night?  
 13 BOB: Uh huh?  
 14 MAR: ‘t ‘hhhhhhh A:nd uh,hhh she said thet uh: you guys were  
 15 havin a party Friday’h

Similarly to the first two examples (Excerpt 5 and Excerpt 6), the move to discuss the caller’s reason for calling is accomplished by the call recipient (Bob) via a topic solicitation (line 10). However, here this action occurs immediately on completion of the routine opening tasks in the anchor position—and is not prefaced with *so*. The differential, position-sensitive usage of *so* suggests that speakers reserve this discourse marker for launching courses of action that have been delayed.

To summarize, when the move to the conversation’s business is delayed, the recipient of the call may indicate the incipient character of such a move when inviting the caller to introduce the reason for his or her call via a topic solicitation. The *so*-prefaced turn through which she or he implements this action takes place after the previous matter, launched in the first topic position, has been brought to a possible completion. The *so*-preface marks the turn-constructural unit (TCU) as dealing with the business of the conversation that has been projected by the initiation of the call and delayed by other, incidental matters. The deployment of *so* in reason-for-the-call solicitations is limited to sequential environments in which such actions are delayed, which offers evidence for characterizing it as a marker of emergence from incipency.

### Topic Proffers by Call Recipients

The recipient may initiate the move to the first intended talkable not only by soliciting the caller’s reason for calling (as in the previous section) but also by proffering a particular, caller-relevant topic.<sup>13</sup> In Excerpt 8, the recipient of the call (Rebecca) proffers the first topic (the caller’s new job) after a discussion of the recording:

Excerpt 8: Arthur and Rebecca

- 01 ((2 rings))  
 02 R: H’lo,;

- 03 A: H'lo:  
 04 (0.2)  
 05 R: Hi.  
 06 A: How you doin.  
 07 R: ↑Arthur,  
 08 A: Yes [:.  
 09 R: [H(h) [i(h).  
 10 A: [.hhh hoh hoh hoh hoh .hhh W(h)hy.  
 11 R: £How are you. £  
 12 A: You are be:ing recorded.

((several lines omitted; discuss the recording))

- 13 R: No no I'm not nervous.  
 14 A: hehh! hh  
 15 R: I can handle it.  
 16 A: Yih hh!h [eh-heh  
 17 R: [So you ta- you took the j^ob huh,  
 18 A: W'll I'm working day times,  
 19 R: Yeah?=  
 20 A: =A:nd um (.) for (.) wha:t I what I did wuz I  
 21 asked them if I cud work like fr'm one to seven,  
 22 (0.5)  
 23 A: for this week an' next week.  
 ((continue about Arthur's job))

Arthur preempts the introduction of his reason for calling with the announcement that the conversation is being recorded (line 12). This sequence gets quite significantly expanded, but at line 17, Rebecca finally moves the conversation on by proffering an addressee-attentive topic, Arthur's new job. This move to business is accomplished via a "so"-prefaced statement about the addressee (a "B-event" statement; see Labov & Waletzky, 1967) followed by a tag ("huh"). The turn formulates the news that has apparently transpired since the two last talked, inviting the recipient to expand on the matter. By proffering this as the first official topic, Rebecca indicates her understanding that Arthur's call was at least partially made to talk about the news—and, indeed, the topic is embraced and discussed at length. Given the late positioning of this first topic initiator, "so" here can be seen to mark the incipient character of this course of action—thus suggesting that the topic has been on the speaker's interactional agenda.

The following segment demonstrates that reason-for-the-call proffers after digressions unrelated to recording conditions may unfold very similarly and be prefaced with *so* as well. In Excerpt 9, Ben calls Albert a few hours prior to the party Albert is hosting. Here, the call recipient initiates a move to the first order of business after some joking around:

Excerpt 9: TCIA Duck

(0:58) Albert was fetched by his wife who first answered the phone

- 01 Alb: (He/Hu)llo:?  
 02 (0.2)  
 03 Ben: Hello:.=  
 04 Alb: =Hi:.  
 05 Ben: Is this nine three sev’n fou:r five one fou:r?=  
 06 Alb: =Mmhm:=  
 07 Ben: =Hi::.  
 08 (0.4)  
 09 Alb: Hi:.hh  
 10 (0.7)  
 11 Alb: Huyih doing.  
 12 (0.2)  
 13 Ben: Fie en you:?  
 14 Alb: ((vi)) hhhh(v) hu:h..hh (.) hh  
 15 (0.2)  
 16 Ben: Oh I’m wash’n my ca:r:.  
 17 (.)  
 18 Alb: u [O h : : ].  
 19 Ben: [A:n’ I y]is got through pluckin a du:ck.  
 20 (.)  
 21 Alb: [O h : : ],  
 22 Ben: [e-heh .h]h hheh.hh hhuh.hh [h hhhh .hh]

((several lines omitted))

- 23 Alb: hhhheh-hn, (.hhhh)  
 24 (0.2)  
 25 Alb: Uhhhhhh. **Sih you guys comin over tihni:ght?**  
 26 Ben: Yeah.  
 27 (0.2)  
 28 Alb: Yiare.hh  
 29 Ben: Yah.  
 30 Alb: Okay.Good.We’re havin a h-buncha  
 31 people over too [:.  
 32 Ben: [Oh are yih?  
 33 (.)  
 34 Alb: Yeh it sort’v uhhh [stardih- ] started out ez sorta=  
 35 [(door)]  
 36 Alb: =impromptu en now it’s, ended up tih be a party.  
 37 Ben: Oh yeaah?  
 38 Alb: Uhhhh hihh  
 39 (0.5)  
 40 Ben: So uh:m, (.) didju wan me do::What time is this thing sta:rt.  
 41 Alb: Oh I don’t know, ((v1)) whyn((v))chu g’mon over aboutah::

- 42           oh: seven thirty er: closer tuh ei:ght,  
 43 Ben:       A-'ri:ght,=

After the opening of the conversation is dealt with (lines 1–14),<sup>14</sup> Ben does not introduce his reason for the call, choosing instead to report on his prior activities (lines 16 and 19). The “plucking the duck” sequence, apparently meant to elicit laughter, gets closed (line 23), and after a bit of silence, Albert proceeds with an inquiry about Ben’s coming to the party (line 25). The inquiry implements the move into the business of this conversation. Launched by the call recipient via a topic proffer, it represents the recipient’s guess about the reason behind the phone call. *So*-prefacing on this turn indicates the pending character of the matter, projected by the call initiation and delayed by the intervening joking sequences. The fact that the party was indeed the reason for Ben’s call is confirmed when he launches his first “serious” action sequence about party arrangements (at line 40).<sup>15</sup> Notably, Ben also uses “so” preface to indicate that the matter has been on his agenda.<sup>16</sup>

As observed earlier (see Excerpt 7), the use of *so* on recipient-initiated introductions of the first “intended” topic is restricted to the environments in which such utterances are displaced from the anchor position. When recipients proffer possible reason-for-the-call discussions early in the phone call, the *so*-preface is not employed. In the following segment, Tony calls his ex-wife about their son Joey’s return trip home after vacationing at Marsha’s:

Excerpt 10: MDE:MTRAC:60-1:2 Stolen

- 01 Marsha: Hello:?  
 02 Tony:   Hi: Marsha?  
 03 Marsha: Ye:ah.  
 04 Tony:   How are you.  
 05 Marsha: Fi::ne.  
 06           (0.2)  
 07 Marsha: **Did Joey get home yet?**  
 08 Tony:   Well I wz wondering when ‘e left.  
 09           (0.2)  
 10 Marsha: ‘hhh Uh:(d) did Oh: .h Yer not in on what ha:ppen’. (hh)

When the call recipient brings up the interactional agenda for the call (line 7), she does so early (in place of a reciprocal “howareyou” inquiry) rather than late (as in Excerpt 8 and Excerpt 9). The absence of *so*-prefacing on this move to business is in line with my characterization of *so* as a marker of the current matter’s emergence from incipency.

To summarize, call-recipient-initiated introductions of the caller’s reason for calling are commonly prefaced with *so* when delayed by some sort of intervention. The discourse marker alerts the addressee that the upcoming turn is launching an

incipient activity, thereby inviting the addressee to understand the action being accomplished as having been pending and delayed.

### First Topic Nominations by Call Recipients

I have shown that following an intervening matter (such as a discussion of the research design or some other incidental sequence), call recipients can solicit the caller’s reason for the call or, alternatively, proffer a caller-related topic as a way of moving the conversation forward. In addition, call recipients may use this position to further postpone (and possibly derail) the reason-for-the-call discussion by unilaterally nominating their own topic. Even though these topic nominations move the conversation out of some extraneous discussion that has delayed other interactional business, interestingly, they do *not* get the *so*-preface. The lack of *so*-prefacing on such topic nominations reflects the fact that these topics have not been projected from the conversation’s start—unlike the initiation of the reason-for-the-call sequences discussed earlier.

Sequences initiated via call recipients’ unilateral topic nominations share several characteristics. These sequences commonly launch call *recipient* topics (i.e., they are self-regarding in nature), announce something unexpected to the caller (i.e., news of some sort), and are usually either latched to or produced in overlap with the prior turn. All of this suggests that these courses of action have not been anticipated and not treated as having been pending. This is reflected in the absence of *so* preface.

In Excerpt 11, for example, the recipient of the call (Anna) initiates the first topic, preempting the move to the reason-for-the-call sequence:

Excerpt 11: CallFriend Eng 6093

(0:00)

01 Anna: (Hello rias,)

02 John: He:y.

03 (0.2)

04 John: [>°That’s (partav the)]°<

05 Anna: [.hhh ] **Du:de. Um I have a friend here**  
 06 **who wants to know whether you’re my da:d.**

07 (0.5)

08 John: <#O:h# re:ally?,>

09 Anna: Kh-kh-yeah.

10 John: We tell’er that n [o I’m notcher-]

11 Anna: [↑>No no ] no no:!<(C(h)l(h)o(h)e)

12 It’s No:. It’s cool.

At line 4, John, who is the caller, starts to explain the study. The call recipient (Anna) interrupts by launching a new sequence (lines 5–6). The sequence initiation is done as a

“spur of the moment” informing. Anna reports on something that apparently is taking place during the conversation: Note specifically the use of “here,” suggesting that Anna’s friend is there with her asking the question. (It’s also a joke.) The call recipient’s report concerns a matter the caller could not have known about. All of this suggests that the sequence does not launch an incipient topic—in fact, it further delays the move to business of the conversation (a discussion of the caller’s reason for calling).<sup>17</sup>

The next segment (previously seen as Excerpt 6) shows another variation on the same practice. Here the recipient of the call (Berta) reports a noticing of a concurrent event:

Excerpt 12: CallFriend Eng 5435

- 01 AD: You heard that right,  
 02 BE: Hm-hmm,  
 03 (0.2)  
 04 AD: .hh hhh .hh [hSo::h  
 05 BE: [tk.hh Yup.  
 06 (2.5)  
 07 AD: °So keep in mind that [this is b-°  
 08 BE: [O(h)h my pho:ne’s ringing  
 09 upstairs now.=too\_  
 10 (0.2)  
 11 AD: Does it matter?  
 12 BE: Nope-.  
 13 (1.8)  
 14 BE: I don’t care.  
 15 (.)  
 16 BE: ↑So what’s up↓ honey.

While the caller (Adam) attempts to explain the study (line 7), Berta interrupts with an announcement of the phone ringing. The preface “oh” functions as a change-of-state token and marks this as a just-now-noticed event (Heritage, 1984a). Obviously, neither the caller nor the recipient could have anticipated the ringing, and the absence of *so* is clearly explained by the fact that the turn does not launch an incipient or pending discussion.

So we have seen that when topics are unilaterally raised by call recipients, they are not prefaced with *so*, which confirms the understanding of *so* as a marker of emergence from incipency. The absence of *so*-prefacing on such utterances demonstrates that they are not being treated as having been incipient from the conversation’s start. In fact, the matters raised via unilateral topic nominations are commonly incidental (e.g., responsive to something in the immediate environment).<sup>18</sup> In effect, unilateral topic nominations further delay the introduction of the conversation’s reason-for-the-call discussion.

The analysis of various ways in which call recipients launch moves to business—and especially, the differential use of *so* in such turns—indicates that parties in interaction routinely differentiate between “official” talk (having to do with reasons for making the call) and “unofficial” talk (that deals with spur-of-the-moment, contingent issues) and are sensitive to the placement of such talk in conversation. This suggests that the discourse marker *so* is deployed in relation to the overall structural organization of the conversation as a unit and is, thereby, a resource for managing such interactional junctures.

### CALLER-INITIATED MOVES TO BUSINESS

Having seen how call recipients use the discourse marker *so* in utterances that implement delayed moves to business, I examine how *so* is employed by *callers* in the same interactional environment. Callers can initiate the introduction of the first “intended talkable” by doing one of the following: (a) soliciting the first topic and thus either forfeiting or postponing the introduction of a reason for the call (e.g., *So what’s up?*); (b) proffering a specific topic, which may be as a reason for their call (e.g., *So you are looking for a job?*); or (c) unilaterally nominating the first topic, possibly as a reason for the call (e.g., *So congratulations!* or *Did you send Kara the printer ribbons?*).

By *soliciting* a topic from the recipient in the anchor position, the caller indicates that she or he has no particular reason for calling—at least not one that should be introduced this early in the conversation. Callers may also *proffer* particular topics or *unilaterally nominate* topics or courses of action as a way of moving the conversation forward. Action trajectories launched in this position would ordinarily be heard as the caller’s reason for calling (or, at least, as one of them), although there may be ways of preventing such a hearing (Couper-Kuhlen, 2001a; Schegloff, 1986). Proffering a topic for the addressee to embrace is a practice for launching addressee-related issues (who, in this case, is the call recipient), whereas unilateral topic nominations may either deal with the recipient or the caller himself or herself (Schegloff, 2006).

*So*-prefacing on caller-initiated moves to business is distributed in an interesting way. As might be expected from the discussion so far, moves to business in this delayed position that are done via topic solicitations and topic proffers are recurrently prefaced with *so*, as are addressee-regarding, unilateral topic nominations. However, topic nominations that raise *self*-regarding matters do not tend to get the preface. The differential usage of *so* suggests that callers may avoid the implication of having been waiting to introduce a self-attentive matter by choosing *not* to preface it with *so* (cf. Bolden, 2006).

### Topic Solicitations by Callers

In the following two examples, the caller initiates a move to business after the discussion of the research study comes to completion. Instead of suggesting a particular reason for the call, however, the caller solicits a topic from the recipient, thus indicating the absence of a specific reason for calling (at least, for the time being<sup>19</sup>), presenting this as a social call made to simply “catch up” with the recipient.

In Excerpt 13, Steve, the caller, is talking to his girlfriend, Tamara. First they discuss the technical aspects of the recording (up to line 16); and after the topic is closed, Steve initiates a move to the conversation’s core activity (second TCU in line 18).

#### Excerpt 13: CallFriend Eng 6065

(0:00)

- 01 STE: I think we’re supposed to press one.right,<Did’e tell you  
 02 to press one?  
 03 TAM: No:.  
 04 (0.2)  
 05 x: [((sound as if pressing the button))  
 06 STE: [Uh-  
 07 (2.2)  
 08 STE: Okey.=I guess we’re okay.  
 09 (0.2)  
 10 STE: .hhAm [Hhehhh  
 11 TAM: [HHH heh-heh-heh  
 12 STE: ↑Alright.=So, ah:hm:.  
 13 (0.5)  
 14 STE: ↓.hOkey it’ll complain later.  
 15 (.)  
 16 STE: when we need to hang up.  
 17 TAM: Okay.  
 18 STE: ↑Okay. [**So what’s up.**  
 19 TAM: [heh-heh-heh  
 20 STE: (H)mhm:.= ((half laugh))  
 21 TAM: =↑Not much. ah:m (2.0) a: I’m (trying)/(sorry) about the:.  
 22 (0.2) I ( ) keep on changing my mind wanning to speak.  
 23 STE: That’s okay.  
 ((in reference to an e-mail exchange))

Here the move to business is achieved via a topic solicitation that invites the recipient of the call to nominate her own topic (which she does at lines 21–22 when Tamara initiates a discussion of an ongoing e-mail exchange between the two of them). This sort of move suggests that the caller has no particular reason for call-

ing—at least not one worth introducing this early in the conversation—and that he understand this conversation to be dedicated to catching up. Interestingly, the caller attempts to navigate the boundary between the discussion of preliminary matters (technical aspects of the recording) and the body of the call twice (see lines 12 and 18), both times using a very similar format to do so. In both cases, the caller produces a high-pitched closing token (“↑alright” at line 12 and “↑okay” at line 18) immediately followed by a “so”-prefaced utterance (cf. Couper-Kuhlen, 2004). The first attempt to launch the discussion of the conversation’s business<sup>20</sup> is suspended in favor of a parenthetical comment on the recording, however (lines 14–15). After that brief sequence is closed, Steve re-does the shift into the conversation’s business by soliciting the first topic from the addressee (line 18). The fact that “so” is deployed in both attempts to move the conversation forward underscores its role in helping navigate this conversational juncture by cuing the recipient in about the status of the upcoming course of action. In both instances, the “so”-preface indicates that the action implemented by the turn has been incipient and delayed by preliminary matters.

Excerpt 14 is very similar. Josh, the caller, initiates an inquiry into the newsworthy events in the call recipient’s life (line 11) after they briefly discuss the study:

Excerpt 14: CallFriend Eng 6058

(0:00)

01 JOSH: >£Do you wan-Do you wanna be recorded£<?

02 MARK: Na(HHh) that’s fine. I d(h)on’t car[e].

03 JOSH: [Okay.

04 (.)

05 JOSH: They’re paying me twanny dollars to do it.

06 MARK: Are [they?

07 JOSH: [hKeh ((cough)) Yeah. yeah.

08 (0.5)

09 JOSH: So:.

10 MARK: Okay.

11 JOSH: .hh >**So what’s going on.**<

12 MARK: h A:h hh nothing much.=I’m ah (0.5) tck js- js filling

13 up some other applications.

14 JOSH: Okay.

((Josh is helping Mark with his college applications))

The discussion of the recording is closed at line 10, and the caller initiates a move to business by soliciting a topic from his addressee (line 11). The discourse marker “so” that prefaces the inquiry marks it as something the caller has understood to be the core conversational activity in this interaction.<sup>21</sup>

Expectedly, when callers solicit topics after a routine opening, *so*-prefacing is not used as in the following segment:

Excerpt 15: Marie & Jeanne

- 00 ((2 rings))  
 01 J: H'llo.,  
 02 M: Hi there.  
 03 J: Hi:.  
 04 M: How iz you,hh  
 05 J: Pretty g [ood. ]  
 06 M: [ 'hhh ] Goo:d.hh  
 07 (. )  
 08 M: **What's ne:w.**'hhh  
 09 M: ((sniff))  
 10 J: Nothin much.  
 11 M: Tch tch.[hh  
 12 [(bang))  
 13 M: 'hh Yuh hadda busy da:y tuhda:y,right?  
 14 ((sound))/(0.4}  
 15 M: 'hhh  
 16 J: She: didn' show up.

Examples like this highlight the fact that *so*-prefacing is position sensitive and is reserved for delayed moves into the conversation's business.

In this analysis, I have shown that after preliminary matters are discussed, callers may initiate a move to business by posing a *so*-prefaced topic solicitation question to generate the first talkable. The discourse marker indicates to the recipient that the action accomplished by the upcoming turn has been incipient, thereby helping the parties achieve a transition from preliminary matters to the conversation's core activity.

### Topic Proffers by Callers

Proffering a topic is a way of moving on with the conversation by launching an addressee-relevant issue. When callers do topic proffering after conversation openings (as in the following examples), they indicate that the topic being proffered is a reason for their call. Not surprisingly, these delayed topic proffers are recurrently prefaced with *so* to show that the matter being launched is something the callers have been waiting to raise when placing the call—and thus, something that has been incipient.

In the following segment (Excerpt 16), Mike is calling an acquaintance of his, Jane, apparently to share some job-hunting experiences. Both are law students looking for summer employment:

Excerpt 16: CallFriend Eng 6401

- (0:05)
- 01 Mike: [ >I mean you< don’t mind being recorded, do you.
- 02 Jane: No I don’t.
- 03 (0.5)
- 04 Mike: Nah,
- 05 (.)
- 06 Mike: [Okey.
- 07 Jane: [We’re not talking about anything private.=so I don’t
- 08 really ca:re:. .h[h
- 09 Mike: [Yeah,
- 10 (0.2)
- 11 Mike: **.hSo you’re looking for jobs in New York right now,**
- 12 (.)
- 13 Jane: I’m gonna look for jobs I think in D: C: an New York.
- 14 (0.8)
- 15 Mike: Yea:h=I’m looking in New Yo:rk, an also Philadelphia,
- 16 (0.5)
- 17 Mike: .hI wantah work in Hawa<sup>ii</sup> but- (.) I don’t know how
- 18 I’m gointah interview there.

After the first topic—dealing with the recording of the conversation—is closed (see lines 7–10), the caller introduces the first intended talkable by asking Jane about her job search (line 11). The topic proffer at line 11 is prefaced with “so” to indicate its incipient character: As a possible reason for the call, the matter has been pending from the call’s beginning and delayed by the discussion of the re-search study.

In the next segment (Excerpt 17), the caller again proffers a recipient topic in the delayed anchor position:

Excerpt 17: CallFriend Eng 6200

- (0:00)
- 01 Greg: Okay=Are you still there?
- 02 Jen: I’m here,
- 03 Greg: Yea:h. **.hSo how- ho- how are you making out in the uh::**
- 04 **(.) uh weather there in the s:now.**
- 05 (0.2)
- 06 Jen: .hhh Well believe it or not where I live we only got about
- 07 three inche:s\_
- 08 Greg: .hhY’know[I w- I- (.) ]I read it but the rest of
- 09 Jen: [Heh-heh-hah-hah]
- 10 Greg: the country thinks it’s the who:le got three feet of snow.

Here, the launch of the first talkable is delayed by the brief sequence in which the parties reestablish the connection (lines 1–3). The caller then proffers a recipient topic (lines 3–4), prefacing it with “so.” The topic appears to introduce one matter Greg had meant to ask about (note his stated prior interest in the topic at line 8), and the use of “so” underscores its incipient (and delayed) character.

### Topic Nominations by Callers

In addition to collaboratively launching topics in the anchor position (by either topic solicitation or proffering), callers may unilaterally nominate a particular matter as their reason for calling. Such matters can either deal with the addressee or the caller himself or herself. When delayed reasons for the call are concerned with the call recipient, they may be launched via a *so*-prefaced utterance. Interestingly however, when callers nominate self-regarding topics in this position, the *so*-preface is not used. This differential deployment of *so* is in line with what has been observed in other contexts of new topic initiations and suggests that topic initiations are sensitive to interpersonal considerations (Bolden, 2006).

*Other-regarding reasons for calling.* In the following two examples, callers launch a recipient-attentive course of action (specifically, congratulations) after dealing with some preliminarily matters. In Excerpt 18, Fannie (F) is calling a relative of hers, Yolla (Y), who is still in the hospital after the birth of her child. They start the conversation by discussing the conditions of the study under which this call is being recorded:

#### Excerpt 18: CallFriend Eng 4889

(0:10)

- 01 F: >No, I think at the end of the month they send  
 02 you a money.<  
 03 (0.6)  
 04 Y: Goo:d.  
 05 F: just for:v be:ing (.) in it.=an, what's the big deal.=  
 06 =I'm not doing anythi:ng. Not ha:rd.  
 07 (1.2)  
 08 F: **So** ↑**Mazel tov**. I was so excited. when Jimmy called me.=  
 09 Y: =Yea:h.=Well I [told him to call you ]  
 10 F: [Are you early? ] la:te,  
 11 (0.4)  
 12 Y: U:m, ↑we:ll, two days early I gue:ss,  
 13 That's not really early.  
 14 F: ↑Yea:h? That's not ba:d.

At lines 5 through 6, Fannie closes the discussion of the study and then, after a pause, launches a new sequence—congratulations on the birth of Yolla’s child (line 8). This sequence is apparently the reason for Fannie’s call. Because the first topic position was taken up by another matter, Fannie’s congratulations occur later than they could have been. The “so”-preface on this turn underscores the fact that this other-regarding (and highly affiliative) course of action has been incipient from the start of the conversation.

In Excerpt 19, the reason-for-the-call sequence is delayed not only by a discussion of the study (not shown) but also by the caller’s getting a call on the other line before the reason for this call is even introduced. The conversation is between Briar (BRI), the caller, and her friend Maya (MAY) who just got a new job:

Excerpt 19: CallFriend Eng 5000

((Briar has just finished talking to somebody else on the other phone line))

(0:30)

01 BRI: Maya?

02 MAY: Ye::s[:.

03 BRI: [You wouldn’t believe who that was,

04 MAY: Who::.

05 BRI: ↑Rachel.

06 MAY: Oh my ↑go::↓d.

07 BRI: I kno::[w:.

08 MAY: [(Is) she have free calls too?

09 BRI: N-n-no:. She’s jus- (0.2) she was just calling  
10 cause I called her earlier.

11 BRI: .hhh because I- haven’t called her twice. =but- (.) >She  
12 was never< involved in the whole free call thing.

13 MAY: \*O::h.\* ((\*breathy\*))

14 BRI: **So- congratu<sup>^</sup>lations Maya.**

15 MAY: #U-O:#h tha<sup>^</sup>::nks.

16 BRI: I- I was I’m wanted to call you right away, as soon as I  
17 >heard and then I didn’t have< your n:umber,

18 [an then,

19 MAY: [#u- u-# w-I have a letter for you sitting in my ba::g.

When Briar returns to her conversation with Maya, the two discuss who it was on the other line (lines 3–13). As soon as that sequence comes to a possible completion (line 13), Briar introduces her reason for calling, congratulating Maya on her new job (line 14). This turn is prefaced with “so” to indicate that the issue now raised has been on the speaker’s agenda to discuss (as evidenced as well at line 16) and has now, after a substantial delay, emerged from incipency.

Thus, in both examples, the caller nominates a particular matter as her reason for calling and prefates it with “so” to underscore that the issue has been pending

since the initiation of the call (at the very least) and now is launched later than it could have been. In both cases, the course of action launched in this way is highly affiliative with the addressee, and the “so”-preface highlights the speaker’s investment and interest in the addressee’s life by emphasizing the action’s incipient nature (Bolden, 2006).

*Self-regarding reasons for calling.* As mentioned earlier, *so*-prefacing appears to be an optional (although very common) feature of delayed moves to business; however, there are circumstances under which it is rarely, if ever, used. One such environment, as discussed previously, is when call recipients unilaterally nominate incidental topics in this position. As it turns out, callers do not use the discourse marker in similarly positioned topic nominations (which typically formulate their reason for calling) when they launch *self*-regarding rather than recipient-regarding courses of action.

The following segment (Excerpt 20) is a representative example. The caller, Joe, is talking to a relative of his, Rick (RIC). After the standard recording message is played, the two reestablish the connection (lines 1–3), and Joe introduces the first topic of business—checking up on some prior arrangement (lines 3–6):

Excerpt 20: CallFriend Eng 6952

(0:00)

- 01 JOE: Hm-hhh (0.5) Okay?  
 02 RIC: Yah-aa=  
 03 JOE: =Oh alright. .hhhhh U::m: hh did you uh (0.2) did you  
 04 sen:d u::h Kara the uh (1.0) tck! u::[h  
 05 RIC: [Yeah.  
 06 JOE: >prin'er ribbons?<  
 07 RIC: Yup-.  
 08 JOE: O:h good.  
 09 RIC: [.hhh] I sent'e::m o::[:n  
 10 JOE: [Did-] [d- d-did you send'er the coffee  
 11 grinder too?  
 12 RIC: Nope-hh=  
 13 JOE: =Heh-heh-huh-huh-huh

At lines 3 through 4 and 6, Joe, the caller, unilaterally launches the first course of action (checking to see if Rick has sent printer ribbons), thereby enacting a delayed move to the business of the conversation. Given that the sequential environment of this utterance and its function are very similar to what has been observed in many other instances of *so*-prefacing, why is the discourse marker not used here?

One might argue that the absence of *so* suggests that the matter at hand is not being introduced as the reason for the call. It is, instead, a spur-of-the-moment

inquiry and thus not pending from the call’s onset. It appears, however, that this is not the case. Not only is this utterance located in the environment in which a reason-for-the-call sequence is expected from the caller, it is also produced in a manner consistent with its status as the reason for the call. Specifically, it contains the TCU initial interjection “Um,” which has been observed to occur in reason-for-the-call turns but *not* in other first topic initiations (Couper-Kuhlen, 2001a). Additionally, the speaker does not make any efforts to indicate that in spite of its placement and composition, the matter should *not* be taken as his reason for calling.

Although the inquiry deals with something within the recipient’s sphere of experience, it is apparently launched for the speaker’s rather than recipient’s benefit since it is the caller who seems to be benefiting from the transaction referred to in this utterance. Additionally, the inquiry checks up on the status of a prior arrangement that involved an obligation on the recipient’s part, which is a rather delicate course of action. The use of the discourse marker *so* would convey that the inquiry has been projected and delayed, thus underscoring the caller’s sustained interest in the issue—an implication the caller may want to avoid (cf. Bolden, 2006).

A very similar set of observations may be made about the next segment (Excerpt 21). The mother calls her daughter (DAU), who lives in another state, to check on when the family can visit the daughter:

Excerpt 21: CallFriend Eng 6899

- (0:05)
- 01 MOM: It’s- >somethin to do with< linguist- (.2) linguistics,  
 02 It’s a research- (0.2) [program. °of some kind°.
- 03 DAU: [A:h.
- 04 MOM: Whatever.
- 05 DAU: hheh- [heh
- 06 MOM: [Anywa:y ((cough cough)) excu:se me.  
 07 (0.5)
- 08 MOM: tck .hh **We’re >goin down to New Jersey today< to see**  
 09 **Grandpa, .hhh a:nd u:m: (0.5) tck so I’m going to: tell**  
 10 **hi:m (.) .h th:a:t (0.2) y’know (1.0) (we’re’ll) (.)**  
 11 **Well that- that the end of m- -May >would be a good time to**  
 12 **come an visit?<**  
 13 (.)
- 14 DAU: Yea:h.
- 15 MOM: tck .h ↑Okay.=
- 16 DAU: =That’s fi:ne.
- 17 MOM: That sounds ↓good.

When the discussion of the study is closed (as in lines 4–5), the caller brackets the matter with “anyway” (line 6) and moves to introduce her reason for calling

(starting at line 8). The turn starts as a telling of the speaker's plans for the weekend, but it soon becomes apparent that she actually wants to confirm the dates for visiting the daughter (lines 11–12). The mother's turn thus minimally implements a request for information but also, in effect, solicits a promise of future availability and projects a future imposition (in the form of an extended visit). On these grounds, the course of action the mother implements can be characterized as self-regarding rather than addressee-regarding.<sup>22</sup> The choice not to use the *so*-preface works to downgrade the speaker's investment in this matter.

To sum up, I have shown that delayed, caller-initiated moves to business are *not* prefaced with *so* when launched via a unilateral initiation of a self-regarding action trajectory. In the two preceding cases, these actions impose on the recipient in some way, but callers may also announce or report various events in their lives without using *so* in this position. It appears that the common use of *so* for highlighting the delayed placement of the upcoming action clashes with the stance speakers typically take when introducing self-attentive matters (the stance being that of minimizing the issue's import or interest to the speaker). This observation is supported by an examination of new sequence initiations in other positions that demonstrated that only other-regarding sequences meant to, in some way, benefit the addressee, get launched via *so*-prefaced utterances (Bolden, 2006).

### MOVES TO BUSINESS IN INSTITUTIONAL INTERACTIONS

So far I have focused on the use of *so* in everyday telephone conversations. However, the deployment of this discourse marker in turns that initiate a discussion of intended talkables is not limited to the telephone or to mundane conversations. This marker is often used in various nonformal institutional interactions in similar sequential environments: to preface turns that implement a delayed move to the interaction's official business or the interaction's agenda (cf. Johnson, 2002). In many institutional settings, the business of the interaction has to do with requesting/providing services, and the moves to business, often initiated by service providers, take shape of service request solicitations (such as the generic *How can I help you?*). Institutional encounters are goal oriented; in other words, participants treat them as having a particular agenda (Drew & Heritage, 1992). The moves to introduce this agenda are expected from the interaction's start and often accomplished via a *so*-prefaced utterance.

Excerpt 22 comes from one type of an informal institutional setting—a college tutoring session. In the beginning of the segment, Marjorie, the research assistant recording the interaction, is about to leave the room so that Emily, the tutor, could start working with Grace:

Excerpt 22: Physics Tutoring (adapted from Schegloff, 1998)

((discuss bathroom locations))

- 01 Mar: Okay, (0.5) enjoy yourself [ves.
- 02 Emi: [Didju want to turn this on?
- 03 It’s [on?
- 04 Mar: [Uh- [I think I [did.
- 05 Gra: [( ) [I see it.
- 06 Emi: Yeah. [Okay.
- 07 Gra: [( )
- 08 (1.0)
- 09 Emi: O [kay.
- 10 Gra: [It’s moving, anyway.
- 11 ?: HH
- 12 Emi: **So what are you doing?**
- 13 (.)
- 14 Gra: Uh [m
- 15 Emi: [°You’re taking physics [class.°
- 16 Gra: [Taking physics three oh two.,

The move into the interaction’s core activity—providing tutoring—is launched at line 12 by the tutor. Given that the interaction was specifically arranged for tutoring, the course of action has been pending from the outset. In this case, several other activities postponed the beginning of tutoring including a discussion of the recording (lines 2–6 as well as earlier) and bathroom locations (immediately prior to this segment, not shown), and the research assistant’s leave taking (e.g., line 1). The “so” preface on the target utterance (line 12) shows that the speaker is now initiating the course of action that has been on the interactants’ agenda.<sup>23</sup>

Turning to another institutional setting, physician–patient interactions, similar observations can be made. In medical consultations, the move to the business of the interaction typically consists of the doctor soliciting the reason for the patient’s visit.<sup>24</sup> Before such a move can be made, however, several preliminary matters need to be dealt with. In his examination of openings in doctor–patient consultations, Robinson (1998, 1999) listed the following preliminary tasks that are typically accomplished before the parties can move to dealing with the patient’s medical problems: greetings, embodying readiness (i.e., positioning bodies and objects to facilitate the consultation), securing patient’s names, and retrieving and reviewing patients’ records. Once all the preliminaries are dealt with, doctors commonly solicit patients’ medical concerns. Their solicitations, having been incipient throughout the preparatory tasks, are quite often prefaced with the discourse marker *so*—especially when the opening phase of the consultation gets somewhat expanded.

The following example illustrates the use of *so* in such environment. In Excerpt 23, the doctor (DOC) initiates a discussion of the patient's (PAT) concerns (at line 18) after all the preliminaries are dealt with<sup>25</sup>:

Excerpt 23: Arm Trouble 3.1196 (Robinson, 1999, p. 79)

- 1 DOC: Hi:..  
 2 PAT: Hi:..  
 3 DOC: How're you:?  
 4 (.)  
 5 PAT: Uh=<sup>^</sup>eh=<sup>^</sup>uh:, hh-heh huh huh Be doin' a  
 6 lot better if m[y arm wa]sn't hurting?=<sup>h</sup>=  
 7 DOC: [Uh huh, ]  
 8 DOC: =Ah:.. Okay.=  
 9 PAT: =(°Go:d°)  
 10 (0.4)  
 11 DOC: My name's Michael Ahn\_I'm one=of th' residents here.  
 12 (.)  
 13 DOC: Ni[ce tuh [meet you.]  
 14 PAT: [(°Hi.°) [( ) ] )  
 15 (.)  
 16 DOC: .hhhh Oka:y.  
 17 (.)  
 18 DOC: **So=what brings you to thuh clinic t'da:y.**  
 19 (.)  
 20 PAT: Well, I'm an amputee:, h[hh ]  
 21 DOC: [Uh hu:]h  
 22 PAT: An' I use this arm all thuh t̄:me,  
 23 DOC: Okay,  
 24 (.)  
 25 PAT: A:nd (h)it's: huh swolle:n?

In this segment, several verbal and nonverbal tasks are accomplished before the doctor initiates a discussion of the patient's medical concerns. While the doctor comes into the office and closes the door, he exchanges greetings with the patient (lines 1–2) and launches a “howareyou” sequence (line 3–8). The doctor then introduces himself (line 11), at the same time moving toward his chair. At line 16, the doctor starts sitting down while looking at the medical records. All these preparatory tasks are completed by the middle of line 18 as the doctor initiates a move to the main section of the consultation—dealing with the patient's medical problems.

The doctor's inquiry into the patient's reason for coming has been incipient: It was projected by the very act of the patient scheduling the visit. It may also be considered delayed, as the opening phase gets somewhat expanded—both with a nonobligatory (for institutional settings) “howareyou” sequence and the doctor's

introduction sequence. The discourse marker "so" appears to highlight the incipient character of the action implemented by the turn.

*So*-prefacing in institutional contexts thus forecasts the upcoming turn as embodying a move to the interaction's agenda, bracketing off preceding tasks as preliminaries or incidentals.<sup>26</sup> Even more clearly so than telephone conversations, institutional interactions are goal oriented, initiated for dealing with particular institutional business. The deployment of *so* on utterances that accomplish the shift to institutional agendas provides additional support for describing *so* as a marker that projects a shift to an incipient action trajectory.

## CONCLUSION

I have examined different ways in which parties move on to the business of the social interaction when the first topic position is occupied by some preliminary or extraneous matters. The analysis of ordinary telephone conversations as well as some copresent institutional encounters has shown that delayed moves to business are recurrently prefaced with the discourse marker *so*. Given that social interactions (casual telephone calls or institutional encounters) are initiated for discussing particular matters, these moves to business are made relevant by the very act of initiating the contact. This deployment of *so* as a preface to TCUs that initiate a projected—and then postponed—action trajectory supports the argument that this discourse marker indexes the upcoming matter's emergence from incipency.

In telephone conversations, there are two contexts in which *so* is not used with delayed moves to business: unilateral, recipient-initiated, first topic nominations and caller-initiated nominations of self-regarding matters. These, however, do not undermine the characterization of *so* as an incipency marker. I showed that in the case of recipient-initiated, first topic nominations, the matters being launched are not, in fact, anticipated from the conversation's start but rather contingently emerged during the course of the interaction. In the case of caller-initiated nominations of self-regarding topics, the callers have a stake at minimizing the appearance of their investment in the issue by deemphasizing its delayed placement (for further discussion, see Bolden, 2006).

The findings I have presented in this article contribute to the understanding of the organization of the conversation's opening phase. Specifically, I have shown that interlocutors have available to them and can marshal specific linguistic resources for navigating the transition to the interaction's core activity when such transition might not be accomplished as a matter of course via routine openings. The discourse marker *so* alerts the addressees to the upcoming interactional juncture, inviting them to hear the ensuing utterance as realizing a move to the interaction's main activity. *So* plays a significant role in projecting the kind of action the

upcoming turn will launch, and is, therefore, an important resource for managing conversational activities.

## NOTES

- 1 This expectation contrasts with the incidental or “by-product” encounters that may or may not extend beyond an exchange of “hellos” (Schegloff, 2004).
- 2 The research into overall structural organization of the conversation as a unit has traditionally deployed the terminology that may suggest that *topic* is the primary unit of analysis (Schegloff, 1968, 1986; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Even though the notion of *topic* was subsequently criticized for not capturing participants’ orientation to action (Schegloff, 1990), such terms as *first topic*, *mentionable*, and *topic organization* continue to be widely used in the literature. For consistency and clarity, I make use of the traditional terminology here with full realization that participants carry out “courses of action” or “activities” through talk rather than simply talk on *topics* (cf. Schegloff, 2006).
- 3 In other words, by “intended,” I do not mean to invoke internal psychological desires or plans but features of observable conduct.
- 4 *So* can also be deployed in a variety of other grammatical functions: for example, as an adverbial modifier (i.e., “he is *so* nice”) or a conjunction (“he took the taxi *so* as not to be late”). These are beyond the scope of this study (but see, e.g., Altenberg, 1984; Ford, 1993; Stenström, 1998).
- 5 For institution-specific practices of introducing reasons for calling see, for example, Potter and Hepburn (2003) and Zimmerman (1992).
- 6 More accurately, the upcoming turn-constructural unit, or TCU (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).
- 7 *Anyway* is another discourse marker often found in this context, and it serves to bracket off the diversion from the first intended talkable (cf. Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). *Anyway* is sometimes used in combination with *so*, which suggests that they have different functions. For some discourse analytic investigations of *anyway*, see Ferrara (1997), Lenk (1995, 1998), and Owen (1985).
- 8 I thank Manny Schegloff for making many of these data sets available to me and Jeff Robinson, Alexa Hepburn, and Danielle Pillet-Shore for providing me with some candidate instances of the phenomenon from their data.
- 9 Much of the data used here can be accessed through the Talk Bank ([www.talkbank.org](http://www.talkbank.org)).
- 10 Here I am following the terminology introduced by Schegloff (2006, p. 169). Somewhat different terms are found in Button and Casey (1984, 1985, 1988–1989).
- 11 Button and Casey (1984) discussed topic solicitations (in a variety of environments) under the title of “topic initial elicitors.”

- 12 All calls have been retranscribed by G. B. Bolden and differ from the transcripts available at [www.talkbank.org](http://www.talkbank.org).
- 13 For a discussion of topic proffering sequences, see Schegloff (2006).
- 14 The opening is somewhat problematic, as Ben’s attempts at joking (e.g., via a make-believe institutional identification sequence) fail to receive the desired response.
- 15 Subsequently, Ben asks what he should bring to the party, which is apparently what he is initially going for at line 40.
- 16 Ben also uses the interjection “uh:m,” which is commonplace in reason-for-the-call turns (Couper-Kuhlen, 2001a).
- 17 In fact, later on Anna proffers a recipient topic (John’s studies) prefacing it with “so.”
- 18 This observation appears to hold true for face-to-face interactions in which preparatory tasks displace first topics: context-specific topics (such as comments about the other person’s appearance) do not get *so*-prefaced, whereas pending action trajectories (e.g., *So how’ve you been?*) recurrently do.
- 19 See Button and Casey (1984) for a discussion of the use of topic solicitations to delay the introduction of the reason for the call.
- 20 At line 12, “so” is followed by “ah:hm:”—a common feature of reason-for-the-call moves (Couper-Kuhlen, 2001a).
- 21 “So” in line 9 is an instance of a stand-alone *so* used to prompt the recipient to produce the next relevant action—here, arguably, an upshot of the preceding sequence (Raymond, 2004). When the recipient does not do so (see line 10), the speaker moves on to launch a new sequence.
- 22 Note also the various ways in which the request is delayed till the end of the turn at lines 21 through 22, which is typical of dispreferred actions (cf. Schegloff, 2006).
- 23 Schegloff’s (1998) analysis of the interlocutors’ body orientations and movements supports this observation.
- 24 Alternatively, in follow-up visits, doctors typically inquire into the current state of the patient’s health.
- 25 For a detailed discussion of this segment, see Robinson (1999).
- 26 In addition to the two settings discussed in this section, I have found *so* to be used in the same way in help-line telephone interactions and teacher–parent conferences.

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