

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Little Words That Matter: Discourse Markers “So” and “Oh” and the Doing of Other-Attentiveness in Social Interaction

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The article presents an analysis of actual, recorded social interactions between close familiars with the goal to describe discursive practices involved in showing engagement with the other party, or other-attentiveness. Focusing on the deployment of the discourse markers “so” and “oh” in utterances that launch new conversational topics, the article demonstrates that “so” overwhelmingly prefaces other-attentive topics, whereas “oh” prefaces self-attentive topics. We consider the interactional implications of this distribution and how the basic meanings of these linguistic objects are employed in the service of communicating interpersonal involvement.

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The idea that human relationships are built through communicative processes is not new (see, e.g., Hinde, 1979; Roloff, 1987; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1968). More recently, communication researchers have come to focus on the role of everyday talk in the construction of relationships (Baxter, 1994; Berger & Kellner, 1964; Duck, 1994, 1995; Duck & Pittman, 1994; Hopper, 1989) and examine the development of relationships in their natural habitat—social interaction (e.g., Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Mandelbaum, 2003; Morrison, 1997; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005; Tracy & Haspel, 2004). Duck and Pittman (1994) write, “‘relationships’ [...] operate through daily talk, the very real social and interpersonal medium by which they are most often achieved in real life” (p. 683). Thus, from this perspective, relationships are collaboratively built, one moment at a time, by interlocutors engaged in everyday activities. Given the pervasiveness of ordinary, casual interactions among such activities, research into the most mundane of social settings—everyday conversation—is central to uncovering discursive practices involved in building and maintaining interpersonal relationships (e.g., Berger, 1993; Dixon & Duck, 1993; Tracy & Haspel, 2004).

Although it may be instinctively evident that human relationships are constructed through social interaction, the explication of the processes via which this

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might be accomplished is a much more complex task. What is involved in the everyday (re)creation of interpersonal relationships? What practices constitute “doing being in a relationship” (Morrison, 1997; Tracy & Haspel, 2004)? Prior work into interpersonal discursive practices has identified several ways in which people enact being in an ongoing relationship by displaying their shared knowledge and knowledge of their interlocutors. Such practices include, for example, collaborative telling of stories about shared experiences (Lerner, 1992; Mandelbaum, 1987; Ochs & Taylor, 1992; Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith, 1992), claiming individualized knowledge of one’s conversational partner (Staske, 2002), and deploying laughter to negotiate the degree of closeness (Glenn, 2003; Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987).

Researchers have also found that the kinds of topics discussed (or avoided) in interaction reflect the existing relationship between conversationalists (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Crow, 1983; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Kellermann & Polomares, 2004; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984; Tracy, 1985). In fact, Kellermann and Polomares (2004) argue that “topics may not only *display* our relationships to others, but *define* relationships with others” (p. 332, emphasis altered). Among a variety of conversational topics, “news update” questions—inquiries that track ongoing events in the interlocutors’ lives—have been identified as a constitutive way of “enacting involvement” with the other and, thus, maintaining closeness (Drew & Chilton, 2000; Morrison, 1997; Sigman, 1991). In addition to examining *what* is being talked about, researchers interested in discursive practices have found that *how* different matters get launched in conversation relates to the kind of relationship being constructed through talk. For example, Lerner (1992) and Maynard and Zimmerman (1984) showed that the deployment of oblique (rather than direct) references to shared experience or shared knowledge in launching new topics is indicative of conversations between the familiars.

This article will build upon this research tradition and describe some discursive practices through which relationship work is carried in everyday social interaction. I will focus on some particular ways in which new topical matters may get introduced into the conversation and show that close familiars employ discursive practices that underscore their concern for or interest in their conversational partners—or, as I will refer to it, *other-attentiveness*. The article will explicate ways in which minute and, at first glance, inconsequential details of talk—little English words “so” and “oh”—matter in the interactional enactment of other-involvement.

The article analyzes a corpus of over 80 hours of recorded and transcribed, naturally occurring casual interactions in American English, both on the telephone and face-to-face. Using the conversation analytic methodology (see, e.g., Goodwin & Heritage, 1990; Heritage, 1984b, 1995; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) to unravel the details of these encounters, I describe how “so” and “oh” are deployed for prefacing utterances that launch new conversational issues. The main empirical finding presented here is that “so” is overwhelmingly used with other-attentive topics, whereas “oh” is deployed with self-attentive topics. The meaning and the interactional implications of this finding will be the subject of this article.

What are “so” and “oh”?

The words “so” and “oh” are usually referred to as *discourse markers*—a class of linguistic devices that includes words and expressions like “anyway,” “but,” “y’know,” and “like” 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 role in demarcating discourse connections as well as their potential for indexing social relationships. For example, in many languages, discourse markers have been found to index alignment and disalignment between interlocutors (e.g., Greasley, 1994; Jucker & Smith, 1998; Morita, 2005; Park, 1998; Wu, 2003) and be involved in building a variety of social and situational identities (e.g., Bolden, 2003; Fuller, 2003; Heingartner, 1996; Kleiner, 1998; Maschler, 2003; Stenström, 1998). The discourse markers “so” and “oh” have received some attention from researchers as well, though rarely in the interactional contexts discussed here.

Most prior—surprisingly scarce—research on “so” has focused on its use for marking inferential or causal connections. Schiffrin (1987) argues that “so” has the basic meaning of result, and Blakemore (1988) maintains that “so” marks inference. Raymond (2004) demonstrates that, due to its ability to introduce upshots of prior talk, “so” can be deployed as a stand-alone to prompt the addressee to produce the next relevant action. There has also been some recognition that “so” may play other roles in discourse as well. For example, Howe (1991) briefly examines the use of “so” in topic initial utterances and characterizes its function as a “marker of connection” (p. 93). Additionally, Johnson (2002) documents the use of “so” for prefacing questions and argues that it functions as a “topic developer” or “topic sequencer” (p. 1031).

In line with the last two studies, this article will describe the usage of “so” outside its inferential functions, focusing on a particular environment: when prefacing utterances that launch new conversational matters (such as topic talk, requests, invitations, or offers).¹ Structurally speaking, such utterances initiate sequences of action (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 2006), and, therefore, I will refer to this usage of “so” as *sequence-initial*.² The article will argue that, sequence-initially, “so” conveys the sense that what follows has been “on the speaker’s mind” or “on the speaker’s agenda” for some time rather than has just occurred to him/her. I will describe this basic meaning of “so” as a marker of “emergence from incipency” (see the following section for further explication).

An alternative to marking an issue as emerging from incipency would be to indicate that it has “just now” occurred to the speaker. In English, “oh” fulfills this function. The discourse marker “oh” has been found to function as a “change-of-state” token, indexing a change in the speaker’s knowledge, awareness, or attention in response to some prior action (Heritage, 1984a, 1998, 2002; James, 1972, 1974; Jefferson, 1978; Schiffrin, 1987). Sequence-initially (our target environment), “oh” is used to communicate the sense that something has “just now” been noticed, realized,

or remembered (Heritage, 1984a, 1998; Jefferson; Schegloff, 1979). Given the use of “so” as a marker of emergence from incipency, “so” and “oh” convey opposite meanings with regards to the status of the utterance they preface, offering different accounts for how that course of action has come to be launched at a particular place in the conversation.³

The characterization of “so” and “oh” as indices of the speaker’s state of mind may convey the sense that these discourse markers directly correspond to the speaker’s mental processes. I will demonstrate, however, that they are interactional (rather than mental) objects employed to communicate the speaker’s public orientation to the particular issue—an orientation that may or may not correspond to whatever psychological reality the markers are designed to index.

A large number of instances of each type of prefacing have been found in the corpus. The analysis of these instances has shown that, overwhelmingly, “so” prefaces sequences that accomplish other-attentive courses of action, whereas “oh” prefaces sequences that are speaker-attentive (see Table 1). This means that conversationalists introduce other-attentive issues as having been on their agenda (or “on their mind”) and self-attentive matters as “just now remembered,” thereby accentuating their interest in their interlocutors and downplaying the importance of their own affairs. This finding suggests that “so” and “oh” prefacing are discursive practices employed in the service of “doing other-attentiveness” in social interaction.

This article will first examine the use of “so” prefacing. The analysis will show how the functioning of “so” as a marker of emergence of incipency interplays with its deployment on other-attentive courses of action, making it possible for the speaker to employ this discourse marker for displaying involvement with the addressee. Next, I will analyze “oh”-prefaced sequences and examine how the meaning of “oh” as a change-of-state marker serves the interactional function of downplaying the speaker’s self-involvement.

“So” prefacing

A larger research project on which this article draws has shown that, in addition to indicating causal connections, “so” often functions as a marker of “emergence from incipency” (Bolden, 2005). A complete presentation of this argument is beyond the scope of the article, so the following brief illustration will have to suffice, and subsequent sections will provide further support for this analysis.

Table 1 Distribution of “So”- and “Oh”-Prefaced Sequence Initiators

	“So” Preface	“Oh” Preface ¹⁵
Other-attentive action trajectory	88	1
Self-attentive action trajectory	4	65

Note: The numbers show that sequences initiated by a “so”-prefaced utterance are almost always other-attentive (i.e., the concern the addressee), whereas “oh”-prefaced sequences are self-attentive (i.e., they raise speaker-centered issues).

Perhaps, the clearest place to start is by looking at cases where “so” occurs in *non*-sequence-initial positions. I have found that “so” may preface utterances that accomplish actions that had been projected by some prior talk and, therefore, anticipated by the interlocutors. Although this is not the environment that will be further discussed here, it clearly illustrates the underlying meaning of “so” as a marker of emergence from incipiency. For example, when telling a story, narrators often use “so”-prefaced utterances to resume a temporarily interrupted line of telling. One way of returning to a story after an intervention is to redo an earlier part of the story by repeating the utterance that preceded the intervening talk. In Excerpt 1, a “so”-preface utterance accomplishes just this. Here, Shirley is starting to tell a story to her friend, Geri, about the events of the previous night.⁴

Excerpt 1: TC Geri & Shirley

(9:05)

- 1 Shi: .hhh Listen, u- something very very:
 2 cute happened las'night et the Warehouse.
 3 (.)
 4 Ger: Wha[t
 5 Shi: [.hhhhh YihKNOW Cathy, (.
 6 Larry Taylor's ex girlfrie[nd,]
 7 Ger: [Yee] ah.
 8 Shi: [.hhhhhhhh] =
 9 Ger: [°M-hm?°°] =
 10 Shi: =Okay. **Cathy came in** las'night. ((sniff))
 11 (0.4)
 12 Shi: .t
 13 (0.6)
 14 Shi: .p Whenever she comes in she always wants me t'do
 15 something fer her,
 16 Ger: M-hm,
 17 Shi: either siddown'n ta:lk, h whatever. .hhhhh **Suh she came in**
 18 en she starts asking me if I'd seen ↑Gary. Gary Klei:n,

In the beginning of the segment (lines 1–2), Shirley indicates that she has a story to tell. This story preface functions to project an extended telling of the previous night's events.⁵ At line 10, Shirley formulates the first event in her story: “Cathy came in.” After a gap (at lines 11–13), Shirley continues. However, instead of narrating what happened next, she provides a piece of background information about her history with Cathy (at lines 14–17). This parenthetical stands apart from the telling because, rather than conveying what happened on a particular night, it describes what “always” happens. At line 17, Shirley returns to the main story line. The return to

the story after the parenthetical is done via an almost exact repeat of line 10 plus the “so” preface:

Cathy came in las’night. (line 10)

Suh she came in (line 17)

Thus, we can see that “so” is used to mark a resumption of the main story line after a parenthetical. Because the story could not have been complete at line 10, this resumption was projected by the teller and anticipated by the addressee—in other words, it was *incipient*.

This example illustrates how “so”-prefaced utterances bring into current relevance something that was already on the conversational agenda, thereby embodying the current matter’s emergence from incipency. Although in this case the incipient action was projected by the prior talk, speakers can also deploy “so” on courses of action that were not specifically projected in order to convey their incipient, “on-agenda” status of the upcoming course of action. We will now turn to such cases, focusing on the deployment of “so” as a marker of emergence from incipency in new sequence initiators that (a) resume a previously closed action trajectory and (b) launch a new course of action. We will see that in virtually all of the cases, “so” prefaces other-attentive topics and is a resource for enacting involvement.

“So how are you?”: resuming abandoned action trajectories

One very common environment for “so” prefacing is in “howareyou” inquiries. The prototypical placement of “howareyou” inquiries is in conversation openings following an exchange of greetings (Schegloff, 1986), though they may first appear later or reappear in various forms throughout the conversation. The placement of “howareyou” inquiries in the conversation is consequential for “so” prefacing. All “so”-prefaced “howareyou” inquiries found in the corpus are launched from late positions. This contributes to the understanding of “so” as a marker of emergence from incipency, conveying an “on-my-agenda” nature of the sequence being launched. Most commonly, “so” prefaces nonfirst “howareyou,” that is, those that were asked in the opening but then relaunched later in the conversation as well. “So”-prefaced relaunched “howareyou” normally occur when the initial inquiry received only a brief response, especially if that response indicated the presence of some tellable news (cf. Jefferson, 1980). This suggests that such inquiries function as pursuit questions, prompting the recipients to provide further details on what is happening in their lives.

The following excerpt illustrates this usage of “so.” Here, Shirley, the caller, poses a “howareyou” question three times, prefacing the last two with “so.”

Excerpt 2: TC Geri & Shirley

- 1 Ger: Howyih doin.h
 2 Shi: Okay **h**ow’r **y**ou.

3 Ger: ↑Oh alri:[:g_ht,
 4 (S): [(.h_hh_hh_h)
 5 Shi: Uh:m yer mother met Michael las'night.
 6 Ger: Oh rilly? =
 7 Shi: =Ye:ah.
 8 (): .hh-.hh
 9 Ger: ↑Oh::: =
 10 Shi: =Yeah. She wz taking Shiloh out. just ez we w'r coming back
 11 fr'm dinner.

..... (23 lines omitted; 0:30)

12 Ger: e-Ye::h,
 13 Shi: .hh- So: yihknow she said hi: ez- ez he tried tih yank'er
 14 up'n down the block .h_hh_h y'know ioh wz kind'v a funny way
 15 t'say hello.
 16 Ger: Ye::h, =
 17 Shi: =.h_hh Suh how'r you?
 18 Ger: Oka:y d'dju just hear me pull up? =
 19 Shi: =.h_hh_h ↑NO:. I wz ↑TRYing you all day. 'n the LINE wz busy
 20 fer like hours.

((continue about trying to get in touch)

..... ((7 pages omitted; 6:17))

21 Shi: Yihknow why: fer three years sh'd she be miserable. .t.hh
 22 when she c'n have a few months of reasonable (.)
 23 contentment.
 24 (1.2)
 25 Shi: You know,
 26 Ger: We:ll,
 27 (0.3)
 28 Shi: Y'know I teh- anway it's a hunk a' shit goes on I don'
 29 haftih tell you.
 30 (0.7)
 31 Shi: .hm_hh_h.t.h_hh_hh_h BU:::T?h_hh **SO HOW'R YOU:?**
 32 Ger: .t.h_hh I'm oka:::y?
 33 Shi: What's new,
 34 Ger: We:ll? .t lemme see las' ni:ght, I had the girls ove[r]
 35 Shi: [Yea:h? =

In line 2, Shirley asks “howareyou” in response to Geri’s “howareyou” in line 1. The most neutral response to this question is “okay” or “fine,” but Geri answers with a “↑oh alright,” which suggests that she may have some news to tell.⁶ However, Shirley does not immediately pursue this response and makes an announcement instead (at line 5). After the announcement sequence comes to a possible closure (at line 16), Shirley immediately redoes the “howareyou” inquiry (in line 17), using the same form of the “howareyou” question as before plus the “so” preface.

Given Geri's nonneutral response to the first "howareyou" question, this one is attempting to pursue a more expanded answer, thereby reraising an issue that was already put on the conversational agenda. Geri, however, responds with a minimal "okay" (in line 18) and rushes into a new matter, thus preventing further discussion of the events in her life.

The subsequent conversation centers on various new (and unhappy) events in Shirley's life. After several minutes, the current sequence (about a woman suffering from cancer) is brought to a recognizable possible completion (lines 28–29), nothing else is immediately brought up and a gap develops (at line 30). Shirley uses this opportunity to reraise a matter that has not yet been adequately addressed—and, after a trail-off, "but" relaunches the "howareyou" inquiry for the third time, again prefacing it with "so" (line 31). This reasking, done with a markedly loud articulation, embodies a somewhat forced shift in the focus of the conversation from Shirley (and her various misfortunes) to Geri (and, hopefully, happier events in her life). "So" marks this shift as something Shirley has been meaning to do for some time (as evidenced by her prior attempts to do so), indexing the incipient character of the question.

It is important to note that in the case of "howareyou" inquiries, the discourse marker "so" prefaces utterances that launch other-attentive action trajectories. Although canonical "howareyou"s that occur immediately after greetings may function as only pro forma inquiries, repeated "so"-prefaced "howareyou"s pursue expanded responses, inviting the addressee to introduce personal issues. "So" prefacing suggests that what follows is a pending matter that has not yet been resolved. By marking an other-attentive course of action as pending, the speaker shows herself as being interested in the addressee's world, thereby enacting other-involvement.

"So Mazel Tov!": launching new courses of action

The "so" preface is commonly used on utterances that launch action trajectories that are new for the current conversation, marking them as having been incipient. Oftentimes, the incipient status of these action trajectories can be attributed to their demonstrably delayed placement in the conversation (e.g., when the reason for initiating the conversation is introduced later than ordinarily expected, as in three of the four excerpts presented below). In other cases, however, the incipient status of the upcoming action trajectory may derive largely (or even solely) from the "so" preface itself. In other words, speakers draw on this discourse marker's capacity to mark upcoming matters as having been incipient (Bolden, 2005) to impose (or at least propose) a particular interpretation on the action they are about to launch.

A wide range of actions can be launched with the "so" preface: issuing congratulations, bringing up new conversational topics, making arrangements, and so forth. One feature that all these actions share, however, is that they are concerned with the addressee and the events in the addressee's life rather than with the person who launches the sequence. In other words, virtually all such courses of action are other-attentive (we will discuss some apparent exceptions in the end of the article).

In the following two examples, callers launch a recipient-attentive course of action (specifically, congratulations) after dealing with some preliminary matters. In Excerpt 3, Fannie is calling a relative of hers, Yolla, 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.⁷

Excerpt 3: Talk Bank Eng 4889

- 1 F: >No, I think at the end of the month they send
 2 you a money.<
 3 (0.6)
 4 Y: Goo:d.
 5 F: just for:v be:ing (.) in it. = an, what's the big deal. =
 6 =I'm not doing anythi: ng. Not ha:rd.
 7 (1.2)
 8 F: **So** ↑**Mazel tov**. I was so excited. when Jimmy called me. =
 9 Y: =Yea:h. = Well I [told him to call you]
 10 F: [Are you early?] la:te,

At lines 5–6, 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. Prototypically, the reason for the call is introduced very early in the conversation—as the first topic immediately after openings. Here, however, the first topic position was taken up by another matter. As a result, Fannie's congratulations occur later than they could have been. The “so” preface on this obviously other-attentive turn underscores that the issue has been on the speaker's agenda from early on.

In Excerpt 4, 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, the caller, and her friend Maya (who just got a new job).

Excerpt 4: Talk Bank Eng 5000

((Briar has just finished talking on the other line and returns to her conversation with Maya))
 (0:35)

- 1 BRI: N-n-no:. She's jus- (0.2) she was just calling
 2 cause I called her earlier.
 3 BRI: .hhh because I:- haven't called her twice. = but- (.) >She
 4 was never< involved in the whole free call thing.
 5 MAY: *O:~:h.* ((*breathy*))
 6 BRI: **So- congrat**u^**lations** Maya.
 7 MAY: #U-O:#:h tha^:~:nks.

- 8 BRI: I- I was I'm wanted to call you right away, as soon as I
 9 >heard and then I didn't have< your n:unumber,
 10 [an then,
 11 MAY: [#u- u-# w-I have a letter for you sitting in my ba::g.
 12 BRI: You d^o::.
 13 MAY: ↑Yea:↓:h.

When Briar returns to her conversation with Maya, the two friends discuss who it was on the other line (lines 1–5). As soon as that sequence comes to a possible completion (line 5), Briar initiates a move to the business of this conversation, congratulating Maya on her new job (line 6). This turn is prefaced with “so” to indicate that the issue now raised has been on the speaker’s agenda to discuss, and has now, after a substantial delay, emerged from incipency. (Note that in lines 8–10, Briar further empathizes the length of time she’s been meaning to congratulate Maya on her new job.)

Thus, in both examples, the caller nominates a particular matter as her reason for calling and prefaces it with “so” to underscore that the issue has been pending since, at least, the initiation of the call. In addition, in both cases thus launched action trajectories are other-attentive in that they are concerned with the affairs of the speakers’ conversational partners. By launching these recipient-attentive courses of actions with “so”-prefaced utterances, the callers draw attention to the status of these issues as having been “on their mind,” thereby underscoring their interest in the addressee.

“So” often prefaces utterances that function as proffers of various addressee-centered topics.⁸ Excerpt 5 (below) is taken from a get-together hosted by Leni and her husband, Jim. The guests are Jim’s parents, Edith and Joe, and an elderly relative Sam. After a lull in the conversation (lines 3–5), Leni addresses Sam with a topic proffer (line 6). (The italicized parts of the transcript mark another overlapping conversation between Joe and Jim.)

Excerpt 5: Schenkein II

((talk about Jim’s type writer))

- 1 Leni: [Yeah that’s (what I’m worrying about)
 2 Leni: (thinking about).
 3 (2.3)
 4 (): ((sniff)) |
 5 (): ((grunt)) —
 6 Leni: **So yuh haven’t been out tuh Palm Springs fer awhile.**
 7 (.)
 8 ↓Have you, I c’n tell you lost yer ta: n.
 9 Sam: Not fer three weeks (now).
 10 Leni: Yeah, (),
 11 Sam: ([])
 12 Joe: [*Gee it’s nice down in Escondido.*]
 13 Sam: I wanna go when [it’s convenient fer me].

- 14 *Jim:* *Yeh?*
 15 *Leni:* *Yeah, You [()*
 16 *Sam:* *[The weather aint right [I don' go.*
 ((Leni, Sam, and Edith continue talking about Sam's tan.))

The “so”-prefaced topic proffer at line 6 is initially formulated in the form of a statement about the addressee (cf. Labov & Fanshel, 1977) that requires a confirmation or a disconfirmation. After a micropause, Leni adds a tag (“have you”) and an account for her initial statement (“I c’n tell you lost yer ta:n.” at line 8). Sam responds (line 9), and when Leni acknowledges the response (line 10), the topic gets expanded (from line 13 on).

The proffered topic is an addressee-sensitive one, inviting the recipient to talk about the events in his life. The design of this topic proffer is quite interesting: It displays the speaker’s high level of knowledge about the addressee. By doing the proffering via a statement and then accounting for it (line 8), Leni suggests that she not only noticed something newsworthy about Sam (the loss of tan—which, in itself, presupposes that she remembers him having a tan before) but also knows enough about Sam’s life to provide a reasonable guess at to its cause (having not been to Palm Springs). Thus, the design features of this utterance convey a high degree of familiarity with the addressee and his lifeworld, thereby invoking their continuous social relationship (Sigman, 1991). Note also that, similarly to most of the above examples, this “so”-prefaced utterance is placed after the prior matter has been closed and followed by a gap (lines 3–6). Leni takes the opportunity provided by the lull in the conversation to proffer an addressee-centered topic, marking it as having been incipient (something that she, perhaps, noticed earlier and has been waiting to raise).

In addition to introducing topical talk about the addressee, the discourse marker “so” often prefaces utterances that initiate arrangements-making sequences—in particular, those that deal with the addressee’s plans. In phone conversations, these “so”-prefaced questions may constitute the reason or one of the reasons for making the call. In the following segment (Excerpt 6), Bee, the caller, inquires into Ava’s weekend plans with intent to set up a get-together (line 19). The “so”-prefaced question occurs very late in the conversation (about 13 minutes after the start).

Excerpt 6: TG

(12:40) ((Ava and Bee discuss where they are presently located))

- 1 *Bee:* *I finally said something right. (0.2) You are home. hmfff*
 2 *Ava:* *Yeh- I believe so. [Physically anyway.*
 3 *Bee:* *[^oh^ohm hhh*
 4 *Bee:* *Yea-a-h. ^oNot mentall (h) y (h) though (hh)*
 5 *Ava:* *^oNo,*
 6 *Ava:* *khhhh!*

- 7 Bee: °hmhhh hh So yih gonna be arou:n this weeken' ɔ̃
 8 Ava: Uh::m. (0.3) Possibly.
 9 Bee: Uh it's a four day weeken-I have so much work t'do it
 10 isn' ffunn[y].
 11 Ava: [Well, tomorrow I haftuh go in.
 12 (0.2)
 13 Bee: Y'have cla:ss [tomorrow?
 14 Ava: [hhhh

Similar to other examples we have seen, the “so”-prefaced question is placed after the prior sequence has been brought to a close (lines 4–5) and a gap has developed (see the half laugh token, half out-breath in line 6 and the beginning of line 7). The “so”-prefaced question (in line 7) is an other-attentive inquiry into the addressee’s plans. Bee raises the matter she called about, and the question’s late positioning in the conversation provides support for understanding “so” as a marker of incipency. This question also functions as a preliminary to an invitation and launches an arrangements making course of action.⁹ “So” suggests that this course of action, placed so late in the conversation, has been on the speaker’s agenda and is now emerging from incipency.

Thus, we have seen that new courses of action introduced via “so”-prefaced utterances deal with the addressees’ lifeworlds—that is, these courses of action are other-attentive. We have also seen that many of them are delayed in terms of their placement in the conversation (either by external matters or by other conversational topics). Together, these observations suggest that by prefacing such sequence initiators with “so,” speakers convey the sense that what is being launched now has been on their agenda for a while. In addition, by using this marker of emergence from incipency to launch other-attentive matters, speakers demonstrate their engagement with and interest in the affairs of their interlocutors.

To summarize the findings on “so” prefacing, the examined examples have shown that “so”-prefaced sequences commonly appear at a place where a prior course of action has come to a possible completion and nothing else is immediately launched. An interlocutor uses this conversational lull as an opportunity to launch a new course of action. By prefacing this new sequence with “so,” the speaker marks it as a matter he or she has been waiting to raise. We have also seen that sequences launched via a “so”-prefaced utterance center on the addressee rather than the speaker. Thus, by marking the addressee-regarding matter as having been on their agenda, conversationalists are “doing being” other-attentive.

“Oh” prefacing

In this section, we examine the functioning of the discourse marker “oh” as a preface to utterances that launch new action trajectories. As mentioned earlier, prior research has found that “oh” functions as a “change-of-state” token—commonly

in response to some prior action (Heritage, 1984a, 1998, 2002). This function of “oh” can be seen in the following examples (from Heritage, 1984a):

Excerpt 7: TG

- 1 Ava: Well lately in the morning Rosemary's been picking me up.
 2 yihknow so I (haven' been) even takin a train in
 3 [(the morning) .
 4 Bee: [hhOh that's grea:t!

Excerpt 8: WPC

- 1 J: When d'z Sus'n g[o back. =
 2 M: [.hhhh
 3 J: [()
 4 M: [u-She: goes back on Satida:y =
 5 J: =Oh: .
 6 M: [A:n:' Stev'n w'z here (.) all las'week ...

In Excerpt 7, Bee responds to Ava's telling (at lines 1–3) with an “oh”-prefaced assessment (line 4), indicating that she has been told something she didn't know before. In Excerpt 8, J responds with “oh” to M's answer (line 4) to her question (at line 1), again showing that she has received new information. Thus, in both examples, one party informs the other about some matter. By responding with “oh,” the recipient of the informing shows that the information is, in fact, news to her. In other words, they have “just now” undergone a change in the state of their knowledge.

“Oh” may also signal a change of state in the speaker's attention or awareness as a result of other people's talk or from sources that are extraneous to the conversation (visual, auditory, mental, etc.) (Heritage, 1984a, 1998, 2002; James, 1972, 1974; Jefferson, 1978; Schiffrin, 1987). “Oh” has a “response cry” character and may serve as a “fugitive commentar[y] on the speaker's state of mind” (Heritage, 1984a, p. 200). As a response cry, “oh” does not simply suggest a change of state, but conveys the sense of immediacy of this change, indexing the point at which the change has taken place. Thus, “oh” may be used to convey the sense that something has “just now” been noticed, realized, or remembered (Heritage, 1984a, 1998; Jefferson, 1978).

Here, we will not consider “oh” in responsive positions (like in the two excerpts above) but only those that preface new sequences. My findings show that, aside from a few special environments (such as to preface noticings¹⁰), “oh” only prefaces sequences that deal with the speaker or a third party (see Table 1). Even though, in principle, one can suddenly remember something about the addressee, “oh” is not used to preface such sequences, suggesting that it is an interactional resource rather than a direct index of the speaker's internal state.

In the remainder of this section, we will examine different types of sequences that are prefaced with “oh” and the environments in which they occur.

“Oh”-prefaced requests

The discourse marker “oh” may be used to preface action sequences that benefit the speaker rather than the addressee, such as requests. In the following segment (Excerpt 9), two friends, Hyla and Nancy, discuss their evening plans, after which Hyla asks Nancy to return her book:

Excerpt 9: Hyla & Nancy

(17:25) ((discussing getting drinks after their theater trip))

- 1 Nan: =(Look,) (0.2) I said one dri[nk].
 2 Hyl: [hhheeh `neh `eh [`hh
 3 Nan: [You think I`m
 4 made a` money er shhomehhn-hhn =
 5 Hyl: =`e`e =
 6 Nan: =`hhi::[::hh]
 7 Hyl: [`t`k]°h-h°
 8 (0.3)
 9 Nan: `hheh[h
 10 Hyl: [`hhhOh en yihknow w`t I wan`my book ba:::ck. =
 11 Nan: =Yer book. ↑Qkay:, I`ll haftih look for it, =
 12 Hyl: =dUhhhhh=
 13 () : = (k-k-k) =
 14 Hyl: =`eh-`uh `hhh
 15 (0.2)
 16 Nan: I d`know where it [is b`t ah`ll fin[d it.]
 17 Hyl: [°hhhhhhhhhhh [#u.-Oh]:: A`right, =
 18 Nan: =[O:kay,]
 19 Hyl: =[OH don`] worry I mean (·) yihknow y- (·) don`t thing I`m
 20 g`nna read it t`ni:ght [`r anyth]in[g b`t]
 21 Nan: [Q k a y.] [Buh I t]ry en look for it
 22 right now. =
 23 Hyl: =I`d like it back, =
 24 Nan: =Ka: :y¿ =

Note that the environment in which the “oh”-prefaced sequence takes place is very similar to what we saw with “so”-prefaced utterances. The discussion of the evening plans takes on a joking character and comes to a possible completion (see, e.g., lines 3–4). A gap, partially filled with laughter, develops (lines 5–9). Hyla takes this opportunity to launch a request, prefacing it with “oh” (line 10). The “oh” preface characterizes the request as “just now remembered.” Its late placement in the conversation (more than 17 minutes into it) and the “oh” preface present the request as an “afterthought.”¹¹ In fact, it gets further downgraded (in lines 19–20) when Nancy expresses difficulty in locating the book. Thus, we can see that “oh” prefacing provides a means of advancing a temporarily stalled conversation, characterizes the upcoming matter as “just remembered,” and is apparently used for launching self-attentive sequences.

“Oh”-prefaced tellings

In addition to prefacing requests, the discourse marker “oh” commonly introduces various telling sequences that are concerned with the speaker or some third, usually distant, party. In these cases, “oh” suggests that the speaker has just remembered of the news she is about to tell. We will see, however, that the “just now-ness” is an interactional stance and not necessarily a reflection of the speaker’s mental state. “Oh” does not index the speaker’s internal psychological processes but rather offers an account for how the sequence has come to be launched at a particular place in the conversation.

The discourse marker “oh” is often deployed in news tellings that are launched via preannouncement sequences. Preannouncements (such as “guess what?” or “guess what happened?”) secure the recipient’s cooperation with the telling (and, thus, make the telling itself contingent on the recipient’s response) and often provide an advanced characterization of the upcoming news (e.g., happy, sad, shocking, etc.) (see Schegloff, 2006; Terasaki, 2004). One illustration of “oh”-prefaced tellings can be found at line 4 of the following conversation between two friends, Alex and Chris (Excerpt 10):

Excerpt 10: Talk Bank Eng 6092

(3:50) ((about Alex’s roommates))

- 1 ALEX: 's: fucking a:ssho:les.
 2 CHR: HH
 3 {1.5}/{.hh}
 4 ALEX: **Oh. (.) You wanna hear something (d)interesting?**
 5 CHR: Sure.
 6 ALEX: .hAh::: ^I don't know-Okay this does not go e- hh I like
 7 how =
 8 CHR: =Hhe[h-heh-heh
 9 ALEX: [(I'm playing as being) .hh alright, =Uh::m.hh (0.2)
 10 >okay< (1.2) Alright uh: I'll see if I can try to::: (0.5)
 11 hh #eh:::#I like t'ema:ncipate myself from my parents,
 12 (0.2)
 13 ALEX: financially?,
 14 CHR: Legally?
 15 ALEX: Legally en financially,
 16 CHR: Why:.
 ((continue about the emancipation))

Note that the announcement sequence emerges from a rather long silence (line 3) that follows the closing of the preceding sequence (lines 1–2). Alex breaks the silence with “oh” quickly followed by a preannouncement (line 4). “Oh” functions as a response cry designed to index the moment some piece of information was presumably remembered by the speaker. After receiving a go-ahead response from Chris (line 5),

Alex proceeds with the telling and eventually conveys that he wants to emancipate from his parents (line 11). Thus, the telling sequence launched by this preannouncement is about the matters of primary concern to the teller (Alex) and is, therefore, self-attentive.

Although in the above instances of “oh” prefacing, the issue introduced by the “oh”-prefaced sequence might indeed be just remembered by the speaker, it is important to consider “oh” as an interactional marker rather than an indicator of the speaker’s mental state. Excerpt 11 illustrates this distinction. Shirley has been calling her friend Geri for a while and now finally got through.

Excerpt 11: Geri & Shirley

(1:17) ((Shirley complains about Geri’s line been busy for hours))

- 1 Ger: =Cz Marla likes t’sleep *la:te. .hh[hhh
 2 Shi: [Yeh,
 3 Ger: So::,
 4 (0.3)
 5 Ger: Th[at’s w’t it wa:s, =
 6 Shi: [Yeh,
 7 Shi: =Ye:h,
 8 (.)
 9 Shi: Figure(s/d) .hhhhh **Oh: I got my (Elset) score back t’day.**
 10 Ger: Yer kid- - - - - ((TAPE BREAK)) - - - - -
 11 (6.5)
 12 Ger: - - - ((TAPE RESUMES)) - - - (). .hhhhh Thet’s about hh-
 13 what ha: a little:, more then[half,
 14 Shi: [Tha’t’s very ba:d.h =
 15 Ger: =It is ba:d?
 16 Shi: Yeah,h
 17 (.)
 18 Shi: .hh very bad.
 19 (0.5)
 20 Ger: B’did- (.) uh:: Mike git his score ba:ck? =
 21 Shi: =No Mike’s not taking his til Decemb[e:r.
 22 Ger: [Oh:: oh::,
 23 (.)
 24 Ger: .hh =
 25 Shi: =(hh[hhh)
 26 Ger: [Sih yih g’nna take it agai:n? =
 27 Shi: =nNo.
 28 (0.5)
 29 Ger: No:?
 30 Shi: °No.°
 31 (0.3)
 32 Ger: Why no:t. =
 33 Shi: =.t.hhhhhh I don’t rilly wan’to.

- 34 Ger: Yih don'wanna go through all the ha:ssle? =
 35 Shi: =.hhhh I don'know Geri,
 36 (.)
 37 Shi: I've I've stopped crying uhheh-heh-heh-heh-heh,
 38 Ger: Wuh were you cr[y:i]ng?
 39 Shi: [.hhhhh Oh I wz hysterical.
 40 (0.4)
 41 Shi: Yihknow how much I p't ot fer this?
 42 Shi: .hhhhhhhh But I feel better a:n' (.) now the neh- th'nex'
 43 question is what I'm g'nna do next year.
 44 (0.2)
 45 Shi: .t.hhhh B't I rilly don't think I'm g'nna go tuh law school.
 46 (0.3)
 47 Shi: et least not right now.
 48 () : .hh
 49 Ger: Are you se:rious, =
 50 Shi: =Yeh,
 51 (0.2)
 52 Shi: Very.

In line 9, Shirley announces the news of her law school test scores, prefacing the announcement with “oh.” Later, we find out that Shirley did very badly—so badly that she has been crying hysterically about it (lines 38–40)—and she has now decided not to go to law school at all (lines 46–48). From the immediately preceding sequence (not shown), we also know that Shirley has been trying to get through to Geri for hours—presumably to talk about her test results. Moreover, the announcement is placed quite late in the conversation—after several other issues have been discussed. Yet, in spite of the apparent gravity of the news delivered by the announcement and the length of time she has been meaning to convey it, Shirley prefaces it with “oh.” In light of what is revealed in the sequence, the “just now remembered” status of the news is not very credible. This use of “oh” highlights the fact that “oh” is an interactional marker rather than a direct index of the speaker’s mental state. Additionally, it suggests that speakers may work on presenting, at least initially, personal issues as being “just now” remembered (and thus downgrading their import on the speaker). The fact that the “real” valence of the news gets discovered is a contingent interactional matter.

Having seen several instances of the differential distribution of “so” and “oh” prefacing, the reader might wonder if the correlation between “so” and other-attentive actions and “oh” and self-attentive actions is due to chance or, perhaps, to some analytical slight of hand. The next example (Excerpt 12) will demonstrate that the distinction between “so” and “oh” prefacing is something interlocutors themselves are oriented to, which provides data internal evidence for the interactional significance of the “so”/“oh” distribution. In this segment, Lottie announces her plans to throw a surprise birthday party.

Excerpt 12: NB II-3-R

(4:50) ((discussing weather))

- 1 Emm: Yeh 't's cool th's mornin ah mean it's ni:ce,
 2 (0.2)
 3 Lot: Yeah but it i:s'n (0.2) too coo[:l,
 4 Emm: [Huh-uh:,
 5 (0.7)
 6 Lot: **So: uh:**
 7 (.)
 8 Lot: **Oh: Tuesdee I'm 'onna: it's Zero's birthday en I'm 'onna
 9 give'm a party over et the 'waiian 'ou:se °with a s'prize
 10 party 'e doesn ev'n know abaht [it.]
 11 Emm: [Oh reall[y?
 12 Lot: [I got abaht twunny
 13 two peophhle kh(h) o(h) min[hn
 14 Emm: [Oh: rea:lly:
 15 Lot: ihYeheh huh.
 16 Emm: Yee all back tihgether agai:n hu[:h?
 17 ['Oh: ↓no: b't I'm g'nna
 18 give it to'm any[way, ↓°
 19 Emm: [Ahr yih
 20 (.)**

As the discussion about the weather winds down, the conversation stalls (line 5). Lottie breaks the gap, starting a “so”-prefaced turn in line 6. This, however, gets abandoned as she restarts the utterance with an “oh” preface in line 8. The replacement of “so” with “oh” shows the speaker’s orientation to the distinction between “so” and “oh” as to the kinds of sequences they should properly preface. As Lottie starts her turn with “so,” she finds herself in a situation where the self-regarding sequence she’s about to launch is a poor match for the preface, and to avoid the possible understanding of the upcoming matter as “having been on her mind,” chooses to restart the turn with the appropriate “oh” prefacing. “Oh” functions as a kind of disjunct marker, suggesting that the self-attentive issue announced in the turn has “just now” been remembered.

To summarize the discussion of “oh” prefacing, we have seen that courses of action launched via “oh”-prefaced utterances regularly occur in the environment similar to “so”-prefaced sequences: after a prior conversational matter has been closed and nothing else has been launched.¹² “Oh” overwhelmingly prefacing topics that are self-attentive, that is, concerned with the speaker’s own lifeworld. This discourse marker displays the speaker’s stance toward the introduced matter as being “just now remembered,” even though this interactional stance should not be equated with the speaker’s subjective state of mind. This use of “oh” suggests that bringing up self-attentive matters is a rather delicate interactional business, and interlocutors are oriented to *not* appearing excessively self-attentive.

Exceptions to “so”/“oh” distribution

Although conversational partners overwhelmingly use “so” to launch other-attentive sequences and “oh” for self-attentive sequences, there are occasional exceptions (see Table 1). The exceptions to the “so”/“oh” distribution are of two kinds: (a) those cases that appear, at first glance, to be violations but on further analysis conform to the general pattern and (b) those where violating the “so”/“oh” distribution brings about interactional consequences for the participants.

The following two segments will present instances in which apparent exceptions to the “so”/“oh” distribution do, in fact, support the general pattern. The first example presents a rare case of “so” prefacing where the new action trajectory is, at first glance, speaker—rather than addressee-attentive. Excerpt 13 comes from a phone conversation between a teenage boy Robert and his mother Connie:

Excerpt 13: Goldberg JG IV

((discussing dinner options))

- 1 C: Yah,
 2 R: .hhh ((breathily)) **So, I’m doing my home-** I-I gotta do a-
 3 .hh It’s due the nineteenth? No the ninth? .hh -of
 4 Febyuareh- .hh En I’m doing another boy’s fer him cuz he
 5 doesn’t know ha’tuh draw too well .hh en I said I’d do it
 6 for im .hh But en he ginna give me the idea you know ’n he
 7 just wants me t’draw it for im?
 8 (1.5)

Here, the topic initiator at line 2 is apparently self-attentive because it reports the speaker’s activities. However, given the social relationship between the two parties (child/parent), the self-attentiveness of this sequence may be misleading as the topic of doing homework may be construed as being of at least as much concern to the parent as it is to the child. In fact, the subject of homework is typically raised by parents, often as soon as they meet the child after school (Wingard, 2004).¹³ Inquiring into homework is perhaps constitutive of “doing being a parent.” By prefacing the sequence with “so,” the boy in this segment marks the reporting on his homework as being done for the mother’s, rather than his own, behalf or benefit.¹⁴

In the next excerpt (Excerpt 14), an apparent addressee-centered matter is introduced via an “oh”-prefaced inquiry, thus constituting a possible exception to the correlation between “oh” prefacing and self-attentiveness. In this conversation, Ava inquires into the well-being of Bee’s grandmother:

Excerpt 14: TG

(1:30)

- 1 Ava: Yer home? hhh=
 2 Bee: = [(Mnuh,)]
 3 Ava: = [**Oh my**] **mother wannduh know how’s yer grandmother.**

- 4 Bee: 'hhh Uh::, (0.3) I don't know I guess she's aw- she's
 5 awright she went to thee uh:: hhospital again tihda:y,
 6 Ava: Mm-hm?,
 7 Bee: 'hh t! 'hh A:n:: I guess t' day wz d' day she's supposetuh
 8 find out if she goes in ner not. =
 9 Ava: =Oh. Oh::.

Ava poses a “howareyou” type question about Bee’s grandmother (line 3) but rather than formulating it as a question on her own behalf (e.g., “How is your grandmother”), she attributes the source of the inquiry to another party, thus distancing herself from the issue being raised. As a change-of-state token, “oh” indicates that Ava has “just now” remembered her mother’s request. The inquiry is apparently addressee-centered as it concerns a close relative of Bee (and her ongoing medical condition). However, the reported speech format (“My mother wanted to know”) and the use of the “oh” preface serve to downplay the speaker’s interest in the topic. By launching this topic via an “oh”-prefaced report of her mother’s request, Ava shows herself to be oriented to simply conveying her mother’s question rather than showing concern for Bee’s grandmother’s medical problem. So in this case, by using “oh” on what should be an other-attentive course of action, the speaker signals interpersonal distance rather than closeness. (In fact, there are other indications in this conversation that the relationship between Ava and Bee is deteriorating.)

Finally, exceptions to the “so”/“oh” distribution may be treated as violations by the other participants in the conversation. One such case is presented as Excerpt 15. In this conversation between two former classmates, Adam initiates a discussion of a self-regarding matter via a “so”-prefaced topic initiator.

Excerpt 15: Talk Bank Eng 4175

(3:10) ((discussing a friend’s troubles with the faculty advisor))

- 1 AD: So [why did I have to write this ou::t.]f
 2 BOB: [heh-heh-heh-heh-heh
 3 BOB: .hhh heh-heh-[heh
 4 AD: [°Ya know, ↓Yea:h.°
 5 BOB: .hHH
 6 AD: **.h So you wanna hear what my jo:b is?**
 7 BOB: Ye:s I do:. Des[perately. [eh-heh
 8 AD: [Okay. = I ha[ve a six-month contra :ct,
 9 BOB: fAh ha:h, f
 10 AD: like I went to this: pla:ce and I: said
 11 okay I wanna: This is li:ke at Bell Cor(p)
 12 basical[ly.]
 13 BOB: [Yea]:h. [Yeah.

The “so”-prefaced inquiry at line 6 is designed to launch a self-attentive topic, as Adam initiates a discussion of his new job. Bob appears to embrace the topic (line 7);

however, his response is rather sarcastic. The design of his answer—especially the word “desperately” followed by a laugh token (at line 7) and later the smile voice (at line 9)—betrays his only half-hearted interest in the matter. After all, if he wanted to know about Adam’s new job, he would have asked himself. This example shows that speakers may be held accountable for prefacing self-attentive topics with “so” and thus suggesting, rather presumptuously, that the topic should be of interest to the addressee.

The three exceptional cases of “so” and “oh” prefacing suggest that ways in which new issues are brought into the conversation are consequential for the ongoing construction of the relationship between parties in social interaction. The use of “so” prefacing in launching self-regarding topics may have interactional consequences evident in how interlocutors orient to the issue being raised and help define the state of the relationship at a particular moment in time. The same is true for “oh” prefacing, deployed on apparently other-attentive sequences as a way of indexing interpersonal distance. The analysis of these seeming exceptions shows that they fail to undermine the finding about the “so”/“oh” distribution for prefacing different sequence types. Moreover, this discussion demonstrates that “so” and “oh” are flexible interactional resources that can be deployed to achieve interpersonal effects that are specific to each interactional situation.

Conclusions

This article has discussed the use of the discourse markers “so” and “oh” for prefacing utterances that launch new conversational matters. We have seen that “so” and “oh” prefacing are two ways of moving on with the conversation that has been temporarily stalled. These discourse markers occur in the environment where one chunk of talk has been brought to a possible completion and nothing else has yet been launched. “So” and “oh” provide an advance characterization of the upcoming matter as either something that has been incipient or just now remembered. My finding is that the incipient matter, something marked as having been on the speaker’s “mind” or “agenda,” deals with the addressee, whereas the “just now remembered” issue concerns the speaker. We have also seen that these are interactional stances rather than direct indexes of the speakers’ state of mind. “So” and “oh” prefacing are, then, discursive practices via which interlocutors enact their involvement with their conversational partners and which reflect interlocutors’ orientation to doing other-attentiveness.

More generally, the analysis demonstrates that the state of a particular relationship between the participants—as it is being worked out on each interactional occasion—not only affects or is affected by the kinds of topics that can (or should) be discussed but also by *how* and *when* various matters are brought into the conversation. The article, then, underscores the fact that communication is not purely informational but a medium for social action. Ways in which

interlocutors inquire into the lives of their conversational partners or tell about their own lives are crucial to the everyday construction of their relationship. This, in turn, argues for the importance of detailed analyses of actual social interactions for understanding human relationships as they are created and negotiated through everyday communicative events. Although it may be tempting to dismiss such small details of talk—especially little words like “so” and “oh”—when examining development and maintenance of social relationships, it is apparent from the findings presented here that participants themselves closely monitor their talk on a very fine level of detail, taking measures to display the appropriate level of involvement in the other person’s life on each particular interactional occasion.

The findings presented in the article shed light on some important questions in interpersonal communication research. For example, how do interpersonal relationships transcend individual social encounters? Sigman (1991) identified a variety of behaviors that retrospectively invoke and reenact relationships after a period of separation. Among such behaviors, the invocations of taken-for-granted knowledge and agendas are the most relevant to the current discussion. Given the function of “so” to mark the upcoming matter’s emergence from incipency, this discourse marker—especially when used to introduce new for the current conversation issues—is one important discursive practice for bridging discrete encounters in an ongoing construction of a social relationship.

Discourse and conversation analysts have documented ways in which the organization of social interaction is biased toward building social solidarity and the avoidance of conflict (Heritage, 1984b). For example, preference organization—ways in which agreeing and disagreeing responses are produced—maximizes the occurrence of aligning actions (e.g., Heritage; Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 2006). Politeness strategies show the interlocutors’ concern with presenting positive self-image and not imposing on others (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1971). The discursive strategies discussed in this article—showing interest in the other (with “so” prefacing) while downplaying interest in one’s own affairs (with “oh” prefacing)—are additional, previously undocumented, methods for building and maintaining social solidarity.

The findings presented here imply that to study relationships as dynamic processes accomplished through everyday interpersonal work, we need to turn our attention to moments in time where such work is being done, that is, natural interactions between people engaged in their ordinary activities. We have seen evidence that social relationships are inextricable from the smallest details of interactions through which they are built, which means that even minute details of talk cannot be a priori dismissed from examination. Communication scholars working within language and social interaction tradition have started to conduct work along these lines (recent references include Mandelbaum, 2003; Morrison, 1997; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005; Tracy & Haspel, 2004), but many discursive practices await investigation.

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Notes

- 1 The discourse marker “so” can, of course, occur in other environments. For example, “so” can preface turns that formulate an upshot of the preceding talk (e.g., “so it went really well”) or invite the address to produce an upshot (e.g., “so what are you going to do?” or even just “so?”). In these cases, “so” functions primarily as an inference marker (see Blakemore, 1988; Schiffrin, 1987). The relationship between the use of “so” for marking causal connections and its functions examined in this article awaits further investigation.
- 2 In conversation analytic terminology, I will consider “so” in first pair parts of adjacency pair sequences that either launch new courses of action or advance larger, multisequence action trajectories.
- 3 It would be incorrect to say that “so” and “oh” are always alternatives to each other as in some cases it would appear (grammatically or pragmatically) impossible to substitute one for the other. It’s better to consider “so” and “oh” prefacing as two options among various ways of launching a new course of action, including “just starting” without a preface of any sort or seamlessly transitioning into a new topic via, for example, a stepwise topic shift (Jefferson, 1984). An examination of other ways to do topic initiations lies beyond the scope of the paper (but see, e.g., Button & Casey, 1984, 1985, 1988/1989; Local, 2004).
- 4 The transcript follows the standard conversation analytic conventions (see, e.g., Sacks et al., 1974).
- 5 For a discussion of story prefacing, see Sacks (1974), Schegloff (1992), and Goodwin (1996).
- 6 Jefferson (1980) refers to such responses to “howareyou” inquiries as “trouble premonitory” because they suggest that the speaker may have something to report if further pursued.
- 7 The excerpts marked as “Talk Bank” are taken from the Call Friend corpus of telephone conversations collected by the Linguistic Data Consortium of the University of Pennsylvania (available via Talk Bank at <http://www.talkbank.org>).
- 8 For a discussion of various ways of launching new topics see, for example, Button and Casey (1984, 1985, 1988/1989).
- 9 On presequences, see for example Sacks (1995), Schegloff (2006), and Terasaki (2004).
- 10 By “noticings,” I am referring to those actions that register something about the environment, as in “Oh lookit all these pretty pillows.” (from Schenkein II). The function of “oh” in utterances like this is beyond the scope of the paper, but it is worth mentioning that it appears to relate to the specific features of noticings as an

- activity—specifically, their preferred placement immediately after the “initial perceptual exposure” (Schegloff, 2006).
- 11 Requests are dispreferred types of action—they are often delayed and accompanied by accounts, mitigations, and so forth. (see Schegloff, 2006).
 - 12 “Oh”-prefaced sequences may be also launched interruptively, sometimes in overlap with another interlocutor—but almost never after a normal transition space (Sacks et al., 1974). This placement underscores the “just now remembered” character of the upcoming issue.
 - 13 Interestingly, parents’ inquiries into homework are often prefaced with “so” to mark their “on agenda” character, as in the following instance reported by Wingard (2004):

((in the car on the way back from school))
 ((long silence))
 01 Mother: So Sonya what’s the homework lookin like.
 02 (1.0)
 03 Sonya: (hm m) not (.) too bad.
 - 14 In fact, the boy is apparently “doing being a parent/caregiver” throughout the conversation, as evidenced, for example, in the way he constructs his inquiry into dinner plans earlier on: “Whuyih wanna eat fer dinner” (not shown on the transcript).
 - 15 These numbers exclude “oh”-prefaced noticings (see footnote 10).

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