

Further Analysis of English Connective Words in Interview Settings

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Abstract

This paper examines the discourse functions of English connective words used in conversations and interviews between teachers and students and between doctors and patients, focusing on what connective words are used and how. Connective words join the units of utterances regardless of the language being employed, and facilitate the flow of conversation. What connective words are taken up by native speakers is of great importance in assisting non-native speaking students to understand what conversation is going on. This is because connective words segment conversation and mark the units of discourse. Recognition of the segmentation of conversation is something with which non-native speakers have trouble, especially at the beginning levels of language learning.

Introduction

While connective words often do not have meaning in themselves, seeing how units of conversation can be coordinated by what connective provides clues to pragmatic conversation structures. In this sense they have important meaning for the conversation researcher as well as for teachers and non-native speaking students of English. Our previous studies suggest that teachers first set up a friendly situation and then encourage non-native beginner-level students to participate in the ongoing conversation by using some simple connective words. These connective words play an important role in conversational management, enabling the students to receive cues and increase their understanding (Tabuki et al., 1990a; 1990b).

In this paper we examine the discourse functions of the three connective words *so*, *oh* and *OK*. Some sets of interviews were managed by native speakers with non-native speaking respondents, and others were managed by non-native speaking doctors conducting medical interviews with native speaking patients as respondents. The data were analyzed contrasting the correlation of the various connectives with conversational strategies by native and non-native speakers. The non-native speakers were grouped and contrasted according to ability as beginner, intermediate and advanced, and according to position as interviewer and interviewee. Some differences of usage between male and female respondents were also addressed.

Data

We have utilized three kinds of discourse data to analyze connective words. All the discourse data were first videotaped and then transcribed. All turns were numbered for identification.

The first discourse data (Table 1) were acquired in 1988. Five pairs of Japanese students attended the conversational sessions. They were three male/male pairs, one male/female pair and one female/female pair. All the students were taking an English conversation class at the time, but still had low-level verbal skills. Both native and non-native teachers of English attended the sessions to serve as helpers, not to control the conversation. Since the five pairs of Japanese students were in beginners level, the discourse data were taken under quite controlled settings in terms of time assigned for each pair (5 minutes), encouraging them to speak out by teachers.

The second discourse data (Table 2) were acquired from 1993 to 1994. Twenty respondents were used, varying from beginner's level to advanced in terms of verbal skills. There were college students, office workers and school teachers among them but all of them were learning English from native speakers of English at that time. The conversations used to acquire the data were less controlled than the first setting (Table 1).

The third discourse data (Table 3) were taken in actual situations—non-native doctors versus native patients. Non-native Japanese doctors listened to the patients's complaints and gave advice to them. So in this setting the doctors took the role of interviewer while the patients took the role of interviewee. It is interesting in that non-native doctors have to manage conversation though they are inferior in verbal skills to native patients.

Table 1. Connective words used (Beginner's Level)

	Teachers	Students	Total
So	37 (22.2%)	2 (3.4%)	39 (17.3%)
Oh	31 (12.6%)	6 (10.3%)	27 (12.0%)
OK	70 (41.9%)	1 (1.7%)	71 (31.6%)
And	25 (15.0%)	43 (74.1%)	68 (30.2%)
Now	7 (4.2%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (3.1%)
Or	4 (2.4%)	2 (3.4%)	6 (2.7%)
Well	1 (0.6%)	2 (3.4%)	3 (1.3%)
Because	1 (0.6%)	1 (1.7%)	2 (0.9%)
But	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.7%)	1 (0.4%)
Then	1 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.4%)
Total	167	58	225

Table 2. Connective words used

	Teachers	Students	Total
So	41 (26.1%)	44 (14.8%)	85 (18.7%)
Oh	20 (12.3%)	17 (5.7%)	37 (8.1%)
OK	35 (22.3%)	3 (1.0%)	38 (8.4%)
And	34 (21.7%)	134 (45.0%)	168 (37.0%)
Now	4 (2.5%)	9 (3.0%)	13 (2.9%)
Or	10 (6.4%)	26 (8.7%)	36 (7.9%)
Well	1 (0.6%)	14 (4.7%)	15 (3.3%)
Because	1 (0.6%)	1 (0.3%)	2 (0.4%)
But	6 (3.8%)	44 (14.7%)	50 (11.0%)
Then	5 (3.2%)	6 (2.0%)	11 (2.4%)
Total	157	298	455

Table 3. Connective words used (Doctors vs. Patients)

	Patients (native speakers)	Doctors (non-native)	Total
So	2 (8.0%)	2 (5.4%)	4 (6.5%)
Oh	0 (0%)	1 (2.7%)	1 (1.6%)
OK	6 (24.0%)	4 (10.8%)	10 (16.1%)
And	4 (16.0%)	13 (35.1%)	17 (27.4%)
Now	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Or	1 (4.0%)	8 (21.6%)	9 (14.5%)
Well	4 (16.0%)	3 (8.1%)	7 (11.3%)
Because	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
But	7 (28.0%)	5 (13.1%)	12 (19.4%)
Then	1 (4.0%)	1 (2.7%)	2 (3.2%)
Total	29	41	62

Analysis

In this study we narrowly focus on the English connective words *so*, *oh* and *OK* of Table 1 and Table 2, in most cases conducted by native speakers with non-native speaking respondents, but also including non-native speaking doctors and native speaking patients. In the interaction between native and non-native speakers, connective words are used by both to structure and manage the conversation. The speaker uses connective words to keep the conversation moving by breaking it into smaller and functionally recognizable segments. In addition, there was a tendency on the part of the non-native speakers to use connective words to indicate understanding

of the foreign words themselves, or to cope with the struggle of finding the correct word or phrase.

SO

Analysis of *So* = Marker of Potential Transition

- A Consequence
- B Inference
- C Summing Up
- D Prodding
- E Filler
- F Initiation
- J Affirmation (Japanese "so", "so omoimasu" and "so so so")
- / Non-Connective

So Total occurrences = 89 (Table 2 & Table 3)

So Occurrence by Type

A-Consequence	36 (40.4%)
B-Inference	8
C-Summing up	2
D-Prodding	7
E-Filler	12
F-Initiation	8
J-Affirmation	3
/-Non-Connective	13

So occurrence by speaker level¹

Native	43
Non-native	46
-Advanced	19
-Intermediate-1	12
-Intermediate-2	8
-Intermediate-3	5
-Intermediate-4	1
-Intermediate-5	1
-Beginner	0

So occurrence by Male / Female²

Male	53
Female	36

So-Consequence (A), Non-connective (/), Inference (B)

(1)

10

S *um*..next *uh* last week I was busy *so* (A)
... weekend ... all sleep .. always sleep

11

T Nothing else?

12

S *yes*. Nothing. All all ... sleep.

13

T Why were you *so* (/) tired?

14

S *um*... I have a report *and* little examination *and* *um* speech table speech
and homework *and* baseball game. Very tired.

15

T You play on the baseball team?

16

S *ummm*..in the class ..*uh*..*eh* in the class.

17

T In the class?

18

S In the class.

19

T *So* (B) that means, not the school team? Not the Kyushu Kyoritsu team?

Example (1) shows *so* as consequence, in a non-connective use and as inference. Student S responds to a question from the interviewer that he slept all weekend as a consequence of being busy, also concluding his turn and passing to the interviewer. The second *so* is the non-connective adjective. The final *so* in line 19 is a connective of inference. The interviewer infers from “..in the class..” that the student does not play on the university team, and then asks him to confirm it.

So - Summing up (C), Prodding (D), Filler (E)

(2)

533

M *So* (C) my foster mother hate me.

534

T Oh, *so* (D) what did you how did you handle that?

535

M Ah, she say no, not I mean that I hate you.

53

T Ah. Uh huh.

537

M But, I was like that (makes sad face). I couldn't understand that word.

538

T Ah. Ah. Ah. *So* (E). (laughs) Yea, that's funny.

The *so* in line 533 has a more global scope in that it sums up larger unit of discourse that has gone before, then passing to the interviewer. The interviewer's *so* in the next line is prodding the student to say more. The *so* in line 538 is filler. It allows the interviewer a pause before continuing his turn.

So - Filler (E), Inference (B)

(3)

780

H *So* (E) and I ordered a simple coffee coffee and the waitress the waitress eh looked at me with pity eyes. (laugh) *So* (B) she thought I thought I think she thought that *oh* this Japanese was very poor she didn't have money to buy big burger (laugh) big coffee.

So in line 780 is used by a high level student somewhat differently than a native speaker would use it, in that she uses it as filler but at the beginning of the utterance to secure her turn. It cannot be considered as initiation since it doesn't initiate a new topic. The second *so* indicates her inference as to the meaning of the waitress' glance.

So - Initiation (F)

(4)

906

M *So* (F) out of the whole trip what did you like best? You start. What did you like best about the trip?

In this example the interviewer initiates the topic and chooses a student to pass to.

So - Affirmation (J) - (Native / Non-Native Overlap = Japanese “..so omoimasu”
-“I think so”)

(5)

195

M What is the best experience in your life? What was the best thing that ever happened to you?

196

T ...I thought I thought mm. Europe person every kind, mm but..I I think very mm dirty street, *so*.. (J)

This *so* is ambiguous between an unstated consequence and a common Japanese “so”, (sometimes more polite “so omoimasu”) both meaning “I think so” often used at the end of this kind of expression to soften the negative unstated implication.

So - Affirmation (J) (Native / Non-Native Overlap = Japanese “..so omoimasu”
and “so so so” “I think so” or English “so so”)

(6)

229

M Are you a good pitcher?

230

D Pardon?

231

M Are you a good pitcher?

232

D ahh.. ah.. mm *so*s *so* *so* (J).

The ambiguity of this *so* is explicit in the “s” sound that occurs between the first and second *so*. The Common English expression “so so” meaning “fairly good” is well understood by Japanese students, and in the course of speaking seems to have become overlapped with the Japanese “so” (“so omoimasu”) or more enthusiastic “so so so” all meaning “I think so”. It seems likely that this student intended to use the more modest English meaning and then tripped over the more familiar Japanese expression.

OH

Analysis of *Oh* = Orientation Shift to Information

A Receipt of Information

1 New Information

2 Unexpected Information

- B Recognition of Old Information
- C Repair
- D Shift in Subjective Orientation
- E Evaluation
- F Acknowledge Question (non-native use)
- G Correction of Previous Understanding
- J Filler (while searching for words, like "um") continues turn S responds affectively to what is said—non-native usage
- / Exclamation (non-connective)

Oh Total Occurrences = 38 (Table 2 & Table 3)

Oh Occurrence by Type

A-Receipt of Information	22
A1-New	19 (50%)
A2-Unexpected	3
B-Recognition of Old Information	1
C-Repair	2
D-Shift in Subjective Orientation	0
E-Evaluation	2
F-Acknowledge Understanding Question	3
G-Correction of Previous Understanding	1
J-Filler (non-native)	3
/-Exclamation (non-connective)	4

Oh Occurrence by Speaker Level

Native	19
Non-Native	19
-Advanced	5
-Intermediate-1	3
-Intermediate-2	6
-Intermediate-3	2
-Intermediate-4	0
-Intermediate-5	3
-Beginner	0

Oh Occurrence by Male / Female

Male	28
Female	10

Oh - Unexpected Information (A2)

(7)

915

F I longed for horseback riding, so I we could go the horse
ranch horse ranch and we could do, so I was happy.

916

M Was that first time?

917

F Yea the next day everyone say said my bottoms hurt. (laugh)

918

M *Oh* (A2) right. Right. Did you ride fast?

The speaker in line 918 shifts his orientation to the information as he is surprised by the unexpected and amusing result of the horseback riding.

Oh - Unexpected Information (A2), Recognition of Old Information (B)

(8)

479

T Head to?

480

M Hate. hate.

481

T Hate. *Oh* (A2).

482

M I ask to hate, but she means, she not means, she hate me, she didn't hate me,
but I thought she hate me.

483

T *Oh* (B).

Oh in line 481 indicates the speaker's surprise when he understands the other is saying "hate", not "head". The next *oh* indicates the recognition of that same information.

Oh - Repair (C)

(9)

618

T What did they say?

619

M Always said May Yumi.

620

T Mai *oh* (C) May Yumi.

The speaker corrects himself with *oh* when he at first mispronounces the student's name.

Oh - Repair (C) (Non-Native)

(10)

301

T OK. What is your best experience in your life?

302

F ... um *oh* (C) uh *oh* (C) I c uh I can't re uh remember it um eh ah

The non-native speaker struggles to find the correct English words, using *oh* to reorient himself when he thinks he has found them.

Oh - Acknowledge Question (F) (Non-Native Usage)

In the next three examples, non-native speakers acknowledge having understood a question. This usage of *oh* was found only among non-native speakers.

(11)

55

T When you were in high school, did you also study very hard?

56

S *Oh* (F), em my high school, when I'm in high school mm mm not enough.

(12)

737

Pat Yea, um what can I.. can I.. can I cure my backache?

738

Doc *Oohhh* (F), very difficult but uh slowly increase, I think.

(13)

872

M And what did you do?

873

T *Oh* (F) I I mm that that that was a mm school's school's mmm school abroad ah studying abroad ...

OK

Analysis of *OK* = Discourse Management

- A Transition
 - 1 Beginning
 - 2 Topic Change
 - 3 Conclude the Topic
- B Continuance
- C Request Agreement
- D Agreement
- E Approval
- F Signal Understanding
- / Non-Connective (= "all right")

OK Total Occurrences = 48 (Table 2 & Table 3)

OK Occurrence by Type

A-Transition	31
A1 Beginning	4
A2 Topic Change	21 (43.8%)
A3 Conclude the Topic	6
B-Continuance	6
C-Request for Agreement	1
D-Agreement	2
E-Approval	1
F-Signal Understanding	3
/- Non-connective (= "all right")	4

OK Occurrence by Speaker Level

Native	39
Non-native	9
-Advanced	0
-Intermediate-1	1
-Intermediate-2	8
-Intermediate-3	0
-Intermediate-4	0
-Intermediate-5	0
-Beginner	0

OK Occurrence by Male / Female

Male	44
Female	4

Out of 48 occurrences of *OK*, only 9 were from interviewees, and 6 of those were from native-speaker patients being interviewed by Japanese doctors. Of those 6 uses one was not a connective use and another was a response to the doctor's request for agreement (as will be seen below). In the three interviews by Japanese doctors, moreover, there were 4 uses of *OK* by the non-native doctors, indicating the controlling function of *OK* in conversation. It is an indication of the controlling function of *OK* that the occurrences of *OK* by the interviewer were much higher with lower level than with higher level students.

OK - Request Agreement (C), Agree (D)

(14)

639

Doc (?) ah .. you uh you should decrease the use .. ah .. ah .. use, decrease the dose,
OK (C)? .. two eh two units or something

640

Pat Uh huh, *OK* (D).

In line 639 the non-native speaking doctor is requesting agreement, and in line 640 the native speaking patient indicates agreement.

OK - Approval (E), Non-Connective (/), Conclude Topic (A3)

(15)

718

Doc No. Good. And uh, (Japanese) *OK* (E).

719

Pat I thought, um, maybe well I picked something up, but .. it's a .. after I was,
you know, I went to the gym, I started at the gym and It was *OK* (/), but
uh then I took a little rest and started again.

720

Doc *OK* (A3).

Ok in line 718 indicates that the Japanese doctor approves of what the patient just said (the pain doesn't increase with coughing). The second *OK* is an adjectival use by the native-speaking patient. With the final *OK* in line 720 the doctor concludes the topic.

OK - Beginning (A1), Topic Change (A2), Continuance (B)
(16)

741

T *OK* (A1) it's November 5th, 1994, and, um we're going to have an interview in English. What's your name?

742

H My name is Hitomi Shibasaki.

743

T Uh huh. What do you do?

744

H Mm I'm a primary school teacher.

745

T What grade do you teach?

746

H Ah, third grade.

747

T Third. *OK* (A2). Umm, let's see.. how old .. never mind. Uh (laughs) ummmm you went to America this summer, right?

748

H Yes.

749

T *OK* (B). Tell me all about your American trip.

The interviewer opens the conversation with the *OK* in line 741, changes the topic in line 747, and continues the same topic with another question in line 749.

Comparing the Results

Compared with Table 1, we first note that only 7% of the connective words *so*, *oh* and *OK* are used by non-native students but 41% of connectives are employed in Table 2. This fact tells us that the higher the speakers' level goes the higher the frequency of connective words becomes. Table 3 shows that non-native doctors use as many connective words or more connective words than native patients.

A closer look at Table 1 and Table 2 reveals the following points; (1) *OKs* are seldom used by non-native students in the interview setting. *OKs* are used only twice by non-natives but are used 98 times by native teachers. (2) As for *so* and *OK*, non-native students in Table 2 use them as often as native teachers while non-native students in Table 1 seldom use them.

When we look at the occurrence by speaker level of each connective word—*so*, *oh*

and *OK*, we have found the following points: (1) Non-native students of higher than Intermediate-3 level can use *so* frequently and properly while the ones of lower than that use them improperly. (2) *Oh* occurrence is scattered out across speaker's levels. (3) Non-native doctors, being in the position of providing interviews to native patients, use *OK* as often as native patients.

Concluding Remarks

Our research in this paper concerns with connective words—mainly *so*, *oh* and *OK* in the interview settings. Compared with the data of Table 1 which narrowly deal with verbally low-level students and shows a sharp contrast in frequency of usage between native teachers and non-native students, Table 2 and Table 3 reveal that non-native students (or interviewees) or non-native doctors (or interviewers) use connective words as frequently as native teachers (or interviewers) or native patients (or interviewees) except for *OK* in the setting of 'teacher versus student'.

In the interaction between native and non-native speakers, connective words are used by both to structure and manage the conversation. Connective words used by native speakers assist non-native speakers to understand what conversation is going on by segmenting the conversation and marking the units of discourse. This allows the speaker to keep the conversation moving by breaking it into smaller and functionally recognizable segments. The non-native speakers used connective words to maintain their place in the conversation, to buy time while searching for the correct word or phrase or to indicate understanding of what has been said to him or her.

In analyzing the connective words *so*, *oh* and *OK*, we found the basic discourse functions of marking potential transitions between speakers or maintaining one's turn (*so*), shifting one's orientation to information (*oh*) and discourse management by the senior participant or conversation manager (*OK*).

We found that, in the case of discourse management, there was a clear delineation of hierarchy of conversation management in that the connective *OK*, in its function as a term of conversation management, was used almost exclusively by the conversation managers even when those managers (male) were not native speakers and the interviewees were native speakers. Further in the four uses of *OK* by females in our data, there was no instance of its use as a connective of discourse management. This is perhaps not surprising when we consider that, in Japanese women's language is inherently more indirect. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the highest ratio of occurrence of a connective word by females was as a marker of potential transition (*so*) in which the speaker may be offering a transition of speaking turn to the other.

Non-native speakers often used connective words to indicate understanding of the

foreign words themselves, or, as in the following cases, to cope with the struggle of finding the correct word or phrase. In the case of the transition marker *so* the data showed an ambiguity between its English connective use and a Japanese meaning based on "... *so omoimasu*" ('I think so') and "... *so so so*" ('I think so', or 'that's right'), and between "... *so so so*" and English "*so so*" meaning 'about average' (Japanese "*ma ma*"). Non-native speakers also used the connective *oh* to acknowledge having understood a question, a usage found only among Japanese speakers.

Let us restate the points made in this paper. (i) *So* has such functions as (A) Consequence, (B) Inference, (C) Summing Up, (D) Prodding, (E) Filler, (F) Initiation, and (J) Affirmation (Japanese usage of *so*). It is most often used as a marker of Consequence (40.4%).

(ii) *Oh* has such functions as (Aa) Receipt of New Information, (Ab) Receipt of Unexpected Information, (B) Recognition of Old Information, (C) Repair, (D) Shift in Subjective Orientation, (E) Evaluation, (F) Acknowledge Understanding Question (non-native use), (G) Correction of Previous Understanding and (J) Filler (non-native use). In our analysis *oh* is most frequently used as a marker of Receipt of New Information (50.0%).

(iii) *OK* has such functions as (A) Transition, (B) Continuance, (C) Request for Agreement, (D) Agreement, (E) Approval, and (F) Signal Understanding. *OK* is used by teachers most frequently and appears most often in the transition of the topic, especially as a marker of the topic change (43.8%).

Notes

- 1) Judgment of the ability levels of the interviewees is determined by native speakers' intuitions based on the complexity of their language use, and their interaction in their talks with native speakers.
- 2) The total number of interviewees in this study is twenty. Eleven of them are males and the rest are females. The total number of turns taken by interviewers and interviewees in this research is 940 times. Therefore, the numbers attached to the left side of the dialogues extracted from the conversational data indicate serial turn-taking.

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Appendix

Style	Teachers to Students			Doctors to Patients			Natural Conversation (controlled)
	Interview by Native to Non-Native	Native Teacher	Non-Native Students	Interview by Non-Native to Native	Non-Native Doctors	Native Patients	Purely Native Movie Scripts (Graduate)
So	124	78	46	4	2	2	42
Oh	64	41	23	1	1	0	41
OK	109	105	4	10	4	6	4
And	236	59	177	17	13	4	80
Now	20	11	9	0	0	0	35
Or	42	14	28	9	8	1	14
Well	18	2	16	7	3	4	44
Because	4	2	2	0	0	0	15
But	51	6	45	12	5	7	31
Then	12	6	6	2	1	1	16
total (vertical)	680	324	356	62	37	25	322

- (1) Interviews by Edythe Kizaki (Most of the patients are beginner's level.)
total words 2928
- (2) Interviews by Thomas McMahon (Levels vary from beginner's to advanced.)
total words 4084
- (3) Interviews by Doctors
total words 1068
- (4) Natural Conversation (controlled) from 'Graduate'
total words 13486