"You Are So Money":
The Contemporary Usage of the SO NOUN Construction
from a Semantic Point of View

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the new usage of the intensifier *so*, which I call the SO NOUN construction[1]. In the example below, you will see that the intensifier *so* is positioned just before a noun.

(1) This is so Iceland (Zwicky 2006).

This construction is frequently used by younger people, especially younger women (Zwicky 2006). However, the usage of this construction is still unclear. Gonzálvez-García (2014) states that the intensifier *so* modifies the noun which works as if it were an adjective. That is, the noun after *so* "involves metonymic inferencing" (Gonzálvez-García 2014: 290), and conveys a metaphoric meaning when the subject appears. However, this view is different from Irwin (2014: 30), which does not consider the booster as modifying the noun, but regards it as an adverb which shows the speaker's strong commitment to the proposition (i.e. the whole sentence), meaning "definitely". This view does not particularly focus on the metaphoric feature of the construction, though there is still a possibility that the

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[1] Gonzálvez-García (2014) calls it the "X *is so* N(P)" construction. However, this paper will use my own term, the SO NOUN construction, because the subject is not always necessary in the usage.

interpretation of the construction is metaphoric.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the usage of the SO NOUN construction from a semantic point of view. Especially, this paper is interested in the meaning of the noun and the function of the intensifier *so*. Though previous literature describes a similar research, this paper will revisit how the construction is used in Present-day English, applying a different methodology.

2. Previous Studies

Previous studies mainly focus on two aspects of the construction: the metaphorical feature and the intensification. For the former, although Irwin (2014: 30) does not highlight the metaphorical feature of the SO NOUN construction, it is generally considered to be metaphoric, conveying some assessment by the speaker. According to Austin (2006: 106), some negative valuation is attached to the construction, though she refrains from making the definite statement. On the other hand, Gonzálvez-García (2014: 282-290) observes that there are some cases in which the construction is interpreted in a positive sense. For the latter, there has been a discussion about the function of the intensifier *so*. As is stated, Irwin (2014: 30) considers the adverb as expressing the speaker's emotional attitude towards the proposition. In other words, it does not place something in the Subject slot high on the gradable scale inferred from the nature of the thing of the N(P) slot[2]. However, this view is not supported by Waksler (2012: 28-29), which states that the intensifier *so* serves to increase the degree on the

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[2] Beltrama (2014: 10) also insists that the "non-lexical" (i.e. nonstandard) intensifiers "are not actually contributing to the descriptive meaning of the sentence". However, Beltrama (2014: 3) implicitly mentions that the intensifiers as in this construction modify the N(P).

scale, though she also admits that it shows the speaker's attitude towards the target (i.e. N(P)).

3. The Purpose of This Study

As is stated, this paper will examine the usage of the SO NOUN construction from a semantic point of view. Especially, this study will answer the following questions: (a) whether the construction is a metaphorical expression, (b) what kind of nuance it conveys, (c) what the intensifier *so* modifies, and finally (d) what kind of function the intensifier *so* has.

4. Methodology

For these purposes, a survey by questionnaire was conducted in May to June 2014. A three-page questionnaire, consisting of two sections, is used in this study. In STUDY 1, the participants are asked to paraphrase statements, each with the SO NOUN construction (see Figure 1). They can write "Don't Know" in the space when a sentence does not make sense to them. In STUDY 2, they are required to read statements with the construction and to decide whether they are positive or negative. Six options are given for each sentence: "positive" (No.1), "fairly positive" (No.2), "neutral" (No.3), "fairly negative" (No.4), "negative" (No.5), and "Don't Know" (No.6) (see Figure 2). In the actual analyses, however, the tokens of "Don't Know" (No.6) are excluded in the statistics. Furthermore, I will take no account of "neutral" (No.3) because of the small occurrences. In addition, I will combine "positive" (No.1) and "fairly positive" (No.2) into an overall positive meaning and "fairly negative" (No.4) and "negative" (No.5)

into an overall negative meaning because the small categorization has made the comparison between positive and negative responses ineffective. Thus, only the two indicators (overall positive or overall negative) are applied in this study.

Figure 1. A Part of the Questionnaire (STUDY 1)

1. *Podcasts are so last year.*

....

2. *These are so Audrey Hepburn.*

....

3. *They are so London.*

....

Figure 2. A Part of the Questionnaire (STUDY 2)

1. *Podcasts are so last year.* ....
2. *These are so Audrey Hepburn.* ....
3. *They are so London.*...
4. *Your designs are so next year!* ....
5. *I am so OBAMA!!!.*..
6. *You are so Hollywood.*..
7. *That's so today.*..

The statements are taken from the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the Corpus of American Soap Operas (Operas), and the discussion from Wee and Tan (2008) with some other sources from the Internet, with a few of them modified. First, the texts with the construction were taken from the first four corpora. Then, they were

mainly categorized into four types of N(P) based on the semantic features: the SO PERSON construction, the SO PLACE construction, the SO TIME construction, and the SO MONEY construction (see the definitions in Section 5). Next, some typical examples are extracted from the texts and included in the questionnaire form with other examples from the other sources. All are selected in terms of the length of the sentence and some of them are edited shortly. All of the statements have an auxiliary verb (BE) or a verb of perception (e.g. *felt*). 13 people aged 18-30 (8 men and 5 women) took part in this study. They are from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They all acquired British English as their first language.

5. Metaphorical Feature

This section reports the results of the questionnaire research. As is mentioned, four types of the construction are investigated: the SO PERSON construction, the SO PLACE construction, the SO TIME construction, and the SO MONEY construction[3].

5.1 The SO PERSON Construction

The SO PERSON construction has the N(P) which is related to someone's name, especially a famous person's name as in Example 2. It is used when someone or something shares some characteristics of others (e.g. fashion, thoughts, or other characteristics).

(2) These are so Audrey Hepburn (GloWbE).

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[3] These designations are my own.

Whether the construction is interpreted in a positive or negative sense largely depends on the person in the N(P) slot. Figure 3 shows that the sentences with "so Audrey Hepburn", "so Obama", "so Catwoman", and "so Einstein" are interpreted in a positive way whereas the statements with "so Bush" and "so Blair Waldorf" are more likely to be given a negative meaning.

Figure 3. The Distribution of the Nuances for the SO PERSON Construction
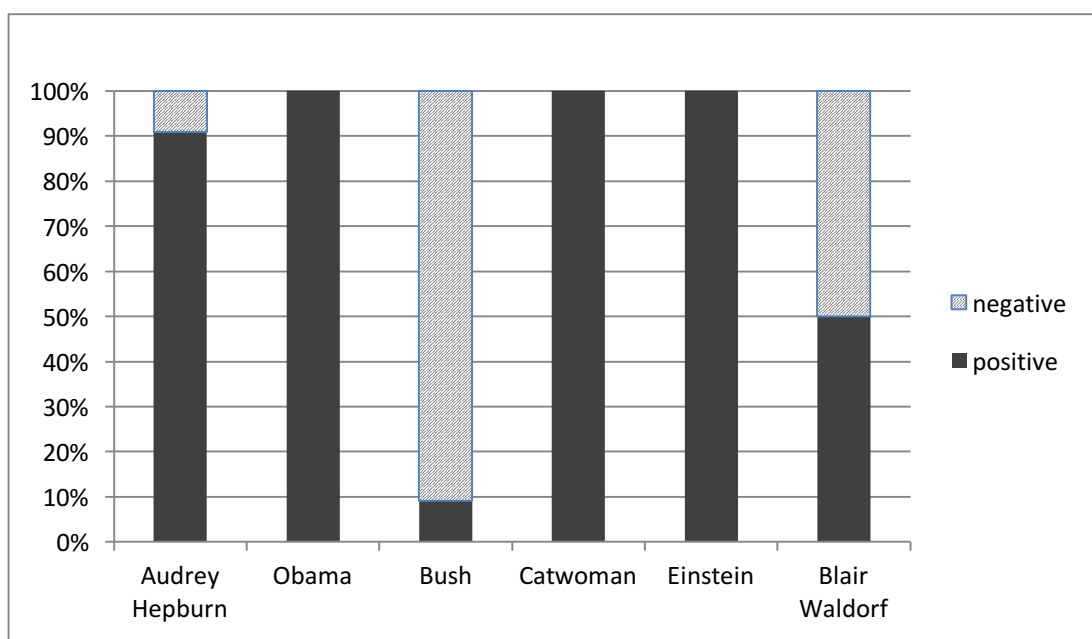

5.2 The SO PLACE Construction

The construction with a place in the N(P) slot is called the SO PLACE construction. The main characteristic of this construction is that it can produce many interpretations. For example, Example 3 can mean that they are "people in London", "stereotype", "fashionable", "cosmopolitans", "confident", "rude", "modern", "posh", "sophisticated", "something related to business", or "something

related to London".

(3) They are so London (GloWbE).

Although some sentences ("so Hollywood" and "so LA") are more likely to be interpreted positively, the two indicators (overall positive meaning and overall negative meaning) are distributed almost equivalently in most of the sentences (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The Distribution of the Nuances for the SO PLACE Construction
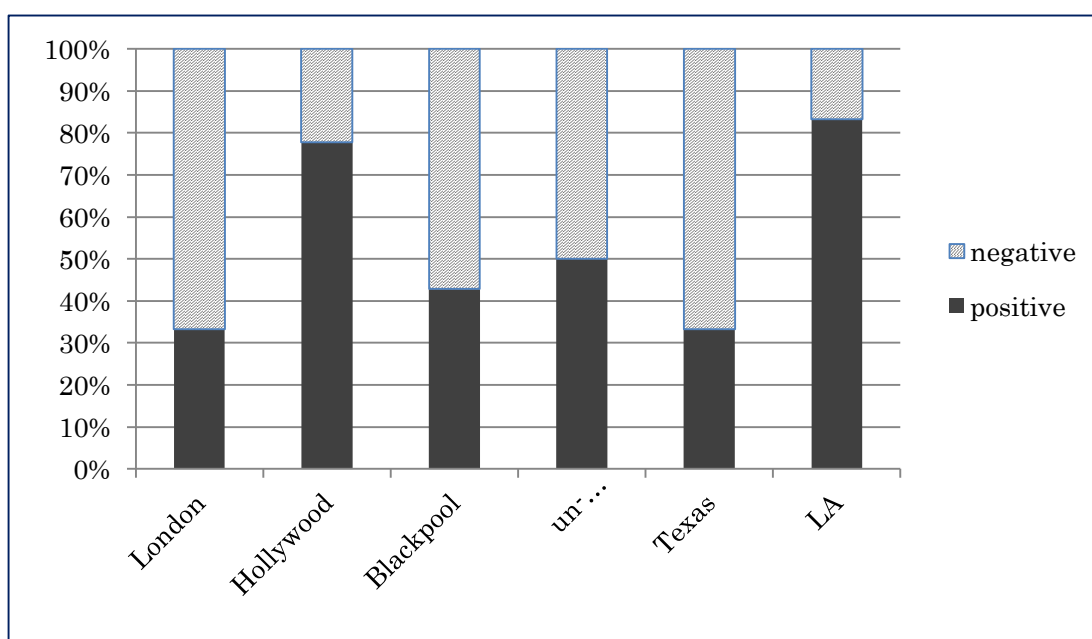
5.3 The SO TIME Construction

This construction is called the "*So* TIME" construction by Wee and Tan (2008). The past (i.e. "last year", "yesterday"), present ("today"), or future time (i.e. "tomorrow", "next year") fills in the "TIME" slot. The sentence with the past time is interpreted as "out of date", a

negative interpretation. On the other hand, the statement means "up-to-date" or "cool" when the N(P) is related to the present or future time. The distribution of the nuances perfectly reflects these interpretations (see Figure 5).

(4) Podcasts are so last year (qtd. in Wee and Tan 2008: 2101)
(5) That's so today (GloWbE)
(6) That's so tomorrow (qtd. in Wee and Tan 2008: 2104)

It is also worth noting that these meanings are not given without the intensifier *so*. Without *so*, even when the statement is metaphorical, it sounds more literal[4]. See Example 7.

(7) Podcasts are last year.

Although there is still a possibility that Example 7 means that podcasts are out of date, some other interpretations inferred from "last year" are also possible. That is, "last year" literally means the year before, and for some people who had a good experience the year before, Example 7 may mean something positive.

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[4] This judgement is from some of the participants in this research.

Figure 5. The Distribution of the Nuances for the SO TIME Construction
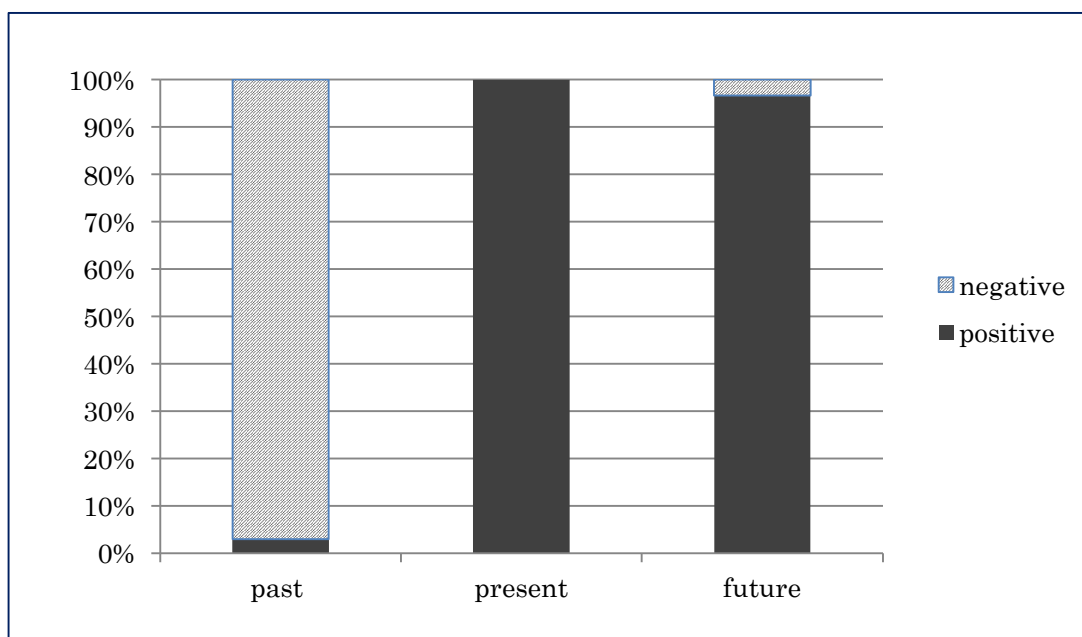
5.4 The SO MONEY Construction

The SO MONEY construction is the construction with the noun "money" positioned after the intensifier *so*. According to the *Urban Dictionary*, it prevails from the movie *Swingers* (1996). The participants understand this construction as meaning "rich" or "swanky" in a positive way as Figure 6 shows. Again, without the intensifier *so*, these positive meanings never occur.

(8) You are so money (COCA).

Figure 6. The Distribution of the Nuances for the SO MONEY Construction
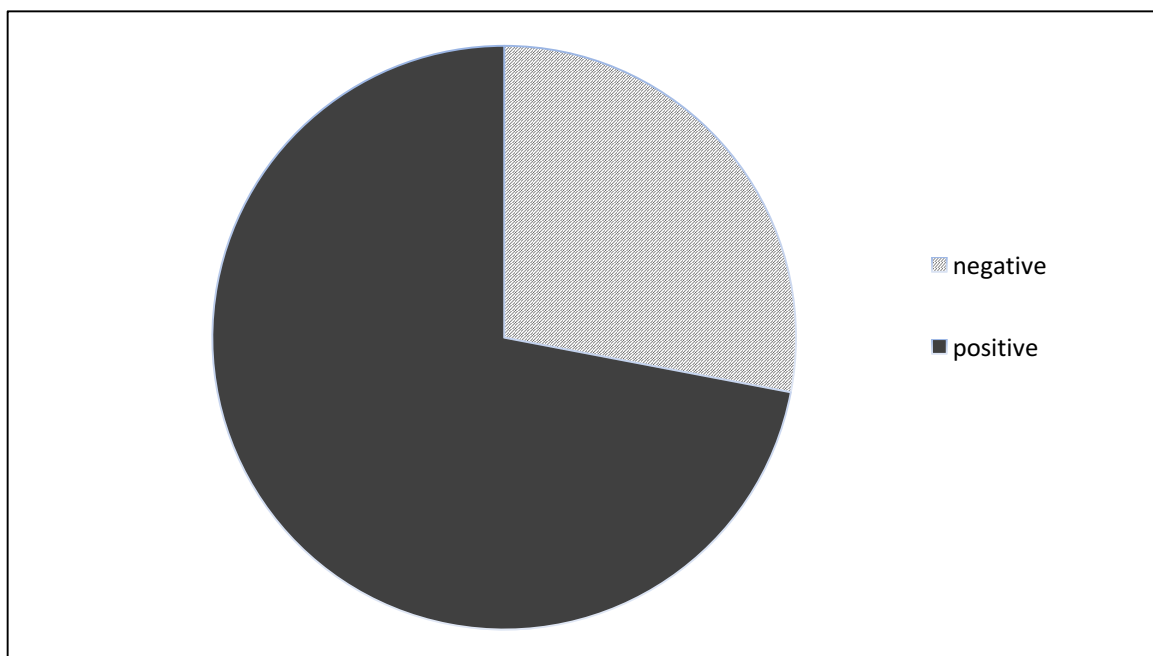
There are several variations of this construction, which make it possible to do research on the influences of the types of subject and verb on the nuances. Figure 7 shows the results of the comparison of subject. The sentence "I am/was so money" and "You are/were so money" are compared. The statements with first-person pronouns are more likely to be given a positive meaning than the sentences with second-person pronouns. Figure 8 illustrates the outcomes of the comparison of tense. The statements "You are so money" and "I am so money" were compared with "You were so money" and "I was so money". The statements with the present tense are more likely to be given a positive meaning than the sentences with the past tense. These comparisons reveal that the nuances are not only decided by the nouns after the intensifier *so* but also by the subjects and tenses in the sentences.
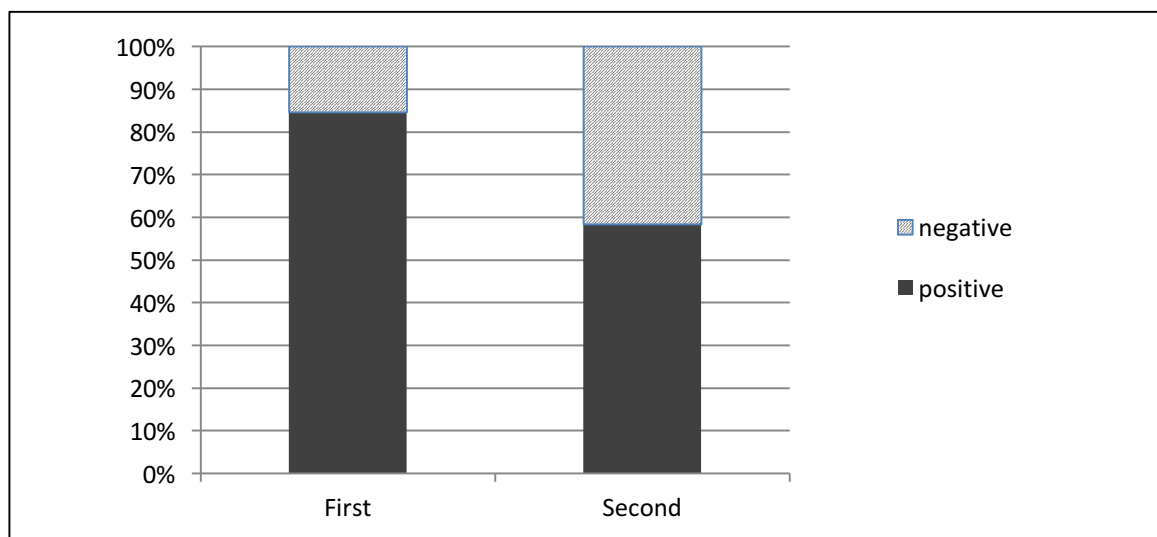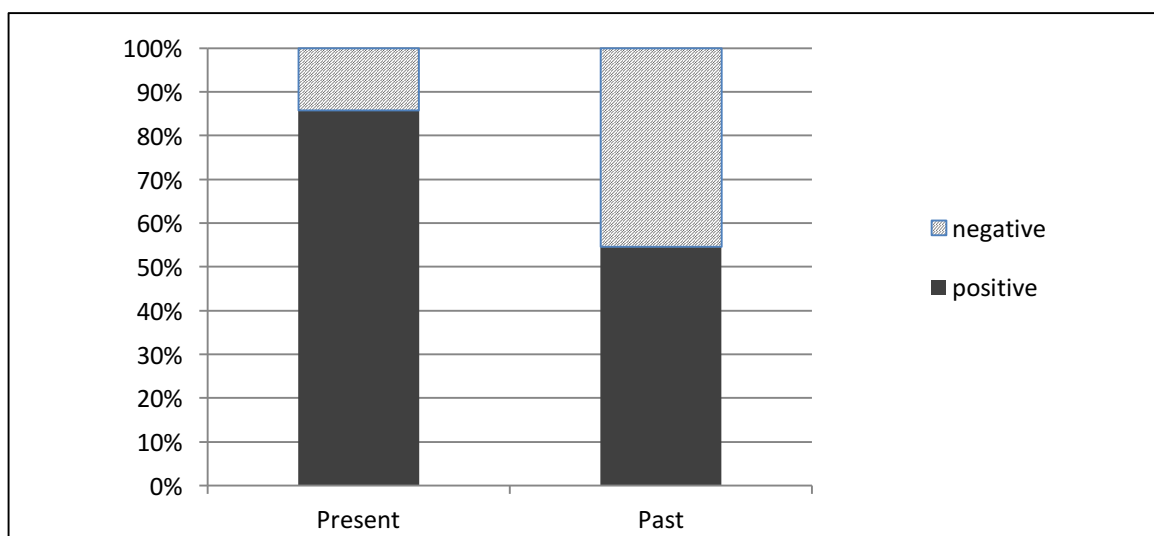
Figure 7. The Comparison of the Types of Subject


Figure 8. The Comparison of the Types of Tense

6. Intensification

The questionnaire survey has made it clear that the SO NOUN construction is a kind of metaphor. It is worth noting that the intensifier *so* makes the expression metaphoric because without it, non-metaphorical interpretation is also possible. The restriction of the

meaning of the N(P) is a feature of modification. Therefore, it is the target (i.e. N(P)), not the proposition (i.e. the whole sentence), that the intensifier *so* modifies.

This paper now turns to the function of the intensifier *so* in more detail. The results of STUDY 1 are used in order to investigate whether it is intensive or speaker-oriented. Figure 9 shows the rate of intensification for the statements in the questionnaire, which is calculated by counting the intensive words given for the paraphrased sentences (e.g. "really"). It turns out that the majority of the responses (64.6%) are not emphatic, which means that the intensifier may work as the adverb expressing the speaker's attitude or as a kind of function word which makes the N(P) metaphoric.

Figure 9. The Rate of Intensification for STUDY 1
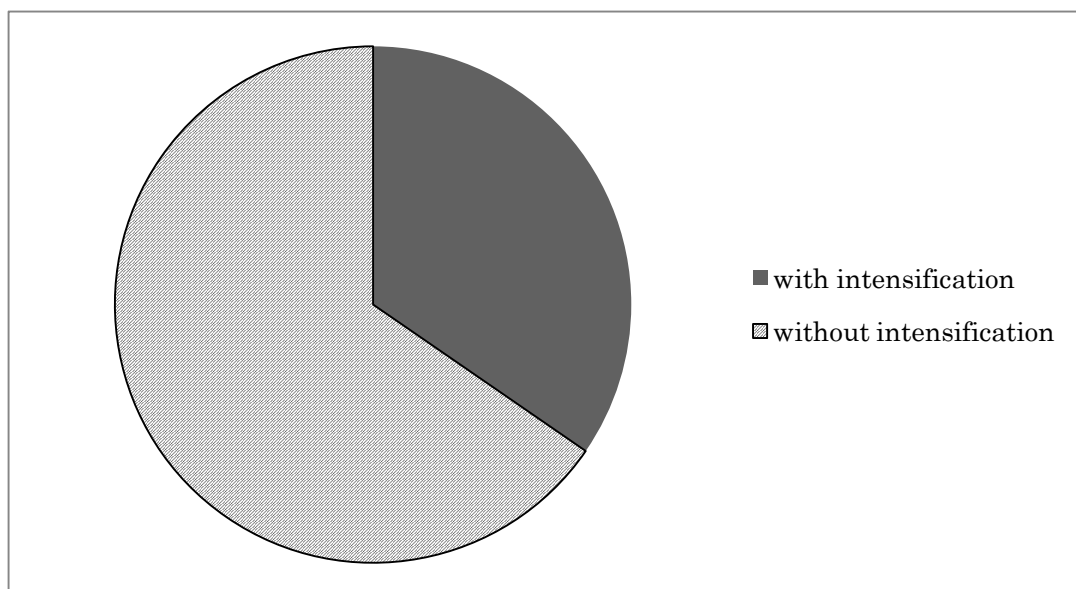
7. Concluding Remarks

This study has shown four findings relating to the SO NOUN construction: They are that (a) this construction is a metaphorical expression, that (b) it conveys a positive or negative sense according to the types of N(P), and that (c) the intensifier *so* modifies the N(P) and finally (d) the intensifier *so* carries no intensive meaning. Unfortunately, the function of the intensifier *so* is not fully explained in this paper as Section 6 shows. Is it a speaker-oriented adverb or a kind of function word which makes the N(P) metaphoric? I leave this question for future research.

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