How believing so is different from believing it

A. Marlijn Meijer
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
meijeram@hu-berlin.de

This study focuses on the English propositional anaphor so, in comparison to it; see 1. Native speakers report that in embedded responses to questions, such as 1, using so is better than using it. Needham’s (2012) corpus study shows that antecedents of so mostly are questions. Furthermore, the distribution of so is quite restricted: it cannot occur with verbs such as regret or resent. Therefore, it has been suggested that so only occurs with non-factives (Kiparsky & Kiparsky 1971); that so does not presuppose that the referent is true (Cornish 1992); or that so refers to the question under discussion, to which the speaker is not committed (Needham 2012). However, Bhatt’s (2010) finding, that so can occur with know in certain contexts, e.g. in 2, is problematic for these theories.

I argue that so presupposes that its referent is still under discussion and thus is not part of the common ground (CG), at the time of the occurrence of the eventuality of the predicate that so combines with. For it, I follow Moulton (2015) in assuming that it refers to salient propositional content, without speculating on whether the associated proposition is part of the CG or not. This explains the context-sensitive distribution of so, as well as the finding that so more is often used in response to questions. Following Farkas & Bruce (2009:24), I assume that propositions denoting polar questions are not part of the CG until the ‘asker’ (implicitly) signals agreement with the answer, whereas affirmation of an assertion can happen ‘unsignalled’. Reference to asserted propositions by so is thus only possible in restricted environments; for example in rejecting responses such as I don’t believe so or if the assertion was not confirmed yet by other speakers (e.g. 2).

2. It will rain tomorrow. I know so, because I checked the weather report.