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That's so last year! Constructions in a socio-cultural context

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine in detail the properties of a grammatical construction that we call the 'So TIME' construction. Expressions instantiating this construction include *Podcasts are so last year, E-mail is so five minutes ago* and *That's so today*. In those societies that are deeply ensconced in a world of fast-paced technological changes, there is clearly an obsession with the currency of various phenomena. The 'So TIME' construction is a reflection of this. Our paper therefore argues that a fuller understanding of the construction needs to take into account its socio-cultural context. This is a point of general importance, and we suggest that attending to the social-cultural contexts of constructions in fact creates opportunities for significant convergences between the enterprise of construction grammar and some recent concerns in sociolinguistics.
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1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine a grammatical construction (Fillmore et al., 1988; Goldberg, 1995; Kay and Fillmore, 1999; Croft, 2001) that is used to express the currency of various kinds of activities, entities or social values. We will use the term 'phenomena' as a cover term for these

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activities, entities and social values, and we will call the construction itself the 'So TIME' construction. The following are two examples[2] of the construction.

(1)   (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel 23 August 2005, italics in original)
    Podcasts are *so* last year.
    Podcasting isn't passé yet, but the seeds of an even newer electronic world are
    sprouting in Waukesha County and elsewhere around the country.

(2)   (*BusinessWeek online* 28 November 2005)
    E-Mail is so five minutes ago.
    It's being replaced by software that promotes real-time collaboration.

In (1), the construction is being used to express the opinion that podcasting as a form of electronic mass communication is on the way to being replaced by something else ('so last year'); the rest of the article suggests that it is being replaced by video blogs. Similarly, (2) shows the construction being used to make the claim that e-mail as a tool for business communication is on the way to becoming obsolete ('so five minutes ago'). Notice that a literal interpretation of the specified time period ('last year', 'five minutes') is more plausible with (1) than with (2). This indicates that the time period may be, but is usually not, understood literally. This observation is bolstered by the fact that there is an aspectual clash between the 'So TIME' expressions and their accompanying texts. In (1), the writer admits that podcasting 'isn't passé yet'. And in (2), the use of 'ago' (which suggests that e-mail has in fact already been replaced) conflicts with the actual claims in the elaborated text (which claims that e-mail is in the process of being replaced). It seems clear that, together with 'so', the time phrases in both (1) and (2) function as hyperbole to convey the opinion that certain phenomena (podcasting or e-mail) are no longer as valued or widely used as before.

Our goal, in this paper, is to understand in detail the properties of the 'So TIME' construction, especially its morphosyntactic and pragmatic[3] features. Because the construction is especially concerned with the relative currency of various phenomena, we argue that a fuller understanding of the construction needs to take into account its socio-cultural context. In particular, we show that the pragmatics of the 'So TIME' construction is intimately tied up with the experience of life in an increasingly globalized world, one that is characterized by rapid social and technological changes. This is a point of general importance, and we want to suggest that attending to the social-cultural contexts of constructions in fact creates opportunities for significant convergences between the enterprise of construction grammar and some recent concerns in sociolinguistics.

Our paper is organized as follows. Sections 2 and 3 briefly summarize some of the key issues in construction grammar, focusing in particular on how construction grammarians have interpreted the idea of a usage-based approach to grammar (Croft, 2001; Goldberg, 2007). Section 4 provides a detailed analysis of the properties of the 'So TIME' construction. Section 5 connects the 'So TIME' construction with broader attempts in sociolinguistics to study how the effects of globalization might be manifested linguistically (cf. Coupland,

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[2] Unless otherwise noted, all our examples are taken from the Internet.

[3] Since construction grammar makes no sharp distinction between lexicon and grammar, meanings are understood as being grammaticalized to varying degrees and the distinction between semantics, pragmatics, and discourse is really a continuum. In this paper, we use the term 'pragmatics' rather than 'semantics' because, as we show later, the meanings associated with the construction are defeasible, suggesting that they are implicatures.

2003). Here, we give special consideration to studies that focus on the rapid pace of change in social life (e.g. Bauman, 1998; Giddens, 1990, 1991). Concluding remarks are given in section 6.

2. Construction grammar: an outline

Construction grammar treats the grammar of a language as constituted by an inventory of constructions or form-meaning pairings, all of which are assumed to co-exist in a multi-dimensional network of inheritance relationships[4] (Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987; Fillmore et al., 1988; Goldberg, 1995). Meaning in construction grammar is understood broadly to include semantic, pragmatic and discourse phenomena.

An important aspect of taking constructions seriously is to acknowledge that constructions involve a high degree of conventionalization, since speakers often repeat expressions they have heard before, leading to routinized or idiomatic expressions being stored and used as units (Hopper and Traugott, 1993:65). Individual lexical items (such as *car* or *chair*) are constructions, as are conventionalized linguistic collocations of varying sizes. These include formulaic expressions as well as more general phrasal and syntactic patterns (such as Determiner followed by Head Noun). Constructions thus arise because certain collocations of language occur with relatively high frequencies, leading speakers to associate certain linguistic forms with certain meanings. Because of this, constructions may have properties that are not always compositionally derivable from their constituent parts.

Constructions can be of varying degrees of specificity, with some lexically specified and others more schematic. For example, Kay and Fillmore (1999) argue that sentences such as *What's this fly doing in my soup?* and *What is this scratch doing on the table?* are examples of a relatively idiomatic *What's X doing Y?* construction. 'What's' and 'doing' are lexically invariant parts of the construction while 'X' and 'Y' represent empty slots that can be satisfied by various noun phrases. As they point out, the construction has a very specific pragmatics associated with it. It does not simply ask about an activity; rather, it indicates the speaker's judgment that there is an incongruity (for example, the presence of the fly in the soup). In contrast, a less idiomatic expression such as *The man painted the house* is an instance of a *Transitive Verb Construction*, which is highly schematic in that it does not demand the presence of any specific lexical item. This construction in turn instantiates an even more general *Subject Predicate Construction*. In this way, construction grammar is able to account for the entire continuum of linguistic expressions, ranging from those that are highly irregular to those that are more prosaic, by looking at how constructions are related to each other, and how they combine to form newer ones.

3. Competence-based and usage-based models of construction grammar

As with any field of inquiry, sustained activity over a period of time will lead to internal differentiation, as researchers demonstrate different sets of priorities or interests. Within construction grammar, the most significant difference for the purpose of this paper lies in whether a postulated model is competence-based (Croft and Cruse, 2004:291; Fillmore et al., 1988; Kay, 2002; Kay and Fillmore, 1999) or usage-based (Croft, 2001; Goldberg, 1995, 2007).

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[4] The formal machinery used to express such relationships (which we will not be concerned with here) varies. Croft (2001), following Langacker (1987), uses construction schemas with varying degrees of abstractness, while Kay and Fillmore (1999) prefer a unificational approach involving feature structures.

A competence-based model is primarily concerned with representing the structure of linguistic knowledge *quite apart* from how such knowledge is employed in actual processes of communication. A usage-based model, on the other hand, treats such a partitioning of knowledge and use as unrealistic, since processes of communication are assumed to play a critical role in the structuring of linguistic knowledge. Langacker (1987:494, italics added) provides the following definition of a usage-based approach (see also Barlow and Kemmer, 2000; Bybee and Hopper, 2001):

> Substantial importance is given to the actual use of the linguistic system and a speaker's knowledge of this use; the grammar is held responsible for a speaker's knowledge of the full range of linguistic conventions, *regardless of whether these conventions can be subsumed under more general statements*.

A key difference between competence and usage-based models is that the former places a premium on constructional parsimony. It eschews redundancy in favor of analytical economy, and thus only accords constructional status to form-meaning pairings whose properties are not strictly predictable from other pairings. In contrast, a usage-based model recognizes that speakers' knowledge of language can in fact be redundant; it therefore allows both specific instances as well as more general patterns to be reflected as constructions even if the former can be captured as instances of the latter. In other words, even if an observed convention can be captured by a more general statement, there is no reason why the two should not co-exist. This is the point that Langacker is emphasizing in the definition quoted above.

However, it must be said that the interpretation of usage within the usage-based model is rather restricted, at least from a socio-cultural point of view. The investigative focus, perhaps not surprisingly, has been mainly on evidence for psycholinguistic processes and how human experiences are conceptually represented. Most of the work has in fact dealt with frequency effects, looking into how type or token frequencies can influence the representation of a form (Bybee, 2006). Relatedly, this has led to studies on productivity and how it aids in the learning of specific constructions, especially in the context of child language acquisition (Goldberg, 2007; Tomasello, 2003). Thus, despite acknowledgements that recurrent human experiences play an influential role in the rise of specific constructions (Goldberg, 1995:5), the emphasis in construction grammar – even where a usage-based approach has been adopted – has so far been very much on cognitive correlates of language use. Relevant features of human experience are typically characterized in terms of volition, motion, or force dynamics. We do not deny the value of this to the study of constructions, but it is also the case that, as a consequence, relatively little attention has been given to their socio-cultural contexts (Croft and Cruse, 2004:329; Östman and Fried, 2005: 1). But as Croft (2001:364–365) observes, construction grammar needs to be seen as part of larger attempts (Agha, 2007; Silverstein, 2004; Strauss, 2004) to understand how humans use language to communicate and interact with each other. In the absence of a richer conception of usage, construction grammar's potential for illuminating the social and cultural dimensions of language remains unexploited.

4. The 'So TIME' construction

To demonstrate the value of situating constructions in their socio-cultural contexts, we now consider the 'So TIME' construction in detail. We first describe its morphosyntax and pragmatics before relating it to broader social considerations.

4.1. Morphosyntax

The subject of the 'So TIME' construction is syntactically optional. When present, it can appear either as a specified noun phrase (3) or noun clause (4). Example (4) is our own.

(3)   (Los Angeles Times 9 October 2005)
        Fads are so yesterday.
        As culture morphs worldwide at Internet speed, forecasters fight to stay ahead of it all.

(4)   Doing your own laundry is so last year.

The subject can also be a pronoun (5) or a demonstrative (6), if it is clear from the context what these refer to. While 'it' is used in (9), by far the most common is 'that'[5] (6).

(5)   (Hip Scouts, Review of *Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment*)
        I personally loved the 'genetic spin'; it's so today.

(6)   (Guardian Unlimited 11 March 2004)
        Samba? That's so last year.
        It's a hit in Brazil's slums. Now, thanks to a car ad and Fatboy Slim, Rio funk is
        about to sweep Britain.

There are also instances where no subject appears at all, as shown in (7). However, upon reading the accompanying text, it becomes clear what 'Soooo Last Millennium' is predicating. The writer is talking about what he sees as outdated cultural attitudes towards women that are being propounded in a piece of 'horrific drivel' that he had come across.

(7)   (The Un-Apologetic Atheist, web-blog by Robert Richardson, 26 May 2005,
        underlining and italics in original)
        Soooo Last Millennium.
        One of my colleagues showed me *this horrific drivel*, which is frankly enough to
        make my skin crawl. A brief excerpt:
        *. . .Any man seeking to beg, borrow or steal a daughter's hand without her father's
        endorsement is seeking to gain, in unlawful ways, "property" not his own.*

If we now focus on the nature of the time phrase itself, we notice that particular time phrases can refer to the past (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7), the present ('today') (5) or the future (8) ('tomorrow').

(8)   (Xelibri—is it the new black? Rob Bamforth, 28 April 2005)
        That's why it's refreshing to see the direction taken by Siemens in forming it's
        own fashion accessory division, Xelibri. This new division, with the tagline
        "That's so tomorrow", which admittedly, is so yesterday, says it is creating "fashion
        accessories that make phone calls."

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[5] Both pronouns and demonstratives are traditionally absorbed under the rubric of 'deixis' (Levinson, 1983: 62). Furthermore, the common use of the distal 'that' (as opposed to the proximal 'this') is probably related to the fact that the most common time reference in the construction is to the past. The deictic referent of 'that' therefore is some event or entity that is considered to be outdated.

Most of our attested examples, though, refer to the past. Here, we note that with past time, some of the examples contain the word 'ago', while others contain the word 'last'. Consider the examples in (9); (9a) is (2) repeated here while (9b and c) are variants. As (9a and b) show, an expression referring to past time can be marked with 'last' or 'ago' – either suffices to anchor the relevant time period in relation to the deictic center. In the absence of any such anchor, however, the expression becomes unacceptable (9c).

(9)

a. (*BusinessWeek online* 28 November 2005)
    E-Mail is so five minutes ago.
    It's being replaced by software that promotes real-time collaboration.

b. E-Mail is so last year.

c. *E-Mail is so five minutes.

To summarize, the subject need not be present in the construction. And among the elements that can appear in the construction, the only consistently obligatory ones are 'so' and the time expression itself – with a suitable modifier such as 'ago', 'last' 'next' to anchor the time period appropriately (as past, present or future) vis-à-vis the deictic center. Which, of course, is why we have decided to call it the 'So TIME' construction.

4.2. Pragmatics

Returning to (8), recall that the writer quotes the promotional tagline from a handphone manufacturer "That's so tomorrow', and comments on the tagline as being 'so yesterday'. This observation leads us nicely to the pragmatics of the 'So TIME' construction. The 'So TIME' construction carries the implicature that being current is positively valued while being out of date is negatively valued. Thus, in (8), the author's use of 'so yesterday' is intended to convey his opinion that the manufacturer's tagline is not as effective as it aims to be. Similarly, recall that in (7), the author uses 'Soooo Last Millennium' as part of his negative reaction to social values that he considers 'horrific drivel'. And likewise, in (9a), the writer's description of e-mail as 'so five minutes ago' is part of his attempt to convince the readers that those who are truly in touch with technological advances no longer use e-mail.[6]

The 'So TIME' construction thus locates a phenomenon (represented explicitly by the subject or implicitly inferable from the context if no subject is present) along a timeline, using the moment of utterance as the deictic 'now'. Crucially, this timeline is typically not understood as literally marking actual time; rather, it presents a continuum of meanings based on the time expression, indicating how current or outdated the phenomenon is relative to the moment of utterance. If the phenomenon coincides with the 'now' (that is, is current), then it is viewed favorably. If it only existed prior to the 'now' (that is, is in the past), then it is viewed unfavorably as being outdated. If it is located after the 'now' (that is, in the future), then it is also viewed favorably as having anticipated a future trend.

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[6] An anonymous reviewer suggests that the use of 'deictically anchored temporal' expressions to convey (dis)approval is analogically formed on 'deictically anchored locational' expressions such as 'That's so New Jersey!' or 'That's very Upper East Side!'. This is clearly an interesting point that is worth pursuing, but one that is beyond the scope of the present paper.

However, the fact that past time examples are much more common than present or future time suggests that unless there is a specific indication to the contrary, the default interpretation of the construction is that it refers to past time and is intended negatively. We can see support for this default negative reading in the following online posting by 'ESC' (www.phrases.org, 21 October 2002) that comments insightfully on the pragmatics of the construction. Notice that all of the examples mentioned by 'ESC' have to do with past time and furthermore, 'ESC' characterizes them as 'dismissives':

> "(That's) so . . ." as a dismissive descriptor with defined time periods, such as, "that's so 80's" or "that's so last year" is in common enough usage on both sides of the Atlantic, I believe. "So last month" is a nice twist on this, carrying as it does connotations of the fickleness and ephemeral nature of media popularity and fashionability. What with today's channel surfers, who have less attention span than a damaged goldfish, I expect soon to see "he's so last week" or "that's so yesterday".[7]

Our suggestion that the default reading of the construction is that of past time and negative valuation gains support when we consider the use of negation. The constructed examples in (10) demonstrate what happens when the construction is negated. Consider (10a). Strictly speaking, 'not today' can be understood as referring to either past time or future time. However, (10a) tends to be understood as referring to past rather than future time, with the attendant negative valuation. Now consider (10b), which is much harder to interpret than (10a), for the following reason. As we pointed out, it is the choice of time (past, present, future) that conveys the relevant valuation (positive or negative). The difference between specific past times ('last year', 'last century', 'the 1960s', 'five minutes ago') does not really affect the negative valuation. A person faced with (10b) would therefore need to ask what the speaker hopes to convey by negating a specific past time, especially since the negation ('not yesterday') still does not change the tendency to interpret (10b) as having a past time reference. That is, 'not yesterday' is still consistent with 'not last year' or 'not five minutes ago'. Thus, (10b) becomes difficult (though not impossible)[8] to understand because it is unclear what pragmatic purpose would be served by negating the past time[9].

(10)
a.   So not today!
b.   ?So not yesterday!

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[7] As we can see, ESC's prediction about 'so yesterday', made in 2002, has come true 3 years later (see (3)).

[8] (10b) might be uttered if the addressee were required to dress up in period costume for an event, but failed to do so. This interpretation, too, is consistent with the our analysis, where the negative valuation of evoked by a past time expression is an implicature and hence defeasible. See our discussion of (15–16) below. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

[9] Cases where the negation appears outside the construction, with consequent scope over the entire construction, seem to us to occur only as retorts or responses to an earlier assertion. In the constructed example below, the speaker disagrees with 'so yesterday' as an appropriate characterization and suggests 'so five minutes ago' instead. See examples (12–14) in the main text for further discussion of this.

That's not so yesterday! I think it's more like so five minutes ago! (Said in response to the earlier assertion: 'That's so yesterday!).

Though much less common than past time, expressions involving present time do occur, and the positive valuation accorded to something that is perceived as current can be seen in (9), where the writer 'loved' the book because it deals with genetics, a topic that she considers 'so today'. Cases where the time phrase refers to the future also appear to be positive in valuation, as we already noted. (8), for example, clearly indicates that 'so tomorrow' is intended positively, though its effectiveness has been questioned in the accompanying commentary. And in (11), the writer uses 'so next century' to support the idea of gay marriage and to indicate that those who oppose it are simply too conservative in their outlook.

(11)   (Vital Voice, article by Colin Murphy, 2 December 2005)
        Think about it for a moment; if we were to wait for public prejudices and mores to
        catch up with the times and change, through the legislative process, laws such
        as banning interracial and gay marriage, the headline of most papers might have
        read last week: "Governor of Alabama signs long sought-after law allowing whites
        and blacks to marry." Gay marriage—well, that's so next century.

Within the broad categories of past, present and future, there are also other interesting meanings that can be conveyed. For example, the use of past time indicates a negative evaluation regardless of how recently in the past the time specified might be. But the more recent the time expressions, the more strongly it signals that changes are taking place very rapidly in modern life. In (12), a trend that is 'so two seconds ago' and one that is 'so two years ago' are both outdated. The main difference is that the former further conveys a greater sense that the pace of social change is accelerating.

(12)   (Seattle Magazine.com October 2005)
        The music industry is notorious for chewing up and spitting out what has already
        been imitated. And shelf life has become shorter and shorter. Once a trend
        might have been dismissed as "so two years ago"; now, "so two seconds
        ago" heralds "out" status.

Also, we mentioned at the beginning of this paper that, depending on the context, some time phrases are more easily construed as literally true than others. A literal construal makes it possible to interpret the expression as a statement of historical fact, and this has the effect of mitigating (but not eliminating) the negative valuation. For example, compare (13a) with the constructed examples in (13b and c).

(13)
a.   (Norwhich Bulletin 24 September 2004)
        "To fire them because of their appearance, man, that's so 1960s."
b.   To fire them because of their appearance, man, that's so yesterday.
c.   To fire them because of their appearance, man, that's so five minutes ago.

In (13a), the reference to '1960s' makes it possible to interpret the utterance as meaning that firing people based on their appearance, though not acceptable today, was something that was commonly done in the 1960s. The negative valuation is therefore (to a small extent) mitigated by the possibility that people who in fact continue to fire others based on appearances are simply clinging to an attitude that was at one time socially pervasive. In contrast, this interpretation of

historical 'fact' is not available with (13b and c). As a result, the negative valuation remains unmitigated and comes across more strongly than with (13a). In fact, (13c) poses a bigger interpretative challenge compared to (13b) because the time-expression ''five minutes ago'' is incongruent – given real-knowledge – with the actual practice of hiring and firing, since this process does not generally take place within five minutes.[10]

Something slightly different appears to be the case within future time. Things that are 'so next year' and 'so next century' are both understood as having successfully anticipated possible trends. However, the more further into the future the time expression, the more likely the added implicature that the trend is outrageous. Thus, compare the constructed examples in (14).

(14)
a. Your designs are so tomorrow!
b. Your designs are so next year!
c. Your designs are so next century!
d. Your designs are so next millennium!

That these valuations are indeed implicatures can be seen in (15) and (16). In (15), the normally negative valuation accorded to past time is defeased when the writer embeds 'so five years ago' within the matrix clause 'It's hip' to report favorably on a growing nostalgia for the 1990s.

(15) (The Sydney Morning Herald 12 October 2004)
It's hip to be so five years ago.
The 1990s may not yet be the new 1970s, but it seems young people are taking a look back at the last decade of last century and deciding it was a pretty good place to be. ''Nineties club night are huge,'' says *Cosmopolitan*'s editor, Mia Freedman, who has also noticed 1990s themes in fashion, such as op-shop clothes.

In (16), the sense of outrageousness associated with future time can likewise be canceled.

(16) Your designs may be so next century, but they're still too conservative for my tastes.

We close this section with the observation that the implicatures are associated with the construction as a whole rather than its individual constituents. For example, as an intensifier, 'so' is not specifically associated with any kind of valuation, positive or negative, as we see from expressions such as 'He's so rude/nice'. The time phrases, too, in and of themselves, do not convey any kind of valuation. It is therefore the 'So TIME' construction as a whole that conveys the relevant implicatures.

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[10] We thank a reviewer for alerting us to this.

5. The 'So TIME' construction and life in modernity

Recent work in sociolinguistics has begun looking in earnest at how the effects of modernity and globalization[11] are manifested linguistically (Blommaert, 2005; Coupland, 2003; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Flowerdew, 2002). As Coupland (2003:466) points out:

> The qualities of linguistically mediated social experience that define 'local' – inhabitation of social networks, social identities, senses of intimacy and community, differentials of power and control – all potentially carry an imprint from shifting global structures and relationships.

Coupland's suggestion that 'linguistically mediated social experiences' may carry the 'imprint from shifting global structures and relationships' is exactly in line with what we might expect from a usage-based model of construction grammar, albeit one involving a richer construal of usage. In other words, if constructions are indeed motivated by recurrent human experiences, then it would be only reasonable to expect particularly salient aspects of life in modernity to be linguistically conventionalized.

One such aspect that has occupied much recent work in social theory is the rapid pace of change, experienced especially by those living in highly developed societies. As Giddens (1991:16, italics in original) observes:

> One of the most obvious characteristics separating the modern era from any other period preceding it is modernity's extreme dynamism. The modern world is a 'runaway world': not only is the *pace* of social change much faster than in any prior system, so also is its *scope*, and the *profoundness* with which it affects pre-existing social practices and modes of behavior.

This experience of an ever-increasing tempo of life, and the different reactions that individuals have towards it, is nicely documented in Gleick (1999). Gleick (1999:11) quotes the social historian Theodore Zeldin as saying:

> Technology has been a rapid heartbeat, compressing housework, travel, entertainment, squeezing more and more into the allotted span. Nobody expected that it would create the feeling that life moves too fast.

A contrasting reaction to that of Zeldin's can be seen in the impatience expressed by one Mike Holderness, who lives in London (quoted in Gleick, 1999:169):

> Ten years ago, I was delighted and enthralled that I could get a telegram-like E-mail from Philadelphia to London in only fifteen minutes. Three years ago, I was delighted and enthralled that I could fetch an entire thesis from Texas to London in only five minutes. Now, I drum my fingers on the desk when a hundred-kilobyte file takes more than twenty seconds to arrive . . . damn, it's coming from New Zealand . . .

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[11] The relationship between modernity and globalization is as follows. Modernity refers to a series of institutional and technological developments traceable to post-feudal Europe (Giddens, 1991). These changes are understood as having a number of effects, including the fostering of even greater linkages between different parts of the world (Giddens, 1990: 64). It is in this sense that modernity is said to be 'inherently globalizing' (Giddens, 1990: 63, quoted in Flowerdew, 2002: 211).

Of course, not all societies are equally obsessed with the rapidity of social change, especially since effects of modernity are distributed unevenly. But in those societies that are deeply ensconced in a world of fast-paced social and technological changes, and whose members are living in a highly developed consumer culture where 'people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices that they possess and display' (Warde, 1994:878), there is clearly an obsession with the currency of various activities, entities or social values. The 'So TIME' construction, as 'ESC' points out above, is a reflection of this.

In this regard, it is worth recalling that the 'So TIME' construction does not simply describe the relative currency of a phenomenon. The construction naturalizes currency as a reasonable criterion for evaluating the desirability of a phenomenon. A speaker therefore can use the construction to justify his or her opinion regarding a phenomenon on the basis of just how current it is. For example, as we see in (17), the construction is used to support one side of a debate, namely, promoting the use of open source technologies, by dismissing the entire debate itself as outdated and hence, irrelevant.

(17)   (LinuxInsider 28 November 2005)
        Debates on Open Source So 'last year' Says Novell Exec.
        . . .there's still some confusion and fear surrounding the low-cost software
        alternative, says Ross Chevalier, CTO/CIO of Novell(Nasdaq: NOVL) Canada.
        "There's a very strong element of fear that if I do this maybe I'll get in trouble,"
        says Chevalier, who recently spoke at GETC Week. . . . "There's still a perception
        that the public sector hasn't embraced open source," he says. . . .Outside of
        Canada, adoption rates are significantly higher. In Europe, for example, open
        source is much more common. "That's so last year," he says of the open-source
        versus proprietary software debate, in Europe. "It's not even a relevant conversation."

In (17), Chevalier, a Novell executive, acknowledges that worries about the use of open source technologies are common. That is, he is indicating his awareness, with respect to individuals and companies who are promoting or combating the use of open source, that there are strong feelings on either side of the debate. Chevalier, however, is intent on providing support for one side of the debate, namely, the side that calls for greater use of open source technologies. He does this by using a past time expression ('so last year') in the 'So TIME' construction. Thus, by simply characterizing the debates over open-source and proprietary software as no longer being current, he is able to suggest that concerns over source open are groundless, especially in Europe.[12]

It may seem unremarkable that speakers should attribute a negative valuation to being out of date and a positive valuation to being current or futuristic. But this is actually indicative of a cultural logic that is of relatively recent origin, following the shift from a 'producer society' to a 'consumer society'. As Bauman (1998:24) points out:

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[12] There is undoubtedly an ideological effect involved here where, by using the construction, a speaker is able to present what might otherwise be a personal opinion as though it is widely shared. By using the construction, Chevalier presents as common opinion *his* personal opinion that debates about open source are not worth pursuing. How effective this elision between the public and the personal is really dependent on the status of the speaker, among other factors. For example, consider the utterance *Blue jeans are so last year!* This is more likely to be received as common opinion if uttered by a well-known fashion designer than if uttered by, say, a school teacher. However, for even a fashion designer's pronouncement to gain authoritative status, it has to be mediated (Myers, 2004: 230) in some way, such as being disseminated through a series of television or print interviews, or advertising.

> The difference is one of emphasis, but that shift does make an enormous difference to virtually every aspect of society, culture and individual life. The differences are so deep and ubiquitous that they fully justify speaking of our society as a society of a separate and distinct kind—a consumer society . . .

For Bauman (1998:28), this shift towards a consumer society is marked especially by the constant search for new consumer goods in order to satisfy the desire for 'new and improved identities'. Sassatelli (2007:65, citing McCracken, 1988) also makes a similar point in her observation that 'whilst in traditional societies the guiding principle in attributing value to goods was the *patina* of time (that is the appearance that objects gain through use over generations) in modernity it is fashion, intended as the search for the new'.

The existence of the 'So TIME' construction is a testament to how deeply entrenched this way of thinking has become. Needless to say, appealing to a narrow, cognitively oriented notion of usage would not be sufficient to account for the pragmatics of the construction, much less why it should be emerging in the context of specific societal developments. Instead, it is necessary to acknowledge that the construction reflects a cultural outlook that is prominent in societies dominated 'by the volatile, the ephemeral and the disposable, not only in the domain of material goods' but also in lifestyles, relationships and social values (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999:77).

6. Concluding remarks

While the concern with currency is itself a fairly recent cultural consequence, it is not unreasonable to ask whether a preoccupation with currency will become even more pronounced as more societies become caught up in the currents of globalization and modernity. And as they do, we can begin asking if the 'So TIME' construction will start being used even more widely, or whether other constructions that perform a similar function might be developed.

As the posting by 'ESC' suggests, as recently as 2002, the 'So TIME' construction was still not that widely used, indicating that it is probably of relatively recent provenance. The number of examples we have discussed attests to its growing use, however. But it is not impossible that with greater usage, the properties of the construction may begin to change. For example, it is possible that present time (with its attendant positive valuation) might become the default instead of past time. It is also possible that the negative valuation attached to past time might disappear, to be replaced by some other evaluative stance. Yet another possibility is that the subject, currently optional, could well become syntactically obligatory. After all, each use of a construction in a specific context involves a re-mapping of the form-meaning relationship, and it is not unthinkable that this may lead to 'innovation or ALTERED REPLICATION in grammatical structures' (Croft, 2001:366, upper case in originals).

But whatever the changes, we would want to relate any such observations to the prevailing social milieu. As Silverstein (2004:634, italics in original) observes:

> . . .stereotypic or cultural concepts are invoked in and by the use of tokens of words and expressions to which they are attached. . . .Such cultural knowledge *lives and dies in textual occasions.* We create it on occasions of use of particular words and expressions in particular cotextual arrays one with respect to another, as much as, on subsequent occasions of use of them, we try to presume upon the knowledge previously experienced and, perhaps finding our presumption being questioned, have to create it again or modify it for some new interlocutor.

This is a point of general relevance. Sociolinguistic attention to the relationship between language and globalization is concerned with analyzing the social trajectories of language resources as these are transported from one linguistic market to another, in the course of which they may be appropriated, rejected, or resignified (Blommaert, 2005; Jacquemet, 2005; Pennycook, 2007). In this regard, Blommaert (2003:608) suggests that a key part of understanding how language mediates globalization and modernity is to move away from a preoccupation with named varieties such as English, Spanish or Mandarin and, instead, towards the investigation of particular varieties, particular repertoires, and particular discourses. To Blommaert's list, we would add, in particular, constructions.

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