

The so problem

An indirect amplifier or intensifier



I'm **so** hungry that I could eat a horse.

In sentences like this **so** is an adverb that amplifies or intensifies the meaning of the following adjective or adverb but indirectly. There are other meanings for the word **so** but this text is about **so** as an amplifier or intensifier.

so means: *as much as I communicate to you.*

It means, as much as I have communicated, I am communicating now or I will communicate to you. How much **so** amplifies or intensifies the following adjective or adverb can be communicated verbally, linking to a verbal clue or nonverbally, linking to a nonverbal clue.

So linking to a verbal clue

In the example above **so** amplifies *hungry* indirectly. The conjunction *that* introduces the clause which verbally indicates how much. The phrase *I could eat a horse* communicates the intensity of my *hunger*. It shows how much I'm *hungry*. The conjunction *that* can be omitted: *I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse.*

I felt so ill that I could hardly get out of bed this morning.

Here the phrase *I could hardly get out of bed this morning* indicates how much I felt ill.

So linking to a nonverbal clue

[sighing] - I'm **so** tired.

A phrase like, *I'm so tired* is normally accompanied by body language such as sighing, intonation, mimics or other body language that clearly show how tired the

person is. This means, there is nonverbal communication to indicate how much I am tired and **so** tells you to use these nonverbal clues to understand how tired I am. In this case the nonverbal communication is crucial.

Without the nonverbal communication, the word **so** loses its meaning because I am telling you that I communicate, I indicate, how severe my tiredness is but I don't indicate anything. It is like saying: *Look at the thermometer to see how hot it is* when there is no thermometer.

Because indicates the reason

When you use the conjunction **because**, people will conclude that you are going to tell the reason why you are as tired or ill as you are. You will still have to indicate, verbally or nonverbally, how much you are tired or ill. When using **because** and telling the reason, you will normally use nonverbal communication to show how much to amplify or intensify the adverb or adjective following **so**. *I'm so hungry because I had neither breakfast nor lunch. I'm so tired because I've worked for eight days in a row.* These sentences only make sense if something like intonation or gestures indicate how tired the speaker is.

[holding or rubbing belly] - I'm so hungry because I had neither breakfast nor lunch.

The holding or rubbing of the belly shows how hungry I am. Normally this will be accompanied by facial expression showing discomfort.

[sighing] - I'm so tired because I've worked for eight days in a row.

The sighing indicates how tired I am. The part *I've worked for eight days in a row.* communicates the reason of this tiredness, not the level of it.

Difference between so and words like very

The difference between the adverb **so** and adverbs like **very** or **really** is that **very** and **really** are direct amplifiers or intensifiers. These words themselves indicate how much the following adjective or adverb is amplified. The phrase *I'm very hungry* by itself is sufficient for adequate communication. It indicates clear enough how hungry I am. Additional nonverbal communication is possible and normal but not necessary. With the indirect amplifier **so** extra communication is necessary as explained above.