

## Mitchell's Musings 5-6-13: Should You Join the So'ing Circle?

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If you are a diligent reader of these musings – and who wouldn't be? – you will recall that back last June 25th, we dealt with problems of undergraduate writing. For that small minority of readers who can't recall the piece, the link is:

<http://www.employmentpolicy.org/sites/www.employmentpolicy.org/files/field-content-file/pdf/Daniel%20J.B.%20Mitchell/MitchellMusings%206-25-12.pdf>

At the tail end of that musing, we got into the issue of oral presentation as opposed to writing:

*...(W)e find that some students are afflicted with "uptalk," a malady not well suited to job interviews or the workplace that seemed to arise in the 1980s. It is more unkindly is known as the moronic interrogative:*

Moronic interrogative: Raising your voice at the end of a statement to turn it into a question as typified by valley girls but has spread far beyond to both sexes and even beyond the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

*That definition is reasonably accurate but true practitioners of uptalk actually insert the questioning tone in the middle of their statements as well as the end. A good start in alerting students to avoid uptalk is to play the YouTube video I have embedded on the subject on the EPRN website. Click on <http://www.employmentpolicy.org/topic/403/blog/avoiding-uptalk>.<sup>2</sup> None of the remedial efforts described [in the musing] are cure-alls. But they help and may be of use to other college and university instructors. They might even help, like, your students? find, you know, a job? in today's difficult labor market?*

The implication of the earlier musing was that poor writing and odd speech patterns could be a hindrance in the job market. It's hard to imagine that poor writing could ever be a help in job search. But what about speech patterns that may seem odd but in fact are carefully tailored for specific audiences?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=moronic%20interrogative>.

<sup>2</sup> If it loads slowly, go directly to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCNIBV87wV4>. And if you enjoyed that video, you might also enjoy <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if5XbL2I1Ic>.

When I was growing up in New York City in the 1950s, you could hear Dr. Carlton Fredericks on the radio giving seemingly erudite advice about nutrition. He sounded very authoritative but his name wasn't actually Carlton Fredericks and his doctoral degree wasn't in medicine or really directly in nutrition.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Dr. Fredericks spoke on the radio with an educated accent that he definitely did not pick up in his native Brooklyn: [Click below for a sampling.]

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xG2c3sEjCg>

So... that observation suggests that speaking in patterns that differentiate you from the *hoi poloi* could be an advantage in certain segments of the labor market. Indeed, it might even become a quasi-necessity. I have noticed in seminars at UCLA, starting maybe a couple of years ago, that when asked questions, the presenters started their answers with "So..." And since we were referring to radio above, as it turned out, radio commentator Harry Shearer recently noted the same thing. Experts now begin their answers to questions with what is called by linguistic specialists the "initial so." So Shearer has started a segment of his "Le Show" program on the "So's of the Week": [Click below so you can practice and polish *your* so's.]

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10151664032996522>

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (which noticed the phenomenon about when I did), the "initial so" – while now so prominent in academia – may have begun with nerd-talk at Microsoft.<sup>4</sup> So, whatever the origins, budding academics should seriously consider joining the so'ing circle, if they already haven't do so. Otherwise, their responses to questions will likely be viewed as just so-so.

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<sup>3</sup> Some details are in his obituary: <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/31/obituaries/carlton-fredericks-76-host-of-radio-program-on-health.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2011/12/02/so-it-turns-out-that-everyones-starting-sentences-with-so/>