

Functional Interpretation of *Alright?* as a Lecture Question: a Multimodal Analysis

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the revelation of how crucial the multimodal analysis is in the functional interpretation of *Alright?* as a lecture question, because it is only thanks to the multimodal analysis that the functional interpretation of the question becomes complete and comprehensive. Moreover, we will attempt to answer the question whether *Alright?* is a true question or not.

Key words: *Alright?*, *functional manifestation*, *multimodal analysis*, *pause*, *gestures*, *facial expressions*.

Introduction

Alright? has functionally been interpreted as a comprehension check (Morell, 2004, Thompson, 1998, Fortanet-Go'mez, and Ruiz-Madrid, 2014). E. Schleeff considers it as *Progression checks*, *Modal question tags*, *Facilitative question tags* and *Common ground tags* (Schleeff 2009: 64):

Progression checks mark the end of the preceding idea or signal the importance of the preceding idea, as well as the possibility that the idea may be difficult to understand. Usually the lecturer continues talking after the tag question.

Modal question tags are aimed at getting either confirmation or more data as a response to the question. In this case the audience takes the turn.

Facilitative question tags are used to shift the turn to the audience as a matter of “*a positive interest in or solidarity with the addressee , and ... offer her or him a way into the discourse, signalling in effect, ok, your turn now*” (Cameron et al. 1988:82, quoted in Schleeff 2009:65).

Common ground tags are a means to check the perception of the idea though the turn may not be offered to the audience.

Meanwhile, some scholars who do not regard it as a true question at all, find it redundant to research its functional manifestations. Camiciottoli (2007), for instance, in her study on questions in 12 Business lectures in terms of non-verbal behavior, does not regard it as a conventional question: “*They are not true questions, but primarily manifestations of individual speaking habits as lecturers do not really engage with students or wait for their reaction*” (Camiciottoli 2008:1221, quoted in Fortanet-Go’mez, I. and Ruiz-Madrid, N.M^a, 2014:210). Moreover, “*lecturers continue to speak after “okay?” without pausing for audience response... This raises doubts about whether these items are actually comprehension checks or simply manifestation of the habits of individual lecturers that are systematically unaccompanied by gaze toward the audience, again calling into question their true role*” (Camiciottoli 2007:108).

In our case we will try to get a comparatively complete image of the function(s) of the question. This attempt will, to the greatest extent, be impossible without the “*multimodal analysis*” (Fortanet-Go’mez and Ruiz-Madrid 2014), otherwise we will either face misinterpretations, or ignore some of the functions the question acquires in different contexts.

The Role of Pause in the Functional Interpretation of the Question

In the present study *Alright?* with the pause of at least two seconds is considered as a conventional question that elicits feedback (the presence of pause has been marked with “+++” while its absence with “---“ plus the duration of the pause). Analyzing 70 lectures on Natural Sciences downloaded as a part of OpenCourseWare run by prominent universities (Oxford, MIT, Yale, University of Chicago, Saylor Academy, etc), we have come across 5 cases out of 431 applications of the question, where it is intended to elicit feedback in a form of a question, worry, request, confirmation, agreement, etc.

In the following example the lecturer pauses for two seconds after the question, checking whether there is any feedback in the form of a question, a request to explain it once more, or any concern that the students want to share:

“...So that I can do. 65:46 This also holds. 65:48 And formally, of course, S sub T is a random variable, 65:51 so it's a function from the sample space of the real line. 65:53 But this holds for every point on the sample space. Right? 65:56 So I can write down this equation 65:58 between random variables. 66:06 Here it's just the integral over dK . Right? 66:10 So that holds. 66:11 Now I'm going to take the expectation operator. 66:16 So take discounted expected value, OK?, of each side. 66:32 So in other words, what is my operator 's look like? 66:34 It looks like $Z(t, T)$, expected value of, given S_t . 66:41 **Alright?---** 2sec 66:45 OK, so this one is a discounted expected value. 66:48 That's the price. 66:55 So this becomes price of the derivative with payout 67:01 at maturity ...”

(Blythe 2013)

The following example presents another context, when *Alright?* is applied with a pause to signal that the audience is offered to take the turn if they wish:

“...And the reason I want you to do this, 46:45 is because I want to show you an expression where in some sense, 46:49 this is the term that is the summation for your expression. 46:52 If we just replace this, you can write this out 46:55 as i equals 0 through k , 1 plus 1 divided by 2 raised to i . **Alright?** 47:05 That is the symbolic form of this expression, 47:09 which came from here. **Alright?** 47:10 And then the argument was made that this 47:13 is a convergent series and is bounded by a constant. **Alright?---** 2sec 47: 18 That make sense? 47:20 Good”.

(Devadas 2011)

Conversely, our analysis has also revealed some cases when *Alright?* is not followed by a pause, but manifests a broad range of functions presented in the table below:

Verify the preceding idea	Focus attention	Create the illusion of involvement	Sound less overbearing	Signal what comes next	Fill in the silence
335	335	335	335	3	2
					Total 340

Let us analyze an example where the question *Alright?* performs several functions though it is not followed by a pause:

“To give you all the detail, 9:11 there’s two classes of bases that appear here. 9:15 One class is called the purines and they have two ring-like 9:19 structures. There are two of them that are 9:22 going to be important to us, one is adenine and the other is 9:25 guanine, shown here. Because saying adenine takes a 9:29 long time and saying guanine takes a long time we’re going to 9:33 simplify it by calling adenine (A) and guanine (G). Alright?+++9:36 The second class is the pyrimidines. And there’s three of 9:40 those that are important: uracil, thymine and cytosine 9:43 which we’re going to simplify by calling (U), 9:47 (T) and (C).”

(Saltzman 2008)

In this context *Alright?* is used to verify the preceding idea in order to eliminate any doubts about the truthfulness of the given information, to “*focus attention*” (Schleef 2009) on the preceding idea in order to mark its importance, to create the illusion of involvement in order to make the class student-oriented, and to sound less overbearing in order not to harass the audience for knowing less than the lecturer and for being in the role of the learner throughout the course. These functions usually come up together with no shade of *inferiority* or *dominance* (Jacobson 1960).

As for signaling what comes next, this functional manifestation indicates that the question may make reference not only to what comes before it but also to what follows it. In the latter case it is considered as a referent question with the logical flexibility of making reference. E.g.:

*“Now talking about 33:25 protein structure. There’s one other 33:26 thing I want to consider. **Alright?+++** 33:27 Collagen is an example of one class of 33:32 protein. I’ll give you some other 33:33 examples in a minute, that we call 33:35 fibrous proteins, fibrous in the sense 33:38 that they are literally fibers. OK? They 33:43 form a helical structure, and that 33:45 helical structure just goes on and on 33:47 and on, on and on, on. OK? It doesn’t stop. 33:51 it just keeps going on and on. Your hair 33:53 is a fibrous protein. OK?+++ It goes on and 33:58 on and on. In my case it doesn’t go on as 33:59 much as it goes on you, guys, but it keeps 34:00 going on and on and on and on. Right? OK? 34:03”.*

(Ahern 2013)

Filling in the silence is another function, when the question is used in order not to make the lecture boring or discontinued:

*“...So this observed the operator tau, the 28:55 hermitian operator tau, which we suspect 28:57 is connected to some observable, well, 28:59 will turn out to be connected some 29:00 observable in every case, is the thing. 29:02 What does it do?, what it does is it 29:05 measures the rate of change of your 29:06 states when you change the parameter 29:09 theta. So this is a generalization of... 29:16 where are we? This equation, this equation 29:20 here. Yeah. **Alright?+++** So this is a 29:23 concrete example of this... “*

(Binney 2011)

Functional Interpretation of *Alright?* According to Gestures/Facial Expressions and Context

Quite interestingly, we have also come across some contexts when there is no pause after the question, but the appropriate gestures/facial expressions or context enable us to interpret that its function is to elicit feedback. The most common gestures and facial expressions are the following: nodding the head, looking through the audience to see whether any hands or reactions have been missed or not, pulling out the hand, or keeping eye contact with the particular speaker or audience. As for the context, it may be “*Interaction phase*” (Young 1994), for instance. With the aforementioned functional interpretation the question *Alright?* is attested to have been applied 4 times in 70 lectures. E.g.:

“PROFESSOR: How about it, Nick? 80:25 AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE] 80:26 PROFESSOR: Exactly. 80:28 And you ought to be able to see it from where you are. Alright?+++ 80:32 Can you appreciate that they're not at the moment? 80:36 Alright? Now hang on. 80:41 Here comes mode number one. 80:44 This takes two hands to do it. 80:47 All right, you ready? 80:53 This is mode number one. 80:54 Again, it's a those numbers...”

(Gossard 2013)

In this context *Alright?* in bold is applied as a means to elicit feedback. That conclusion is arrived at due to the context of *Interaction phase* (Young 1994) and the eye contact the lecturer is maintaining with the audience.

One more example illustrating the importance of the context:

“Now let's take entirely different bone. Let's look at the femur. The distal end of the femur so you can just pick out a bone right away. You know that's femur. Right? That's the way we examine you. We give you a box of bones and call out one and you got to get it for us. Alright?+++ That's a femur. And what do we have that's unique on the femur are what are called condyles, condyles. Condyles are large

smooth surfaces, curved surfaces. So they're large smooth curved surfaces...

(Diamond 2005)

In this passage *Alright?* is applied with the aim of eliciting feedback in order to check whether the examining conditions are clear or not. Those conditions are incredibly vital to be understood, hence it is logically assumed that its comprehension has to be confirmed by the audience. Moreover, the lecturer is looking at the audience and maintaining eye contact with them.

Our analysis has also brought to the light some cases when *Alright?* is followed by pause but is not intended to elicit feedback. And it is thanks to the “*multimodal analysis*” (Fortanet-Go’mez, and Ruiz-Madrid 2014) that the functional manifestation is distinguished from the former ones: the question is accompanied with the corresponding facial expression/gestures or the context that prompts that the question is not intended to elicit feedback. Examples similar to this have been 11 in 70 lectures on Natural Sciences. In all the examples the question functions as a means to verify the preceding idea in order to eliminate any doubts about the correctness of the information, to focus attention on the preceding idea by marking its importance, to create the illusion of involvement so that the audience does not feel ignored, and to sound less overbearing to motivate the audience in the way that they do not feel less knowledgeable compared to the lecturer (as is the case of *Alright?* without pause which does not elicit feedback). As for the pause, it is made to fulfill an action in order to upgrade the quality of the lecture.

Below an example where a pause is used to draw the path the lecturer has been talking about, is presented.

“...It's worked through already. Let's see. I believe it's 27:10 worked through in the notes. Yes. 27:17 So if you need the help of the notes it's in there, but I 27:21 would urge you to work through it on your own, and it's the 27:26 following: let's start with the same path A. Alright?---7sec 27:49 So we've got our reversible adiabatic path.

Right?+++ 28:00 And now, try working through what happens if we close the 28:06 cycle in a different way, right?, like this...

(Bawendi, Nelson 2008)

In this example the question itself is applied to eliminate any doubts about the correctness of the information, to focus attention on the preceding idea and mark its importance. Simultaneously, there is the illusion that the audience is involved in the lecturing process through the seeming feedback provoked by the question. Moreover, the lecturer tries not to sound overbearing in order not to disappoint the students who might have the feeling of knowing less or nothing about the object compared to the lecturer. The question makes up the atmosphere as if they are asked for feedback and that feedback as an answer is necessary to the lecturer, etc.:

*“...That would say that any set of one horses the horses 45:26 are all the same color. 45:28 That's true. 45:29 I've got one horse. 45:29 It's the same color as itself. 45:32 So that's easy. 45:33 It's true since just one horse. 46:03 **Alright?---13 sec** What's the next step of the proof?+++ 46:08 What's the next thing I do?---2sec 46:10 Inductive step. 46:15 So I'm going to assume that pn is true to prove $pn--$ and show 46:28 pn plus 1 is true...”*

(Leighton 2010)

As can be seen, in this case a pause is used to tidy the board for the further explanation while *Alright?* has the same functional manifestation it had in the previous example.

Conclusion

To conclude, we may say that the most productive way to analyze the functional realization of *Alright?* in lectures comprehensively is to carry out a multimodal analysis. This approach helps to get more objective and realistic results in terms of how the question functions. Moreover, it also makes the functional interpretation of the question more substantiated and rigid.

Additionally, it is the multimodal analysis that points out the uniqueness of the question in the sense that it may come up as a true question to elicit feedback or as an unconventional one that still maintains the features of a true question due to its interrogative form but is still different in its functional realizations.

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***Alright*-ի գործառութային մեկնաբանությունը՝ իբրև հարց
դասախոսություններում. բազմապայման վերլուծություն**

Աշխատանքի բուն էությունն է՝ մատնանշել բազմապայման վերլուծության կարևորությունը *Alright?*-ի գործառութային վերլուծության ընթացքում: Այն օգնում է ձեռք բերել իրատեսական և օբյեկտիվ արդյունքներ՝ տալով ավելի հիմնավորված և սպառիչ պատասխան հարցի գործառութային վերլուծության վերաբերյալ: Բացի այդ, հենց բազմապայման վերլուծությունն է օժանդակում պատասխանելու այն հարցին, թե արդյոք *Alright?*-ը իրական հարց է: