Differential uses of *okay*, *right*, and *alright*, and their function in signaling perspective shift or maintenance in a map task

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A growing body of research has been devoted to the study of the functions of discourse markers and the important and multi-faceted work they do in various types of talk. Of the three markers that form the nucleus of the current study (*okay*, *alright*, and *right*), the marker *okay* in particular has received the greatest attention by researchers. Very few studies, however, have looked at how these markers might differ from each other in the ways that speakers use them or in how they are deployed by speakers to signal a shift in perspective in the context of route-giving talk.

In this article, we endeavor to bring together the disparate findings on the uses of these three discourse markers in an attempt to shed some light on these questions using data derived from a map task involving route-giving talk.

Route-giving talk provides a potentially rich source of data for the study of discourse markers because it involves two participants working collaboratively to achieve the successful outcome of finding a specific place on a map. Both parties come to the task with differential knowledge bases. The instruction-giver recipiently designs her utterances to take her greater knowledge base into account, and the instruction-follower, as an active participant in the process, provides information to the instruction-giver about how her instructions have been received. However, in this process, the instruction-follower also takes a stance in relation to the prior turn as revealed through the choice of response token that she uses (Gardner 2001). The collaborative and locally determined next utterance — whether it be a next instruction or a reworking of a prior instruction or a clarification check (among other possibilities) — may thus involve a topic shift, an activity shift, or a phase shift.

The nature of the map task in our corpus also requires that the speakers suspend the route-giving activity in order to establish what landmarks they have in common and/or their position on the map. This involves both a shift in topic focus and a shift in perspective.

Perspective shift refers to the strategies that speakers use in describing spatial environments (Filipi and Wales in prep.; Taylor and Tversky 1996).
They may choose a dynamic route perspective where the vantage point is expressed from either within the map world or from above. Alternatively, they may choose a survey perspective where the vantage point adopted is that of a bird’s eye view, but the landmarks are the focus of the description. These are described in relation to each other in terms of left or right or using the cardinal terms. Finally, speakers may use a gaze perspective where the vantage point is fixed and external. Importantly, it has been shown that speakers shift their perspective as they go about describing a route (Filipi and Wales in prep.; Taylor and Tversky 1996) and that they may use a range of devices to signal such shifts (Filipi and Wales in prep.). One of these devices is the use of discourse markers. Task based route-giving talk thus offers the analyst the opportunity to investigate four possible shifts: shifts in topic, phase, and activity (all of which have been described in other forms of talk, for example, by Rendle-Short 1999 and Turner 1999), and shifts in spatial perspective.

From a structural point of view, discourse markers have also been shown to provide links between utterances and between larger segments of talk (Condon 1986, Schiffrin 1987, Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). As we shall see shortly, discourse markers are deployed in just such structural places in the samples of talk we analyze in this study. Our corpus should thus provide ample opportunity to study how the three markers are deployed by the speakers, at which junctures in the talk they occur, and how they are implicated in signaling shifts in topic focus, activity, spatial perspective, and phases in the talk. In investigating these questions, we draw on previous work using Conversation Analysis, which distinguishes the markers based on their position in a sequential environment and their prosodic features.

Previous research

The tokens we are concerned with in this study have been variously referred to as response tokens (Gardner 2001), back-channel utterances (Duncan and Fiske 1977), micro-markers (Chaudron and Richards 1986), bracket markers (Goffman 1981), discourse markers (Schiffrin 1987), and boundary exchange tokens (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). In this article, we refer to them as discourse markers because as our analysis shows they function in a number of ways that may be associated primarily with the work of the current speaker or primarily with the work of the current listener. From this perspective, some of the other terms that have been used are more limiting because they may emphasize a specific set of functions. For example, a term like ‘response token’ is associated with the listener’s stance.
As features of discourse, these tokens have been difficult to define. Schiffrin (1987) characterizes *okay* as having both pragmatic and semantic meaning, as well as playing a part in assisting in the achievement of cohesion at a textual level. In opposition to this view, Chaudron and Richards (1987) prefer to describe *okay* as carrying no semantic meaning. Conversation Analysis (CA), with its focus on talk as a co-constructed social phenomenon, has provided yet another level of characterization. Here, the tradition has been to describe the position, prosodic shape, and interactive functions of the markers. It is to this research tradition that we address ourselves in this article. We begin by looking at *okay*, the marker that has received by far the greatest attention.

*Okay* has been characterized by Gardner (2001) as a ‘change of activity’ response token because of its deployment in topic, phase, and activity shift in talk in interaction. It is precisely because of this work that *okay* has been found to occur at boundaries such as openings and closings, as well as phase boundaries in the middle sections of various types of talk.

At the openings, it has been described by Schegloff (1986) as functioning to mark the commencement of the first topic of a telephone call after the initial opening itself. This function has also been described in institutional forms of talk by Rendle-Short (1999) in monologic seminar talk and by Beach (1990) in focus group meetings. In pre-closing environments, which occur just prior to the actual conclusion of a telephone conversation, its deployment heralds a willingness or readiness on the part of the speaker to move into closure of the interaction (Button 1990, Schegloff and Sacks 1973).

*Okay* has also been studied in institutional talk, for example, the classroom (Hatch 1992, Sinclair and Coulthard 1975), seminar talk (Rendle-Short 1999), focus group meetings (Beach 1990), and service-counter talk (Merritt 1984). These forms of talk involve clear phases or segments where *okay* works as a marker of closure, while at the same time projecting the next phase. Both Beach (1993) and Rendle-Short (1999) emphasize this dual role. Rendle-Short (1999) maintains further that it is an important feature in talk that has an instructional flavor because of its capacity to link prior talk with next. Her micro-analysis of *okay* at the boundaries within seminar talk shows convincingly how this dual function of *okay* works and reveals the essential prosodic and design features associated with either marking closure or marking topic shift.

Finally, because of the principal association of *okay* as marking movement at transitional junctures in the talk to next phase, activity, or topic, its presence in the middle sections of talk has also been investigated (see Rendle-Short 1999) and found to be working in similar ways to close and/or initiate and/or resume talk after understanding checks and bracketing of definitions or asides that interrupt the main talk.
Alright similarly works to mark a shift in topic, activity, or phase (Turner 1999). Investigations of the comparative functions of alright and okay by Turner (1999) suggest that there are some differences in the work they do. Basing her analysis on a corpus of naturally occurring telephone calls, she showed how each marker was differentially associated with various aspects of topic shift. She found that alright was deployed to mark a shift in topic at the macro level resulting in a major topic shift, while okay was associated with shifts to the sub-topics or to the topic focus. She also found a greater occurrence of alright in actual telephone closings than okay. This counters Beach’s (1993) assertion that alright and okay are functionally equivalent in this environment.

A search of the literature reveals that the response token right has attracted very little research interest. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) report on its deployment at the boundaries of a lesson that marks the end of one stage and the beginning of the next. They note further that okay and alright also occupy this position. However, there is no attempt to explain whether there is any functional difference between them as to their use. Stenström (1987) similarly uses an exchange structure model to explain the distribution and function of right, alright, right o, that’s right, that’s alright, and it’s alright in British English. She found that the use of right indicated a display of less involvement than alright in its use as a response token and follow-up move. Likewise, differences emerged in the degree of connection to a preceding topic and to the degree of closure in its deployment as boundary marker. She concludes that right is a more neutral marker than the others in the set.

Gardner’s (2001) investigation of the interactional work of right suggests that it is used in distinct ways in American, Australian, and British English. In the former, it works as an agreement token, while in British and Australian English, it is used as a ‘connector’ where it connects an idea from one unit of talk to another from either an immediately preceding turn or across a stretch of talk. The speaker who utters right is thus displaying that she or he recognizes the activity as being a linked set of multiple turns. Such activities are found in types of talk such as instruction-giving, reporting, and explaining (Gardner, in prep.). As far as we have been able to ascertain, there have been no further substantial reports on the occurrence of right in other sequential positions or on its association with topic shift or closure.

It is evident from the above that very little work has been done on the investigation of the differential uses of these three markers. This is particularly true for task-based talk involving a differential knowledge base as it relates to route-finding.
With respect to the differential uses of *alright* and *okay* by speakers, it transpires that they are very much implicated in signaling shifts in major topic or topic focus. In our corpus, topic shift at the macro level is confined to task beginnings and endings. During the task itself, the main shifts occur as a result of a shift in spatial perspective. These can occur between the survey perspective and one of the two route perspectives, between the two route perspectives, or from or to the gaze perspective (Filipi and Wales in prep.). Invariably, they also involve a shift in topic focus from route-giving talk to talk about the task itself or to talk that establishes what landmarks the participants have in common. However, it is possible to have a shift in perspective without a corresponding shift in topic focus. This occurs, for example, in reformulations where the perspective can shift from one of the two route perspectives to the other (Filipi and Wales in prep.). Only very rarely is there a major topic shift. When such a shift occurs, it is treated as a digression or interruption. Structurally (in conversational terms), it is contained in a side-sequence, which Jefferson (1972) defines as a sequence in talk that has nothing to do with the topic or activity of the on-going sequence.

It is to the shifts in spatial perspective that we address ourselves in this article. Specifically, our research sets out to investigate how speakers deploy the markers *okay, right, and alright* to signal perspective shift and perspective maintenance. In investigating this question, we hope to also uncover any differences among the three markers with respect to the interactional work that they are deployed to do, particularly as they might relate to instruction-based talk.

**Details of the data and methodology**

The corpus for this study was derived from the map task section of the Australian National Database of Spoken Language (ANDOSL) (Millar et al. 1994). This corpus closely follows the Human Communication Research Centre (HCRC) Map Task (Anderson et al. 1991) in design. The map task itself was originally designed by Brown, Anderson, Shillock, and Yule (1984) for use in pedagogic settings, but it has subsequently become a valued source of constrained but spontaneous discourse data.

Eight interactions produced by four dyads form the database. The dyads were mixed gender. The participants in two of the dyads were known to each other, while the remaining four participants had not previously met. All were native speakers of (Australian) English. The task required speakers to work in pairs with a map in front of them that the other could
not see, and to assume the roles of the instruction-giver (IG) or the instruction-follower (IF). The IG’s map had a path marked on it. The IF had a similar map without a path. In addition to the presence or absence of a path, there were also some differences between the maps with respect to the position, existence, and names of landmarks. The IG’s role was to instruct the IF to draw the path onto her or his own map. Each pair performed the task twice using a different map each time, and they swapped roles.

The eight interactions were transcribed using CA transcription conventions, first developed by Jefferson (1984).

Analysis and discussion

In our corpus, okay, alright, and right were deployed as response tokens, confirmation requests, understanding checks and agreement eliciting tokens, third turn acknowledgement tokens, markers of closure and markers of next phase, topic, topic focus, activity, and spatial perspective. As analysis shows, there appeared to be differences with respect to the degree to which each of the markers was associated with each of these functions. In frequency terms alone, as can be observed in Table 1, it is evident that the use of right was more restricted in its deployment by the speakers. Its occurrence as a response token outweighed other functions, while its use to mark next or closure was rare. Alright too appeared to be more restricted, overwhelmingly occurring as a response token. However, after taking into account its deployment as a response token, it was more evenly distributed in all the other functions. In contrast, the use of okay extended to a wider range of functions.

Analysis also shows that there are differences in the precise details of the interactional environments in which the markers were found, as well as between and within the dyads with respect to frequency and choice of marker. These are alluded to when relevant to our research purpose.

We begin by examining these markers in their function as response tokens.

Table 1.  Total numbers of functions for each of the discourse markers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function Marker</th>
<th>Response Token</th>
<th>Third Turn Ack. Token</th>
<th>Tag-pos. (Checks/ Agreement Eliciting)</th>
<th>Marker of Closure</th>
<th>Marker of Next</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Okay</td>
<td>56 (28%)</td>
<td>60 (30%)</td>
<td>17 (9%)</td>
<td>39 (20%)</td>
<td>26 (13%)</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alright</td>
<td>39 (44%)</td>
<td>13 (15%)</td>
<td>14 (16%)</td>
<td>11 (12.5%)</td>
<td>11 (12.5%)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>55 (57%)</td>
<td>18 (18.5%)</td>
<td>21 (21.5%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: Ack. = Acknowledgement; Tag-pos. = tag-positioned.
Okay, alright, and right as response tokens

We define response tokens as receipts of a prior utterance. They therefore occur in second turn position. Further analysis of these markers in our data reveals that the work they do varies. Table 2 sets out their different functions and their relative frequencies in performing each of the functions.

A precursory glance at the table establishes that while the main function of okay and alright is to acknowledge a prior turn, right more frequently functions as a continuer or ‘go ahead’. Interestingly, it emerges that there are only four occurrences of okay as continuer and no instances of alright to do this work. Occurrences of the other functions are low for all three markers. However, alright seems to be more restricted in its uses relative to the other two markers.

Beyond differences in frequencies, the analysis of the data yields some interesting findings with respect to the distinctions between the functions and the interactional environments in which they occur.

In the discussion to follow, our major concern is to describe the markers in their work as acknowledgement tokens and continuers. The other categories presented in the table receive less attention because of their relatively low occurrence.

Next turn acknowledgement and continuer functions When used as receipt tokens, the work of the markers is to acknowledge the prior turn and as such offer a display to the speaker that there is no problem with the current speaker’s understanding of the prior utterance. In this sense, they are retrospective (Gardner 2001), and they function to offer some kind of closure. However, close analysis of the markers in this position has revealed an important difference in the interactional environment in which they occur. In acknowledging a prior turn, the markers can be used as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marker</th>
<th>Ack. Token</th>
<th>Continuer</th>
<th>Ans./Con-firming Response</th>
<th>News Receipt Token</th>
<th>Agreement Token</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Okay</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alright</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: Ack. = acknowledgement; Ans. = answer.
responses in an environment where the flow of instruction-giving or path description is momentarily interrupted. Here, we find that the path description is suspended as the IF and IG take time out to deal with talk about landmarks, to establish some common understandings about their map differences, or to give more precise instructions, all of which can lead to trouble if they are not sorted out.

This environment then is typically one of repair, either potential or actual. The discourse marker produced in this position has a terminal intonation. Example 1 illustrates.

Example 1

1IG: so when you [turn south] southwest,
2IF: [huh huh]
3  yeah=
4IG: =a [little bit,]
5IF: [(cough)]
6IG: °or when I say a little bit I suppose a few centimetres (.). down°,
→7IF: °awright.°=
9IG: =um:: and then (0.2) turn (.). um:: west. (0.8) directly=

In this sequence, we note a temporary interruption to the flow of the route instruction as the IG offers an increment to her talk in line 6. This is a reworking of her description to make the reference to distance more precise, a strategy that is used by the IG to avoid possible later repair (Filipi and Wales in prep.). The IF’s acknowledging alright in line 7 is produced in response to this reworking and contrasts with the continuer yeah in line 3. It has the effect of acknowledging the bracketed extension, thereby closing it. And indeed after this, the IG takes up the route talk again by offering the next instruction. It is because of this association with a shift that Gardner (2001) describes okay and alright when used in this way as ‘change of activity’ tokens.

Conversely, in acknowledging a prior turn, the markers right and to a far lesser extent okay are used in sequences of instruction-giving or path description where there is no such interruption to the flow of talk.

Example 2

1IG: . . . you (0.5) uh bring the trail up a little bit to the north west,
→2IF: right=
   (0.7)
4IG: and head it west a little bit. hh

Here, we note that the IF’s right, uttered with a slightly rising intonation in line 2, as denoted by the Spanish question mark, is adjacently placed
with respect to the IG’s turn in line 1 and has no impact on the flow of the talk. It functions to accept the prior instruction and to signal to the IG that there is no problem with it. Subsequently, the IG continues with her instruction in the next turn in line 4 which is prefaced by and. Given its position and its intonational contour, it behaves very much like the continuer mm hm (Gardner 2001). We note further that Gardner’s (2001, in prep.) claim that right works as a connecting token is supported by our data. Here, it connects the instructions in the route-giving task creating a sense of linked stages, which are an important feature of instructional talk.

Right as a response token was thus the marker that was most clearly associated with instruction-giving that was unproblematic. When it was used in this way, it appeared as the only utterance in its turn. However, it too was deployed in environments where the route talk was suspended, in which case it overwhelmingly co-occurred with okay or was accompanied by further talk. Example 3 illustrates.

Example 3
1IF: yes I’ve just gone over the top of the millstream and heading down
2 south again.=
3IG: =°okay.° (0.2) .hh well it sweeps towards the centre of the page,
4 (0.5)
5IF: right¿=
6IG: =and then it goes over the top of the millionaire’s castle,
7IF: yeah,
8IG: but not as far- not as- not as close as the s- as the desert dunes
→9IF: right okay.=
10IG: =°okay¿°

Here, the markers appear as a doublet in line 9 following a repaired increment by the IG to her turn in line 8. They function to both acknowledge and close the IG’s self-repair. As well as co-occurring with right, okay also conjoined with alright. In all four instances of its use as a continuer, okay appeared alone.

Unlike right and okay, alright occurred only as a ‘change of activity’ acknowledgement token. However, in contrast with the other two markers, it tended to appear as the only utterance in its turn when used in this way. We can tentatively conclude from this that in its deployment as an acknowledgement token alright was more strongly associated with sequences that suspended the route-giving talk, whereas this was true for right only when it appeared in combination with another marker. We reserve judgment about the differences in the work these markers were deployed to do until further discussion of other uses.
With respect to perspective shift, when the markers were used as continuers, there were no examples of shift involving okay and only four involving right, three of which occurred in overlap. The switches in two cases were from perspective-free talk to a route perspective so that the talk moved from talk about landmarks to path description. The other two involved a switch within the route perspective, which is the perspective that is associated with the activity of following or drawing the path onto the map. Continuers were thus strongly implicated in perspective maintenance rather than shift. Conversely, perspective shift did occur when the markers functioned as ‘change of activity’ acknowledgement tokens. In fact, they occurred in over half of the cases. However, only eleven involved a shift in spatial perspective. The remainder involved a shift from or to perspective-free talk, which was invariably about landmarks or occurred at the openings and closings of the task.

Answer and response functions Response tokens were also produced in answer to a preceding question and as a response to a request for confirmation or suggested route to follow in an immediately preceding turn.

Example 4
1IG: well you should be between the loose rubble and the rolling stone creek;
2IF: okay yep I am.

Example 5
1IG: yeah. (1.3) that’s- that is as a point of looking at the consumer trade affair
2 right?
3IF: [okay.] yeah.=

Recursively in these environments, the markers were accompanied by the response token yes or one of its variants. Although the numbers are too small to make any firm conclusions, shift occurred in just over half of the cases.

Responding to a prior turn as receipt of information  Okay, alright, and right were also used by a speaker to show comprehension or to mark a change of state with respect to receipt of information.

Example 6
1IF: . . . we’re going right now we’re going back across the page in the opposite
Differential uses of okay, right, and alright, and their function

2 direction [undernea-]
3IG: [no we’re not] we’re heading due n- south.
→4IF: oh awright [okay.]

In all cases of their occurrence in the category, the news marker or change of state token oh (Heritage 1984) immediately preceded them. In five cases, the markers co-occurred forming a doublet as in the example above, where the oh awright receipts the information and the okay closes the sequence. No shifts were recorded for this category.

Agreement functions The following example occurs right at the beginning of the task where the IG is proposing a way of proceeding with the task.

Example 7
1IG: . . .we can do it that way.=
2IF: =right, ye[p. o]okay.

The IG’s use of the subject pronoun in the first person plural suggests that he is soliciting the IF’s agreement, which she proffers in the next turn. We note her use of right and of yep in her response. Such co-occurrences were a common feature of the markers when deployed as agreement tokens.

Shifts occurred in all instances. They mainly involved a shift from or to perspective-free talk where the talk was about procedure or landmarks, with only four cases of a shift in spatial perspective.

In sum, of all the response tokens identified, right in its function as continuier was strongly associated with perspective maintenance. No such association could be made for alright and okay when used as acknowledgement tokens. Differences in how the markers were used also emerged. Right was overwhelmingly deployed as a continuier causing no disruption to the flow of instruction-giving, and providing a staged series of instructions, while alright was deployed as an acknowledgement token only in sequences where there had been an interruption to the flow. Okay was principally deployed as an acknowledgement token.

Okay, alright, and right as third turn acknowledgements

The markers in this position were also deployed as acknowledgement tokens. What distinguishes them from the response tokens just discussed is that they occur in third turn position and not in second. They are part of the adjacency pair structure. The work they accomplish in this position is that of acknowledging the answer thereby closing the question and answer
sequence. Intonationally, they display a terminal contour and are either uttered more softly or faster than the surrounding talk.

Two distinct designs have been identified. In the first, which is principally a feature of the IG’s talk, the route description or instructions are suspended as talk about the existence of a particular landmark and its position is taken up. Structurally, this talk is contained in insertion or pre-sequences (described in Filipi and Wales, in prep). The following fragment illustrates.

Example 8
1IG: and when you get to the top go:: (0.5) east but on a slight down angle,
2 [not]
3IF: [yeah]
3IG: too much,=
4IF: =okay.
5 (0.6)
6IG: ah for about an inch or so,
7IF: yeah,
8 (0.5)
→9IG: have you got some spruce trees [over on the right] hand corner?
→10IF: [yes I have. ]
11 (0.5)
→12IG: >tsk okay.< (0.8) UM::: once you’ve gone across the top
13 about- make it about an inch and a half,

The route instructions are suspended by the question/answer and acknowledgement (henceforth Q/A/Ack) sequence at lines 9 to 11 to be taken up again after the closing okay and pause in line 12. In addition to the slight shift in topic focus (from instructing to talking about landmarks), we note a shift in perspective from route to survey. This was a recurring feature of this first design.

The second design is a feature of the IF’s talk. This routinely takes the form of an interruption to the route description as the IF produces a clarification check or confirmation request.

“Example 9
1IG: and then you do a sweep up to the mill stream [now g-]
→2IF: [n]ow hang on are these um open gravestones (0.3) are they um
→3 about the same level as the mine or are they [below-]
→4IG: [yes they] are. and
they’re below the mill stream.
5IF: >they’re belo- yeah fine okay. < so I just come directly (0.6) ah:: (. )
6 across to the right.
7IG: yep. (0.3) and [then go up]
In this example, the Q/A/Ack sequence is similarly about a landmark, specifically about its precise location. As in the previous example, we observe a perspective shift from route to survey and then back to route again on resumption of the path description. However, these clarification checks and confirmation requests are not necessarily associated with perspective shift in the same way that the IG’s initiated Q/A sequences are. The IF’s question can be about the direction of her or his movement along a path itself as in the following fragment.

Example 10

1IG: so you head east:. (0.5) and you go AROUND millstream (0.5) [so it’s like-]
→2IF: [go around millstre][am?]
3IG: [y]eah like um over the top of millstream and back down 4 again.=
→5IF: =right,=
6IG: =°okay?
7IF: right°=
→8IG: =so you head (1.0) ah:: (. ) south to-

In this sequence, perspective is maintained.

The work of the third turn acknowledgement marker was predominantly accomplished through okay, particularly when it was the IG who initiated the Q/A sequence and the topic was one of establishing common landmarks and their position. However, there were differences between and within the dyads, both to the extent to which these markers were a feature of their talk and the marker used to accomplish the work in this position. We note that two participants did not use okay at all. One used right and the other alright. However, these were used only minimally. Of the four participants (all male) who used all three markers or two of the three markers, the use of okay dominated while alright and right appeared to be used in very specific circumstances. For example, alright appeared to be used in a third turn acknowledgement position at the macro-structurally important places of task beginning and task conclusion. The following fragment occurred at the beginning of the task.

Example 11

1IG: good afternoon Jane and welcome to tour two. (0.5) we are 2 starting in the northwestern corner of the page.= 3IF: =with [the cross robbie?]
4IG: [top left ] with the cross yeah correct. (0.5) okay:::. (0.2)
5 >now< if you were to be- come slightly (0.4) um::: (0.4) tsk south 6 east of that cross [very s]lowly 7IF: [yeah]
→8IG: southeast (0.3) do you come to a sheer cliff or sheer-cliff? =
→10IF: =yes.=
→11IG: >awright.< well bring your line from the cross …

In this fragment, *alright* is being used to mark closure after which the very first reference to the line on the map is made as the task of giving instructions begins.

*Right* was found to be used in an IF initiated repair sequence. Specifically, the IF initiates the sequence with a clarification or confirmation request, which leads to a reformulation by the IG in the next turn. Example 10 above illustrates this quite nicely. We note that the IF’s initiating question in lines 2 and 3, a partial repeat of the IG’s instruction in line 1, prompts the IG to rework her turn in line 4. This is accepted by the IF who produces an acknowledging *right*, which functions to close this activity and sequence. Gardner (in prep.: 8) characterizes the work of this *right* as one of ‘reconfirming the basic correctness’ of what has been said.

Closer examination of a greater number of examples needs to be conducted to be able to arrive at a better understanding of what is at play here with respect to the differential work of the three markers. It may be, for example, that the markers are differentially associated with particular types of repair initiations (illustrated by fragments 9 and 10) or with yes/no Q/A adjacency pairs. However, our analysis does lead us to confidently conclude that *okay* is the marker that was more pervasively found to be used as a third turn acknowledgement token and further, that of the two designs reported, it is the first, associated with the work of the IG, where shifts in perspective recurrently occurred.

*Tag-positioned okay, alright, and right*

These tag-positioned markers were deployed in three environments: repair, at the end of a series of instructions for drawing or following the path on the map, and at boundaries or phases in the talk. They were mainly a feature of the IG’s talk, although they also appeared in the IF’s talk for dyad 2 where they were restricted to repair environments. They were deployed as understanding checks, as confirmation requests, and to elicit agreement. Example 12 provides an example of the deployment of the markers in a repair environment.

Example 12 (repair)
→11IF: no but I’m not at the tepee. I’m at millionaire’s castle now right?
2 like so I’ve gone past there like- like I’ve got those- those last um
3 directions=
4IG: =yeah?=
→5IF: =right! now I went southwest to millionaire’s castle,
6IG: yeah [but you should]
7IF: [and I’ve do-]
8IG: be at the top of millionaire’s castle not underneath it. not on the
9 bottom of the diagram.=
10IF: =oh right okay.=
→11IG: =okay¿=
12IF: =awright. (0.4) okay [so I should be-]
13IG: [so you’re at the top] of it.=
14IF: =awright.

In the above fragment, we have three examples of a tag-positioned
marker, each produced with a rising intonation. Two are produced by the
IF (lines 1 and 4) and one by the IG in line 10. We note that the marker
in the IF’s turns is followed by (same speaker) further talk—a recurring
feature when it is the IF who produces it in a repair environment. When the
IG produces the marker in a repair environment, it is normally followed in
the next turn by the IF with a response token, either immediately as in line
11 or after a gap.

Example 13 provides a typical example of the characteristics of the
marker that is produced at the end of a series of instructions by the IG.
Here, it appears to be requesting a confirming move on behalf of the IF.

Example 13 (after instructions)
1IG: >okay. when you get to that< point stop and take a sharp turn to
2 the east so you’re coming towards the right-hand side of ya page.
3 (0.3) and just do a big loop right around the consumer trade fair.
4 en- entirely encase the (0.4) consumer trade fair with a loop that
5 goes to the east (0.4) round the- round the eastern side in a big
6 loop and then underneath the words “consumer trade
7 fair” just come underneath that, (0.2) okay¿
8 (0.5)
9IF: [*yeah,°]
10IG: [and then] go due slightly north of west. . . .

We note first that it is uttered with a rising intonation. Second, it typi-
cally occurs at the end of a long series of instructions by the IG with a
pause usually preceding its production. This is probably as a result of the
IF being given time by the IG to find the place on her or his map to which
she or he has made reference. A third feature is an IF confirming move in
the next turn, although this does not always take place, which suggests that
perhaps the physical actions of the IF in drawing the line on the map is
enough of an indication to the IG that the description or instruction has been understood and accepted. In other words, a verbal response by the IG is not pursued.

The next example is of the markers working to elicit agreement. These examples usually occurred at the beginning of the task (as in the fragment that follows) or at the end of a phase in the route description.

Example 14

1IG: so we’ll start off on a north western top corner
2
(1.2)
3
→
4IF: =yeah.

All three markers appeared as confirming or understanding checks or as agreement eliciting devices, and while there were marked differences between the dyads, we can draw some tentative conclusions about their different uses. First, with respect to the differences between the dyads, we offer the following observations. Dyad 4 did not use the markers for this function and there were only three instances of their occurrence for dyad 1; all three involved okay and were deployed to elicit agreement. In dyad 3, only the male IG produced understanding checks while both participants of dyad 2 produced them in their roles as IG. Interestingly, the male participant of dyad 2 was the only one in the corpus to produce them in his role as IF, suggesting that the deployment of the marker was mainly a function of the IG’s talk.

Second, there were differences in the work of the markers or at least greater degrees of association with particular kinds of interactive function. For example, okay appeared as an understanding check after some kind of repair work, but mainly after an IG self-repair. There were only two instances in which okay was used in non-repair instruction-giving environments.

In dyad 2, both speakers used okay and right in their roles as IG. Close analysis, however, reveals that they were used differentially. For the male IG, who used okay only twice and on both occasions to elicit agreement, right was deployed after repair in much the same way as for okay reported above. The female IG used right as a check after a long period of silence following an instruction or in redoing a set of instructions after an initiation of repair by the IF, as in example 15.

Example 15

→1IF: =we- I’ll- well I’ll- I’ll tell you where I am right- I’ve got
2 everything below me uh now right- I’m at millionaire’s castle
3 awright- I’m going round and round (in) circles around millionaire’s castle,
Here, we have *right* working to acknowledge a repeat of the instructions. It works in a similar way to the *right* described by Gardner (in prep.) as acknowledging a reiteration. We note the contrast between the IF’s *right* (lines 1 and 2) and the IG’s *right* (lines 10 and 13), all of which are deployed to check understanding (as in *Are you with me?*) within the context of a set of connected instructions. But whereas the IF’s markers are neither preceded nor followed by a pause, consistent with the reporting style, the IG’s are. Indeed, the pauses are decidedly long in conversational terms and provide the IF with the necessary time to draw or find the path on the map and confirm the same. This is particularly important because this is a second attempt at getting the instructions right.

*Alright* was used in addition to *okay* as a confirmation request and understanding check by the two male IGs in dyads 2 and 3. In contrast to their use of *okay*, *alright* was deployed after ‘other correction’ and after a new instruction, where it functioned to elicit some kind of confirmation from the IF. Example 16 illustrates the latter usage.

Example 16

1IG: oh okay. (0.3) and then start turning round in a wide loop. (0.4)

→2 a- at a level equal to the bottom of the whispering pine. (0.5) awright?

3IF: and head east ?

What emerges from this analysis is that there were individual preferences in the use of these markers, with some participants using one marker only, while others used two or all three. What is important for our analysis is that when speakers did use more than one marker for the same function,
there were differences in the environments with which they were most closely associated, although in some cases alright and okay seemed to be used interchangeably as understanding checks at the end of a long instruction. A wider sample needs to be examined to tease out these differences before any strong claims can be made and to more closely examine the cases in which the markers seemed to be functionally equivalent.

Finally, with respect to perspective shift, no clear association emerged when the markers were deployed in repair environments or at the end of a series of instructions. The next utterance after an understanding check in both of these environments could be an elaboration, a reformulation, or some kind of clarification, all of which could involve a change in perspective but not necessarily so. However, the association with perspective shift was much greater when the markers were deployed to elicit agreement at boundaries.

Okay, alright, and right as markers of closure and as markers of next.

Consistent with findings of other investigations of okay, alright, and right (for example, Rendle-Short 1999, Stenström 1987, and Turner 1999), we similarly found that speakers deployed them both as markers of closure and markers of next activity, phase, sub-topic, and perspective shift, although in our data right was far less implicated in this work. Beach (1993), Rendle-Short (1999) (for okay), and Stenström (1987) (for right and alright) note the dual function of these markers when they occur at boundaries. Rendle-Short (1999) takes the analysis further by differentiating the emphasis of the work of okay at the boundary in talk through its prosodic features and whether it is preceded or followed by a pause. Although there were instances in our data in which we were able to make such distinctions, this was not always possible. Our analysis was therefore guided by the prosodic features as well as judgments about the extent to which an utterance was ‘forward looking’ (associated with next) or ‘backward looking’ (associated with closure). Here, we borrow Stenström’s (1987) terminology in her discussion of the differences between right and alright. Considerations as to who produced these tokens was a further feature that enabled us to categorize the markers as either performing closure or next. When deployed as a next marking token, it was overwhelmingly produced by the IG because it was associated with providing a description or instruction about the path. This was not the case when the markers were deployed as markers of closure because they could be, and indeed were, used by the speakers to close repair sequences.
Having clarified how we categorized these markers and having noted their dual function in both closing and projecting next, we are now in a position to proceed with our discussion. We begin with an analysis of the markers when they are more closely associated with closure.

**Closing function** In our data, *okay* was the marker that was deployed by the speakers at the task opening. Two designs were identified. Speakers either used *okay* to project movement into the beginning of the task (as in examples 18 and 22 to be discussed shortly), or they initiated the opening through a turn aimed at eliciting an agreement about the starting point on the map. This is nicely illustrated in the next fragment, example 18.

Example 18

1IG:  okay. (0.7) well, (03) if you can imagine (0.7) there’s like a map.
2 north would be up. (0.9) to the right would be east, (0.3) we can do
3 it that way.=
→4IF:  =right, [yep. o]okay.

Here, *right* functions as an agreement token alongside *yep*, while *okay* closes the response turn. After this, the description begins. *Okay* thus provides closure of the preliminary talk about how to proceed. The only interaction in which *okay* did not play a role in the opening, either as a marker of closure or next, was characterized by trouble right from the beginning.

As noted in our review of previous research, another macro-structurally important place for these markers to occur is in pre-closings in telephone conversations (Beach 1993, Button 1990, 1987, Sacks and Schegloff 1973, Turner 1999). In this environment, they suggest a readiness to bring the conversation to an end. In our data, they similarly featured at the end of the task as the next example shows.

Example 19

→1IG:  [yep.] okay I think we’ve finished.
→2IF:  okSay. (.) awright, bewdy. (0.5) that was- took us a while to get
3 there [but finally got there.]

In this fragment, the participants have reached the end of the task, although not the end of the conversation. We note that both participants indicate a readiness to move into the closing phase of the task as indicated by each of them producing the markers. Indeed, the IF’s doublet *okay* (.*) *alright* followed by an assessment is strongly indicative of the concluding stage of the activity.
In our data, both *alright* and *okay* were found in the closing stage of the task. Turner (1999) suggests that *alright* is more strongly associated with closure at the macro-level, activity, or main topic than *okay*. Example 19 above provides evidence for this claim with the doublet in line 2. The *okay* that appears as the first marker seems to be acting to acknowledge the IG’s prior utterance, while the work of the second placed *alright* appears to be providing macro-level closure.

*Okay* and *alright* also occurred in the middle of a piece of talk where they functioned as markers of closure projecting the next phase or topic in the talk. This has been reported, for example, by Rendle-Short (1999) for *okay* only and by Turner (1999) for *alright* and *okay*. The next fragment is offered as an example.

Example 20

1IF: [oh I ca- I can im]agine where they might be. so they’re just left of
2    (0.3) [puddle cove.]
3IG: [left of] puddle co[ve. ye]ah.
4IF: [°yeah°.]
→5IG: °okay. ° (1.0) um:: (. ) right, (0.5) okay. (. ) so we’ve just crossed . . .

The talk in this sequence has suspended the route-giving instructions as the IG and IF take time out to talk about the position of a landmark that emerges as one of the differences between the two maps. The *okay* in turn-initial position in line 5 marks closure of the sequence as the talk shifts back to the main topic of route description. It is uttered softly with a falling intonation, prosodic features that are consistent with talk in topic attrition environments (Gardner 2001), and is followed by a one-second pause. After this pause, we note further evidence of a sub-topic shift with the *um right*, another pause and then a second *okay* followed by *so* and further talk. This is uttered more loudly, indicating a return to the main activity. In fact, this second *okay* co-occurring with *so* provides not only for a return to the activity, but also for a return to the same place in the activity prior to the suspension. Here, we have two examples of what on the surface appear to be the same marker. Yet, they are deployed to achieve different ends. The first closes the sequence, while the second one is associated with a return to the route-giving activity and therefore more strongly projects forward movement.

One final recurring function of the marker working to provide closure is associated with sequences where some kind of repair work has occurred.

Example 21

1IG: =°o:Kay. ° (0.3) well it sweeps towards the centre of the page,
2     (0.5)
Differential uses of *okay*, *right*, and *alright*, and their function

In this fragment, which has already been discussed as Example 3 above, we note the use of the first *right* (line 3) and *yeah* (line 5) as response tokens to the IG’s installments in the path description (lines 1 and 4). In line 6, the flow of the description is interrupted with an elaboration introduced by *but*, which turns out to be self-repaired. In line 7, the IF produces the marker doublet *right okay*. This seems to have the effect of both acknowledging the repaired elaboration (accomplished through *right*) and of closing it (accomplished through *okay*). That a form of response is required of the IF is made evident in the IG’s latched understanding check in line 8. Thus both the IF and the IG are orienting to the need for an appropriate response to this turn so that the talk can proceed. We note that although the essential characteristics of *right* and *okay* are preserved, when they conjoin they also function together to more strongly provide for closure.

*Next marking function*

The ‘next’ marking *okay* and *alright* similarly occur in very specific environments: at task openings, at task endings, to mark a return to the route description after a suspension, or to mark an interruption to the ongoing description. As alluded to earlier, in the macro-structurally important task beginning, *okay* was deployed to mark movement into the main topic or business of the interaction. This is consistent with findings by Beach 1990, Schegloff 1979, 1986, and Rendle-Short 1999. The next example illustrates.

Example 22

→1IG: okay. (0.5) um right in the top left-hand corner of my page that’s
2 where the tour starts.=
3IF:  =mh mm,
4IG: and there are some sheer cliff[s right ] there.
5IF: [yeah I’ve got that.]

Just prior to this sequence, the participants had been given an explanation about the task by the task administrator. (This does not appear in the recording.) Movement into the commencement of the task, which is the principal business of the interaction, is marked by *okay* at line 1. Of the
eight sets of interactions, *okay* was used in four to mark commencement right from the outset, as in the above fragment.

In the middle section of the talk, both *alright* and *okay* were deployed by the IG to mark a return to the activity. However, in contrast with *okay* when used to mark next, the main work of *alright* seemed to be that of marking the next stage in the path description or instruction as new. Typically in these environments, the talk in the preceding sequence had been about landmarks the speakers had in common and their locations. On conclusion, the talk moved back to the route-giving activity as in the following example.

**Example 23**

1IG: *okay. [how about further] north.*
2IF: [and underneath- and under-] (0.3)
3IG: of [that?]
4IF: [north?]
5IG: yes what do you have?
6IF: oh::! the millstream.
7IG: okay. (0.4) *awright that’s one thing I have huh.* (0.6)
8IF: [ri$tgh{t}.]
→12IG: [awright] NOW. (0.3) you head east and before you get to mill
→13 north again. (0.9) you have to actually um:: (1.2) head n- (0.6) like
14 [go-]

Here, we note a shift from locating landmarks to route-giving talk. The shift occurs in line 12 and is marked by *awright now*. The instruction that follows is a next installment in the path description. We note further that there is a shift in perspective from survey to route. This contrasts with the occurrence of *okay* in the same environment as in Example 24 below. Here, *okay* is explicitly followed by a reference to a return to the same place on the map before the interruption. This occurs as a partial repeat of the original utterance before the interruption.

**Example 24**

→1IG: so::: and then you keep on going in further in a southwest
direction past the statistics [centre.]
3IF: [so that’s] over the top of it? (0.7)
4IG: yeah you’re above it. you should [be above it now.]
6IF: [yeah above it] yeah yeah yeah.
In other words, *okay* marks the intervening sequence as an interruption to the continuing flow of the instruction that needs to be resumed. Condon (1986: 96) describes this as ‘resetting the interpretive principles’ that were in operation prior to the intervening talk.

In marking next, *alright* is thus associated with characterizing the ensuing description as a new installment, while *okay* is associated with a return to the same instruction after an intervening interruption. Like Turner’s (1999) observations about the differences between these two markers, we can conclude that *alright* is more strongly associated with a new focus or stage in the instruction (which mirrors Turner’s claim that it is associated with a shift in topic) than is the case for *okay*.

In the concluding stage of the task, the next marking *alright* and *okay* were deployed to clearly provide movement out of the task. One way of doing this was to provide an assessment as in Example 25.

**Example 25**

1IF: 
[good]. okay well a hundred percent I think we’ll give ourselves a=  
2IG: =huh huh=  
3IF: first [prize for that.]

As a feature of the IG’s talk, the other environment in which *alright* occurred in our corpus was in repeats, restarts, or re-attempts at describing a landmark feature. These were particularly clustered in sequences just after the opening phase of the task and therefore did not involve shifts in perspective or shifts in topic focus.

With respect to perspective shift, outside the opening and closing boundaries, shifts recurrently occurred when the speakers deployed these tokens as markers of next. Here, they functioned principally to mark a return to the main activity of route-giving, contained within the base sequences. No such association with perspective shift could be made when the tokens were used to mark closure. Indeed, much of the work of closing involved interactional matters, most often repair work associated with clarifying and confirming.

We conclude our analysis by reiterating our earlier observations about *right*. Namely, *right* was not deployed to carry out the work of closure or marking next in the way that we have just reported for *okay* and *alright*. As noted in Table 1, there was only one occurrence of *right* as a marker of next. It is likely that in this instance it is a truncated form of *alright*. If we are to accept Gardner’s (in prep.) claim that one of the common functions
of *right* is that of connecting turns or ideas in talk, then its absence from the work of closing and marking next is to be expected. By extension, we should find that when it is used in this way, it should be prevalent in the middle sections of talk.

We have already noted that *right* occurred in sequence-closing environments. However, here it overwhelmingly co-occurred only with *okay* where its principal function was to acknowledge rather than to provide closure. This finding is in sharp contrast to Stenström’s (1987) claims when she concludes that both (free-standing) *right* and *alright* are found in closing environments such as telephone conversations. Stenström maintains that whereas *alright* is prevalent in pre-closings, *right* occurs in the actual closing just prior to the leave-taking. Clearly more studies of a variety of types of talk are needed to account for the disparate findings.

**Summary**

Our analysis has shown that while all three markers functioned as signaling devices, there were some important differences in their deployment. Of the three, *okay* was more widely used to perform a range of functions. However, it was also more strongly associated with topic continuance. This was particularly evident when deployed as a marker of next, where it treated the intervening talk as an interruption to the activity of route-giving. While *alright* was also deployed in such environments, on resumption of the route-giving activity, it marked the next instruction as new and not as a return. *Right* was found to have a much more restricted use being principally deployed as a continuer with a connecting function. This is consistent with Gardner’s (in prep.) characterization of *right* as a connector. However, its deployment in specific types of repair environments was also noted, as was its appearance as a doublet with *okay* in closing environments. As a general concluding statement, preliminary analysis seems to indicate that the differences between the markers may also have something to do with particular repair initiations. Further investigations are needed to take this analysis further.

In addressing the issue of the role of discourse markers in signaling spatial perspective shift or maintenance, three functions were identified as strongly associated with perspective shift. These were third turn acknowledgement usage as a feature of the IG’s talk, tag-positioned agreement eliciting usage, and deployment as markers of next. The only marker most strongly associated with perspective maintenance was *right* in its function as continuer. The sequences of talk where strong associations with shift or maintenance occurred were very much those that were task oriented in
the sense that the business of the talk was about instruction-giving or the establishment of common landmarks, rather than interactional matters.

Concluding comments

From the preceding analysis, it is evident that the discourse markers in our corpus function in ways that are associated both with the work of the primary speaker (the IG) and with the work of the primary listener (the IF). Although the parameters of the assignment of the role of primary speakership are set by the confines of the task, fluid movement beyond the confines of the roles of IG and IF is made possible by the demands of the interaction at any given moment. The IG provides a series of staged instructions, in a discourse that is organized into manageable phases that informs the IF about the path to be drawn. In this process, both speakers move from the activity of description and/or instruction-giving to suspension of the action in order to talk about landmarks and their existence and position, provoking a shift in spatial perspective. The discourse markers function to signal these movements, as well as to assist in creating a coherent set of instructions.

The IF works to provide the IG with feedback about her or his understanding, by indicating that the instruction has been received, is comprehensible, or is problematic. Often, this feedback is explicitly sought by the IG through the deployment of understanding or confirmation checks. This work too is signaled by the discourse markers.

There is one final and important function of the discourse markers: to signal that the talk is about to move on. This provides the participants with a final opportunity to clarify, confirm, and repair any misunderstanding before the talk moves onto the next phase in the instruction.

The task is thus a double-pronged activity. On the one hand, there is the main business of getting the task done, and on the other, there is the interaction itself such that at any given time an aspect of the interaction such as repair becomes a relevant action. The resulting talk is a collaborative achievement in which the participants work in tandem, despite their different roles and differential access to knowledge bases, using discourse markers as one of the local resources in structuring their talk.

Having sought to establish how the three markers were used by the speakers in our corpus, we are now in a position to suggest future directions for ongoing investigations beyond the areas already noted. One fruitful area might be to address the question of differences between men and women, and how the degree of familiarity of the participants with each other might affect the use of discourse markers. Other forms of instruction-based talk
in which there are differential competencies between speakers also need to be studied in order to achieve a better understanding of the differential functions of the discourse markers and their relationship to the quality of the interaction overall. One question that might be explored in this regard is whether, in fact, there is likely to be less repair or interruption when discourse markers are used systematically by the speakers. The functions of the markers when they co-occur also warrant further study. Such ongoing investigations are important to our understanding of how even small features of talk contribute to human interaction so that we might be better placed to begin to tease out universal from situation specific features.

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Differential uses of okay, right, and alright, and their function


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