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## PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION OF SPECIAL QUESTIONS IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

*The paper is devoted to the functional interpretation of special questions in academic discourse, particularly in lectures. To stress the importance of the extra-linguistic reality for the interpretation of pragmatic meaning the analysis of the questions is conducted within a wider context. It has been shown that special questions have the function of contributing to the discourse continuity by the elimination of the possible barriers on the way of discourse development.*

**Key words:** *special questions, academic discourse, lectures, pause, paralinguistic means of communication*

There have been a number of studies on how questions generally function in lectures /Westwood, 1996; Thompson, 1998; Camiciottoli, 2008; Morell, 2004; Dafouz-Milne, Sánchez Garcia, 2013; Long, Sato, 1983/. The studies have more focused on the interpretation of the functions manifested based on the content of the question rather than the context it has been applied in. As a result, the focus of the research has turned to be on the functions expressed by the questions and not the questions themselves which have specific features that are revealed when being interpreted in context. The pragmatic approach to the investigation of questions has enabled us to gain more comprehensive and thorough data about questions and the functions they perform. To keep in mind, the interpretations are made at the level of subsidiary discourse when the speech is analyzed through the content of lectures /Montgomery, 1977/ when the speech is still in the process of production and is not a byproduct yet.

The corpus of the material is lectures delivered in Natural Sciences. The authentic lectures have been recorded by famous universities and uploaded online as a part of OpenCourseWare which attempts at making good education accessible for the purpose of amending the level of education all over the world. For the research, we have transcribed the lectures, done a contextual analysis for each question and fixed the features that have contributed to the exact interpretation. While reviewing the results in order to avoid any slips it has become noticeable that

the extra-linguistic features accompanying the questions were so common that it is possible to propose a new taxonomy for the questions that encompass not only their contextual features but also the functional realizations in the discourse. Hence, we have classified special questions according to the existence and absence of pause in parallel to the exceptions. In addition, the presence of pause has been marked with ‘+++’ while its absence with ‘---’ which is followed with the exact pause duration.

The first question type is special questions without pause not to elicit feedback. In the study, we have come across the contexts where the questions have been applied not for the purpose of eliciting feedback. The absence of pause and the appropriate gestures/facial expressions (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) and/or the context, such as the Interaction phase /Young, 1994/ signal that lecturers do not have the intention to offer the turn. Instead, they have used the questions for some other purposes shown in Table 1.

As we see in the speech corpus we have come across 1288 instances when the questions have been applied with no intention to elicit feedback. As the figures indicate, the first three functions are equal in their frequencies. The explanation is reasoned with the idea that the same question may multifunction. What is more the functions are equal and have no shade of ‘inferiority’ or ‘superiority’ /Jakobson, 1960/. For example,

(1) *The second kind of limit - well so this isn't the only 19:42 second kind of limit but I just want to point this out, 19:44 it's very important - is that: derivatives are, are always 19:55 harder than this. 19:59 You can't get away with nothing here. 20:03 So, **why is that?+++**20:05 Well, when you take a derivative, 20:07 you're taking the limit as  $x$  goes to  $x_0$  of  $f(x)$ , 20:13 well we'll write it all out in all its glory. 20:24 Here's the formula for the derivative. 20:28 Now notice that if you plug in  $x = x_0$ , always gives  $0/0...$  /Jerison, 2007/.*

As we see the question multifunctions in the context. Firstly, the question focuses attention on the idea /Camiciottoli, 2008/ in order to stress its importance. This function becomes essential as it informs about what is especially valuable to be aware of and what will be required from the audience to know:

Focus attention	Create the illusion of involvement	Sound not overbearing	Make humour	Attract attention	Reformulate the student's question
1262	1262	1262	4	4	21
					Total 1288

Secondly, the question is applied to create the illusion of involvement. Yes, it is really an illusion as there are no paralinguistic means of communication that indicate that the lecturer's intention is to offer the turn but, as we see, the idea is still expressed in the interrogative form. With the interrogative form of the statement, the lecturer wants to make up an atmosphere that the students are asked to be engaged in the lecture while in reality, they are not. This performance makes the lecture 'student-oriented' /Goffman, 1981, cited in Malavska, 2016: 67; Yu, 2009, cited in Vivekmetakorn, Thamma, 2015; Dafouz-Milne, Sánchez Garcia, 2013/. A similar idea has been expressed by Bamford on self-answered questions that 'serve to induce the student into thinking that what is taking place is an interactive sharing of ideas and information' /Bamford, 2005, quoted in Dafouz-Milne and García, 2013: 140/. So the idea of 'induce to think' is what we perceive as creating the illusion of what does not exist but is simulated through the interrogation which has the power of attracting human attention conditioned with certain neuro-scientific processes /Hoffeld, 2016/. Thirdly, the lecturer uses the question because the latter helps him to avoid being overbearing. For this particular function, the lecturer expresses the idea in the interrogative form as if he wants some feedback from the audience, and that feedback is valuable. But the feedback is not real as there are no extra-linguistic indicators that make us suppose that it has truly been asked to elicit feedback. In this manner the lecturer imitates that he is not the only knowledgeable 'tenor' /Halliday, 1978: 143/ in the auditorium and may have the need of the information elicited by the audience. These factors make him sound not overbearing and motivate the students not to feel depressed because of being a learner. This behavior leads to the feeling of belongingness /Hyland, 1998/. All the functions go hand-in-hand, and it is impossible to discuss which one out of them is primary or secondary.

Let's take another example:

(2) *In fact, here's another reason. 27:37 This is even a more important reason. 27:40 Well, **how can I say more important?+++** 27:42 All those are important. 27:44 This is another way to see it. 27:47 A matrix has no inverse -- 27:51 yeah -- here -- now this is important. 27:55 A matrix has no -- a square matrix won't have an inverse 27:59 if there's no inverse because I can solve -- 28:07 I can find an X of -- a vector X with A times -- 28:20 this A times X giving zero. 28:27 This is the reason I like best...* /Strang, 2005/.

This context indicates that the question is used with more functions. In addition to the functions mentioned above, i.e. to focus attention on the importance of the idea /Camiciottoli, 2008; Querol-Julian, 2008; Chang, 2012/, to create the illusion of involvement and not to sound overbearing, there is another function, i.e. to attract the audience's attention to his mistake so that the audience avoids repeating it.

In parallel to the examples where the questions have mainly multifunctioned, there have also been the instances of fulfilling one function only in the context:

- (3) ...*The femur is the thigh. What bones are in the leg?+++So you've always called this lower appendage, the whole thing a leg. It's really a thigh and a leg. So what are the bones down here?+++ Whoops. Can you see him?---2sec Where is he? ---2sec **Where's our, our help?+++** No, I was just bragging about you that. You are really good. So I want you to live up to what I've been saying. Well, I went to other websites to look at other professors and the person up there was so far behind everything the professor was talking about...* /Diamond, 2007/.

The lecturer uses the question to create a humorous atmosphere by talking about the assistant who is not in the auditorium. The incongruity between the absence of the helper and the imitation that he is in the setting brings about laughter.

The reformulation of the question asked by a student which is also known as 'clarification requests' /Long and Sato, 1983; Camiciottoli, 2008; Morell, 2004; Querol-Julian, 2008; Chang, 2012/ or 'repetition questions' /Dafouz-Milne and Sánchez García, 2013/ deserves special attention in the research. We assume that a question's reformulation has dual purposes. One of them is to make the question scientifically appropriate by using the necessary terms that the student may not know. The second function is to make the question available to the audience so that the process of initiating the question and responding to it does not turn into a private conversation between the student and the lecturer. The lecturer wants the audience to hear and think about the question. We have come across such 21 cases in the collected data:

- (4) *Professor: ...As we know with the dynamic animator, as soon as you change 60:29 that elasticity, it's going 60:33 to immediately start affecting the elasticity. 60:37 Okay?+++ So let's go ahead and try this. 60:40 See if this works. 60:42 [ Pause ] 60:47*  
*Student: For the slider, what's the granularity? 60:52*  
*Prof: Yeah. So the question is "**What's the granularity 60:53 of the slider as we move along?**"+++ 60:56 And it depends. 60:57 If it's a float, then however wide the slider is, you know, 61:02 however many points that can be divided into, 61:04 that's how much granularity you're going 61:05 to get on the float /Hegarty, 2013/.*

Thus, the lecturer reformulates the student's question in order to adjust the question appropriate to the academic setting at the same time making the question reachable to the audience. To add, as far as the lecturer is the basic participant of the setting /Halliday, 1978: 143/ or axis of the context, who teaches and disseminates information, the question will surely be heard and paid attention to.

Here is another example:

(5) AUDIENCE: ...How do I know what's the right balance 13:00 to draw in my portfolio? 13:02 Whether it would be cash, bills, or stuff like that? 13:07

PROFESSOR: How do you do it, really?+++ 13:08 What's the criteria?+++ 13:09 And so before we answer the question "How 13:12 you do, how do you group assets or exposures 13:17 or strategies or even people, traders, together?"+++ Before we 13:22 ask all those questions, we have to ask 13:24 ourselves another question: 13:26 "What is the goal?"+++ 13:28 "What is the objective?" Right?+++ 13:29 So we understand what portfolio management is... /Xia, 2013/.

It should be pointed out once more that the lecturer reformulates the student's question for making the question more scientific and audible to the audience.

The next type of question is special questions without pause to elicit feedback. This type of special questions is discovered due to the consideration of the paralinguistic means of communication similar to the questions above. Those means are pause, gestures/facial expressions (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, moving the eyebrow) and/or the context in the form of 'Interaction phase' /Young, 1994/. In the research, pause has been defined as the silence of at least 2 seconds after the question as a sign to elicit feedback (number 2 is not accidental but the average duration of all the pauses in the corpus).

The question with the function of eliciting feedback has been noticed by many scholars /see Camiciottoli, 2008, Fortanet-Gómez, Ruiz-Madrid, 2014/ but what conditions have brought to that interpretation have not been distinguished and detailed. Hence, there has been no differentiation between questions with pause and questions without pause. Nevertheless, the analysis of our factual material has indicated that this distinction is quite essential, especially when the questions are studied at the discourse level. Having considered the extra-linguistic characteristics of the usage of questions in lectures we have revealed the following functional realizations for this specific question type:

Elicit a response	Confirmation whether the student's question has been understood or not	Comprehension check on the students' understanding of the material
178	3	1
Total 182		

The example is another case when the question performs the function mentioned above:

- (6) ...*The covariance to lag 1 up to lag p 63:23 is equal to basically linear functions 63:27 given by the phi of the other covariances. 63:33 **Who can tell me what the structure is of this matrix?**+++ 63:37 *It's not a diagonal matrix?---2sec 63:38 What kind of matrix is this?---4sec 63:41 Math trivia question here. 63:48 It has a special name. 63:52 Anyone?---2sec 63:54 It's a Toeplitz matrix...* /Kempthorne, 2013/.*

The instance points out that the lecture has initiated the interaction in the form of the question and expects the feedback. There is a direct addressivity to the audience expressed with “Who”. Moreover, during the question the lecturer is looking at the audience and maintaining eye contact with the students.

Another instance is as follows:

- (7) *Professor: All right, now but I want to get started on it. All right. Now let me give you a little clue... Yeah.*  
*Student: Okay, cordyline is the named way, no audio you were talking with one?*  
*Professor: **Why am I suddenly starting with one?**+++ Well for one thing... So the question is “Why do some go from minus n to N and why isn't it just going from 1 to N?”+++ Well, for one thing: if it went from 1 to N, the co fit the signal wouldn't be real. Right?+++ Remember! There's this combination of the positive terms and the negative terms...* /Osgood, 2008/.

The lecturer reformulates the question to understand whether he has perceived it correctly in terms of its content or not. Of course, the lecturer’s question requires feedback in order to either continue the lecture delivery or ask more questions until the correct understanding of the question is achieved.

The next example refers to the function of getting feedback:

- (8) ... *We've got paracrine which is a little more short-range and you guys have heard about neuronal and endocrine. And I am going to to put these examples of communication in the context of us as a giant multicellular organism this class. Right?+++ Now, OK, **so who wants to be the pancreas?**+++ No one wants to be the paint. Okay. We got a pancreas right there. Thank you very much. No, we don't have to be specialized cells but the point is that a cell-cell contact in our organism would be actually someone physically handing you a note during class. Okay?+++...* /McFadden, 2010/.

While asking the question the lecturer is looking at the audience and waiting for the response to the question. The eye contact and the waiting process leave no doubt that the question is intended for offering the turn.

The next question type is special questions with pause to elicit feedback. This question type is accompanied by the pause of at least 2 seconds that signals the turn offer. Plus, there might be contexts when the other extra-linguistic features may be

considered as well to confirm the reliability of the interpretation which is the Interaction phase /Young, 1994/ when there is no pause after the question but a fast response by the student.

In the study, there have been 498 occurrences of this type of question use:

- (9) ...*What's really going on?+++ 22:53 So let's start by thinking about what 22:54 would happen if I considered an  $s$  depicted by this red  $x$ . 22:59 I probably shouldn't have used  $x$ . 23:00 I should have probably used a star. 23:02 That's not a pole. 23:04 That's the value of  $s$  in this integral. 23:09 What happens if I choose to integrate against the function 23:12  $e$  to the minus  $st$  where  $s$  is 0?---2sec 23:19 If I choose to integrate against that function, 23:21 that function as depicted by red here. 23:25 So the convergence of the integral, 23:26 the convergence of the thing that I'm 23:27 calling a Laplace transform depends entirely 23:29 on the convergence of  $x$ . 23:32 That's what  $s$  equals 0 means... /Freeman, 2011/.*

In this example, the lecturer pauses after the question, looks through the students and expects to hear the answer to the question. He elicits feedback in the form of a response.

Out of 498 cases there has been only one instance when the question has been aimed at provoking thinking or, as other scholars have called it, 'stimulate thought or thinking' / Camiciottoli, 2008, et al./

- (10) *And we're going to start 23:40 talking about energetics, how does this cell get energy?+++23:44 And one of the things you might wonder is if you were to design such 23:47 a nano machine how would you power it?---2sec They exist. 23:51 I mean it's here. But that's why in part I'm going to 23:55 start talking about energy and how cells make energy, 23:59 because this is one of the things they have to do. 24:03 And that was, as I said, was an average electron micrograph 24:06 of a lot of those motors... /Walker, 2005/.*

After the question, the lecturer pauses and looks through the audience but he does not expect any feedback because the question refers to the material that is new and complicated and is the one he is explaining. Instead, he provokes the audience to think about the question which is the nucleus of the material.

One more interesting example that we have come across is the case when the question itself is intended to elicit feedback but is followed with no pause. Instead, the pause as the sign for shifting the turn is made after the following sentence:

- (11) *Let's keep going. 34:29 So, now we have our tetrahedral based system 34:35 AX<sub>3</sub>E 34:39 and an SN number of 4 based on tetrahedral. 34:45 And so here, now, we have trigonal pyramidal. 34:50 So, we have a bunch, this is why it's confusing. 34:53 It's not bi-pyramidal, there's only one pyramid here 34:56 and it looks like a triangle. 34:58 So, trigonal pyramidal. 35:01 And now what are the angles going to*

*be?+++ 35:03 **And you can just yell this one out--- 2 sec** 35:07 Yeah, 109.5. 35:10 And now let's keep going. 35:11 And we have another clicker question. 35:24 All right, 10 more seconds. 35:41 OK 35:44 /Drennan, 2014/.*

Nevertheless, there have also been contexts where the questions have been used with pause but with no intention to have their responses. This application of the questions is what we have called special questions with pause not to elicit feedback.

The functional realization has been decoded with the consideration of the paralinguistic means of communication which indicate that the pause is made in order to commit some physical activity for improving the lecturing quality while the question has been applied to focus attention on the importance of the idea /Querol-Julian, 2008; Chang, 2012/, to create the illusion of involvement and not to sound overbearing. The physical activities may be cleaning the board, pulling down or pushing up a piece of board, looking through the notes, walking to the board, changing the slide, writing down something, drawing a graph and so on. In the research corpus, the question has been applied for 122 times. For instance,

*(12) So trying to impress on you that damping 62:17 doesn't cause much of a change in systems 62:21 that actually vibrate. 62:22 Really observe the vibration. 62:24 If you can observe the vibration, 62:26 damping cannot possibly account for a very large shift 62:29 in frequency. 62:30 **What's the motion look like?--- 6sec** 62:34 Let's move on a little bit here. 62:44 So that's what this solution looks like. 62:46 We know it depends on initial conditions. 62:48 The distance from here to here will make this a time axis. 62:57 This is one period. 62:59 So this is tau d... /Vandiver, 2013/.*

The question is followed with pause which does not offer the turn but is made in order to draw the 'vibration' he is talking about. Meanwhile, the question itself is applied similarly to the special questions without pause not to elicit feedback, namely to focus attention on the importance of the question, to create the illusion of involvement and not to sound overbearing.

Or this example:

*(13) It's this guy. 51:02 It's this ratio. 51:04 So I basically arbitrarily chose. Is it 51:06 the negative first?+++ 51:07 No. 51:10 I chose that one over there, 1.618. 51:14 And then a minus 1 for the second one. 51:17 Fair enough?+++ 51:18 OK, there it goes. 51:19 We've got to save it and make sure we got it. 51:22 So again, you got a clue. **What's going to happen here?---4sec** 51:31 Here we go. 51:32 Boom. 51:35 Look at that. 51:36 What's going on there?+++ 51:39 Yikes. 51:42 Explain me. 51:43 Is that good, bad, indifferent?+++ 51:44 Is it right?+++ 51:45 Wrong?--- 3sec 51:46 /Gossard, 2011/.*

Here the lecturer pauses in order to type the formula on the computer while the question performs the same functions as the question in the previous instance.



To continue, rarely enough but we have come across question uses when the question is followed with a pause but it has not been intended for eliciting feedback. The thing is that during that pause the lecturer does not make the conventional gestures and facial expressions that are typical of the questions with pause to elicit feedback (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 in general, raising the eyebrow). They only passively continue looking in the direction they have been looking before the question and do not maintain eye contact whereas when using questions conventionally, the lecturers look through the audience to see whether they have missed any students or not, maintain eye contact with the audience or the talking student, move brows and their hands to offer the turn. In this context, the pause is made in order to impact the audience with the content of the question and give them some time to understand the content better. In the corpus, we have come across such 8 cases. For example,

(14) ...As you can see, they're very proud of the upper left hand 46:58 part. 46:59 This is one of the major methodological advances 47:01 of 1000 Genome Project, figuring out 47:04 how to recalibrate quality scores for instruments. 47:11 **Why is this so important?---2sec** 47:14 The reason it's important is that the estimate 47:18 of the veracity of bases figures centrally 47:23 in determining whether or not a variant is real or not. 47:27 So you need to have as best an estimate as you possibly 47:30 can of whether or not a base coming out of the sequencer 47:34 is correct, OK?---3sec 47:40 /Gifford, 2014/.

In this case, the lecturer asks the question, pauses after the question and continues looking in the direction he has been looking before the question: no motions of the head, hands or brows which usually indicate the shift of the turn. With the pause after the question the lecturer impacts the audience with the importance of the content of the question and gives them some time to understand its content.

Even more, the analysis has revealed the instances of the question's use when the function of the question is possible to decode only through context. The questions are addressed at the audience but the context assists in understanding that the question function is not that of getting feedback but the one that is acquired through the extra-linguistic reality. A similar application has been noticed in the lecture of a single lecturer:

(15) Now we've got to go ahead and find the  $f$  18:07 of  $X$  plus  $h$ .  $f$  of  $X$  plus  $h$  says, "Do I just 18:12 add  $H$  at the very end?"+++ Is that the 18:13 appropriate thing to do?+++ No. It's like  $X$  18:15 plus  $h$ . It says you can't separate that 18:17 thing. So tell me, **what is  $f$  of  $X$  plus  $h$ ?---3 sec** 18:23 OK. Good. So even where we see the  $X$  we're 18:26 going to

*insert that entire explanation .18:28 Do remember doing that?+++ Also, so it'll be  $x + 18:30 H$  to the  $O$  cubed minus....So it does have to be 18:37  $X$  plus  $h$  in that as well. So everywhere 18:38 we saw an  $X$  we're now putting  $X$  plus a 2 18:41 in parentheses. Ok. So hands. how many will 18:46 feel ok with that so far ? --- 4 sec /Leonard, 2012/.*

This example shows that the question is directed at the audience (“So tell me.....”), and there is the pause to indicate the turn shift but the action of the lecturer, that is writing the formula on the board, guides us to the understanding that the function of the question is not to elicit feedback but to focus attention / Camiciottoli, 2008, et al./, create the illusion of involvement and not to sound authoritative.

Or this instance:

*(16) ...The 63:58:00 limit doesn't exist there as well. So two 64:00:00 implications are: you can't take a 64:01:00 derivative at a sharp point or where the 64:04:00 slope is undefined 64:25:00. So the slope is vertical .64:29:00 this one, this gives two, at least two, 64:32:00 different slopes for that 64:33:00 point. This one we run to find repository 64:35:00 of infinite. Your slope is vertical. You 64:37:00 can't, can't take it riveted with that .64:40:00 **How many okay with our two implications 64:42:00 here?+++** All right /Leonard, 2012/.*

In the example the lecturer directly addresses the audience with the question but does not pause to elicit feedback. Even more, he is looking through his notes to see what idea comes next. It follows that the question is without pause but to elicit feedback while the paralinguistic means of communication indicate the absence of the intention to offer the turn.

Thus, with the help of the extra-linguistic reality it has become possible to decode and interpret the functional realizations of special questions in academic discourse. With the help of the results acquired we may make the generalization that special questions have the function of contributing to the discourse continuity by elimination the possible barriers on the way of discourse development. It may be done by focusing attention on the importance of the idea, engaging the audience in the lecture, creating the atmosphere of mutual belongingness, etc. The finding is quite valuable in terms of reconsidering the role of questions as a teaching tool which may multifunction and promote interaction. Moreover, the analysis of the genre recurrent element in the scientific discourse community enables lecturers, as discourse participants, to influence speech perception implicitly by taking the genre not for granted. Instead, they become equipped with the knowledge that the genre consists of recurrent elements that may be selected carefully during speech production so that the perception of the audience is promoted.

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**Ա. ՉՈՒԲԱՐՅԱՆ, Ն. ՀԱԿՈՒՅԱՆ – Հարուկ հարցերի գործաբանական վերլուծությունն ակադեմիական դիսկուրսում.** – Հոդվածում դիտարկվում են հատուկ հարցերի գործաբանական առանձնահատկությունները գիտական դիսկուրսի ժանրերից մեկում՝ դասախոսություններում: Տարբեր դասախոսություններից քաղված հատուկ հարցերի օրինակով ցույց է տրվում, որ հատուկ հարցերը իրենց բնորոշ հարալեզվական հատկանիշների շնորհիվ իրականացնում են այնպիսի գործառույթներ, որոնք ապահովում են վերոնշյալ ժանրի շարունակականությունը, այդ կերպ խթանելով հաղորդակցությունը և նպաստելով նրա կառուցվածքային ամբողջականությանը:

**Բանալի բառեր.** հատուկ հարց, ակադեմիական դիսկուրս դասախոսություն, դադար, հաղորդակցության հարալեզվական միջոցներ

**А. ЧУБАРИЯН, Н. АКОПЯН – Прагматическая интерпретация специальных вопросов в академическом дискурсе.** – Статья посвящена функциональной интерпретации специальных вопросов в академическом дискурсе, в частности в лекциях. Анализ практического материала выявил необходимость учета собственно языкового контекста и экстралингвистической реальности для адекватной интерпретации передаваемого данными конструкциями значения.

**Ключевые слова:** специальный вопрос, академический дискурс, лекция, пауза, паралингвистические средства общения

Ներկայացվել է՝ 06.03.2019

Երաշխավորվել է ԵՊՀ Անգլիական բանասիրության ամբիոնի կողմից  
Ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 25.04.2019