

# ALRIGHT: A DISTINCTIVE PATHWAY OF CHANGE FROM THE 18TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT DAY

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## Abstract

The origins of the vast majority of the words we use in contemporary English go back as far as Old or Middle English. In contrast, *alright* and *all right* in their present-day application appear to be the result of a more recent evolution, as there is no evidence of their use, not even in the two-word form, in the published fiction before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, there are not in the research literature, at least to my knowledge, any previous linguistic studies on this specific subject matter. The present article is simply an attempt to describe the various processes of diachronic change that brought about the emergence of *alright*.

## Sinopse

A grande maioria das palavras que utilizamos no Inglês actual tem a sua origem no Old ou no Middle English. Pelo contrário, *alright* e *all right* tal como os usamos hoje aparentam ter resultado de uma evolução mais recente, pois não há indícios da sua utilização na literatura de ficção anterior ao século XVIII. Além disso, não existe na literatura de investigação, tanto quanto é do meu conhecimento, quaisquer estudos linguísticos sobre esta matéria específica. Este artigo é apenas uma tentativa de explicação dos diversos processos de evolução diacrónica que estão na origem do surgimento de *alright*.

**Keywords:** adjective, adverb, diachronic, evolution, grammaticalization, noun, occurrences.

**Palavras-chave:** adjetivo, advérbio, diacrónico, evolução, gramaticalização, substantivo, ocorrências.

## 1. Introduction

The main purpose of this work is to analyse and try to recognize the mechanisms of morphosyntactic and semantic change that can account for the process of evolution of the lexical items *all* and *right* into *all right* and *alright* as they are currently used in the following settings:

1. as an adjective, meaning ‘satisfactory, acceptable’ as in:

*If it's all right with you, I'd like to keep it that way.*

2. as an adverb, meaning ‘in a satisfactory, acceptable manner’ as in:

*Things have thankfully worked out all right.*

3. as an emphasizing phrase, meaning ‘there is no doubt’, as in:

*I remember him, all right.*

Evidence was found, after consultation of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and thorough analysis of the uses of *all* as a noun and as an intensifier and of *right* as an adjective and as an adverb, that *all right* is the result of a relatively recent development, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when compared with most of the words in present-day English. On account of this, three corpora were used as the main sources for this study: the Chadwyck-Healey’s eighteenth and nineteenth-century fiction collections and The Lancaster/Oslo-Bergen Corpus (LOB), a one million word collection of texts from the 1960’s. Another source, the British National Corpus (BNC), a 100 million word collection representative of a wide

range of both spoken and written texts from the later years of the 20th century, was also used but only for statistical purposes and in view of the absence of the form *alright* in the other three corpora.

The following section presents some key theoretical frameworks in the field. This is followed by a more extended section where the data collected are analysed, initially in a broad approach, subsequently in a historical and more detailed manner, and the results of the analysis summarised. Finally, the results obtained will be confronted with the theoretical frameworks in order to try to explain the various phenomena that lie behind the specific process of grammaticalization of *all right/alright*.

## 2. Theoretical background

It is unconditionally acknowledged amongst linguists (Lehmann, 1985:303; Hopper, 1991:17; Brinton, 1996: 50) that the first definition of grammaticalization should be ascribed to A. Meillet (1912:131), who characterized it as “the attribution of a grammatical character to a previously autonomous word”.

Hopper, however, who seems to prefer the term ‘grammaticization’, draws attention to the fact that in his works Meillet gives more importance to the individual grammatical forms in a language (morphology) rather than its broader structures (syntax) and that because of his predominantly diachronic perspective, Meillet’s notion of grammaticalization “did not rest ultimately on a clear definition of a grammatical system as such” (Hopper, 1991:18). Supported by Traugott’s research into semantic change (1989), Hopper concludes that

*[...] there seems to be no possibility of constructing a typology of grammaticization, or of constructing principles which will discriminate between grammaticization and other types of change. (1991: 19)*

For purposes of simplification, the definition of grammaticalization that appears to be the most widely accepted, the one by Kurylowicz (1965: 69), could be adopted here: “[...] the increase of the range of a morpheme advancing from a lexical to a grammatical or from a less grammatical to a more grammatical status [...]” (Brinton, 1996:50).

As far as the mechanisms of change involved in grammaticalization are concerned, Lehmann (1985) was the first linguist to present a comprehensive study on grammaticalization and, most importantly, the first to put forward a grammaticalization scale. Apart from this, he also outlined what he called ‘processes’ of grammaticalization, among which he includes, for instance, the following: *obligatorification*, which happens when one of the structures, normally the new one, becomes the obligatory one; *coalescence*, a phonological feature, the fusion of two originally different and separate forms; and *condensation* (or loss of scope), which may be considered a minor factor, given the fact that shrinking of scope does not always occur.

Hopper, adopting a wider approach to grammaticalization, and following his studies on Lehmann’s parameters and processes, argues that these were very influential but somewhat static. In Hopper’s view (1991: 21), Lehmann’s principles were useful to explain obvious cases of grammaticalization, but not enough to explain ongoing processes. As a result, he proposes five principles to identify these processes: *layering*, *divergence*, *specialization*, *persistence*, and *decategorialization*. *Layering* concerns the coexistence of older and newer forms and meanings and it appears to be the norm rather than the exception. *Divergence* is a specific case of layering and it happens when the same lexical item turns out to suffer grammaticalization in one context but not in another. *Specialization*, the same as Lehmann’s obligatorification, involves “the narrowing of choices that characterizes an emergent grammatical construction” (1991: 25). *Persistence* occurs when traces of the original meaning are still present and recognizable. Finally, *decategorialization* refers to the loss of the morphosyntactic features of the original form(s), which makes major categories like

nouns or verbs become minor categories, like prepositions, conjunctions or pronouns. Hopper points out that this does not necessarily encompass a negative connotation, but that words are purely and simply deprived of the typical features they used to have.

Traugott comes up with the principle of *subjectification*, “the development of a grammatically identifiable expression of speaker belief or speaker attitude to what is said” (1995: 33). In other words, the more grammaticalized a word is the more subjective it will become, which implies that new meanings are always more subjective.

Brinton (1996), adopting a different approach, places a great deal of emphasis on *reanalysis* as probably the most common mechanism of morphosyntactic change, in that it is almost always involved. It appears to be unconscious and it refers to the fact that when the underlying structure of a word is changed in the process of grammaticalization, its surface structure remains unaffected. According to Brinton (1996:53), *renewal*, another very frequent characteristic of grammaticalization, takes place when a new structure occupies the space left by the original structure, as is normally the case of intensifiers. Aside from these formal changes, Brinton equally demonstrates great interest in *semantic change*, a phenomenon which has been studied by several linguists, including Meillet. Also known as *bleaching* or, as Lehmann puts it, *semantic attrition* (1985: 307), it can be described in general terms as a gradual loss of significant semantic meaning (Brinton, 1996:54). In spite of being a controversial issue, it seems to be an important factor, at least in the later stages of the process of grammaticalization.

To conclude this part, let us now briefly turn to the factors responsible for the grammaticalization of words. Among the internal factors, particular importance should be given to ‘ambiguity’, quite often responsible for syntactic change, and ‘systemic pressure’, which relates to the fact that languages tend to harmony or symmetry. External factors, such as gender, age, geographical origin or institutional influence cannot be ignored either as they also contribute to grammaticalization

and to the diffusion of innovative forms.

### 3. The data

#### 3.1. Statistical analysis

The comparative study of the total number of occurrences of *all*, *right* and *all right* in the three main corpora used shows that the latter does not seem to be a very common combination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This will be reinforced by further detailed analysis below, which will demonstrate that most of the occurrences in the eighteenth century and in the early years of the nineteenth century are simple combinations of *all* + *right* and not really the present-day collocation.

	18 <sup>th</sup> century		19 <sup>th</sup> century		LOB	
all	57,580	94%	157,317	87.73%	2,954	80.7%
right	3,553	5.8%	20,678	11.53%	625	17.1%
all right	35	0.2%	1,327	0.74%	82	2.2%
alright	0	-	0	-	0	-

**Table 1.** Total number of occurrences in the three corpora analysed

Not counting the late emergence of *all right*, the most striking feature about these preliminary results is probably the perception that the form *alright* does not occur in any of the three corpora. In order to detect the reasons for this absence two lines of approach were taken. Firstly, four dictionaries were consulted to examine its use and appropriateness. The results obtained proved to be rather inconsistent:

1. US spelling (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, 1974*)
2. informal/non-standard/not to be used in formal writing (*Oxford Advanced*

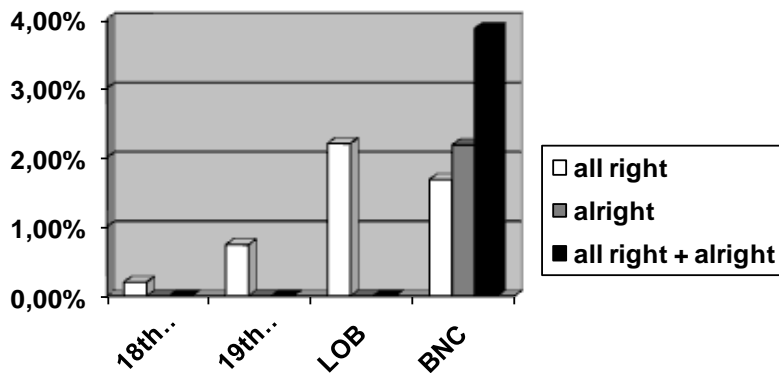
*Learner's Dictionary, 2005)*

3. an alternative spelling (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, 1995*)

4. a frequent spelling (*Oxford English Dictionary, 1998*).

Accordingly, the form *alright* can be considered a commonly accepted spelling, although it may be regarded by some as a 'sub-standard' form. The absence of instances in the three above mentioned corpora may also be attributed to the fact that the texts used as sources are predominantly in written form and hence in a formal register and/or simply because it is an even more recent development.

The second step was to try and find any developments in a more recent corpus, the BNC. The results obtained were rather surprising, with *alright* achieving 8,329 instances, intriguingly higher than the 6,435 instances of *all right* in the very same corpus, as shown in the graph below.



On the one hand, these figures seem to indicate that there is a widespread trend towards a preferable use of the single-word form. On the other hand, they reveal that the frequency of use of both forms is, at least in comparative terms,

steadily increasing<sup>1</sup>.

### 3.2. Descriptive analysis

#### 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FICTION

Since there are clear differences between the first and second halves of this century, that is, there are only 11 instances of *all right* in the first half of this century against 24 in the second, these two periods will be analysed separately.

#### FIRST HALF (1700-1750)

Most of the examples in the first fifty years, 9 out of 11, are very similar and noteworthy combinations, following either 'put' or 'set':

1. (...) Man I loath. This set ***all right*** again, and our warm (...) (Davys, Mary. *The Lady's Tale*. 1725)
2. (...) no Stone unturn'd to set ***all right*** again. Early in (...) (Haywood, Eliza Fowler. *Love in Excess*. 1725)
3. (...) made the Property to set ***all right*** again; to this end (...) (ibid.)
4. (...) or three months, usually sets ***all right*** on both sides (...) (Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa*. 1748)
5. (...) which, he said, would put ***all right***. would make my first (...) (ibid.)
6. (...) my brother's scheme, and set ***all right***. But what could I (...) (ibid.)
7. (...) lost character, and of setting ***all right***, in the next adventure? (...) (ibid.)
8. (...) to put ***all right*** with every body? ---And what now can be done? (...)

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<sup>1</sup>These statistics should ideally have taken into consideration the total number of words in every corpus. Unfortunately, the Chadwyck-Healey collections do not possess a 'word count'. Upon request to the editors by email, I was informed that the only word counts they would be able to supply are run by genre and therefore have a total count for the poetry, prose and drama collections in **all** their databases, which turned out to be completely useless for this study.



(ibid.)

9. (...) visits to my several cousins, to set **all right**. Proud spirits (...) (ibid.)

Probably the most remarkable feature in this period is that all the examples here immediately follow a transitive verb; they are plain combinations of the noun *all*, meaning ‘everything’ with the adverb *right*. None of the previous relates to the collocation *all right* as we use it today. This postulation is supported by the fact that the most typical construction nowadays is normally preceded by the verb ‘to be’, as will be seen further on in this work, which is not the case here. We can, however, say that these two words are gradually starting to come into use together. Another significant and curious feature is the fact that the last 6 of these 9 examples were produced by the same author.

#### SECOND HALF (1751-1800)

Sixteen *all + right* combinations were selected in this period, out of a total of 24 encountered; eight were not chosen as they were repetitions in new editions of the same work. Ten other examples were also left out because they were found to be simple ‘quantifier + noun’ combinations and for this reason totally irrelevant to this study. The remaining six examples may be grouped as follows:

a) Noun + adverb combinations:

1. (...) that the husband would set **all right**, and was for encouraging (...) (Richardson, Samuel. *Sir Charles Grandison*. 1754)
2. (...) and that only, can set **all right**. My heart is distressed (...) (ibid.)
3. (...) the time that should set **all right**. (...) (Reeve, Clara. *The Old English Baron*. 1780)

Unmistakably, all the three sentences have the same structure as the ones in

the previous period. Again, it should be noted that two of these were produced by the same author mentioned above, albeit in a different work now.

b) The other examples:

4. (...) my Mouth. I know them **all right** well, and (...) (Brooke, Henry. *The Fool of Quality*. 1765-1770)

In this case, it appears that *all* relates to *them*, as a quantifier, and *right* to *well*, as an emphasizer. The various uses of *right* in this particular period were then checked to find out about its frequency. This particular use of *right* is not very common in the whole 18<sup>th</sup> century, where only **two** other instances were found out of a total of 27 examples analyzed:

(...) of the Year, and blew **right** in our Teeth, so (...) (Defoe, Daniel. *Captain Singleton*. 1720)  
 (...) variable under the Shore, and **right** against us; so we concluded (...) (*ibid.*)

This is indeed a completely new structure and if we are, as it seems, in the presence of the earlier uses of *right* as an emphasizer, this could suggest the origin of the use of *all right* as an emphasizing phrase.

5. (...) merry enough,--- I find we are **all right**." Mr. Truworth made (...) (Haywood, Eliza Fowler. *Betsy Thoughtless*. 1751)

6. (...) join us, we should be **all right**, and more at liberty (...) (Haywood, Eliza Fowler. *Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy*. 1753)

As far as these two instances are concerned the first observation is that they were produced by the same author, which already seems to be a persistent trait in

this century. Two interpretations of both examples are possible here: we are either in the presence of the present-day collocation, meaning ‘okay’, or else *all* can be an intensifier of the subject and *right* an adjective meaning ‘correct’. In the presence of this uncertainty, the contexts in which both statements occur were subsequently examined to try to throw some light on the question. There appears to be some evidence that the first interpretation is the most tenable one. Still, some semantic ambiguity subsists, which may be interpreted as a sign of development of this combination towards its current use. In any case, another two aspects are worth noticing here: it is the first time that *all right* combines with the verb ‘to be’ and it occurs in a terminal position in the clause.

#### 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FICTION

Three examples were randomly collected from each decade in this century, with a total amount of 32 examples.

#### THE EARLY YEARS

The early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, until the 1830s, do not present any significant changes from the previous period. It must also be stressed, though, that this 19<sup>th</sup> century collection actually includes works from the later years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. 1782-1799.

In this period the combination *all right* occurs between 2 and 11 times in each decade, with a total of 29 occurrences, almost the same as in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Eleven examples were randomly collected in this period. Three of them are clear ‘noun + adverb’ combinations like the ones in the previous period and therefore will not be considered here. The remaining eight occurrences are the following:

1. (...) and as ridiculous. It is *all right*. Things must (...) (Holcroft, Thomas.

*The Adventures of Hugh Trevor*. 1794-7)

2. (...) so is Isabel, we are **all right**. For look here: (...) (Edgeworth, Maria. *The Absentee*. 1812)

3. (...) hurry, so I settled it **all right**, and as there was (...) (Edgeworth, Maria. *Ennui*. 1809)

4. (...) fresh confirmation that they were **all right**. The light (...) (More, Hannah. *Coelebs In Search of a Wife*. 1809)

5. (...) on the future. It was **all right**, all open, all equal. (...) (Austen, Jane. *Emma*. 1816)

6. (...) have no doubt it was **all right**." Vivian was (...) (Disraeli, Benjamin. *Vivian Grey*. 1826)

7. (...) of Queensberry at the head. **All right**---See here it is, sir, (...) (Hogg, James. *The Private Memoirs And Confessions Of A Justified Sinner*. 1824)

8. (...) here it is, sir, --- **all right**---done your work. So you (...) (ibid.)

Once again the contexts in which the words occur had to be examined for a better perception of the whole setting. The possible interpretations are as follows: sentences 2, 4 and 5 seem to be simple collocations of *all* as an intensifier of the subject and *right as* an adjective meaning 'correct'; sentence 3 is ambiguous, but it also appears to be a meaningful example of grammaticalization (although apparently similar to the very first instances in this work, it now contains an object, 'it', before *all right*, which makes it absolutely clear that *all* is no longer a noun); sentences 1, 6, 7 and 8 are typical collocations of *all right* as we use it nowadays (sentences 7 and 8 are particularly out of the ordinary for the time at hand, since *all right* appears in an initial position, showing a shift from propositional to textual meaning). It is also worth mentioning that this is the period when the largest number of diverse combinations were found.

## THE 1830S AND ONWARDS

The 1830s can be said to represent the turning point in the pathway of change of *alright*, namely in terms of frequency. The number of instances rises sharply to between 95 and 302 per decade until the end of the century, with a total of 1,298 occurrences. Twenty-one examples from this period, again three per decade, were randomly collected and analyzed and all were found to be *all right* collocations. There is still no evidence of *all right* as an emphazier. Six examples, by different authors, are given below to illustrate the findings.

1. (...) We understand each other. It's ***all right***." "I make him come!" (...)  
(Dickens, Charles. *Barnaby Rudge*. 1840)
2. (...) as to say, It is ***all right***, the young man is used to claret (...) (Borrow, George Henry. *Lavengro*. 1851)
3. (...) as this.' "'Oh, it is ***all right***!' he replied, 'only (...)' (Brontë, Charlotte. *The Professor*. 1857)
4. (...) "I shall soon be ***all right***. I must have taken cold (...)' (Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. 1874)
5. (...) it, and it was ***nearly all right***, and he put (...)' (Butler, Samuel. *The Way of All Flesh*. 1903)
6. (...) were devils, but that was ***all right enough***; there must be (...)' (ibid.)

Apart from the fact that all the examples mentioned here already exhibit the verb 'to be', today's most typical structure, it is also significant that *all right* is by now modified (examples 5 and 6 – added emphasis), which is a completely new feature and a clear indication of diachronic change.

20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FICTION

A completely different approach was taken for this period in an attempt to enhance the accuracy of the present study. Instead of randomly selecting only a given number of statements, all the 82 sentences found in the LOB corpus were analyzed and grouped according to their meaning and use. As it would be fastidious to quote them all in this work, three examples under the different categories are presented here as a demonstration.

1. *'satisfactory' or 'acceptable'. (17 occurrences)*

a) (...) Mr. Kennedy said to his interpreter: "Ask him if it would be **all right** to shake hands again for the photographers." (...) (text A28 – no title, lines 151-154)

b) (...) Resignedly, I telegraphed back that it was **all right** with me if he insisted. (...) (text G14 – no title, lines 174-175)

c) (...) "Will twenty minutes be **all right** for you?" (...) (text L11 – no title, line 203)

2. *in a 'satisfactory' or 'acceptable' manner (5 occurrences)*

a) (...) "I reckon we can deal with them **all right**." (...) (text N06 – no title, line 201)

b) (...) "Oh, stop your whinin'!" interrupted the gruff voice. "We'll be met **all right**." (...) (text N18 - She had to decide quickly which man to trust-and she chose the wrong one!, lines 62-63)

c) (...) "In the Sooth they don't work on any Saturdays at all, and they do **all right**." (...) (text N24 - A Night in the Firth, by John MacGillivray, lines 44-45)

*3. 'well' or 'safe' (20 occurrences)*

a) (...) "You just stick with us and you'll be **all right**." (...) (text K22 - Never speak to strange men, by Diana Athill, lines 64-65)

b) (...) "She'll be **all right**. It's the men who'll be after that coach I'm interested in, Johnny." (...) (text N06 – no title, lines 84-85)

c) (...) "Don't struggle! It's **all right**, now. I've brought the police and it will soon be over." (...) (text N18 - She had to decide quickly which man to trust-and she chose the wrong one!, lines 221-222)

*4. as an emphazizer (10 occurrences)*

a) (...) "Who wants to go sailing on dirty water? Yes, the water will be dirty **all right**." (...) (Of shoes and ships and sealing wax, Of cabbages and Kings, lines 155-156)

b) (...) He didn't know what to make of it, but it was Mr. Copthorne **all right**. (...) (text P01 – The black candle, lines 162-163)

c) (...) "They'll be sweet **all right**. I shall be dreaming of you." (...) (text P10 – no title, line 152)

*5. for agreeing (20 occurrences)*

a) (...) Bower: **All right**. I will accept probation. (...) (text A34 - Excavation Work Identifies Shrine Chapel, line 197)

b) (...) "Oh, my God! **All right**, you win!" (...) (text L01 – 'Middle of quote', line 177)

c) (...) "**All right** then. Come with me, and we'll get that bottle of beer." (...) (text N21 – At that man's mercy, lines 119-120)

6. *for checking agreement or acceptance (2 occurrences)*

a) (...) “Ten-thirty be **all right?**” (...) (text K01 – no title, line 19)

b) (...) And Celia had telephoned in the afternoon, breathlessly, saying that the car had broken down and she was bringing a friend - was that **all right?** (...) (text K28 – no title, lines 25-27)

7. *for showing understanding (1 occurrence)*

(...) “That's **all right**, you weren't to know, girl, but I don't know how Maggie will take this.” (...) (text P21 – no title, lines 42-43)

8. *for challenging or threatening (7 occurrences)*

a) (...) “**All right**, friend; stick 'em up. I'm perfectly ready to use this thing.” (...) (text L17 – no title, lines 175-176)

b) (...) “**All right**,” cut in Juarez sharply, “my crew-men are already aboard.” (...) (text N19 – He was betrayed – by the one man whose loyalty he had always taken for granted, Destination danger, by Ernest Haycox, lines 66-67)

c) (...) “**All right** - talk,” I barked. (...) (text N22 - Continuing Reveille's exciting serial, Vice King's sweetheart, Hide-and-seek with a killer, by Douglas Enefer, line 199)

The most frequent uses of *all right* in this corpus are 1, 3, and 5, respectively meanings ‘satisfactory’ or ‘acceptable’, ‘well’ or ‘safe’ and ‘for agreeing’, which account for 57 out of a total of 82 occurrences. The use of *all right* as an emphazier also seems to have established itself, with ten instances.



#### 4. Conclusions

Several principles of grammaticalization such as decategorialization, divergence, and layering have been outlined and described in the theoretical background section of this paper. I will now turn back to them and reanalyse the results obtained in the previous section in order to establish which of those principles are involved in the process of grammaticalization of *alright*. There is clear evidence from the collection of examples above that layering plays a part in the process: *all*, *right*, *all right* and *alright* all coexist, despite being different layers of the same process (*all + right* > *all right* > *alright*). The same can be said about divergence, because both the original lexical items, *all* and *right*, and the two new forms, *all right* and *alright* subsist, without the former having lost their original meanings. Looking back at the set of sentences in the first half of the 18th century, the ‘*set all right*’ combinations, we can say that they are an apparent first sign of specialization into a meaning. Persistence also seems to be present, since the original meanings of *all* (everything) and *right* (correct) persist in the grammaticalized forms, at least in some of their uses, for instance in agreements. As far as decategorialization is concerned, there should be no doubt: what formerly used to be a ‘noun + adjective/adverb combination’ has now become an adjective, an adverb, an emphasizer or a discourse marker (see sentences 7 and 8 in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Coalescence is equally noticeable, for there is clear agglutination of the two original lexical items. If we take into account that in the particular case of the form *all right* the surface structure has not changed, we can also say that reanalysis is evident. As regards subjectification and semantic change, it is true that there appears to be some loss of semantic weight, a shift from concrete to abstract, and more subjectivity. A good example of this could be the use of *alright* - the discourse marker use of the two-word form is so well established that it is conceptually fixed in speakers' minds as a single word.

The fact that *alright* is the result of a recent development does not make it a

less interesting case of grammaticalization. Quite the contrary, it is indeed satisfying to perceive that as the results and findings come to light they do support many of the existing theories of grammaticalization and diachronic change.

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