Double-checking as a second-order speech act

Questions and answers are two sides of the same coin. While questions are primarily intended to seek information, answers provide them. Although we can ask and answer questions in many ways, we typically use the default, flat-out linguistic forms—the speech acts of asking and asserting, respectively.

An influential and widespread view holds that we ask questions to gain knowledge. This stems from the conviction that "knowledge is a central sort of epistemic achievement" (Sosa 2021, 22; cf. Friedman 2020; Kelp 2021). Following this view, once we have acquired knowledge, there is no point in asking further. Let us call it the *Knowledge View* (KV).

However, we often ask further even if we already know that *p*—we verify, corroborate, confirm, or double-check whether *p*. KV wrongly predicts something improper is happening in such cases (§ I). The main goal of this paper is to propose a normative picture of speech acts (Goldberg 2015) that ask for and give more than knowledge (§ II). I also discuss some implications of my proposal (§ III).

§ I Asking and double-checking

KV has clear benefits. According to this view, the speech acts of asking (often called *inquiring*) and asserting complement each other. When inquiring, the speaker is ignorant and assumes the hearer's competence; when asserting, the situation reverses—the speaker is competent and assumes the hearer's ignorance. In normative terms, while assertions are governed by the *knowledge norm* (Williamson 2000; cf. Kelp and Simion 2021), inquiries by the *ignorance norm* (Whitcomb 2017; cf. van Elswyk and Sapir 2021).

The main challenge for KV are cases called *double-checking*, i.e., cases in which we inquire further even though we already have reliable, knowledge-level information.

Imagine the following scenario (cf. Brown 2008, 176):

> A surgeon examines a patient with a diseased kidney. She asks which kidney is diseased and establishes that it is the left one. She decides to remove it. Just before the operation, the surgeon asks her colleague to consult the patient's notes to double-check which kidney she should remove and hears that the left one. After that, she proceeds to the operation.

The surgeon asks the same question twice. Firstly, she comes to know that *p* ("the left kidney is diseased"), secondly, she double-checks whether *p*. She neither loses knowledge in the process nor forgets which kidney she has to operate on. By double-checking, she can acquire one of many epistemic goods beyond knowledge (Woodard 2022; Haziza *forthcoming*), such as certainty, knowing that she knows, understanding, increased confidence, or justification.

What is the relationship between KV and double-checking? Two approaches are available. The first tries to convince us that one who double-checks whether p does not know that p and so KV is correct (Friedman 2019; van Elswyk and Sapir 2021). The second maintains that one who double-checks knows that p and so KV is wrong (Archer 2018; Falbo 2021; Millson 2021; Woodard 2022; cf. Willard-Kyle 2023). I argue that both approaches are unsatisfactory because both wrongly treat cases of double-checking as instances of speech act of asking.

§ II The speech-act-theoretic perspective

While the currently dominant perspective is based on arguments that interrogatives consist of one type of speech act (e.g. Roberts 2018, van Elswyk and Sapir 2021), I turn to the speech-act-theoretic perspective (e.g. Searle 1969, Searle and Vanderveken 1985), according to which the interrogative mood may be used to perform various speech act types.

As an illustration, consider alethic—i.e., truth-aiming—speech acts. They can be ranked or sorted on a spectrum (credibility index, or speaker's commitment). Although assertions are the default ones, some alethic speech acts are weaker than assertions (such as guesses, or conjectures) and others are stronger (such as guarantees, or assurances). Guarantees, for instance, can be understood as second-order assertions (Turri 2010, 2013); just as *knowledge* is the norm of assertion, *second-order knowledge* (knowing that one knows) is the norm of guaranteeing.

Interrogatives exhibit analogous behaviour. While the speech act of asking is the default use of interrogative mood, we can perform other types of questions—including double-checking.

I propose that double-checking stands for asking like guaranteeing to asserting. It is thus a second-order speech act that requires more than knowledge. To meet this threshold, double-checking requires a guarantee, not an assertion, as an answer.

This proposal has two advantages. First, it does not throw out KV but limits its scope to the default question-type. Second, it respects the widely shared intuition that one can both double-check whether p and know p.

§ III Implications

The sketched proposal has broad implications. Here are three examples.

1. Uninformative speech acts

No new knowledge is gained by double-checking; rather, the answer received is uninformative, at least at the content level. The standard approach (e.g. Williamson 2000) treats such an answer as an assertion. However, because this answer provides no new information, by many accounts it is an improper assertion (e.g. Stalnaker 1978; García-Carpintero 2004).

This issue does not arise in the present account. The answer to double-checking is not an assertion, but a speech act—such as a

guarantee—regulated by a stronger norm. Importantly, such a speech act does not have to be informative.

2. Moore-paradoxical questions

Some questions are incoherent if not Moore-paradoxical (cf. Whitcomb 2017):

> (a) I know which kidney is diseased, but I wonder which one.

Following KV, the infelicity in (a) arises from the fact that one represents oneself as both knowing and now knowing whether p. However, this observation does not apply to double-checking. Consider (a'):

> (a') I know which kidney is diseased, but I double-check which one, to be sure.

Here one represents oneself as both knowing that p and investigating further. This can be done without inconsistency because the goal is to achieve other epistemic gains beyond knowledge.

3. Insincerity and lying

The consensus states that only assertions are lie-prone. By asserting p, I commit myself to p, which is necessary for lying (Marsili 2020; Viebahn 2021). Asking a default type of question carries no such commitment. Double-checking, however, seems to go against this. In such cases, one investigates further while knowing that p. Thus, double-checking can be an ingenious type of question that carries enough commitment to qualify for a lie.

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