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[gaszczyk.grzegorz@gmail.com](mailto:gaszczyk.grzegorz@gmail.com)

## Interrogatives, inquiries, and exam questions

### Abstract

The speech act of inquiry is generally treated as a default kind of asking questions. The widespread norm states that one inquires whether  $p$  only if one does not know that  $p$ . However, the fact that inquiring is just one kind of asking questions has received little to no attention. Just as in the declarative mood we can perform not only assertions, but various other speech acts, like guesses or predictions, so in the interrogative mood we can also make various speech act types. I propose a speech-act-theoretic account of a distinct kind of question that I label exam questions. According to the proposed account, one performs an exam question  $p$  only if (i) one has access to the answer to  $p$ , and (ii) one does not officially know whether the hearer knows the answer to  $p$ . Exam questions satisfy all the necessary requirements of being a distinct kind of speech act. Additionally, my proposal contributes to the recent expansion of the normative approach to a variety of speech acts.

### 1. Introduction

A lot has been said about the speech act of assertion, but recently the speech act of asking questions has been gaining more attention. The philosophical interest is concentrated on a default way of asking questions that is called *inquiring*. The speech act of inquiring is often seen as the inverse of asserting. We cannot fully understand one without the other. On the one hand, a typical answer to an inquiry is an assertion. On the other hand, just as an assertion provides information, an inquiry seeks information. Thus, when you ask, "How is the weather outside?" a cooperative thing to do is to respond with an assertion that answers this question, saying something like "It's sunny."

One way to theorise about assertions and inquiries comes from the normative approach. According to this view, speech acts are governed by constitutive norms. Consider the following parallel between the norms of assertion and inquiry. The most widespread norm of assertion is the knowledge norm (KNA) and for inquiry, it is the lack-of-knowledge norm (INQ):

**KNA** One must: assert that  $p$  only if one knows that  $p$ .<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Unger (1975), Slote (1979), Williamson (2000), DeRose (2002), Hawthorne (2003). For simplicity, I assume the correctness of KNA throughout the paper.

**INQ** One must: inquire whether  $p$  only if one does not know the answer to  $p$ .<sup>2</sup>

One of the aims of KNA is to discriminate assertion from other speech acts. Williamson suggests that “in natural languages, the default use of declarative sentences is to make assertions” (2000, 258). He refers to such default uses as flat-out assertions (2000, 246). García-Carpintero (2021, 416) observes that KNA allows us to differentiate flat-out assertions “from other specific speech acts that we also make in

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<sup>2</sup> For various versions of this claim, see e.g. Whitcomb (2010, 2017), Friedman (2017); van Elswyk and Sapir (2021) argue for INQ in non-normative terms; varieties of this view can also be found in linguistics literature, see e.g. Hintikka (1974), Farkas (2022). A weaker version of the norm of inquiry is lack-of-belief, see e.g. Friedman (2019a, 2019b), Kelp (2021a, 2021b). Some argue that, apart from INQ, there are other norms governing inquiries—for an audience-directed norm stating that an inquiry should only be directed towards the addressee that knows its answers, see Haziza (2023); for a norm proposing that one who inquiries ought to know that the inquiry has a true, complete, and direct answer, see Willard-Kyle (*forthcoming*).

I do not need to settle what questions are; for a discussion of various views on that subject, see e.g. Cross and Roelofsen (2020), Moyer and Syrett (2020).

conventional, literal uses of declarative sentences,” like predictions, or guarantees.<sup>3</sup> Assertion is considered to be one among many declarative speech act types.

At first sight, the situation seems different in the case of interrogatives since there is no morphosyntactic differentiation of different sorts of speech acts that can be performed by interrogative sentences. Following this observation, some argue that interrogatives consist of just one kind of speech act (e.g. Roberts (2018), van Elswyk and Sapir (2021)). What follows from such a *monistic* view is that inquiring has a broad extension because all interrogatives are inquiries. INQ, as the norm of inquiring, is the norm of all questions. This approach is concentrated on the semantics of interrogatives. Roberts (2018), for instance, argues for a default correlation between a particular linguistic mood and speech act type. Thus, naturally, an interrogative mood is used to make questions. Roberts claims that this correlation is sufficient to constitute a speech act type. In other words, on the locutionary level, we have fixed speech act types. Van Elswyk and Sapir (2021), on the other hand, argue that just as hedged declaratives are not governed by KNA, the

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<sup>3</sup> A thorough discussion of the nature of constitutive norms goes beyond the scope of this paper. Here is the summary of the main tenets of this approach: “The obligations these rules impose are *sui generis*, like those constitutive of games, the model on which Williamson bases his account: they do not have their source in norms of morality, rationality, prudence or etiquette. They are not *all things considered*, but *pro tanto*; in any particular case, they can be overruled by stronger obligations imposed by other norms. They are intended to characterize what is *essential* or *constitutive of assertion* (and not, as it may seem at first glance, of *correct assertion*)” (García-Carpintero 2019, 9, emphasis in original). The same considerations apply to all speech act norms. Thus, the constitutive norms are necessary for the performance of a particular speech act type. For more on the nature of constitutive norms, see e.g. Williamson (2000), Goldberg (2015), García-Carpintero (2004, 2019, 2020, 2021); cf. Simion and Kelp (2020).

same concerns questions, i.e., hedged interrogatives are not governed by INQ.<sup>4</sup> Both approaches are supposed to generalise to all interrogatives. In philosophical theorising, the monistic view is often treated as a default option because the discussion concerning questions is focused exclusively on inquiring.<sup>5</sup>

On the other side, there is a *pluralistic* view, according to which interrogatives may be used to perform various speech act types. Here inquiring has a narrow extension because it is one interrogative among others (even if it is the default one). In this sense, INQ is the norm of only some interrogatives. A pluralistic understanding of interrogatives is a traditional treatment of questions in speech act theory (e.g. Searle (1969), Searle and Vanderveken (1985)). Across the literature, we can find many labels for inquiries (like real questions, information-seeking questions, or canonical questions) that point us in the direction of the plurality of

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<sup>4</sup> Such hedges are often called d(iscourse)-markers, see e.g. Farkas (2022), cf. Benton and van Elswyk (2020). D-markers either trigger certain additional discourse effects that signal the usage of a speech act different from a default one or weaken the standard assumptions behind a default speech act.

<sup>5</sup> This is reflected in the recently discussed cases of double-checking. They are supposed to show that we can inquire whether  $p$  when we already know that  $p$ . However, if cases of double-checking are correct inquiries, INQ is wrong. Researchers who discuss such cases are divided into two camps. They say either that one who double-checks that  $p$  does not know that  $p$  and so INQ is correct (Friedman (2019a), van Elswyk and Sapir (2021)) or that in those cases one knows that  $p$  and so INQ is wrong (Archer (2018), Woodard (2021), Falbo (2021), Millson (2021)). Both camps treat cases of double-checking as inquiries, and in this sense, they assume the monistic view.

interrogatives.<sup>6</sup> Following the normative approach, just as flat-out assertions are default uses of declarative mood, inquiries are considered to be default uses of interrogative mood. Moreover, just as KNA individuates assertions from other declarative speech acts, INQ differentiates inquiries from other types of questions.<sup>7</sup>

I provide an account of one kind of asking questions that is often referred to as quiz or *exam questions*. Exam questions are types of interrogatives in which one can felicitously ask whether  $p$  while knowing the answer to  $p$  or having access to it. They are typically made in institutional contexts; for instance, when a teacher asks her student (1):

(1) When did Caesar cross the Rubicon?

It is generally assumed that the teacher does not wait to be illuminated by the student, rather she wants to verify the student's knowledge regarding the answer to (1). However, notice that, if the monistic view is correct, exam questions are in direct violation of INQ since one knows the answer to the asked question. Exam questions

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<sup>6</sup> Traditional speech act theories, like those of Searle and Vanderveken (1985), treat questions as subspecies of directives and thus classify them together with requests and commands; in this sense, questions are analysed as requests for information. Linguistic approaches (e.g. Roberts (2018)), on the other hand, start from sentence types and thus separate interrogative speech acts from imperatives (i.e., commands); here questions form a distinct category.

<sup>7</sup> Exam questions are merely an instance of an interrogative speech act. Nielsen (2020), for instance, proposes a taxonomy of interrogative speech acts based on Searle's preparatory conditions.

would then be in some sense inappropriate. However, there is nothing inappropriate in asking (1).<sup>8</sup>

The aim of this paper is to propose a speech-act-theoretic analysis of exam questions. By doing that, I show that exam questions are a distinct kind of speech act. The data on exam questions are scarce. So far they have been sparingly analysed in general discussions on interrogatives in linguistics (e.g. Åqvist (1965), Wachowicz (1974), Krifka (2015), Plunze and Zimmermann (2006), Farkas (2022), Rudin (2022), cf. Gartner and Pankau (2021)). In the philosophical literature, they have been mentioned in passing (e.g. Whitcomb (2017)). My goal is to use linguistic insights and provide an account of exam questions in the recently dominant philosophical approach to speech acts, i.e., the normative approach.

The plan is as follows. I start by introducing the basic linguistic observations for inquiring and INQ (Section 2). In the next three sections, I present my account of exam questions. Firstly, I propose a constitutive norm for exam questions (Section 3). Secondly, I show how they differ from inquiries (Section 4). I end with discussing what kind of speech acts answers to exam questions are (Section 5). In Section 6, I respond to a possible objection to my proposal. I conclude in Section 7.

## 2. Linguistic observations for inquiring

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<sup>8</sup> The idea behind monistic and pluralistic views can be applied also to other types of mood, i.e., declarative and imperative. When we look at the recent accounts of declaratives, the dominant approach is pluralistic, i.e., the speech act of assertion is considered to be one of many declaratives.

The dominant view about inquiring is INQ. I discuss three unique linguistic observations that corroborate the relationship between INQ and inquiring.<sup>9</sup> In Section 4, I compare these data points to exam questions and show that they are distinct from inquiries.

Consider firstly Moore-paradoxical inquiries:

**MOORE** Moore-paradoxical inquiries are incoherent.

There seems to be a difference between (2a-b) and (3a-b):

(2a) #It's snowing, but is it snowing?

(2b) #I know it is snowing, but is it snowing?<sup>10</sup>

(3a) I believe that it's snowing, but is it snowing?

(3b) It's snowing, I believe. But I don't know that. So, I wanted to ask you: is it snowing?

Following INQ, asking whether  $p$  implies that one does not know that  $p$ . This explains why (2a-b) are paradoxical and why (3a-b) seem to be not. Take the first pair. One first asserts that one knows that  $p$  (or simply asserts that  $p$ , which implies

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<sup>9</sup> These data points are widely accepted, see e.g. Whitcomb (2017), Friedman (2017), van Elswyk and Sapir (2021).

<sup>10</sup> The same observation can be extended to statements with interrogative attitudes (like "I wonder..." or "I'm curious..."), see e.g. Friedman (2017), Archer (2018), van Elswyk and Sapir (2021). For arguments that one can inquire further even if one knows that  $p$ , see the discussion on double-checking, for references see footnote 5.



that she knows that  $p$ ) and after that immediately asks whether  $p$ , which implies that one does not know that  $p$ . Hence, the incoherence. However, in the second pair, one does not assert that  $p$  but hedges one's assertion. This hedge indicates that one does not yet know that  $p$ . Thus, one can further inquire whether  $p$ .

The second observation concerns challenging inquiries:

**CHALLENGE** Improper inquiries can be challenged.

By INQ, an inquiry is improper if the speaker knows the answer. Imagine that I ask (1) while knowing its answer. Assume further that you discovered that fact. In such a context you can rightfully complain by saying something like (4):

(4) Why do you ask?! You know the answer!

The final observation is also broadly accepted:

**INSINCERITY** Inquiries can be misleading.

If one knows the answer to  $p$  and inquires whether  $p$ , one's inquiry can be judged as misleading. Consider again (1). If I ask (1) and know the answer to it, I can mislead you into thinking that I do not know when Caesar crossed the Rubicon.

Two caveats here. Firstly, one could forget that one knows that  $p$  and sincerely inquire whether  $p$ . Such a case can still meet resistance from the hearer:

(5a) A: Is there milk in the fridge?

(5b) B: Why do you ask?! You know the answer! You were shopping yesterday.

(5c) A: You are right. Sorry, I forgot.

Secondly, there is also another way in which a speaker can be insincere and misleading when inquiring whether  $p$ . This type of insincerity is not unique for inquiries. It follows from the observation that typically one who asks a question wants to know the answer. Thus, one can be insincere when asking whether  $p$  if one does not want to know the answer to  $p$ . For instance, knowing that your mother is sick, I can ask “How is your mother?” without being interested in knowing the answer.<sup>11</sup>

Now we can see why inquiring is a reverse of asserting and how KNA and INQ fit together. In inquiring, the speaker is ignorant and assumes the hearer's competence (or at least the speaker has a reason to believe that the hearer knows the answer). In asserting, the situation reverses. The speaker is competent and assumes

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<sup>11</sup> Recently, it has been argued that we can lie with utterances carrying projective content, i.e., with presuppositions and conventional implicatures, see e.g. Meibauer (2014), Viebahn (2020), Viebahn et al. (2021), (AUTHOR), cf. Stokke (2017). Because projective content can be embedded into questions, we can lie with questions that carry such content. However, this does not mean that we can lie with questions *qua* questions. One of the reasons is that we can lie only with propositional content and the content of questions is non-propositional (it is a set of propositions, see e.g. Cross and Roelofsen 2020). Consider the following example of lying with questions. Imagine that someone makes a false presupposition that Pompey, not Caesar, crossed the Rubicon, as in the following example: “When did Pompey cross the Rubicon?” Notice further that false presuppositions render speech acts defective, thus the above inquiry does not have a correct answer.

the hearer's ignorance.<sup>12</sup> Assertions are often seen as essentially informative speech acts (e.g. Searle (1969), Stalnaker (1974, 1978), García-Carpintero (2004, 2020), AUTHOR, cf. Pagin (2011, 2020)).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, just as it is generally considered improper to inquire when one already knows the answer, it is also improper to assert information that is already commonly known. For instance, it would be highly confusing to assert to my friend “I have a sister,” or “It’s raining” to someone standing outside in the rain. In these cases, the hearers could challenge the appropriateness of my assertions by responding something like “Why do you say that? I already know that!” In this sense inquiries and assertions complement each other. Table 1 summarises this.

	Speaker	Hearer

<sup>12</sup> Goldberg (2015, 2023; cf. Sbisà 1992), for instance, argues that performing a particular speech act generates normative expectations both in the speakers and the hearers. Among expectations that arise in assertions are the speaker’s knowledge and the hearer’s ignorance; in inquiries, these expectations reverse.

<sup>13</sup> The idea of informativeness of assertion is expressed in various ways. On the one hand, some propose a similar condition for a proper assertion, i.e., a proper assertion that *p* is such that *p* is not already common knowledge (for Searle (1969, 66), this is one of “preparatory conditions” for asserting; for Stalnaker (1978, 88-89 in 1999), this is the first “principle” about assertion; and for Farkas (2022, 326), this is one of the “default contextual assumptions characterising canonical assertions”). On the other hand, some propose that informativeness follows from our conversational patterns. García-Carpintero (2004, 2020), for instance, argues one can be criticised for asserting something that is commonly known; this follows from an observation that “when it is correct to presuppose *p*, it is incorrect to assert it” (2020, 23).

<b>Assertion</b>	Competent about $p$	Ignorant about $p$
<b>Inquiry</b>	Ignorant about $p$	Competent about $p$

Table 1. Speaker's and hearer's typical epistemic position in assertion and inquiry.

### 3. The norm of exam questions

This section is the first part of my account of exam questions. Here I deliver the core element of my proposal, i.e., the constitutive norm of exam questions.

**EQN** One must: perform an exam question  $p$  only if

- (i) one has access to the answer to  $p$ , and
- (ii) one does not officially know whether the hearer knows the answer to  $p$ .

There are two clauses in EQN. The first one states that the speaker has access to the answer to  $p$ . The requirement of the speaker's knowledge is often assumed in the literature (e.g. Whitcomb (2017, 2)). It is easy to see why: we can naturally assume that the teacher asking (1) knows the answer to (1). Nevertheless, even though the speaker often knows the answer to an exam question, they do not need to. Think about numerous game shows where hosts ask questions. They do not know the answer to each question, in fact, they may not know the answer to any of the questions. Usually, they are equipped with sheets with responses. All that is needed is for them to have access to the answers—their job is to verify the responses of the contestants. Having such access, in the case of exam questions, is a sufficient indicator of the speaker's competence regarding  $p$ .

The second clause, on the other hand, concerns the area of the speaker's ignorance—they do not officially know whether the hearer knows the answer to *p*. It employs the notion of official knowledge, which draws from the work on the notions of official and unofficial common ground (e.g. Stokke (2013, 2018), Eckardt (2014), cf. Semeijn (2017), Keiser (2020), Maier and Semeijn (2021)).<sup>14</sup> Exam questions are speech acts in which the speaker asks the hearer to display knowledge—the hearer's answer is put on record. Thus, one acquires official knowledge that *p* only if *p* is given in an official setting, such as an answer on an exam or in a game show. Consider the following example. Imagine that you inquire into (1) and I respond by saying "I think it was in 44 BC, but do not take my word for it." By saying that, I express my uncertainty in the answer I gave and, by doing that, I signal that you should not accept this answer as true. The force of my response is weaker than the force of assertion and, as a consequence, if it turns out to be false, you cannot, for instance, blame me for it. In contrast, if (1) is taken as an exam question, I cannot give the above response. In the exam setting, my hesitancy does not matter—I am expected to give an answer and this answer goes on record. This can be seen even better in the case of written test exams, where I must choose an answer. The same goes for exam questions made in the context of game shows—the hosts often ask, "Are you sure?" and the contestants say "I am not, but I choose A."

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<sup>14</sup> The available accounts are inspired by a Stalnakerian (1974, 1978) notion of common ground. They are originally used to provide a distinction between fictional or temporary and non-fictional (assertoric) content. Exam questions show that asking the same person the same question can play distinct roles in different contexts. For a discussion on keeping distinct conversational records, see e.g. Camp (2018).

Consider another reason why we impose the requirement of official knowledge in the case of exam questions. Take again (1). During the lesson, a student can answer the teacher's query correctly. However, later on, in the exam, the teacher must ask the same question again—they can know that the student knows the answer, nevertheless (1) must be asked again in the official setting to put the answer on record.<sup>15</sup>

Let us compare exam questions with inquiries. The core characteristic of an inquiry is the speaker's ignorance. In exam questions, the speaker does not expect to be illuminated by the hearer since she either already knows the answer to the question or has access to it, so in this sense she is competent. However, the speaker does not know whether the hearer knows the answer, so in this sense she is ignorant.

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<sup>15</sup> One could ask whether such a case does not point to an alternative explanation of exam questions—the one in which both sides of a conversation engage in a situational pretence. I agree that this may work in some cases. However, consider, for instance, a case of a game show in which a host asks a contestant a question to which the host does not know the answer at this very moment and she also does not know whether the contestant knows the answer. The host does not pretend to know the answer—what matters to her is recording the contestant's answer.

On the other hand, an example of a type of question which seems to involve some situational pretence is a case of a lawyer drilling her client in preparation for an appearance on the witness stand. Here the lawyer's aim is not to get the answers, but to practise delivering the answers—when asking the questions, the lawyer is already aware of the answers. In this sense, one could say that the lawyer and her client engage in a situational pretence. In the case of asking such questions, EQN is not in force since the lawyer does not ask the client to display the answers in the official settings and thus the client's answers are not put on record. The lawyer can ask the same question repeatedly and the client's answers can be different when, for instance, their strategy changes. Moreover, such questions are associated with different conversational patterns, see e.g. CHALLENGE in Section 4. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this.

The epistemic position of the hearer is also different than in inquiring. In the latter, we assume the hearer's competence. In exam questions, a teacher asks a question that in principle a student should be able to answer (i.e., information is part of the curriculum), but the teacher assumes neither competence nor ignorance of the student. The purpose of exam questions is to verify whether the hearer knows that  $p$ . Before the hearer proves that she knows the answer, the teacher *suspends* her judgement. It is why, in the hearer's epistemic position in exam questions, I leave a blank cell. Table 2 summarises this comparison.

	<b>Speaker</b>	<b>Hearer</b>
<b>Inquiry</b>	Ignorant about $p$	Competent about $p$
<b>Exam questions</b>	Competent about $p$ and ignorant whether the hearer knows $p$	

Table 2. Speaker's and hearer's typical epistemic position in inquiry and exam questions.

Some may wonder whether the usage of exam questions is not restricted to narrow, institutional contexts; and if so, then whether it imposes a challenge for my proposal. Observe first that if a speech act is made in a non-default context, then this context plays an important role in recognising the kind of speech act type that has been made. Exam questions are made in such non-default contexts. However, my proposal is essentially normative. So, independently of the context, the central idea

behind the normative approach is that constitutive norms allow for singling out speech act types. If EQN performs this task, then even if it works only in a specific context, it is sufficient to talk about exam questions. Inquiries and exam questions are distinct speech act types because they are governed by distinct constitutive norms.<sup>16</sup> Paradigmatic examples of exam questions are made in institutional contexts.<sup>17</sup> However, an *exam question* is a label for speech act type that refers to certain linguistic practice. They can be used in a variety of situations when one wants to verify the audience's knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Exam questions and inquiries

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<sup>16</sup> An anonymous reviewer asks whether exam questions are not conventional, as opposed to normative or natural speech acts. I agree with García-Carpintero (2019, 14), who argues that “for a constitutive norm to really impose any obligation, it must be in force; and its being in force might well be the result of a convention.” What matters is whether there is a linguistic practice that can be individuated by a specific constitutive norm. I argue that EQN identifies such a practice and distinct linguistic patterns in Section 4 are points in favour of it, cf. footnote 19.

<sup>17</sup> Notice that there are genuine speech acts that are restricted to certain specific contexts, like teaching or reporting the news; for a normative account of reporting, see e.g. Simion (2017).

<sup>18</sup> Exam questions can also be expressed in the imperative mood. Instead of (1), the teacher could say

(i):

(i) Tell me when Caesar crossed the Rubicon!

Following the speech act theoretic perspective, questions are treated as directives (see footnote 6), and thus they belong to the same species of speech acts as requests and orders. Such utterances as (i) can be naturally paraphrased into questions. Just as standard cases of exam questions, they are subjects of EQN. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this.



If exam questions are indeed distinct speech acts from inquiries, they should deliver different results for at least some data points from Section 2.<sup>19</sup>

Let us start with MOORE. One explanation of moore-paradoxical inquiries is that they are incoherent because of the violation of INQ, i.e., one should not inquire whether  $p$  if one knows the answer to  $p$ . Assuming that (6a-b) are exam questions such that the speaker knows the answer to, they seem to be infelicitous.<sup>20</sup>

(6a) #I know that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC, but did Caesar cross the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC?

(6b) #I wonder whether Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC, but Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC.

Notice that if we treat (6a-b) as inquiries, they are moore-paradoxical since in these cases I both assert that  $p$  and inquire whether  $p$ . If we treat (6a-b) as exam questions, they are infelicitous and self-defeating since one gives an answer to the question that is supposed to be answered. However, they are not moore-paradoxical exam

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<sup>19</sup> Delivering different results for the data does not automatically mean that exam questions constitute a distinct speech act type from inquiries. Still, it is a strong indicator in favour of this claim. For a discussion of whether such data points can be used as tests for being a particular speech act, on the example of assertions, see Montminy (2020), (AUTHOR). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this.

<sup>20</sup> For simplicity, in the examples that follow, I assume that the speaker knows that  $p$ . The same results can be acquired when the speaker has access to  $p$ , as it is in (i):

(i) #I have access to information that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC, but did Caesar cross the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC?

questions because such questions must be about what the speaker does not know, i.e., about whether the speaker officially knows whether the hearer knows the answer to  $p$ . Thus, (7a-b) should exemplify moore-paradoxical exam questions. Assume that they are made right after a student gives the correct answer to an examiner to question (1), i.e., when the examiner knows that the student knows the answer to (1).

(7a) #I officially know that you know that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC, but I wonder whether you know that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC.

(7b) #I wonder whether you know that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC, but I officially know that you know that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC.<sup>21</sup>

In (7a) the examiner firstly asserts that she knows that the student knows that  $p$ , and secondly makes an exam question asking the student whether  $p$ , hence the incoherence. (7b) reverses these two parts. Thus, we can make moore-paradoxical exam questions. However, notice that (7a-b) could be treated as moore-paradoxical

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<sup>21</sup> Intuitions in moorean cases may vary and for some (7a-b) may sound strange (or more strange than standard moorean statements). So, consider a case that I take to be a slightly more natural equivalent to (7a):

(i) #Here I have the results of your exam and it's on record that you know that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC, but I wonder whether you know that Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC.

inquiries too since they express the standard form of such inquiries, i.e., asserting that  $p$  and asking whether  $p$ ; (7a-b) just have a more complex structure. Thus, when it comes to MOORE, we can conclude that exam questions do not differ from inquiries.<sup>22, 23</sup>

What about CHALLENGE? If one inquires whether  $p$  while knowing that  $p$ , one's inquiry can be challenged. Exam questions behave differently. Take (8):

(8a) A: When did Caesar cross the Rubicon?

(8b) B: #You know the answer!

(8c) A: Of course, I know the answer. This is not relevant; the question is whether *you* know!

B's response is improper since (8a) is asked in the context in which B knows that A knows the answer to (8a). Just as inquiries generate the implicature that one does not

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<sup>22</sup> This result may not be surprising for many readers. MOORE can be used as one of the criteria to verify whether a particular speech act is an assertion (or an inquiry), but it does not filter many other declarative and non-declarative speech acts (e.g., swearing, promising, ordering, see e.g., Searle and Vanderveken (1985), Woods (2018)). Thus, the fact that exam questions also are moore-paradoxical is hardly an argument against their speech-act-hood.

<sup>23</sup> There are differences between these two speech acts in cases that resemble moore-paradoxical utterances. (i) is a correct (even though a bit odd) case of an exam question, but is not more-paradoxical because both parts refer to different agents, i.e., the first concerns the teacher's and the second student's mental state. However, if (i) was treated as an inquiry, it would be an improper one because it violates INQ.

(i) I know when Caesar crossed the Rubicon, but I wonder whether you know it.

know that  $p$ , in the case of exam questions it is common knowledge that the speaker knows the answer or has access to it. Because of that, challenging an exam question would meet rather confusion and resistance. Additionally, because exam questions assume the speaker's competence, lack of it on the speaker's side is also considered to be inappropriate:

(9a) A: When did Caesar cross the Rubicon?

(9b) B: Sorry, I don't know the answer. Can you tell me?

(9c) A: #Sorry, I don't know either, that is why I was asking you.

Finally, consider INSINCERITY. Knowing that  $p$  and inquiring whether  $p$  can be judged as misleading. However, this does not apply to exam questions. Following EQN, the speaker asks whether  $p$  while having access to the answer to  $p$ . This is not misleading to the hearer because the hearer assumes the speaker's competence.

I mentioned that there is also a type of insincerity that is universal for all interrogatives, i.e., one may ask whether  $p$  and not wanting to know the answer to  $p$ . In principle, it also applies to exam questions, but I understand that intuitions can

vary. The reason is that it does not really matter whether a teacher wants to hear the answer from her student. What matters is properly assessing it.<sup>24</sup>

If exam questions would be reducible to inquiries, they would deliver the same results as inquiries to *all* the above linguistic observations. Because this is not the case, these findings strengthen the case for the distinctiveness of exam questions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In footnote 11 I noticed that we can lie with projective content embedded in questions. This is also true for exam questions. Consider the same example with a false presupposition: “When did Pompey cross the Rubicon?” Independently whether we treat this example as an inquiry or an exam question, it is a defective question. The difference is that if this would be an inquiry then it does not have a correct answer, however, if this would be an exam question on a multiple-choice exam, then one of the possible answers could be correct, for example, “It was Caesar, not Pompey, who crossed the Rubicon.”

<sup>25</sup> An anonymous reviewer asks whether inquiries and exam questions are not the same speech act type of asking the hearer to provide the correct answer. Their difference would lie not in the type of performed speech act (on the illocutionary level), but in the reasons for making it (perlocutionary level). Such an approach would be monistic in nature. Moreover, one could go further and group all questions together—by arguing that all directives constitute one speech act type of attempting to get the hearer to do something (see Searle 1975, 355). This way of thinking would not reflect the complexity of our linguistic practices. We do distinguish between questions, orders, and requests. It is why my starting point is pluralistic. Following the normative approach, I am first and foremost interested in individuating speech act types and “asking the hearer to provide the correct answer” is neither distinctive for inquiring nor for exam questions. The data in Section 4 show that these speech acts are associated with different linguistic patterns. Finally, perlocutions understood as characteristic aims of speech acts are closely connected with their illocutionary counterparts. Traditionally, some illocutionary acts can share a perlocutionary aim (e.g., assertives aim at truth), nevertheless, such illocutionary acts have different characteristics. Thus, this proposal lacks the resources to distinguish between the aforementioned speech acts.

I want to end this section with a brief comparison of my proposal with two recent monistic views that mention exam questions.<sup>26</sup> Farkas (2022) distinguishes between canonical and non-canonical questions, where the former correspond to inquiries and which properties “should be treated as default assumptions that follow from the semantics of interrogatives and their effects on context structure” (2022, 296); the basic assumptions of such questions are summarised in Table 1. Non-canonical questions, on the other hand, are questions that depart from these assumptions. Exam questions are one type of such questions. Farkas argues that “Whether a question is interpreted as [an inquiry] or as [an exam] question depends on assumptions the discourse participants make concerning the context they are in, and the reasons that drive the speaker to utter the interrogative sentence” (2022, 298). An unhedged interrogative statement can be used to ask both canonical and non-canonical types of questions. In the case of exam questions, the default assumptions of inquiries (canonical questions in Farkas’ terms) are overridden.

The speech-act-theoretic approach, which I favour, ascribes distinct felicity conditions to inquiries and other types of questions. Thus, even though inquiries are default uses of interrogative mood, in speech act theory, other types of questions are not individuated and constituted in opposition to inquiries. Rather, by the normative account, they are individuated and constituted by distinct norms. Thus, while Farkas characterises exam questions as questions that override the default assumptions

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<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to discuss these views.

behind inquiries, I treat them as distinct speech act types governed by a unique norm.<sup>27</sup>

Another approach comes from Rudin (2022) who focuses on the so-called rising declaratives, i.e., the utterances that are accompanied by rising intonation that behave like biased questions; they share some features with assertions (project only one common ground) and with questions (they lack speaker commitment). (10) is an instance of such an utterance:

(10) Caesar crossed the Rubicon?

I agree with Rudin that “different discourse moves give rise to different inferences about the speaker’s epistemic bias toward some proposition  $p$ , and also the speaker’s expectation of the addressee’s epistemic bias toward  $p$ ” (2022, 365). Compare inquiries and exam questions: in each case, both the speaker and the hearer stand in different epistemic positions (as Table 2 indicates). Rudin relies on conversational maxims that are inspired by Grice’s Quality and Quantity maxims. His verdict for exam questions is that such questions are “intuitively uncooperative, in the narrow sense of the maximally efficient, rational exchange of information—the speaker is not trying to efficiently exchange information; he’s trying to get his students to prove whether or not they’ve learned the material” (2022, 371).

Just as in the case of Farkas’ view, Rudin takes inquiries as a reference point for all other interrogative speech acts. Rudin’s understanding of uncooperativeness

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<sup>27</sup> I devote Section 6 to argue against the view that exam questions are cases of overriding the norm of inquiry.

in the case of exam questions does not imply that they are improper. Nevertheless, they depart from the default, “maximally efficient, rational exchange of information” (2022, 371). My proposal, as I indicated above, is that the differences between interrogative speech acts can be accounted for without characterising them in opposition to inquiries. What is essential is whether there is a linguistic practice that can be individuated by a specific constitutive norm.

##### 5. The answers to exam questions

Questions and answers are two sides of the same coin. For inquiries, we have assertions. What kind of speech acts are answers to exam questions (henceforth, *exam answers*)? It seems that assertions are natural candidates. However, some accounts of assertion treat it as an essentially informative speech act that introduces information that  $p$  into the discourse record. Exam answers however are uninformative because the speaker knows that the hearer is already competent regarding the answer to the question. These speech acts merely inform that the speaker knows that  $p$ . In this section, I discuss this problem and sketch two potential solutions.

Various versions of the norm of assertion deliver a different answer to the question “What is an assertion?” The default type of norms are so-called speaker-centred-norms, i.e., norms that focus on the epistemic position of the speaker. KNA is such a norm because the requirement for a proper assertion that it specifies concerns the speaker. Here are other examples of such norms, i.e., truth norm (TNA), reasonableness norm (RNA), and one knowledge-based norm of assertion, namely, being in a position to know (PTK):



(TNA) One must: assert that  $p$  only if  $p$ . (Weiner 2005)

(RNA) One should: assert that  $p$  only if it is reasonable for one to believe that  $p$ .

(Lackey 2007)<sup>28</sup>

(PTK) One should: assert that  $p$  only if one is in a position to know that  $p$ .

(Willard-Kyle 2020)

As an example of an exam question and its answer, take the question (1) asked by a teacher during an exam and the student's correct answer to it:

(11) Caesar crossed the Rubicon on January 10th 49 BC.

All the above speaker-centred-norms would classify (11) as an assertion. Norms like (KNA) and (TNA) are straightforward, i.e., the student's assertion is knowledgeable and true, respectively. (RNA) and (PTK) are slightly more complicated, i.e., according to (RNA) an assertion should be reasonable for the student to believe, and according to (PTK) the student should be in a position to know  $p$ .<sup>29</sup> (11) satisfies both conditions, i.e., it is reasonable for the student to believe that (11) is true and the student is in a position to know (11).

Consider now accounts that place informativeness of assertions in the centre. Following Table 1, a typical assertion is such that a hearer is ignorant of its content.

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<sup>28</sup> Lackey's norm is more complex, but this formulation is sufficient here.

<sup>29</sup> Willard-Kyle and García-Carpintero, whose norm I will shortly introduce, follow Williamson's (2000, 95) use of "being in a position to know;" here is an excerpt from Williamson: "Thus, being in a position to know, like knowing but unlike being physically and psychologically capable of knowing, is factive: if one is in a position to know  $p$ , then  $p$  is true."

The speaker-centred-norms do not reflect this fact. Thus, consider the so-called audience-centred-norms of assertion, according to which the epistemic position of the audience, not the speaker, licences proper assertion. Here is an example of the knowledge-based norm of assertion, similar to (PTK) but directed towards the audience (PTK-A):

PTK-A: One must: assert that  $p$  only if one's audience comes thereby to be in a position to know that  $p$ . (García-Carpintero 2004)

Assertions are the default way of using the declarative mood. However, this assumption can be overridden, for instance, by using hedging or by making a declarative in a non-default context. García-Carpintero (2004, 156) lists some additional overrides that result in performing a different speech act from assertion, and one of them is the context of exams. Thus, according to his proposal, (11) is not an assertion. Why impose such a restriction? Firstly, exam questions and exam answers are conventional speech acts made in non-default contexts. Such contexts often suspend default communicative norms. Thus, these speech acts cannot be governed by the same norms as ordinary questions and their answers (i.e., inquiries

and assertions, respectively).<sup>30</sup> Secondly, (11) does not satisfy PTK-A since the teacher does not come to be in a position to know (11) because she already knows it.<sup>31</sup>

Keeping in mind the fact that the exam answers are both informative (they answer whether the hearer knows that  $p$ ) and uninformative ( $p$  is already known by the speaker), I see two potential ways of responding to the question “What kind of speech acts are exam answers?”

The first possibility is that they are assertions. This is a default option and most norms of assertion allow for reasserting the same content. Additionally, it has been argued that arbitrarily restricting the scope of assertion risks trivialising the significance of this notion (cf. Weiner 2005), and not allowing for reasserting may seem to impose such a restriction. What about the informativeness of assertions, and norms like PTK-A? One possibility is to argue that responses to exam questions can be used to show that assertions do not always transfer new information (cf.

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<sup>30</sup> Exam questions and exam answers, by all means, are not exceptions in generating non-default contexts. There is an extensive debate regarding various kinds of speech acts that are made in such contexts (e.g., anonymously, in science, or philosophy). Take the case of assertions made in philosophy (e.g., in discussions or publications). There are three camps in this debate. The first one argues that they are assertions, and following KNA, if one publishes something that one does not know, one’s assertion is improper (e.g., Williamson 2000, 258). The second camp also proposes to treat them as assertions but simultaneously relaxes for them the default attitude in assertions, i.e., belief, and proposes different ones (e.g., *regarding-as-defensible* (Goldberg 2015, ch. 11)). Finally, the third camp argues that speech acts made in philosophy are not assertions, but distinct kinds of speech acts (e.g., *contentions* (Montminy 2020), *stipulations* (Shields 2020)).

<sup>31</sup> Hinchman (2013) and Pelling (2013) propose similar norms of assertion. For more on the informative accounts of assertion, see footnote 13.

Montminy 2020). Another is to argue that exam questions and exam answers are cases that override the norm of assertion (I criticise this solution in the next section).

The second possibility is that answers to exam questions are unique conventional speech acts. Just as we can distinguish exam questions from inquiries, we can also discriminate exam answers from assertions. Even though exam answers show that a proper and full answer to a question can be uninformative regarding  $p$ , some may doubt that there can be a speech act that differs from asserting just by being uninformative.<sup>32</sup> However, an exam answer is not essentially about being uninformative, rather it is a speech act that allows for tracking what counts as a proper answer to an exam question. Proposing answering as a distinct speech act is consistent with norms like PTK-A but imposes a challenge for norms like KNA.

My aim was to point out this issue, but more must be said about when it is appropriate to reassert the content that is already known by both parties of the conversation. Table 3 compares exam questions with exam answers.

	Speaker	Hearer
Exam questions	Competent about $p$ and ignorant whether the	

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<sup>32</sup> Consider that an exam answer is not the only speech act that can be uninformative; one can *remind* the hearer of something that was already asserted (when one has a reason to believe that the hearer forgot that  $p$ ). Interestingly, just as exam answers, the speech act of reminding is not an assertion according to PTK-A (here too the audience does not come to be in a position to know); for a discussion, see (AUTHOR).

	hearer knows $p$	
<b>Exam answers</b>	Competent about $p$	Competent about $p$

Table 3. Speaker's and hearer's typical epistemic position in exam questions and exam answers.

#### 6. Possible objection: exam questions as special cases of inquiries

In this final section, I want to discuss a potential counterargument to my proposal. Some may still be hesitant both in treating exam questions as a distinct kind of speech act and in the idea behind the pluralistic view. They can argue that exam questions are just special cases of inquiries, simply inquiries in which one asks for and can obtain knowledge about the hearer's knowledge.

The argument can go as follows: exam questions can be seen as cases of overriding INQ. Consider assertions. One can violate KNA and still perform an assertion. A straightforward example is lying, i.e., asserting something one believes to be false with an intention to deceive. However, cases of overriding norms are different. Simion (2019, 7) proposes what I take to be the most sophisticated version of the argument from overriding norms. She presents two ways in which overriding norms may affect our actions:

Override1. They can render an action all-things-considered improper altogether.

Override2. They can modify the requirements for all-things-considered propriety up or down.

Here are cases that Simion uses to illustrate both overrides. In the first one, during a game of chess, someone threatens to kill you if you make any move. In this case, following a rule of chess (making any correct move) is all-things-considered improper since the rules of chess are overridden by moral and practical norms which render the relevant chess move improper. This is Override1. An example of Override2 is the following: there is a bomb that only you can defuse, but in order to get into the place where the bomb is in time, you must exceed the speed limit. Here you are morally obliged to defuse the bomb, and because of that, the moral norm overrides the norm of the speed limit. The latter norm is still in force; however, a moral norm modifies the requirement for all-things-considered proper action, i.e., you can speed up to get in time to defuse the bomb.

Which type of override can be applied to exam questions? It seems that Override1 does not work for exam questions since it renders an action all-things-considered improper. However, there is nothing improper in asking an exam question. So let us focus on Override2 and assume that exam questions are inquiries that override INQ. A teacher violates INQ since she knows the answer to the question she asks; however, she does not want to mislead a student or be uncooperative; rather, she has practical reasons for asking the question, i.e., she wants to verify whether the student knows the answer to the question she asks. Following Override2, practical reasons behind exam questions override INQ and modify it to render asking exam questions permissible actions. Thus, it seems that exam questions can be treated as special cases of inquiries.

Here is my reply. Consider that even if it is justified to override a norm, such a case always is a violation of the norm in question and as such can be criticised. Take

the case above. We can agree that you *should* violate the norm of the speed limit, even more, your action is excusable and even praiseworthy. However, simultaneously, it is correct to say that you broke the norm and can receive the speed ticket, which shows that the action was a violation of the norm of the speed limit. The same applies to exam questions. In the proposed solution, the teacher still violates INQ and thus can be criticised or at least asked for an explanation. However, she neither does something improper nor violates any norm. I discussed conversational patterns that show that criticising the teacher is inappropriate. Thus, exam questions are not reducible to cases of overriding the norm of inquiry.<sup>33</sup>

## 7. Conclusions

My aim was to propose a speech-act-theoretic account of exam questions. In its centre, as it is in the normative framework, lies the constitutive norm of exam questions. This is a first normative treatment of a different kind of question than the default one, i.e., inquiring. I want to end with a note on how exam questions fit and contribute to the normative approach. I think that they point to a new direction of the expansion of this approach. At the beginning of the new wave of the normative view, i.e., the first decade of the 20th century, the focus was exclusively on assertion and a plethora of norms have been proposed. Recently, however, it has been applied to various kinds of declarative speech acts. To mention just a few, guaranteeing (Turri 2013), retracting (MacFarlane 2014), or reporting (Simion 2017). Some of these speech acts can be distinguished from assertions by means of some kinds of hedgings (like, in the case of retracting, “I take that back,” or “I retract that”), some

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<sup>33</sup> The same argument can be applied to exam answers.

by means of being uttered in non-standard contexts (like the speech act of reporting or analysed in this paper exam answers), and some can be uttered in both ways (like the speech act of guaranteeing that can be made explicitly, i.e., “I guarantee you that *p*,” or in a non-standard, like high-stake, context just by uttering “*p*”).<sup>34</sup> So far, the only non-declarative outliers were inquiring and fiction-making (e.g. García-Carpintero (2013)). Exam questions are a new addition to this shortlist. Therefore, the presented analysis of exam questions can be seen not only as delivering an explanation of exam questions in normative terms, but also as giving more reasons that the usage of the normative approach can be extended beyond declarative speech acts.

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<sup>34</sup> See Turri (2010).



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