# Assertion and Rejection

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**Abstract**

This chapter is about the speech act of rejection and its relation to assertion. One question is whether rejection can be reduced to assertion, as was suggested by Frege. I present two arguments against this. The first argument is that linguistic data shows that some rejections are not equivalent to negative assertions, as there are cases where it is proper to reject a claim *and* its negation. The second argument is that the speech act of rejection fulfills a particular linguistic *need*: the need to register mistakes. This need, I argue, cannot be fulfilled by an assertoric speech act. Both observations suggest a natural characterisation of rejection in the *normative conception* of speech acts. I clarify and elaborate the normative conception by comparing it to the game of chess and then locate rejection's place in it.

# 1 Introduction

> [N]egative judgments ... are regarded as the jealous enemies of our unceasing endeavour to extend our knowledge, and it almost requires an apology to win for them even tolerance, not to say favour and high repute.
>
> (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*)

The study of assertion is a mainstay in both philosophy and linguistics—and quite a few things seem to hinge on what exactly assertions are. To name just a few: If assertions are, roughly, presentations of truth-apt contents, then we can draw conclusions about truth-functional semantics from which sentences can be correctly asserted in which circumstances; if, as Frege (1879) suggested, logic tells us which conclusions we may correctly assert given previously asserted premisses, the study of correct assertion elucidates what logic is (Dummett, 1991); and if correct assertion is intimately connected to knowledge, we can draw conclusions about the nature of knowledge from the nature of assertion (Williamson, 2000).

But it seems that which assertions can be *correctly rejected* is equally relevant for such questions.[1] This point is not new, of course. *Disagreement data* like the following have been the subject of much theorising. Roughly, briefly, and contentiously, the contrast in (1)/(2) seems to show that epistemic *might* cannot have the exact same meaning as *for all I know*, since (1a) is correctly rejectable by (1b), whereas (2a) is not (von Fintel and Gillies, 2007). Similar observations can be made in other domains, e.g. disagreement about taste,

[1] In my terminology, *assertion* and *rejection* are speech acts that correspond to the attitudes of *assent* and *dissent*, respectively. Some say that *rejection* is the attitude corresponding to the speech act of *denial*, but such differences are merely terminological.

morals or aesthetics.

(1) a. A: The keys might be in the car.

b. B: (No,) you're wrong! I checked the car.

(2) a. A: For all I know, the keys are in the car.

??b. B: (No,) you're wrong! I checked the car.

Examining correct rejectability here seems to reveal something that might have been lost if only correct assertibility had been considered, since, arguably, (1a) and (2b) are correctly assertible in the same contexts.

I will largely focus on rejections of assertions here, but it is worth observing that data about the correct rejectability of non-assertoric speech acts may be similarly elucidating. For example, the fact that rejections of imperative sentences can feature a future modal *will* seems to reveal something about imperatives that cannot be read off their surface form: that they feature a covert *will* (Geach, 1958); or that they operate on a future-oriented contextual resource (Portner, 2017); or that establishing obligations leads to certain future-oriented implicatures (Kaufmann, 2012).

(3) a. A: Go home!

b. B: (No,) I won't!

(4) a. A: You must go home!

??b. B: (No,) I won't!

The jury is very much still out on what precisely we learn from such data. My point here is merely that the jury will benefit from some serious study into what it means to correctly reject something. Yet, the speech act of rejection

has been somewhat neglected (particularly when compared to assertion). This is one of Frege's many legacies. In his *Die Verneinung*, he argued that it is useless to consider rejection on its own terms, as the job of rejection is done by negative assertion. Rejection is a shadow thrown by assertion; a 'futile complication' that 'cometh of evil' (Geach, 1965). I will argue that this view is mistaken.

An important concept in the foregoing discussion, at least for the purposes of this chapter, is *correctness*. Not all assertions and rejections are *correct*. Some are *incorrect* in that they are violating some convention associated with these speech acts. Following Williamson (1996, 2000), it has become popular to *characterise* speech acts *by* the norms that are essential for their correct performance. (But even those who do not accept that such norms *characterise* speech acts accept that there *are* norms governing speech acts.) I am sympathetic to this and will attempt in Section 4 to spell out in some more detail what this view amounts to.

However, I will argue in this chapter, the speech act of rejection seems to catch this *normative conception of speech acts* in a dilemma. The argument, in brief, goes as follows. On the one hand, rejection is clearly also a norm-governed act and thus should also be characterised by a norm.[2] But on the other hand, rejection appears to be the device *by which one registers* that some other speech act is in violation of its norm. Such a device is needed in order to even start telling a story about how discourse is a norm-governed activity. Thus, it seems that we need rejection before we can characterise rejection

[2]Not much has been said in the literature about what this view is; Leila Bussière (ms.) considers various accounts of assertion and spells out what norms of rejection naturally follow from considering rejection as a sort of dual of or foil to assertion.

(or any other speech act) by its essential norm. The regress is vicious. Thus, we need to stipulate rejection as a primitive that is not itself definable by a norm. While this may appear to be a *reductio* of the normative conception, I argue that some version of this problem will afflict any method to define what assertion is: one always needs rejection as a additional primitive and cannot define it using the terms one used to define assertion.

This chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, I argue that the study of rejection must free itself from Frege's grasp because *rejections can be weak*, i.e. there are rejecting speech acts not reducible to assertions of negatives. Afterwards, in Section 3, I argue that rejections cannot be reduced to assertions *at all*. The discussion there suggests an account of rejection as pointing out *norm violations*. To investigate this further, I elaborate in Section 4 a story about how speech acts can be characterised by their essential norms by comparing discourse to another rule-governed activity: the game of chess. With these preliminaries in place, I further investigate in Section 5 what the normative conception would have to say about rejection. I argue that rejection is subject to some essential norm, but cannot be *defined* solely by that norm. I conclude with some further commentary in Section 6.

## 2 Rejections are weak

The seminal work about rejection is Frege's *Die Verneinung* (1919). In what is today known as the *Frege–Geach Argument* (Geach, 1965; Schroeder, 2008), Frege considers valid inferences like (5) and two possible analyses (6) and (7).

(5) a. If the accused was not in Berlin, he did not commit the murder.

b. The accused was not in Berlin.

$\therefore$ c. He did not commit the murder.

(6) a. Assert: If not $p$, then not $q$.

b. Assert: Not $p$.

$\therefore$ c. Assert: Not $q$.

(7) a. Assert: If not $p$, then not $q$.

b. Reject: $p$.

$\therefore$ c. Reject: $q$.

The analysis (6) straightforwardly explains the validity of (5) as an application of *modus ponens*. The analysis (7) however is less straightforward. Frege stresses that the *embedded* use of *not* in (5) cannot be an expression of a negative judgement (i.e. a rejection) and must be an embeddable negation. But this means that if we analyse (5) as (7), we need a lot of machinery to explain the validity of (5)—machinery that was not needed to explain (5) as (6). At least we will need some principle that establishes a connection between rejection and the embeddable negation operator. Frege does not deny that such principles can be found, he merely thinks it would be unparsimonious to add such additional principles given that the straightforward analysis (6) is available.[3]

[3] An early response to this argument is due to Kent Bendall (1979). Frege burdens the defender of a distinct speech act for rejection with *three* basic operations—rejection, assertion and an embeddable operator *not*. As one only needs assertion and negation, Frege concludes, rejection should be dropped on grounds of parsimony. But Bendall shows that one can give a classical propositional calculus in which there are no embedded negations; hence one only needs to assume rejection and assertion; so parsimony does not decide between assertion+negation and assertion+rejection.

There is however an ambiguity in Frege's argument. He characterises rejections as negative answers to polar questions (p153). There are two possible ways to answer a polar question negatively: one can answer with a sentence containing a negation (8a) and by using a polarity particle (8b).

(8) Is it the case that *p*?

a. It is not the case that *p*.

b. No.

The ambiguity exists in the original German; the word *Verneinung* (lit. 'noing') can denote both the act of responding with *no* (German, *nein*) and the negation operator in the logician's sense. In *Die Verneinung*, Frege appears to use the forms in (8) interchangably, but in the later *Gedankengefüge* (1923) he is explicit that (8b) is the *Verneinung* of *p*. In fact, the form (8b) is more congenial to Frege's discussion. When analysing (5), an important part of Frege's argument argument was that rejections cannot embed in the antecedent of a conditional. And indeed, negative answers to self-posed polar questions do not embed like this: *if is it the case that p? No, then ...* is incomprehensible, as noted by Ian Rumfitt (2000).

If one performs a rejection of some proposition *p* by putting the polar question *is it the case that p?* to oneself and answering negatively with *No!*, then it makes sense to say that one performs an assertion by answering positively with *yes* (Smiley, 1996). This is already observed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*, paragraph 22.

> We could very well write each assertion in the form of a question with an affirmative placed after it; for example 'Is it raining?

Yes!'.[4]

Thus, we may analyse assertions of $p$ by considering utterances of the form (9a); rejections of $p$ by considering utterances of the form (9b); and negative assertions by considering utterances of the form (9c). This gives us a linguistic grip on investigating the relationship between rejection and negative assertion.

(9) a. Is it the case that $p$? Yes!

b. Is it the case that $p$? No!

c. Is it the case that not $p$? Yes!

There is an imprecision. Here, one uses the polarity particles *yes* and *no* to respond to *self*-posed questions to perform assertions and rejections. But typically, we think of these particles as responding to *other speakers* speech acts—and we also frequently think of rejections as responding other speakers. This disentangles as follows. We can do *logic* by asserting and rejecting some propositions to ourselves and investigating what follows from this; this is Frege's concern. But we can use the same speech acts in dialogue as well. It is clumsy, but not incorrect, to reject (10a) with (10b).[5]

(10) a. A: The accused was in Berlin.

b. B: Was the accused in Berlin? No!

[4]My translation. Original German:

> Wir könnten sehr gut auch jede Behauptung in der Form einer Frage mit nachgesetzter Bejahung schreiben; etwa: 'Regnet es? Ja!'.

[5]There is more to say about the difference between rejections *of propositions* in solipsistic deliberation and rejections *in dialogue*. I return to this in Section 5.

Frege claims that rejections are just negative assertions, i.e. that (9b) is to be analysed as (9c). However, as incisively argued by Timothy Smiley (1996), Frege only succeeds in showing that *not* is not an indicator for rejection, due to the fact that *not* embeds. Thus (7) is not the correct analysis of (5). But one may now ask whether (7) might be the correct analysis of (11).

(11) a. If the accused was not in Berlin, he did not commit the murder.

b. Was the accused in Berlin? No!

∴ c. Did he commit the murder? No!

As before, this appears to be a valid inference and we should be able to give some explanation of its validity. Supposedly, Frege might insist that for reasons of parsimony the two forms of *Verneinung* in (8) are to be analysed the same, their divergent embedding behaviour notwithstanding. Thus, he might insist that it is most parsimonious to analyse (11) as (6) as well.

Smiley counters that there is nothing unparsimonious in introducing additional machinery (such as a conception of rejection distinct from negative assertion) if it accounts for additional data. Smiley appears to think that differences in embedding behaviour suffice to establish that (11) is new data not accounted for by Frege. But this might be begging the question against Frege—after all, the deviant embedding behaviour of rejections is *why* Frege seeks to analyse it away.

There is, however, additional data that gives succor to Smiley (Incurvati and Schlöder, 2017). Say that a rejection of some proposition $p$ is *strong* if it is equivalent to the assertion of *not* $p$, i.e. if instead of rejecting $p$ one had asserted *not* $p$ nothing else would have been different. Call a rejection

*weak* if it is not strong. Many accounts of rejection have it that all rejections are strong. For example, according to Frege (1919), all rejections of any $p$ are strong because they simply *are* assertions of *not p*; according to Rumfitt (2000), from a rejection of $p$ one can infer exactly what one can infer from the assertion of *not p* (in the same context);[6] according to Smiley (1996), given a world model rejecting $p$ is correct if and only if asserting *not p* is correct.

Imogen Dickie (2010) argues that some rejections are weak. Some of her examples are in (12).

(12) a. Did Homer write the *Iliad*? No! Actually Homer did not exist.

b. Was Homer a unicorn? No! There is no such property as the property of being a unicorn.

Clearly, such rejections cannot be strong, as, for example, if (12a) is interpreted as a strong rejection, the speaker has performed a speech act that is equivalent to the assertion of *Homer did not write the Iliad*. But this is clearly not the case, as she would reject *Homer did not write the Iliad* on the same grounds that led her to reject *Homer wrote the Iliad*. The same goes for (12b). Such data seem to doom the Fregean project of reducing rejection to assertion—but it equally troubles Smiley (1996) and Rumfitt (2000), who still maintain that all rejections are strong.

One's initial reaction may be to point out that the rejections in (12) have a certain meta-linguistic character. They reject their prejacent on the grounds that some term therein does not refer. Thus, a story might go, these prejacents are already unsuitable for logical theorising. Once we have excised

[6] Rumfitt (2000) seems to think that his account includes the possibility that rejections are weak; but Rumfitt (2014) concedes that this was mistaken.

such defective sentences from our attention (and dealt with them using extraneous, extra-logical, meta-linguistic means), we are left with strong rejections.

There are three things wrong with this story. First, the paradigm cases of meta-linguistic rejections are utterances like (13).

(13) Did we buy poh-tah-toes? No! We bought po-tay-toes.

The speaker of (13) rejects the *presentation* of the prejacent, but agrees with its content: that they bought potatoes. This means in particular that they would not reject an alternative presentation (here, one with an alternative pronunciation). This is not so in the cases in (12). There are no alternative presentations of *Did Homer write the Iliad?* or *Was Homer a unicorn?* to which the speaker would respond *Yes!*.

Second, the rejections in (12) appear to feature in bona fide logical inferences. Consider (14), featuring (12a) as its minor premiss.

(14) a. If Homer did not write the *Iliad*, the author of the *Iliad* is unknown.
b. Did Homer write the *Iliad*? No! Actually, Homer did not exist.
$\therefore$ c. Is the author of the *Iliad* unknown? Yes!

This is clearly valid. Thus, it is mistaken to say that rejections like (14b) are defective in a way that makes them unsuitable for logical reasoning.[7]

Third, there are perfectly respectable rejections that have non-defective antecedents, but clearly should be analysed as weak.[8]

[7] Incurvati and Schlöder (2017) describe a logic that validates inferences like (14)

[8] Examples (15) and (16) are derived from an example by Grice (1991) and have previously been discussed in Incurvati and Schlöder (2017, 2019); example (17) is adapted from an example by Williamson (1996).

(15) Is it the case that X or Y will win the election?

No! X or Y or Z will win!

(16) Is it the case that X or Y will win the election?

No! Z might win!

(17) This ticket has a one in a million chance to win. Will it lose?

No! I don't know that.

(18) All I know is that the streets are wet. Is it raining?

No! This doesn't follow.

If we were to read the *No!* in (15) as expressing a strong rejection, it would follow that the speaker asserts *neither X nor Y will win*. By disjunctive syllogism it follows that they agree to *Z will win*—which they do not. Similarly, in (16) the speaker claims something *weaker* than *neither X nor Y will win*: namely that this *might* be the case. In (17) and (18), the speaker rejects a proposition since they are not in the position to assert the proposition in question; but they are not in a position to assert its negation either.

Hence, there are cases where it is correct to reject something and its negation. As it is certainly incorrect to assert something and its negation, such rejections are weak—they cannot be explained as being reducible or equivalent to negative assertion. As these cases are not to be explained away by sorting them as meta-linguistic or somehow defective, we cannot give an account of the phenomenon of rejection that would reduce rejection to negative assertion.

However, this does not establish that the rejection of $p$ is not reducible to some other assertion; e.g. based on (16), we might think that the rejection of $p$ is reducible to the assertion that *might not p*. In examples like (12), the rejections may be thought of as equivalent to the assertion of the negative of the unmet presupposition. Reducing different rejections to different assertions is not not entirely satisfying, as then one has not given a *unified* reduction of the rejection phenomenon. But it is not unheard of to analyse rejection as being a multi-category phenomenon (Geurts, 1998; Schlöder and Fernández, 2019). If we can reduce each of these categories to assertion and give a satisfying account of assertion, there would be little to complain.

In the next section I expand on an argument by Price (1990) to argue that such reduction remains hopeless nonetheless, as the speech act of rejection fulfills a *need* that is not fulfilled by assertoric speech acts.

## 3 Rejections fulfill a need

Price (1990) argued that the negation operator *not* is to be explained by appealing to a primitive speech act of rejection (Price calls it *denial*, but this is a mere terminological difference). The purpose of this speech act, Price argues, is that it is a means of "registering ... a perceived incompatibility."

To see this need, imagine that we a members of a speech community that does not possess such a means. Then we could find ourselves in the following unfortunate situation. You might point to some berries, proclaim that *these are edible* and make motions to begin consuming some of them. I, however, see that the berries are lilac and know that all lilac food is highly poisonous.

Your death would greatly trouble me, but I am not able to physically stop you—so I have a need to *linguistically* inform you of the mistake you are making. What sort of recourse do I have? I could tell you *these are lilac!* but you might not realise that *edible* and *lilac* are incompatible. Then all I have achieved is that you now believe that *these berries that are edible and lilac*. Clearly, me telling you *these are poisonous* is equally hopeless, as you may not realise the incompatibility between *edible* and *poisonous* either.[9]

As Price points out, even if you and I have a shared understanding of the truth-table for negation, I could not point out your mistake by uttering *these berries are not edible*, since you might not realise the incompatibility of truth and falsity.[10] Evidently, without you having an understanding of some relevant incompatibility, there is no assertion I could make that would make you realise that you are *mistaken* to believe that *these berries are edible*.

Of course, in our *actual* linguistic practices, competent speakers understand the incompatibility of *edible* and *not edible*, so that I can point out such mistakes by asserting *these are not edible!*. But since we can imagine a situation in which this assertion would not fulfill this purpose, our actual linguistic practices must contain a device that enables us to avoid such situations. This device is *rejection*, the speech act by which I register (or, *signal*) an incompatibility. Price goes on to argue that rejection is conceptually prior to negation and that negation should be explained by its connection to rejection.[11]

[9] This example is inspired by Price (1998).

[10] Tangentially, this is why paraconsistent logicans, who accept the truth table for negation, but do not believe that truth and falsity are incompatible, are also wont to stipulate a speech act of rejection (Priest, 2006).

[11] This has led to the *bilateralist programme* in logic (Smiley, 1996; Rumfitt, 2000; Incurvati and Schlöder, 2017, 2019).

Such thought experiments are suggestive, but may not be ultimately compelling. The need for a primitive mechanism for rejection can also be appreciated by considering Stalnaker's (1978) account of assertion. On this account, the essential effect of an assertion of $p$ is to *propose* to expand the common ground by adding $p$—and such proposals can be *rejected*. Sometimes, Stalnaker is misunderstood to claim that an assertion immediately updates the common ground (e.g. Murray, 2009). But this is strawman. Stalnaker is explicit that not all assertions result in a common ground update, since they can be rejected.

> It should be made clear that to reject an assertion is not to assert or assent to the contradictory of the assertion, but only to refuse to accept the assertion. If an assertion is rejected, the context [JJS: common ground] remains the same as it was.
>
> (Stalnaker, 1978, p87, fn9)

Thus, an assertion does not expand the common ground immediately, but does so only in the *absence of rejection*. Put differently, asserting that $p$ *proposes* to make $p$ common ground and *making* it common ground is a further process that needs to be negotiated by the interlocutors (also see Clark, 1996).

Some have tried to prop up the strawman. Notably, Yalcin (2018) 'favor[s] dropping the "proposal" talk entirely, holding instead that assertions simply always change the state of the conversation ... Rejections of assertions do not stop the relevant changes ... rather, they undo a change that has taken place.' His reason is that characterising assertion by appealing to a speech act of proposing is just to 'pass the buck to the question what proposing is.' But

any serious account of speech acts must face the question of what proposing is (and of how proposals are rejected) anyway. Consider the speech act of *betting*. It is clearly mistaken to say that a bet is automatically accepted—that is, the context is changed so that speakers are obliged to adhere to the rules of the bet—and that to reject it is to undo these changes. This is mistaken, because rejecting a bet—that is, not accepting it—is distinct from undoing a bet. Rejecting a bet is something I can do unilaterally, but to undo a bet that both sides have agreed on usually requires both speakers to agree to this.[12]

Thus, if we want to make sense of betting, we need to make sense of a mechanism by which context changes are proposed and then either accepted or rejected. We can use the same mechanism to give the Stalnakerian account of assertion as proposing context updates. This is not passing the buck, but simplifying and unifying. Yalcin's suggestion might simplify things if one is *only* interested in assertion, but as soon as other speech acts come into play, it becomes a needless complication to make assertion function *differently* from other speech acts that propose context changes.

The occurrence of the word "reject" here does not immediately entail that Stalnaker's account must contain a primitive for rejection alongside assertion. Intuitively, one can reject by making a *counterproposal*. That is, if you have asserted that $p$, I may respond by asserting that $q$, where $q$ is contrary to $p$. As the common ground must be consistent, $p$ and $q$ cannot simultaneously be in the common ground. Hence, a story might go, my assertion is rejecting yours. But this story is confused.

[12]It seems to me that the same can be said about assertion. If you assert $p$ I can unilaterally reject it. But once we both agreed to $p$, it takes *cooperative* effort to remove $p$ from the common ground. But I will not press this point here.

Price's observations apply here too—one may not always realise such inconsistency—but we do not need to appeal to them to see the problem here. To explain a rejection of a proposal to update the common ground as *another* proposal to update the common ground would just get us caught in a regress. Thus, there is a need for a response to an assertion is *not* itself an update proposal. This operation should register that I *reject* your update proposal.

There are different ways of spelling out this operation. Price (1990) argues that rejection signals an incompatibility between truth and falsity; so roughly, rejection would be the speech act that signals *I am not accepting your assertion of p because p is false*. But this fails to capture the data on weak rejection discussed in the previous section. If the incompatibility between *X or Y will win* and *no, X or Y or Z* is the incompatibility of truth and falsity, it would follow that *no, X or Y or Z will win* means that *neither X nor Y will win*, which it does not. In the Stalnakerian picture, we can fix this complaint: rejection registers that I do not wish some $p$ to be in the common ground, period. I may have different reasons for this. I might not want $p$ to be in the common ground because $p$ is malformed, has an unmet presupposition, or there is insufficient evidence for $p$.

There is another option of spelling out a sufficiently broad notion of rejection. In the Introduction, I talked about assertions and rejections being *correct* or *incorrect*. A good explanation of how speech acts can be correct or incorrect is that they are, in some sense, governed by certain *norms* or *rules*. (This can be said while leaving open whether or not these norms are *essential* to linguistic activity or not.) Roughly following Brandom (1983,

1994), we may think of these norms as being enforced by a social order in which violating these norms makes you liable to *social sanction*. The relevant sanctions are social consequences such as your commitments being no longer taken to be authoritative; e.g. the boy who cried wolf is sanctioned for his misdeeds in that nobody heeds his warnings anymore (Brandom, 1994, p180). This leads to an understanding of *rejection* as the device by which one informs one's interlocutor that they have made themselves liable to sanction. Supposing that truth is a norm of assertion, if you assert *the berries being edible* and I know they are not, I judge your speech act as violating a norm. By rejecting your claim, I inform you that you are liable to sanction (and, tangentially, death).

On such a conception, instead of saying that rejection is registering *incompatibilities*, it is more apt to say that it registers *mistakes*. Recall that Price's (1990) original argument was based on the puzzle of how we can inform someone that they are *mistaken*. The rough Brandomian story above would suggest that a mistake is a violation of a norm and thus we may take rejection to register norm violations. I think there is a lot to like about this idea. Price pointed out that speakers may not realise certain incompatibilities, so we need a device to explicitly point out an incompatibility. But we might equally wonder what would be required to point out a norm-violation to someone who does not realise the appropriate norm. (I will continue this line of thought in Section 5.) In what follows, I investigate the prospects of conceiving of the *essential* function of rejections as registering mistakes. I first elaborate my preferred understanding of the normative conception of speech acts.

## 4 The normative conception

It has become popular to characterise speech acts by stating the *norms* (or *rules*) that essentially apply to them in the *conversation game*. A particular focus of recent debate are accounts of assertion that seek to characterise it by identifying the constitutive *norm of assertion*—the fundamental rule that governs assertions (conceived of as moves in the conversation game). One such rule is the *knowledge norm of assertion* (KNA), proposed by Williamson (1996, 2000).

**(KNA).** One may assert that $p$ only if one knows that $p$.

Other putative norms of assertion have been proposed (Lackey, 2007; Weiner, 2007), but it is not the purpose of this chapter to adjudicate between them. Aside from the vibrant debate on *which* putative norm is the essential norm of assertion, there is the attendant debate on *whether* a game analysis of assertion is possible. Invariably, defenders of the normative conception draw a *prima facie* convincing analogy to games such as chess, rugby or baseball. But the dialectic suffers from there being insufficient clarity on *how exactly* the activity of asserting is like a game. In what follows, I elaborate my preferred understanding of how conversation is like playing chess. (I use chess purely for familiarity. It should be easy to see how analogous arguments using any other game can be constructed.)

It makes sense to say that the game of chess is *made up* by a number of rules: when we are asked to explain what chess is, we explain that it is a game subject to a particular set of rules. One of them may be written as (Rook).

(**Rook**). One may move a rook from square $x$ to square $y$ only if $x$ and $y$ are on the same rank or file and no intermediate squares are occupied.

It seems that the question *What are moves of a rook (in chess?)* has no more satisfactory answer than identifying among the rules of chess those rule(s) that *specifically* or *essentially* govern the movements of rooks. To wit, a move of a rook is a move that is subject to (Rook).[13] Then, analogously, the question *What are assertions?* has no more satisfactory answer than identifying those rule(s) among the rules of conversation that essentially govern assertion. To wit, an assertion is a speech act subject to the norm of assertion (be it the knowledge norm or another one).

This analysis of assertion is not troubled by the fact that there are further rules of conversation that govern assertion, but are not *essential* to assertion. For example, assertion—like any speech act—seems to be bound by general rules of relevance and informativeness (to name just two). Likewise, the movement of rooks—like other moves in chess—is bound by further rules as well. For instance, the rule (Check) applies to all pieces in chess.

(**Check**). One may move a piece only if one is not in check afterwards.

But (Check) is not part of our understanding of *rook moves*. If someone knows the rule (Rook) without knowing (Check) we would still attribute to them the knowledge of *what rook moves are*. Say, if we are teaching chess to someone, we would be satisfied that *they understood what rook moves are* if they understood (Rook), even if we haven't yet explained (Check). In

[13] We may also characterise the *rook piece* as the piece whose movement is subject to (Rook).

this sense, (Rook) is *essential* to the understanding of *moving rooks*, whereas (Check) is not.

Again analogously, a proponent of a norm account of assertion claims that it is only the specific *norm of assertion* that constitutes the knowledge of what assertions are, regardless of other putative rules of the conversation game that are less intimately related to assertion. Such rules stand to the norm of assertion as (Check) stands to (Rook). Furthermore, there are broader behavioural rules that apply to assertion (such as politeness or general morals), just as there are broader rules of sporting behaviour that apply in chess (e.g. that opponents shake hands). As the latter do not seem to contribute to our understanding of *rook moves*, we should not think of the former as contributing to our understanding of *asserting*.

However, there are some doubts about the true extent of such an analogy between conversation and such everyday games and about how useful any such analogy is in characterising a speech act (Hindriks, 2007; Maitra, 2011; MacFarlane, 2011). One salient criticism is that a rule like (KNA) might tell us under which conditions one may assert, but tells us nothing about *how* to assert, i.e. about how to complete the sentence "to assert is to ...". Consider, for instance, the following rules that seem to define the move of *short castling* in chess (MacFarlane, 2011).

(**Short Castling 1**) One may short castle only if (i) the king has not moved; (ii) the king's rook has not moved; (iii) the squares between the king and the rook are empty and not attacked; (iv) the king is not in check.

(**Short Castling 2**) To short castle is to move one's king two squares in

direction of the king's rook, and the king's rook two squares in direction of the king.

The rule (Short Castling 1) alone is not sufficient for us to know how to short castle. We need to know (Short Castling 2) as well. Now, it may appear as though (KNA) has the same form as (Short Castling 1). Thus, one may be inclined to conclude, (KNA) alone is insufficient to characterise assertion, as we require another rule of the form *to assert is to* (...). But appearances mislead here. There are many possible assertions (as there are many propositions one may want to assert), but there is only *one* way to short castle (namely, what is stated in Short Castling 2). The phrase *short castling* is a mere abbreviation for this one possible move. Unabbreviating leads to the following rule for (Short Castling), which properly analogous to (KNA).

(**Short Castling**) One may move one's king two squares in direction of the king's rook, and the king's rook two squares in direction of the king only if (i) the king has not moved; *etc.*

Nothing more than knowledge of (Short Castling) is required to understand how to perform the move in chess that is known as short castling. If one knows (Short Castling), but not (Short Castling 1+2), one does not know that the move is *called* 'short castling'. But such knowledge—knowledge of the *names* of certain moves or pieces—is not required to play a game of chess in which one short castles. Thus, the rule (Short Castling 2) that completes the sentence *to short castle is to* (...) is not essential to our understanding of short castling as a move in chess.

But some part of the objection may remain. In (KNA), (Rook) and (Short Castling), certain unanalysed primitives occur. In explaining *move of a rook* by appealing to (Rook), one presupposes an understanding of *move*; and in explaining (*the speech act of*) *assertion* by appealing to a norm of assertion, one presupposes an understanding of *speech act*. Shouldn't we demand an explanation like *to move a piece in chess is to* (...) and *to make a speech act is to* (...)? There is a straightforward answer to this. We have no reason to suppose that there is any better explanation of *move* (*in chess*) than (Chess Move).

**(Chess Move).** To make a move in chess is to perform an act that is understood to be subject to the rules of chess.

It appears to be hopeless to explain *moves in chess* by spelling out the *form* of an act that moves a piece. These forms vary vastly: one can make moves by physically moving pieces, by pronouncement ("E2 to E4"), by sending a letter, or even by entirely mental acts (I can play a full game of chess against myself in my head). Moreover, I can perform any act that has the *form* of a move without playing a game of chess. I can, say, idly move pieces on a board and by sheer circumstance happen to follow the rules of chess, but these idle moves are not moves in a game of chess. (Such observations about intentionality are of course familiar in the context of speech acts.) What does and does not count as a move in chess is a *social* phenomenon. A move in chess is a sort of act that occurs in a particular setting that is understood by everyone in it to be subject to the rules of chess. That is, (Chess Move).

Then, we may explain what it means to move a rook as (Rook Move).

**(Rook Move).** To move the rook in chess is to perform an act that is understood to be subject to the (general) rules of chess and (in particular) to the rule (Rook), but not subject to other piece-specific rules.

If we are happy with (Chess Move) and (Rook Move) characterising what it means to make moves in chess, then we should not be unhappy with (Speech Act) and (Assertion) being the explanations of what it means to assert and make speech acts.[14]

**(Speech Act).** To make a speech act is to perform a (linguistic) act that is understood to be subject to the rules of the conversation game.

**(Assertion).** To assert is to perform a (linguistic) act that is understood to be subject to the rules of the conversation game and in particular to norm of assertion (and not to other specific norms).

Finally, another salient and frequent objection to the normative analysis of assertion attacks the claim that a norm of assertion is *constitutive* of assertion. Defenders of this analysis countenance that an assertion that violates the norm still counts as an assertion; e.g. Williamson (1996), who defends the knowledge norm, explicitly allows that one can assert that $p$ without knowing that $p$. This would be an incorrect assertion, but an assertion nonetheless. Some think that this is nonsense: according to Searle's (1969) definition of constitutive rules, if a rule $R$ is constitutive of an activity $A$, then one ceases to $A$ when one violates $R$ (Hindriks, 2007).

[14] It is well known that to explain assertions by their *form*—e.g. by describing what kind of sentences are used to perform assertions—is hopeless (Cappelen, 2011). The possible forms of assertions are too manifold to be easily subsumed under a single description and I can go through the motions of any possible form without asserting. This is exactly analogous to why it is hopeless to try to describe moves in chess by their form.

Ishani Maitra (2011) offers the useful clarification that only *flagrant* violations of $R$ result in a cessation of $A$, but argues further that this does not resolve the complaint, as there are speech acts that appear to be assertions despite *flagrantly* violating a norm of assertion (e.g. a defendant asserting their innocence in the face of definitive condemning evidence). The claim that any putative norm of assertion is constitutive of the speech act of assertion is apparently incompatible with the claim that speech acts that flagrantly violate that norm can still count as assertions.

The complaint has bite if we understand *constitutive* like Searle does. But this is not the definition that defenders of the normative conception have in mind. Williamson (1996, p. 491) remarks that "[w]hen one breaks a rule of a game, one does not thereby cease to be playing that game." Recall that in (Assertion), I defined assertions as those linguistic acts that are understood to be subject to some rules. Certainly, an act can be understood to be subject to some rules despite violating them. In that case, the act is erroneous. The situation is the same in chess.

Plainly, one can speak of *illegal moves* in chess; the FIDE Laws of Chess do so in Article 7.4. Thus, if we agree that the notion of *move in chess* is defined by a set of rules, we must accept that there *are* acts that can be called *moves in chess* albeit violating one or more of these rules—lest the term *illegal move* be an oxymoron. Making an illegal move does not end a game; rather, if and once the violation becomes apparent, one would be requested to undo the move. (Which appears to be analogous to the request to retract an assertion made in violation of a norm of assertion.) Thus, if (Rook) is a constitutive rule, constitutive rules are violable.

Some have denied the antecedent of this conditional: Hindriks (2007), for instance, claims that the rules that define the legal moves of chess—such as my (Rook)—above are merely regulative. But at this point, we are merely arguing about the semantics of *constitutive*. Plainly, a rule like (Rook) is part of the rules that define the game of chess—that *make up* the game. If we are playing a game that is not subject to (Rook), but instead subject to, say, (Rook'), we are not playing chess.

**(Rook').** One may move a rook from square $x$ to square $y$ only if there is exactly one square in between $x$ and $y$.

We may insist on a particular, technical understanding of the term *constitutive* according to which rules like (Rook) are not constitutive of chess. But this would not change the fact that (Rook) is one of the rules that *define what the game of chess is*. Whether or not one is inclined to *call* such rules "constitutive" is besides the point. One also may want to say that it is constitutive of chess that (Rook) is a regulative rule. I wouldn't object to this, though it strikes me as spurious.

In any case, there is no objection against the normative conception to be found in the observation that one can make assertions violating a norm of assertion. This is because, as shown by the example of chess, violable rules like (Rook) can have the status of definitions. But, as I will argue next, the fact that there are such violable rules entails that rejection has a central place within the normative conception.

## 5 Rejection in the normative conception

The dialectic in this section, in brief, will go as follows. If you accept that conversation is a rule-governed activity like chess, you have to acknowledge the existence of illegal moves (as argued towards the end of the last section). That is, moves that are part of an activity (performing them does not end the activity), but are violating some of the rules that define the activity. But this means that such an activity must *also* have rules that determine what happens in such a situation—rules that govern how to proceed when an illegal move has been made. Based on the discussion in Section 3, this includes, at the very least, a device to *register* that an illegal move has been made: that device is rejection. The rules for rejection (at least partially) determine how to handle illegal moves. However, I will argue, this device cannot itself be characterised as a norm.

The need for this device is particularly visible in learning scenarios. If the norms of the language game are part of the fabric of our social lives, newcomers to our community should learn them. Suppose that assertion is properly characterised by (KNA).[15] Some language learner might assert that $p$, i.e. make an act that is understood to be subject to certain social norms (even though the learner has not fully grasped these norms), but a competent speaker does not believe that the learner knows that $p$. She might point that out by saying *you don't know that p*. If rejections do not register norm-violations, nothing would stop the learner from assuming that they properly asserted that $p$ and that, in addition, they do not know

[15] Any other norm would allow analogous arguments.

that $p$. To make her realise her mistake, a mistake must be registered by the rejection.[16] It does not matter whether one performs the rejection verbally or by intonation or body language *etc*. The point is just that this registering signal, however it is sent, is not explainable by appealing to an account of assertion.

Now, someone endorsing the normative conception of speech acts wants to characterise speech acts by their essential norms, e.g. characterising assertion by the (KNA). Can this be done for rejection? Based on what we have seen about rejection so far, the following norm appears to be a good candidate.

(**Rejection**). One must: reject a speech act $s$ only if the performance of $s$ violated a norm.

There is a lot to like about (Rejection). Conceivably, asserting $p$ is in violation of some norm if: some presupposition of $p$ is not met (12a); or $p$ uses nonexistent properties (12b); of the speaker has insufficient evidence $p$ (15–17). Thus, (Rejection) appears to be broad enough to capture the data from Section 2.[17]

The norm (Rejection) also accounts for the puzzle discussed in Section 3. The puzzle was that if you assert *these berries are edible* and I respond *no, they are lilac*, you may not realise that *edible* and *lilac* are incompatible,

[16] One may attempt to make her realise her mistake by saying that *you shouldn't say that!* but this is hardly instructive—it does not tell the learner what her mistake was. Utterances like *you shouldn't say that because you don't know it* might to the trick, but they hardly seem like the kind of data a language learner is routinely exposed to.

[17] If you want to capture meta-linguistic rejections like (13) under the umbrella of the norm of rejection, mispronunciations will count as mistakes as well. Whether this is the case depends on how the general norms of the language game are spelled out.

thus forming the belief that *the berries are edible and lilac* and proceed with consuming them. The solution was to say that rejection registers that what I said is incompatible with what you said. This incompatibility is in particular registered if we conceive of rejections as being governed by (Rejection). For then your claim that *these berries are edible* and my claim that *no, they are lilac* cannot *both* be correctly performed. Either your assertion was correct, in which case my rejection violated (Rejection). Or my rejection was correct, in which case your assertion violated the norm of assertion. But we cannot both be right, so you have no reason to believe that *the berries are edible and lilac*.

The norm (Rejection) also accounts for the fact that non-assertoric speech acts can be rejected as well. Supposedly, these speech acts are also explained by the norm that is essential to their correct performance. For example, supposing that it is (part of) the norm of questions that one may not ask questions to which one knows the answer, I may reject a question by *You know that!*. In general, then, (Rejection) entails that a speech act $s$ and a speech act rejecting $s$ can not be both correct. This is as it should be.

A particularly interesting cases are rejections of other rejections. If you perform some speech act and I reject it, you need not give in. You can reject my rejection (Schlöder et al., 2017). The norm (Rejection) accounts for that fact. If I reject your speech act, then my rejection was correct if you violated a norm. But of course, if you think that you did not violate any norms, you may reject my rejection. According to (Rejection), your rejection of my rejection is correct if and only if your initial speech act was correct. This is also as it should be.

Finally, although we naturally think of rejections was being in response to other speech acts, there is a coherent notion of *rejecting a proposition* that is not in response to anything (see Section 2). We can extract the correct norm for these rejections from (Rejection). To wit, we may think of rejections of propositions as governed by (P-Rejection).[18]

**(P-Rejection).** One must: reject $p$ only if asserting $p$ would violate a norm.

Note that there is an asymmetry here. I can properly P-reject those propositions that *I* cannot properly assert; but I can properly reject your assertion of a proposition if *you* cannot properly assert them. This means that there are cases where you can properly assert a proposition $p$ that I can properly P-reject. This is also as it should be, since you may have more information than I do. If you know $p$ but I do not, I can correctly P-reject $p$. But, if you assert $p$, me rejecting this assertion would be incorrect. Moreover, your assertion grants me license to assert $p$ to others based on your authority (Brandom, 1983); thus after you properly assert $p$ to me, I am no longer able to properly P-reject $p$.

All of this sounds good. And yet, if you accept the normative conception of speech acts elaborated in Section 4, you should not endorse (Rejection) as defining the speech act of rejection. I argued that rejection—as the device that points out mistakes—is required for language learners to acquire the right norms. I need to be able to register a norm violation even if you do

[18] In some sense, (P-Rejection) matches the *Smileian reductio* principle endorsed by the bilateralists Smiley (1996), Rumfitt (2000) and Incurvati and Schlöder (2017): if in the hypothetical situation in which you assert $p$, you can derive $\bot$, it follows that you reject $p$. But this match is not exact: $\bot$ registers a specific kind of mistake has been—a *logical* one. Bilateralists do not derive $\bot$ from *p and I do not know that p*, even if they accept the knowledge norm (Incurvati and Schlöder, 2019).

not realise the norms of the speech acts we are using. This is analogous to Price's story in which I need to be able to register an incompatibility even if you do not realise any incompatibilities. Saying that rejection is the speech act governed by (Rejection) does not fulfill this purpose, since if you do not yet understand (Rejection), and this is the norm that characterises rejection, my rejections would fail to register with you that there was a mistake.

Hence, having an understanding of rejection as a mistake-registering device is *prior* to characterising speech acts by their essential norms. Characterising rejection by (Rejection) presupposes an understanding of mistakes and how to register them—an understanding of rejection. That is a vicious regress. The point is quite simple: if our social fabric is (partially) made up by certain rules, I need to be able to point out which behaviour is sanctionable so that a newcomer can sort good from bad behaviour. Clearly, my method of pointing that out cannot itself be defined by a rule that needs to be learned this way.

Thus, there is at least one speech act—rejection—that cannot be characterised by appealing to an essential norm. Does this doom the normative conception? I think not. But someone endorsing this conception needs to acknowledge that the registration of mistakes is a *fundamental and unanalysable* part of norm-governed activities. That is, we should accept (Mistake).

**(Mistake).** To reject is to register that a speech act has violated a rule of the conversation game.

With (Mistake) in place, we can then *also* adopt the norm (Rejection) to explain the data discussed in this paper. The situation is somewhat curious:

I maintained that the speech act of assertion is governed by a permissive norm and that it is useless, possibly hopeless, to ask how to finish the sentence *to assert is to...* beyond saying that assertions are acts understood to be subject to certain norms. But for the speech act of rejection, we appear to require the more substantive principle (Mistake).

I think this is a bullet to bite. The registration of mistakes seems to be a fundamental part of any rule-governed activity. In any game we play, we will at some point want to register a mistake. But we do not expect the rules of the game to explain to us what it is to register a mistake, only how to proceed once a mistake has been registered. We simply understand that a means to register mistakes is part of the fact that there *are* rules. This means that the speech act of rejection is on the same conceptual level as the concept of a norm or rule.

In fact, it seems that some version of this problem—the need to stipulate a fundamental principle for rejection—occurs in any attempt to characterise speech acts. In Section 3, I outlined how rejection appears in the Stalnakerian account of assertion. I argued that rejection cannot be reduced to some version of the fundamental operation of *updating the context*, but needs to be taken as a primitive that *governs* such updates. This is analogous to the situation for the normative conception: rejection cannot be reduced to some version of the fundamental principle of a *permissive norm*, but must be taken as a primitive that *governs* these norms. Similarly, Brandom (1994), as anticipated in Section 3, also cannot explain rejection (that act that points out that someone is liable to sanction) in terms of commitment but needs to take it as a fundamental operation that relates commitment to entitlement.

## 6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to win some repute for the speech act of rejection. My main goal is to establish that rejection is not reducible to assertion by arguing (i) that there are rejections that are not equivalent to negative assertions; and (ii) that the speech act of rejection fulfills a particular purpose—registering mistakes—that cannot be met by assertoric speech acts. The most natural explanation of what it means to register a mistake (or so I think) appears to point out the *violation of a norm*. This supports the idea to explain speech acts by determining the norms that *essentially* apply to them.

Curiously, the speech act of rejection cannot itself be thusly explained, as the act of registering mistakes must be *prior* to the norm that governs when mistakes may be registered. But I do not take this to refute the project of characterising speech acts by their norm—rather, this seems to reveal the fundamentality of rejection in linguistic practice. The arguments I presented here suggest that rejection is similarly fundamental in other conceptions of speech acts, although I have not given them as much attention as the normative conception.

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