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Double-Checking: In Speech and in Private

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Abstract

Can we rationally double-check something we already know? Those who say “no” endorse the Ignorance Norm, which states that we should not ask a question whose answer we already know, thereby classifying double-checking as improper. Those who say “yes” reject the Ignorance Norm, instead proposing a broader norm that accommodates double-checking. I argue that both positions are unsatisfactory. Instead, I propose a novel solution that offers two key advantages over existing accounts. First, it preserves the Ignorance Norm. Second, it treats double-checking as a proper form of asking questions. The proposed solution draws on insights from speech act theory, arguing for a distinction between the default way of asking questions – governed by the Ignorance Norm – and the practice of double-checking which is subject to a stronger norm. While in default contexts we ask questions to acquire knowledge, in cases of double-checking we seek further epistemic goods, such as certainty or second-order knowledge.

Keywords: Asking; double-checking; assertion; speech acts; inquiry; knowledge; Ignorance Norm

1. Introduction

Asking questions is an essential part of our communicative repertoire. Questions demand answers that provide the information we seek. Although we can ask and answer questions in many ways, we typically use the default, flat-out linguistic forms – the speech acts of asking and asserting, respectively.

It has been argued that knowledge governs our linguistic practices of asking and asserting. Here are the widely endorsed Ignorance Norm of Asking and Knowledge Norm of Assertion:¹

¹The nature of these norms is a subject of heated discussion. Some argue that they are constitutive (e.g., Williamson 2000; García-Carpintero 2004; Goldberg 2015; cf. Kelp 2021), while others propose weaker understandings of such norms (e.g., Kelp and Simion 2021) or give alternative explanations (e.g., Fleisher 2024). All agree that the norms provide the necessary epistemic requirement for asking and asserting. The proposed formulations remain neutral toward these options. This also applies to other norms in the paper.

INA One should ask whether p only if one does not know whether p .²

KNA One should assert that p only if one knows that p .³

These norms stem from the conviction that “knowledge is a central sort of epistemic achievement” (Sosa 2021: 22; cf. Friedman 2020; Kelp 2021). Some go further and argue that once we acquire knowledge, asking questions becomes pointless (cf. Whitcomb 2010, 2017; Millar 2011; Friedman 2013, 2019; Kelp 2014, 2021; van Elswyk and Sapor 2021).

Although INA has intuitive appeal and widespread support, it disregards the fact that we often keep asking, even if we already know the answer – we verify, corroborate, confirm, or double-check whether p . Imagine a surgeon before an operation who asks their colleague to double-check the patient’s notes to see which kidney they should remove, a scientist who asks their colleague to corroborate the results of the experiments, or a student who asks their friend to verify their exam answers. In all these cases, the agents may already know the answer while investigating further – for instance, the surgeon may have already tested the patient. While their double-checking seems to be permissible, it violates INA.

There are two ways of approaching such cases. The first camp (e.g., Friedman 2019; van Elswyk and Sapor 2021; cf. Flamini 2024) defends INA and argues that since the surgeon already knows which kidney is diseased before rechecking, their asking again is improper. The second camp (e.g., Archer 2018; Falbo 2021, 2023, 2024; Millson 2020; Woodard 2021, 2022; Beddor 2024) rejects INA and argues that there is nothing improper in the surgeon’s double-checking – rather, it is a rationally permissible action.⁴

I argue that the available approaches are unsatisfactory because they wrongly assume that the surgeon performs the same type of action – the speech act of asking – twice. I propose an alternative approach rooted in speech act theory. I will argue that the surgeon performs two distinct types of actions. When the surgeon first asks, they do not know whether p , and they aim to acquire knowledge – this speech act is guided by INA. However, when they ask again, already knowing that p , they want to improve their epistemic position – they may aim to acquire epistemic benefits such as certainty or second-order knowledge. In doing so, I propose, they perform the speech act of double-checking, governed by a stronger norm than the norm of asking.

My approach takes the best from the available accounts. First, it does not reject INA but limits its scope to the default way of using the interrogative mood. Second, it respects the widely shared intuition that one can permissibly and rationally double-check whether p while already knowing that p .

It is uncontroversial that we engage in both linguistic and non-linguistic forms of asking and double-checking. Since my proposal is rooted in speech act theory, it is instructive to consider the following question: “What is the relationship between the mental counterparts of the speech acts of asking and double-checking?” More generally:

²See, for example, Whitcomb (2017), van Elswyk and Sapor (2021). It has also been argued that INA is the norm of inquiry, see, for example, Friedman (2017). See Section 5 for a discussion of the relationship between asking and inquiry.

³See, for example, Williamson (2000), DeRose (2002), Hawthorne (2004) cf. García-Carpintero (2004), Kelp and Simion (2021).

⁴Most of these authors argue for or against treating INA as the norm of inquiry, not as the norm of the speech act of asking. Since I focus on speech acts, like some of these authors, I refer to INA as the norm of asking. However, the arguments of both sides apply equally, regardless of how INA is theorized. See Section 5 for a discussion on asking and inquiry.

“Do we perform speech acts through self-talk or inner speech?” While these are intriguing questions, I do not attempt to provide a novel answer here.⁵ Instead, I follow the traditional understanding of speech acts as primarily social and communicative acts (cf. Austin 1962; Searle 1969). In particular, I take speech acts to be normative acts directed toward the audience (cf. García-Carpintero 2004, 2021; Hinchman 2013).

As a consequence, inner speech does not qualify as a speech act. Nevertheless, speech act theory offers insight into what speech acts and inner speech have in common – namely, speech acts are external expressions of our internal attitudes (e.g., Searle 1969; Bach and Harnish 1979; Searle and Vanderveken 1985). It has been argued that asking expresses wondering (or curiosity) (e.g., Friedman 2013, 2019; cf. Whitcomb 2010; Carruthers 2018; Haziza 2022; Willard-Kyle 2023a) or desire (van Elswyk 2023; cf. Deigan 2025). Regardless of whether we think in terms of wondering or desire, the consensus is that both attitudes are satisfied by knowledge.⁶

Thus, we can wonder about something without expressing it publicly. The surgeon may wonder which kidney they should remove without asking their colleague about it – this would be an instance of inner speech. As Friedman (2017: 315) puts it, wondering is a kind of mental asking. When one expresses one’s wondering attitude publicly, one performs the speech act of asking (cf. Willard-Kyle 2023a). Therefore, speech acts can be seen as public expressions of what happens privately.

What about the attitude expressed in double-checking? While asking expresses wondering or a desire to know, I will argue that double-checking expresses a desire to know +, where knowledge + is, roughly, an epistemic good that goes beyond knowledge. Similar to the attitude expressed in asking, one can desire to know + both internally and externally.

Before moving on, a terminological note. To clearly distinguish between speech acts and inner speech, I use terms such as “asking to double-check” and “linguistic double-checking” for the former, and “inner double-checking” and “non-linguistic double-checking” for the latter. When referring to all cases, I simply use the term “double-checking.” Finally, I use the term “double-checking” to denote all types of cases through which we seek to verify, confirm, or corroborate something while expressing a desire to know+.

Little attention has been paid to speech acts performed using the interrogative mood (with notable exceptions, such as Whitcomb 2017; Haziza 2023; van Elswyk 2023; Gaszczyk 2025). Moreover, in the literature, the term “double-checking” is often used broadly, encapsulating both linguistic and non-linguistic cases without distinguishing between them. My approach, however, differs. While all cases share the same attitude – a desire to know+ – the speech act level adds another dimension to double-checking. This dimension highlights why speech acts are a public and addressee-directed practice. What makes double-checking unique is that it brings the addressee in as a collaborator. Following KNA, assertions can generate knowledge. However, as I will argue, when assertions answer double-checking, they can generate epistemic goods that go beyond knowledge. This public dimension strengthens the case for a speech act analysis of double-checking. Thus, the paper’s main aim is to motivate the claim that

⁵The answers largely depend on the preferred view of speech acts. For a discussion, see, for example, Geurts (2018); for an overview, see Gregory and Langland-Hassan (2023).

⁶The relationship between wondering and a desire to know is controversial. Some argue that wondering is distinct from a desire to know (Friedman 2013; Carruthers 2018; Drucker 2022); while others claim that wondering is a type of desire to know (Whitcomb 2010; Haziza 2022; Nagel 2024; but see van Elswyk 2023).

double-checking can be treated as a distinct speech act type and, as a result, to establish when it is permissible to perform such a speech act.

The plan is as follows. In Section 2, I provide the rationale for INA and show how it aligns with KNA and accounts for the relevant linguistic data. In Section 3, I make a case for considering asking to double-check as an independent linguistic practice. In Section 4, I argue for the distinctiveness of double-checking and asking. To this end, I propose a unique kind of attitude expressed in double-checking and a norm of linguistic double-checking. Section 5 discusses the main implications of my proposal and its relation to the broader debate on inquiry.

2. Asking and asserting

INA and KNA show that asking and asserting are governed by opposite yet complementary norms. Fiengo (2007: 50) argues that “By asking a question, one displays a lack, a lack that can be relieved by the making of an assertion.” These norms pertain to the default uses of linguistic moods – interrogative for asking and declarative for asserting. One of their aims is to discriminate the default uses from non-default ones.

Arguing for INA, Whitcomb (2017: 2) argues that “there is a *kind* of question-asking in which we *do* always represent ourselves as not knowing the answers to our questions.” García-Carpintero (2021: 416) observes that KNA differentiates assertions “from other specific speech acts that we also make in conventional, literal uses of declarative sentences,” like guesses or guarantees. Thus, from the speech act perspective, asking and asserting are among many interrogative and declarative speech act types, respectively.

The case for INA and KNA is compelling. Their main strength lies in their explanatory power regarding various linguistic data. I present three such data points.⁷ The first pertains to both linguistic and non-linguistic cases, while the second and third apply only to linguistic cases.

First, consider MOORE. It is widely recognised that Moorean assertions are infelicitous (1). This observation can be extended to Moore-paradoxical askings (2).

- (1a) #The left kidney is diseased, but I don’t believe that the left kidney is diseased.
- (1b) #The left kidney is diseased, but I don’t know that the left kidney is diseased.
- (2a) #The left kidney is diseased, but is the left kidney diseased?
- (2b) #I know that the left kidney is diseased, but is the left kidney diseased?

Conjunctions like (1–2) are defective. KNA and INA can explain it. According to KNA, asserting implies knowing. In (1), one first asserts that *p*, but the subsequent denial contradicts the initial assertion. According to INA, asking implies not knowing. In (2), one first asserts that *p*, but then asks whether *p*, and in doing so contradicts the assertion.

Second, there is a unique way in which we CHALLENGE assertions and askings. If I assert that the left kidney is diseased, you can challenge my assertion by uttering (3a). By KNA, I should assert only something that I know. Thus, if I fail to respond to the challenge, my assertion was improper. Similarly, if you know that I do not know what I assert, you may respond more directly with (3b).

⁷For a discussion of these and other data points, see, for example, Williamson (2000), Benton (2024) for KNA; see, for example, Whitcomb (2010, 2017), Friedman (2017), van Elswyk (2023) for INA.

- (3a) How do you know?
 (3b) You don't know that!

The speech act of asking behaves analogously. If I ask "Which kidney is diseased?," you may respond with (4a). Following INA, if I already knew the answer, my asking was improper. Similarly, if you know that I already know the answer, you can respond more directly with (4b).

- (4a) You don't know?
 (4b) Why do you ask?! You know the answer!

The third data point concerns INFORMATIVENESS. Just as assertions are essentially knowledge-giving speech acts, askings are knowledge-seeking speech acts. KNA and INA are speaker-oriented norms, that is, they specify the requirements that the speaker must satisfy. However, we can also distinguish audience-oriented norms, which consider the epistemic position of the audience. Such norms are better suited to explain INFORMATIVENESS. Here are audience-oriented norms analogous to KNA and INA (A stands for the audience):⁸

- KNA-A** One should assert that *p* only if the audience does not know that *p*.
INA-A One should ask whether *p* only if the audience knows whether *p*.

The norms express the normative consequences of KNA and INA. On the one hand, it makes sense to assert that *p* to someone who does not know it and to ask someone who knows the answer. On the other hand, the norms predict that it is improper to assert information that is already known and to ask someone who does not know the answer.

From the perspective of INFORMATIVENESS, we can observe that the conversational assumptions and expectations in assertions and askings are reversed (cf. Farkas 2022). In assertions, the speaker is expected to be knowledgeable and the audience ignorant, whereas in askings, the speaker is expected to be ignorant and the audience knowledgeable.

To sum up, asserting and asking complement each other. The data indicate that asking creates a demand for knowledge, while asserting satisfies that demand. In the next section, I demonstrate how cases of double-checking complicate this proposal.

3. Double-checking

Let us start with the following example, drawn from Brown (2008: 176):

Fatima, an expert surgeon, examines a patient with a diseased kidney. After inquiring which kidney is diseased, she establishes that it is the left one. The

⁸I have modified the norms available in the literature. For a full discussion of KNA-A, see Gaszczyk (2024), for INA-A, see Haziza (2023). Although there is no space to discuss the nature of such norms, it is worth emphasizing that they still apply to the speaker. As Haziza (2023: 6) observes, "it is the speaker, not the addressee, who complies with or violates the norm. [INA-A] tells you which addressees to ask given a question. But it can also tell you which questions to ask given an addressee."

Classical audience-oriented norms do not specify separate conditions for the speaker (like KNA) and the audience (like KNA-A), see, for example, García-Carpintero (2004), Hinchman (2013).

decision is taken to remove it. Just before the operation, Fatima asks her colleague to double-check the patient's notes which kidney she should remove and confirms that it is the left one.⁹ After that, she proceeds to the operation.

It seems that Fatima asks the same question – “Which kidney is diseased?” – twice. Initially, she is ignorant toward the answer, and hence her asking is consistent with INA. Subsequently, she learns “The left kidney is diseased.” Since she received a knowledge-level answer to her query, she should be content and stop asking further questions. However, before the operation, she asks the same question again, likely expecting to receive the same answer. If we stipulate that she neither loses her knowledge in the process nor forgets which kidney is diseased, then according to INA, Fatima's checking again is impermissible.

Still, Fatima's action can be considered not only permissible but also appropriate and rational. Consider two perspectives – internal and external. From an internal perspective, we can imagine Fatima's thought process before the operation (cf. Falbo 2021: 5):

Okay, now I know it's the left kidney, but I'm going to ask and confirm it one last time – just to be sure. After all, imagine how horrible it would be if I removed the wrong kidney.

This is an instance of inner double-checking: Fatima knows which kidney is diseased but asks further, seeking more than knowledge. From an external perspective, Brown's original scenario concludes with a dialogue between a student and a nurse (cf. Brown 2008: 176):

The student is shadowing Fatima all day. They saw that she examined the patient and that she knows which kidney is diseased. Before the operation, however, they are puzzled why she asks to consult the patient's notes:

Student: I don't understand. Why is she asking again? She was in the clinic with the patient this morning. Doesn't she even know which kidney it is?

Nurse: Of course, she knows which kidney it is. But, imagine what it would be like if she removed the wrong kidney. She shouldn't operate before confirming which kidney is diseased.

By asking about something she already knows, Fatima is engaging in linguistic double-checking. As the nurse recognises, this is a high-stakes situation. Merely by asking again,

⁹Consider that, when confirming which kidney she should remove, Fatima already knows that *p* and expects to gain something beyond knowledge. Since I am interested in denoting linguistic activities that express a desire to know+, Fatima's confirmation is a paradigm case. Nevertheless, while I follow the standard version of Fatima's case (Brown 2008), one can also ask a confirmation question while merely believing, but not knowing, that *p*. In my proposal, such confirmations are classified as askings: because one does not yet know that *p*, one's speech act is subject to INA. Thus, the term “confirmation” may be used to perform different speech acts, depending on which norm is in force and what epistemic good one seeks – knowledge (asking) or something more (double-checking). For more on confirmation questions, see, for example, Fiengo (2007); Millson (2020).

Fatima can ensure that she does not remove a healthy kidney but instead operates on the diseased one. Thus, from the perspectives of Fatima and her audience, her double-checking is prudential and possibly even obligatory.

What can she expect from double-checking? Just by confirming that p , she can improve epistemically by acquiring one of many epistemic goods beyond knowledge. Woodard (2022: 8) compiles a list, by no means complete, of reasons why one might double-check p despite knowing that p :

- (a) to seek certainty about whether p (negatively: to remove doubts).
- (b) to gain higher-order epistemic states (e.g., knowing that one knows).
- (c) to increase one's confidence (or credence) about whether p .
- (d) to increase the resilience (stability) of one's credence (belief) regarding p , which can make it more likely one will retain knowledge.
- (e) to increase justification for belief that p .
- (f) to increase sensitivity to different possible errors.

By confirming that p , Fatima may gain some of the above – she may acquire certainty or attain a higher-order epistemic state, such as second-order knowledge, or increase her confidence or justification. Depending on the situation, one may seek to improve one's epistemic position in various ways.¹⁰

There are two approaches to double-checking something we already know. The first camp (e.g., Friedman 2019; van Elswyk and Sapir 2021; cf. Flamini 2024) defends INA by arguing that such cases are improper, while the second one (e.g., Archer 2018; Falbo 2021, 2023, 2024; Millson 2020; Woodard 2021, 2022; Beddor 2024) uses these cases against INA by arguing that there is nothing wrong with them. In the next section, I will show how we can save the best of both approaches – preserve INA and judge cases of double-checking as proper. In this section, I focus on arguments against the propriety of double-checking.

The first camp advances two strategies. The first aims to show that a double-checker does not truly know that p , and thus their act is consistent with INA (e.g., Friedman 2019; van Elswyk and Sapir 2021; cf. Archer 2018). On the one hand, the strategy

¹⁰Some may be inclined to adopt a contextualist (cf. DeRose 2002) or a pragmatic encroachment strategy (cf. Hawthorne 2004), arguing that Fatima does not retain her knowledge because the stakes are so high. However, that conclusion would be premature. First, it has been argued that the claim that Fatima knows is perfectly natural and plausible (e.g., Falbo 2023; Friedman 2024; cf. Beddor 2024). As Falbo (2023: 10) argues, “the standards for what it takes to act in high-stakes cases might require of agents that they not merely know that p , but be certain that p .” Thus, given the high stakes, it is reasonable for Fatima to ask again, since she seeks to acquire an epistemic state beyond knowledge. Second, we also double-check in low-stakes scenarios (see, e.g., Falbo 2023: 10).

Some also maintain that knowledge is sufficient for practical reasoning, claiming that since Fatima knows that p , she should proceed with the operation without double-checking whether p (e.g., Hawthorne 2004; Hawthorne and Stanley 2008). My position is analogous to that provided for KNA and INA: these norms specify epistemic standards sufficient for default speech acts performed using declarative and interrogative moods. However, in certain circumstances, the standards become more demanding, requiring speech acts that are subject to stricter epistemic conditions. The same point applies to the norms of practical reasoning. In most cases, knowledge suffices; yet in some contexts, the epistemic standards governing practical reasoning are more stringent. This is consistent with Brown's (2008: 186) suggestion that “the epistemic standard for relying on p in practical reasoning varies with context.” On this view, Fatima both knows that p and, in this particular context, her epistemic position is insufficient to act on p .

suggests that a double-checker merely believes that *p*. For instance, just before the operation, Fatima merely believes that the left kidney is diseased, and so she asks again to acquire knowledge in this regard. On the other hand, a double-checker may ask again because they might have forgotten the answer. Thus, Fatima knew that the left kidney is diseased but it slipped her mind, so she asks her colleague to refresh her memory. Therefore, the price of compliance with INA is a misrepresentation of the original cases. However, we can imagine a scenario in which Fatima knows that *p* yet still asks to double-check.¹¹

The second strategy takes the original cases and aims to show their impropriety. The reference point is the conversational data from Section 2, which I discuss one by one.

Recall MOORE. We saw that Moore-paradoxical askings, such as (2) repeated here, are infelicitous.

- (2a) #The left kidney is diseased, but is the left kidney diseased?
- (2b) #I know that the left kidney is diseased, but is the left kidney diseased?

Advocates of INA argue that Fatima's double-checking is infelicitous because, just as in the case of asking for the first time, (2) remains defective. However, (2) can be rephrased in such a way that it can be considered felicitous in various contexts. Fatima can make these statements to herself (5a), to her colleague (5b), or her student (5c) (cf. Woodard 2021: 8):

- (5a) I know that the left kidney is diseased, but I'm double-checking whether it is, just to be sure.
- (5b) I know that the left kidney is diseased, but I'm looking for confirmation whether it is, so can you check again?
- (5c) Although I know that the left kidney is diseased, I'm double-checking whether it is – I just want to be certain.¹²

Standardly, we aim at knowledge. Thus, as Woodard (2021: 8) observes, going beyond it may be surprising. However, once we explicitly specify and explain that we are seeking an epistemic good beyond knowledge – such as being sure (5a), looking for confirmation (5b), or being certain (5c) – the contradiction disappears.

Consider CHALLENGE. According to INA, asking while knowing can be legitimately challenged as improper (see (4)). Since Fatima asks while knowing, her asking should be improper. To illustrate that this data point cannot be applied to linguistic double-checking, let us revisit the exchange between the student and the nurse. The student says "I don't understand. Why is she asking again?" Notice that this is not a challenge to Fatima's question. Instead, by expressing a lack of understanding, the

¹¹Another potential variation of this critique is to say that a double-checker is asking a different question and is thus obeying INA. However, it is hard to say what kind of question that would be. For a discussion, see, for example, Woodard 2022: 4–5.

¹²Since Fatima is double-checking *whether p*, these examples show that double-checking can express interrogative (or question-directed) attitudes. However, some authors disagree, maintaining that double-checking expresses propositional attitudes, and propose the following version of (5): "I know that the left kidney is diseased, but I'm double-checking it, just to be sure" (Woodard 2021: 8; cf. Falbo 2021; Flamini 2024). I do not deny that certain types of inquiry may express propositional attitudes. Rather, I wish to emphasize that the examples illustrate that double-checking *can* express interrogative attitudes. For further support of this claim, see, for example, Beddor (2024). See also footnote 20.

student is asking for an explanation. Similarly, they could express their puzzlement to Fatima:

Student: I don't understand. Why do you ask again? I saw you examining the patient, you must remember that this is the left kidney.

Fatima: Of course, I remember, but I just wanted to double-check to be sure.

Even if the student thinks that Fatima should not ask again, she explains why her question is legitimate.¹³

The final data point concerns INFORMATIVENESS. Asks are knowledge-seeking speech acts. However, Fatima already knows the answer to her question, so her checking again should be pointless. Yet, certain contextual facts suggest a different interpretation. First, as CHALLENGE demonstrates, criticising Fatima for asking about something that she already knows is inappropriate. The stakes in her context – being just before the operation – make asking for something she already knows legitimate. Second, in the present context, it is common knowledge between Fatima and her colleague that she knows which kidney is diseased. Since her colleague answered her question, they recognized it as appropriate.¹⁴ Both points suggest that Fatima's linguistic double-checking is proper, even though she expects to hear what she already knows.

When asking a question, we have certain conversational assumptions and expectations regarding the speaker and the audience. These do not apply to linguistic double-checking. In asking, the speaker is expected to be ignorant and the audience knowledgeable, whereas in linguistic double-checking, both sides are expected to be knowledgeable.

Conversational data are supposed to help us distinguish proper asking from improper one. However, double-checking does not fit into this picture. Such cases should be considered improper, yet we can see that they are proper questions – Moore-paradoxical constructions are felicitous, a double-checker cannot be legitimately challenged for knowing the answer to the question, and we can ask again for information that we already know. Thus, the second strategy fails to demonstrate the impropriety of double-checking.

These data have been used to challenge INA, as they all indicate that we can appropriately ask a question while knowing that *p*. This result naturally follows from considering double-checking as a kind of asking, a view universally accepted by both advocates and critics of INA.¹⁵ This assumption pushes one camp to argue against double-checking and the other against INA. However, we can tell an alternative story about asking and double-checking. In this story, we can respect all the conversational data without rejecting INA. I present it in the next section.

4. Asking and double-checking as distinct speech acts

Depending on the context, we may perform various types of speech acts using an interrogative sentence. While this idea is well established in speech act theory and

¹³See, for example, Kelp and Simion (2017) on legitimate and illegitimate challenges.

¹⁴Most cases do not require common knowledge – I discuss this in the next section.

¹⁵This argument is standardly expressed in terms of inquiry (e.g., “Genuine double-checkers are inquirers” (Woodard 2022: 3; cf. Friedman 2019: 85)), which I discuss in Section 5.

linguistics, it has not been applied to the recent discussion on interrogatives. However, in the case of double-checking, it opens a novel solution. In this section, I argue that linguistic double-checking should be treated as a distinct speech act type separate from asking.

The idea that the same locutionary act can be used to perform different speech acts has been applied to all linguistic moods (e.g., Searle 1969; Searle and Vanderveken 1985). Recently, the focus has been on assertives (e.g., Turri 2010; Green 2013; Marsili 2024). While all assertives aim at truth, they can be ranked or sorted along a spectrum. This allows us to distinguish weaker from stronger assertives. While assertions are placed in the middle, some assertives commit the speaker in a weaker way (such as guesses or conjectures) and others in a stronger way (such as guarantees or assurances).

By extending this general idea to interrogatives, I propose a similar treatment for linguistic double-checking.¹⁶ Interrogatives, like assertives, can be sorted on a spectrum from weaker to stronger, with double-checking being stronger than asking.¹⁷ Since we can properly double-check while knowing, INA cannot be the norm of double-checking. When double-checking, we seek to improve our epistemic position.¹⁸ We need a norm that will reflect this. To this end, I employ the notion of *knowledge+*, which I borrow from Willard-Kyle (2023b: 372).¹⁹ Knowledge + is an epistemic good that (i) entails knowledge and (ii) is better than mere knowledge; it thus includes such epistemic goods as certainty, second-order knowledge, or increased justification.

The notion of knowledge + is useful when theorizing about the attitude expressed in double-checking. Recall that when asking, one expresses an attitude that is satisfied by knowledge (regardless of whether it is a wondering attitude or a desire). In the case of double-checking, one's attitude is satisfied by knowledge+. This can be explicated in terms of desires. Commenting on Fatima's double-checking, Falbo (2021: 7) observes

¹⁶I follow a traditional approach to speech acts, which holds that speech acts are individuated by distinct norms. Consequently, my proposal contrasts with context-sensitive approaches that posit a context-sensitive norm of asking, where the standard of asking varies with the context. For a defense of this view, see, for example, DeRose (2002), Brown (2008), Goldberg (2015); for a critique, see, for example, Turri (2010), Simion (2021). While a detailed discussion of this approach is beyond the scope of this paper, one reason to prefer the traditional approach is its simplicity in individuating speech acts. Certain non-default interrogative speech acts do not fit within a context-sensitive framework, which lacks a clear criterion for distinguishing between various cases. One such case is exam questions, where a teacher – who already knows the answer – asks a question to assess the audience's knowledge (see, e.g., Farkas 2022; Gaszczyk 2025). The norm governing exam questions is not only more demanding than INA (since the teacher knows that *p*) but also fundamentally different (as the teacher seeks to verify whether the audience knows that *p*). While the traditional approach classifies this as a distinct speech act from asking, a context-sensitive approach fails to provide a clear account.

¹⁷I do not aim to propose a full spectrum of interrogatives. For a discussion of weaker interrogatives, see, for example, Millson (2020), Falbo (2021) (for confirmations), Archer (2021) (for opinions), and Palmira (2020) (for hypotheses).

¹⁸There may be other interrogatives that are stronger than asking. For instance, one may know that *p* but seek to understand why *p* – in such cases, one is asking for an explanation. It may be counterintuitive to classify asking for an explanation as double-checking because the topic of the question changes – here we are looking for information that can contribute to our understanding. For a discussion of inquiry and understanding, see, for example, Kelp (2021) and El Shazly (2025); for a discussion of the speech act of explanation, see, for example, Gaszczyk (2023), cf. Gaszczyk and Grodniewicz (2025).

¹⁹Willard-Kyle acknowledges Matt McGrath for the term, cf. Kelp (2021). Recently, Deigan (2025: 1) uses the term “desire to know+” referring to a different phenomenon, namely, it is “desire to know *Q* or desire to ϕ for some event type ϕ that culminates in knowing *Q* (like finding out *Q* or learning *Q*).”

that it “is perfectly consistent with her having a desire *to confirm that* it’s the left kidney or a desire *to be sure that* or *to be certain that* it is.” Beddor (2024: 4) argues that a double-checker has a “desire to figure out for certain whether $[p]$ is true.”²⁰ To account for various epistemic goods that a double-checker may strive for, I propose that a double-checker expresses a desire to know+. This term is intentionally broad – in one context we may seek certainty, in another additional justification.

A desire to know + connects both linguistic and non-linguistic double-checking. When Fatima double-checks – privately or publicly – which kidney is diseased, she desires to know+. However, only linguistic cases of double-checking are directed toward the audience. Therefore, only linguistic double-checkings are subject to the Norm of Double-Checking (D-C):

D-C One should double-check whether p in context c only if (i) one knows that p , and (ii) one does not know + that p in c .

Knowledge is a prerequisite for linguistic double-checking. Just as in the case of asking, the double-checker seeks something they do not yet possess – while in asking one seeks knowledge, in double-checking one seeks knowledge+. However, unlike in the case of asking, the specific epistemic good that the double-checker seeks varies depending on the context. In some cases, they may need an answer that provides them with a higher-order epistemic state, such as second-order knowledge; in others, they may require additional justification or certainty. The common denominator in all these cases is that the double-checker expresses a desire to know+, that is, they seek an epistemic improvement over the knowledge they already possess.²¹

What about answers to linguistic double-checking? Interestingly, standard assertions are sufficient. As a result, just as in the case of double-checking, one should know that p to give an answer to double-checking. One might wonder: “If knowledge is sufficient for answers to double-checking, how could double-checkers acquire knowledge + from such answers?” The double-checker acquires knowledge + through interaction, and often

²⁰What kind of attitude – that is, interrogative or propositional – is a desire to know+? While the nature of desires is a contentious matter, I am inclined to treat a desire to know+ as an interrogative attitude. Following Beddor (2024: 4, 23), we can observe that the desire expressed in double-checking not only corresponds to the attitudes characteristic of paradigm inquiries but also exhibits all the core features of an interrogative attitude. First, Fatima seeks to answer a particular question, namely, which kidney is diseased. Second, she is trying to settle this question in a way distinctive of inquiry, for example, by gathering and examining new evidence. Third, she is open to revising her attitude toward the question in light of the new evidence. All of these points are corroborated by linguistic data: as examples (5a–c) indicate, double-checking can embed an interrogative attitude. Importantly, the fact that a desire to know+ is an interrogative attitude does not mean that double-checking cannot also express other attitude types (cf. van Elswyk’s (2023) parallel discussion of the speech act of asking). For instance, knowing that p is a propositional attitude that, in my proposal, one expresses – alongside a desire to know+ – when double-checking. For further discussion of interrogative attitudes, see, for example, Friedman 2013, 2017; Carruthers 2018; cf. Falbo 2021; Woodard 2021; Beddor 2024.

²¹What about cases in which we only think we already know – for example, when we have a justified but false belief? Such cases violate D-C but are still governed by it. They are analogous to asserting something we merely think we know: here too, we violate KNA while still being beholden to the norm. Such cases have been explained by appealing to the distinction between primary and secondary propriety (Williamson 2000; DeRose 2002). On this view, double-checking is primarily improper because the norm is violated, yet secondarily proper because we believe we are complying with it. As a result, our behavior is, in some sense, excusable.

collaboration, with the person answering the question. Consider that in many cases, merely repeating information already known to the double-checker will be sufficient for the double-checker to gain knowledge+. ²² This is exemplified by Fatima's case. Confirmation of the known information by her colleague increased her confidence, allowing her to proceed with the operation. In short, she gained the required knowledge+.

The context of Fatima's linguistic double-checking is somewhat unique. Here, both parties not only know that *p*, but also know that the other party knows that *p*. However, such common knowledge is not necessary for acquiring knowledge + or for double-checking. More frequently, we linguistically double-check in contexts where the audience does not know that we already know. For instance, I may know that my train departs from platform 5 at 4:00 pm, but I may still ask at the information booth, just to confirm. Even though the person at the information booth does not know that I already know when my train departs, I am still asking to double-check. Because I know when my train departs, confirming this information may put me in a position to acquire knowledge+. To emphasise, in such contexts, standard assertions are sufficient as answers to double-checking. Such assertions provide a double-checker with an independent route to something the double-checker already knows, thereby allowing them to acquire further epistemic goods. Thus, linguistic double-checkings showcase that diversifying the evidence source – simply hearing something we already know from a different source – can improve our epistemic position. ²³

How does this proposal explain the linguistic data? If double-checking is a distinct speech act from asking, it should have different conversational patterns. This is what I demonstrated in Section 3, where we observed that double-checkings are felicitous in contexts where mere askings are not. For instance, INA predicts that questions like (2) are Moore-paradoxical, but this is not so for questions like (5). This and other data naturally work in cases like Fatima's. In such cases, it is commonly known that one already knows that *p* and seeks knowledge+. However, as I have argued, linguistic double-checking is not restricted to such narrow contexts. We can linguistically double-check someone unaware that we already know *p*, and we can still acquire knowledge+. This is not an undesirable result; rather, it shows that we may double-check in a variety of contexts.

²²Of course, not every repetition will suffice. It is highly doubtful that repeating something to the same person would produce any epistemic goods. The same applies to linguistic double-checking – asking the same person again would not be epistemically beneficial. However, changing the audience makes a difference. Goldberg (2020: 211) observes that an asserter may improve their epistemic position after observing others accept their assertion. I argue below that something analogous occurs with linguistic double-checking.

²³What about higher-order checks (triple, quadruple, etc.)? Since knowledge+ encompasses various epistemic goods, one might seek to improve their epistemic position in different ways. Even after acquiring some type of knowledge+ in one context, one may seek further epistemic improvement in another context. For example, the evening before the operation, Fatima might have rechecked by herself which kidney is diseased, gaining additional justification. Moreover, just before the operation, she might have asked again, this time gaining certainty. Such further checks may be considered prudential and rational, especially if, say, she has many patients with diseased kidneys. Simultaneously, some recheckings may be irrational. As Beddor (2024: 4, fn. 7) puts it, “it is doubtful whether the obsessive re-checker is motivated by a desire to discover the truth.” In contrast, Fatima is motivated by a desire to know+ and, by diversifying the evidence source, can rationally expect to gain new evidence. For a defense of the view that one can rationally double-check something one already knows, see, for example, Falbo (2021, 2023), Woodard (2022), Beddor (2024), Palmira (2025), cf. Haziza (forthcoming).

This result is corroborated by accounts focusing on the speech act of asking. Van Elswyk (2023), for instance, argues that the conversational data apply only to the default interrogative speech acts. When discussing questions that demand more than knowledge, he observes that “*What do you want to be certain/sure of?*” is not a prompt that can be used in ordinary contexts where certainty is not typically expected” (2023: 7). It is, however, a felicitous prompt in contexts where more than knowledge can be required.²⁴ Thus, unlike asking, linguistic double-checking can be discursively marked, as in (5), to show that we are looking for more than knowledge. However, one does not need to explicitly hedge or prompt one’s question to differentiate between these two. We distinguish between them by recognizing whether we are in the context in which we seek knowledge or knowledge+.

To sum up, my proposal has clear advantages over the available accounts. Recall that there are two approaches to double-checking – one criticizes double-checking while defending INA, and the other defends double-checking while criticizing INA. Both assume that cases of linguistic double-checking are instances of the speech act of asking. By rejecting this assumption, my proposal takes the best from both approaches. It maintains that double-checkings are felicitous while preserving INA as the norm of asking.

Just as KNA is the norm of the default act performed by using the declarative mood, INA is the norm of the default act performed by using the interrogative mood. However, linguistic double-checkings are non-default uses of the interrogative mood. Since they require more than asking, they are governed by a stronger norm. This in turn explains why they yield different results for linguistic data.

5. Asking, double-checking, and inquiring

I have proposed treating INA as the norm of asking. However, in recent work in epistemology, INA is often treated as the norm of inquiry. The relationship between these two notions is rarely addressed explicitly.²⁵ In this final section, I show how my proposal fits into the broader discussion of inquiry.

There are two basic understandings of inquiry. The most widespread understanding is very close to the speech act of asking. It can be characterized by two features: first, when inquiring, one suspends judgment (one is prohibited from asking a question while knowing its answer); second, one aims at knowledge (cf. Friedman 2017, 2019). This is consistent with the conviction that knowledge is the central epistemic achievement. Let us label this aim as K-Aim:

²⁴Such cases demonstrate that, in some instances, a double-checker may explicitly ask for a speech act stronger than assertion, such as asking for a guarantee, assurance, or corroboration. This is particularly likely when it is commonly known that the double-checker already knows that *p*. For instance, a double-checker might ask, “Do you know that *p*?” thereby seeking second-order knowledge, or “Are you certain that *p*?” thereby seeking certainty.

²⁵Willard-Kyle (2024: 13, fn. 9) mentions it in passing, when discussing various norms of inquiry:

... the norms under consideration are sometimes framed as norms governing *inquiry*, sometimes *IAs* (or interrogative attitudes). At other points in the literature, such norms seem to target the speech act of asking questions. These concepts are, of course, connected: one’s interrogative attitudes *motivate* inquiry and find *expression* in the speech act of question-asking.

K-Aim The aim of inquiry is knowledge.²⁶

K-Aim is compatible with INA. Therefore, it is not surprising that advocates of the first characteristic of inquiry accept INA as the norm of inquiry.

What about double-checking? Under this view of inquiry, double-checking is improper and irrational. Since Fatima already knows that *p*, she has achieved K-Aim, and thus there is no point in further inquiry.

Recently, however, this view of inquiry has received significant pushback for being overly restrictive. An alternative understanding treats inquiry as a much broader and more diverse phenomenon. It recognizes that, in inquiry, we can seek various epistemic goods, including those beyond knowledge. Accordingly, advocates of this approach propose an alternative aim of inquiry:

I-Aim The aim of inquiry is epistemic improvement.²⁷

One of the primary motivations for I-Aim is the existence of permissible cases of inquiry – such as double-checking – that aim beyond knowledge. In such cases, even though one has already achieved knowledge, one may still inquire further to improve one's epistemic standing. More broadly, I-Aim is compatible with the view that inquiry can consist of various interrogative speech acts. While we typically perform the speech act of asking and thus seek knowledge, we can also perform stronger interrogatives and thereby aim at higher epistemic goods.

This view accommodates the intuition that inquiry is a rich phenomenon, where asking and double-checking are merely examples of various linguistic and non-linguistic actions, including gathering evidence, running experiments, debating, and more (see, e.g., Fleisher 2024: 19). This understanding of inquiry allows for versatile subtypes of inquiry, all of which aim at epistemic improvement. The tension between various types of inquiry dissolves – they share the same aim but may be governed by distinct norms (cf. González de Prado 2024).

Finally, consider that we can endorse I-Aim while maintaining that “knowledge is a central sort of epistemic achievement” (Sosa 2021: 22). I-Aim is compatible with all the norms I have proposed throughout the paper, since all of them are knowledge-based norms, that is, they have knowledge as their content. This fits within the widely endorsed knowledge-centric approach to communication (cf. Williamson 2000; van Elswyk 2023). According to my proposal, knowledge lies at the center of our default linguistic practices – asking and asserting. As a result, the majority of our communication aims at knowledge.²⁸ This is consistent with cases in which we seek further epistemic improvement, as we already possess knowledge at the outset.

6. Conclusions

This paper has argued that linguistic double-checking should be treated as a distinct speech act, separate from the default speech act performed by using the interrogative

²⁶See, for example, Whitcomb (2010, 2017), Millar (2011), Kelp (2014, 2021), van Elswyk and Sapir (2021).

²⁷See, for example, Archer (2021), Falbo (2021, 2023, 2024), Woodard (2022), cf. Beddor (2024).

²⁸Some may wish to supplement I-Aim with the view that we can only end our inquiry after achieving knowledge, but we are permitted to go further. My view is consistent with or without this supplementation. For arguments in favor, see, for example, Woodard (2022), against, see, for example, Archer (2021), Falbo (2023).

mood. In default cases, we perform the speech act of asking and thereby seek knowledge. However, in non-default cases, we may seek further epistemic goods. I have proposed that linguistic double-checking is a non-default interrogative governed by D-C. At the same time, my proposal naturally extends to inner double-checking, as all cases share the same attitude – a desire to know+.

One reason double-checking has drawn so much attention is that it does not fit the standard explanation of linguistic data. Existing accounts, which treat double-checking as a mere instance of the speech act of asking, struggle to provide a satisfactory explanation. They either deny the felicity of double-checking or reject INA. The proposed solution offers an alternative. By distinguishing double-checking from asking, we can treat double-checking as felicitous while preserving INA as the norm of asking. Finally, this framework does not diminish the central role of knowledge in communication. Rather, it recognizes that, while knowledge is our default epistemic state, there are times when we naturally seek more.

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