Assertion and Rejection[*]

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penultimate version

to appear in *Linguistics Meets Philosophy*, ed. D. Altshuler, CUP

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.
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> (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*)

Speech acts can be *correct* or *incorrect* in that they adhere to or violate some normative component of the conventions surrounding their use. A lot hinges on which assertions are correct. If assertions are 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 premises, 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).

None of these analyses of correct assertion, or their purported import, are uncontroversial. But few doubt that an analysis of correct assertion plays a pivotal role in both linguistics and philosophy. I contend that it is equally important to provide an analysis of *rejection* to say something about which assertions can be *correctly rejected*.[1] As a case in point, consider how *disagreement data* like in (1) and (2) can elucidate the semantics of epistemic modals.

(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.

The contrast in (1)/(2) suggests that epistemic *might* cannot be paraphrased as *for all I know*, since (1a) is correctly rejectable by (1b), whereas (2a) is not (von Fintel and Gillies, 2007). Arguably,(1a) and (2b)

[1]In my terminology, *assertion* and *rejection* are speech acts that correspond to the acts of positive and negative judgement and/or 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.

are correctly assertible in the same contexts, so do not differ in their assertibility-conditions. However, they apparently differ in their rejectability-conditions. Considering rejections reveals something that would be lost if we had only considered assertibility. Similar observations can be made in other domains, e.g. disagreement about taste, morals or aesthetics.[2]

The jury is still out on what precisely we learn from such data. Surely, however, the jury will benefit from studying 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. On this view, rejection is a shadow thrown by assertion—to not reduce it to negative assertion would be a 'futile complication' that 'cometh of evil'[3] (Geach, 1965, p. 455). I will argue that this view is mistaken.

Beyond addressing the Frege point, the focus of this chapter will be on the notion of *correctness*. Following Williamson (1996, 2000), it has become popular to *characterise* speech acts *by* the norms that are essential for their correct performance. (But many of those who do not accept that such norms *characterise* speech acts still accept that there *are* norms governing speech acts.) I am sympathetic to this and in Section 4 will spell out in some more detail to what this view amounts and respond to some of its critics.

However, 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.[4] 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, we need to stipulate rejection as a primitive that is not itself definable by a norm. I argue that the following characterisation of rejection will get the normative conception off the ground.

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

Much of the appeal of the normative conception of assertion stems from the fact that it allows one to characterise assertion without having to complete the sentence "to assert is to...". However, one nevertheless has to characterise rejection by completing "to reject is to..." as in (Mistake). While this may appear to be a *reductio* of the normative conception, I argue that it is not.

Indeed, some version of the problem that requires the adoption of (Mistake) will likely afflict *any* proposal to define what assertion is. In brief, the problem of the normative conception is that we expect a norm-governed activity to *come with* a mechanism *à la* (Mistake) for registering rule-violations. Hence talk of norms requires talk of rejection, so rejection is not itself characterised by a norm. Other conceptions of assertion likewise explain what assertions are by appealing to certain in-place frameworks (e.g. related to context updates or the undertakings of commitments). Such frameworks, I argue, must likewise include rejection as a primitive, so one cannot give an explanation of rejection itself from within the framework.

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[2]This chapter is focussed on rejections of assertions, but data about the correct rejectability of non-assertoric speech acts is similarly important. For example, one rejects imperatives most naturally by responding *I will not*, which appears to reveal something about imperatives that cannot be read from their surface form (Geach, 1958; Kaufmann, 2012; von Fintel and Iatridou, 2017; Portner, 2017).

[3]An allusion to Matthew 5:37: 'Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil' (ESV). See Geach and Black (1952, p. 125, note A).

[4]For further useful discussion on what such a norm could be, see Bussière (ms.).

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 that are 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, instead requiring the principle (Mistake). I conclude with some further commentary in Section 6.

2   Rejection and negative assertion

The seminal work on 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 (3) and two possible analyses in (4) and (5).

(3)   a. If the accused was not in Berlin, he did not commit the murder.
      b. The accused was not in Berlin.
∴ c. He did not commit the murder.

(4)   a. Assert: If not p, then not q.   (5)   a. Assert: If not p, then not q.
      b. Assert: Not p.   b. Reject: p.
∴ c. Assert: Not q.   ∴ c. Reject: q.

The analysis (4) straightforwardly explains the validity of (3) as an application of *modus ponens*. The analysis (5) however is less straightforward. Frege stresses that the *embedded* use of *not* in (3a) cannot be an expression of a negative judgement (i.e. a rejection) but must be a *operator* that modifies a sentence, not expresses a judgement about it. But this means that if we analyse (3) as (5), we need a lot of machinery to explain the validity of (3)—machinery that was not needed to explain (3) as (4). 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 have *three* primitives (assertion, rejection and negation) where two would do (assertion and negation). By reducing rejection to negative assertion, Frege does away with the third primitive and, he contends, when we can make do with fewer primitives, 'we must' (1919, p. 154).[5]

There is however an ambiguity in Frege's argument. He assumes that rejections are linguistically realised by negatively answering polar questions (p. 153), but there are two possible ways to do so. To wit, one can answer with a sentence containing a negation as in (6a) and by using a polarity particle as in (6b).

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[5]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.

(6)   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. 'no-ing') 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 (6) interchangably, but in the later *Gedankengefüge* (1923, p. 34ff) he is explicit that (6b) is a *Verneinung* of p. In fact, the form (6b) is more congenial to Frege's discussion. When analysing (3), an important part of Frege's 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!'.[6]

Thus, we may analyse assertions of p by considering utterances of the form in (7a); rejections of p by considering utterances of the form in (7b); and negative assertions by considering utterances of the form in (7c). This gives us a linguistic grip on investigating the relationship between rejection and negative assertion.

(7) 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 to other speakers. This points towards another important distinction we need to untangle. On the one hand, we can do *logic* by asserting and rejecting some propositions to ourselves and investigating what follows from this; this is Frege's concern. But on the other hand, we can also use the same speech acts in dialogue to, in particular, accept or reject another speaker's contribution. Expressing a rejection by negatively responding to a self-posed question is not *per se* unsuitable for this second purpose. It is clumsy, but not incorrect, to reject (8a) with (8b).

(8) a. A: The accused was in Berlin.
    b. B: Was the accused in Berlin? No!

There is more to say about the difference between rejections 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 (7b) is to be analysed as (7c). However, as incisively argued by Smiley (1996), Frege only succeeds in showing that *not* is not an

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[6]My translation. Original German:

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

indicator for rejection, due to the fact that *not* embeds. That is, Smiley concedes that (5) is not the correct analysis of (3). But, he continues, one may now ask whether (5) is the correct analysis of (9).

(9) 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. Frege could insist that for reasons of parsimony the two forms of *Verneinung* in (6) are to be analysed the same, their divergent embedding behaviour notwithstanding. Thus, he could insist that it is most parsimonious to analyse (9) as (4) as well.

Smiley counters that there is nothing unparsimonious about introducing additional primitives (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 (9) is new data, distinct from (3), that Frege leaves unexplained. But this could be seen as begging the question against Frege. The difference between (3) and (9) is acknowledged by Frege and it is precisely this difference that he seeks to analyse away.

There is, however, additional data that gives succor to Smiley. 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 proposition *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);[7] according to Smiley (1996), rejecting *p* is correct if and only if asserting *not p* is correct.

Enter Imogen Dickie (2010), who argues that some rejections are weak. Some of her examples are in (10).

(10) 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.

Dickie argues that such rejections cannot be strong, as, for example, if (10a) 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 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 (10b). Such data seem to doom the Fregean project of reducing rejection to assertion—but they equally trouble Smiley (1996) and Rumfitt (2000), who still insist that all rejections are strong.

The Fregean has some room to manoeuvre. In a sentence like *Homer did not write the Iliad because Homer did not exist*, it appears that the speaker *does* assert that *Homer did not write the Iliad*, but the use of negation here is metalinguistic (see Horn, 1989). Thus, perhaps the Fregean can resist Dickie's argument from (10) by claiming that such rejections *are* reducible to assertions of negatives, if the latter includes assertions of metalinguistic negatives. Thus, we might say that the rejections in (10) are *metalinguistically strong* in that they are equivalent to an assertion containing a metalinguistic negation.[8]

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

[8]Calling such rejections/negations 'metalinguistic' is arguably misnomer (although a frequently repeated one; see Schlöder and Fernández, 2015). Compare the following paradigm cases of metalinguistic rejections (adapted from Carston, 1996) with Dickie's examples.

But this will not do. Incurvati and Schlöder (2017) claim that one can reject out of ignorance, which suggests to them the existence of *bona fide* weak rejections. The following are cases in point.[9]

(12) a. Is it the case that X will win the election? No! Z might win!
   b. This ticket has a one in a million chance to win. Will it lose? No! I don't know that.
   c. 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 (12a) as expressing strong rejection (in the non-metalinguistic sense), it would follow that the speaker asserts *X will not win.* But the speaker claims something *weaker* than this. Namely, that this *might* be the case (see Bledin and Rawlins, 2016 and Mandelkern, this volume for additional discussion and data related to how epistemic modals occur in disagreements). In (12b) and (12c), the speaker rejects a proposition since they are not in the position to assert the proposition in question; but they are clearly not in a position to assert its (non-metalinguistic) negation either.

It seems far fetched to read such examples as 'metalinguistically strong'. The following utterances sound odd.

(13) a. It is not the case that X will win the election (because Z might win).
   b. This ticket has a one in a million chance to win. It will not lose (because I don't know that it will).
   c. All I know is that the streets are wet. It is not raining (because this doesn't follow).

It is difficult to read (or even coerce) a metalinguistic interpretation of the negations in these examples. Intuitively, none of (13a,b,c) have the same meaning as, respectively, (12a,b,c).

Hence, rejections such as in (12) 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 metalinguistic, we cannot give an account of the phenomenon of rejection that would reduce rejection to negative assertion.

Incurvati and Schlöder (2017) conclude that the most parsimonious explanation of *all* the data is to accept a primitive operation for rejection that encompasses both weak and strong instances of answering *No!* to a self-posed polar question. They characterise this as the speech act that expresses that one *refrains from accepting* some content and suggest that this is the fundamental function of all rejections. Strong rejections, they claim, arise as a pragmatic strengthening of this more basic function. A related proposal by Manfred Krifka (2013, 2015) and colleagues (Cohen and Krifka, 2014; Meijer et al., 2015) is that responding *no* to an assertion is to foreclose continuing the conversation in a way where the assertion would have been accepted (which need not mean to continue the conversation in a way where a negative was accepted). They call this *denegating* the assertion.

Be that as it may. Negation and rejection have sometimes been recognised as multi-category phenomena (Geurts, 1998; Schlöder and Fernández, 2019) and arguments from parsimony do not have the last word in this debate. An analysis of rejection in terms of assertion and two or more embeddable operators to cover the various weak cases has not been ruled out. However, in the

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(11) a. Did we eat tom-ah-toes? No! We bought tom-ay-toes.
   b. Did we see hippopotamuses? No! We saw hippopotami.
   c. Jane isn't hardworking or brilliant; she's both.

The speaker of such utterances takes issue with the *form* of the prejacent, but agrees with its (material, first-order) *content*: that they ate the fruit of *solanum lycopersicum*, saw more than one hippopotamus, that Jane is hardworking or brilliant. This means in particular that they would not reject a rephrasing—an alternative form—of the same contents. This is not so in the cases in (10). There are no rephrasings of *Did Homer write the Iliad?* or *Was Homer a unicorn?* that have the same content, but to which the speaker would respond *Yes!*.

[9]Example (12a) is derived from an example by Grice (1991) and has previously been discussed in Incurvati and Schlöder (2019); example (12b) is adapted from an example by Williamson (1996).

next section I expand on an argument by Huw Price (1990) to argue that we *must* admit a primitive operation for rejection, this speech act fulfills a *need* that cannot be fulfilled by any assertoric speech act.

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 are 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 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.[10]

As Price points out, even if you and I have a shared understanding of the truth-conditional semantics of negation (e.g. by knowing the truth-table for negation), I could not point out your mistake by uttering *these berries are <u>not</u> edible*, since you might not realise the incompatibility of truth and falsity (despite being a competent user of the language) and believe *these berries are edible and not edible.*[11] It does not suffice that there *is* an incompatibility (such as between truth and falsity), I also need to be able to *inform* you of it. Evidently, without you having an understanding of any 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!.* Thus, actual competent use of negation goes beyond the truth-table for negation: it *includes* an understanding of the fact that the use of *not* is registering an incompatibility (Price, 1990). Price claims that the act of registering an incompatibility is rejection and claims that *not* is the expression of rejection. Taken literally, his suggestion of letting *not* directly express rejection falls prey to Frege–Geach problem discussed in the previous section. The problem can be resolved by assuming a primitive speech act for rejection and stating the meaning of *not* in *terms of* this speech act instead of the *direct* expression of that speech act (Smiley, 1996; Rumfitt, 2000; Incurvati and Schlöder, 2017, 2019).

Either way, the thought experiment suggests that we need to stipulate a distinct expression of incompatibility. Although suggestive, such thought experiments may not be ultimately compelling. The need for a primitive mechanism for rejection can also be appreciated by probing into analyses of assertion, such as Stalnaker's (1978). On his 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.[12]

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

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

[12]For example, Sarah Murray (2009, p. 324) attributes to Stalnaker the view that 'an assertion updates the common ground' and contrasts this with other views on which 'an assertion is a proposal to update the common ground'.

But this is a 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.
>
> <div align="right">(Stalnaker, 1978, p. 87, fn9)</div>

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, Seth 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.[13]

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 explaining assertion (which may indeed be Yalcin's ambition), 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 whose rejection and undoing are distinct activities.

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 inconsistent with 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, as Price's observations apply here as well. There *being* an incompatibility does not exempt us from needing a mechanism to register it. That is, one may not always realise that a proposal is a *counter*proposal.

Reducing rejection to counterproposing faces another problem. To explain a rejection of a proposal to update the common ground as *another* proposal to update the common ground may lead to a regress with proposals stacking up and not being resolved. There must be a mechanism to halt the regress. That is, there is a need for a response to an assertion is *not* itself an update proposal. This operation should register that one is *rejecting* an update proposal.[14]

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[13]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.

[14]Alternatively, a mechanism to accept a proposal that is not itself an update proposal. Either way, another primitive is required.

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 will win* and *no, Z might win* is the incompatibility of truth and falsity, it would follow that *no, Z might win* means that *X will not win*, which it does not. By adopting the Stalnakerian picture, one can fix this issue: rejection registers that I do not wish some p to be in the common ground. 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, there is insufficient evidence for p, or indeed because p is false. This or a similar conception of rejection is available to the gamut of accounts that characterise speech acts by their context update potential (e.g. Roberts, 2012; Portner, 2018; Murray and Starr, 2018).

There is another option to spell out a sufficiently broad notion of rejection, not requiring a context-update framework. As said in the Introduction, not all assertions or rejections are *correct* and some are *incorrect* in that they are violating some convention associated with these speech acts. 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* (Williamson, 1996, 2000). (This can be said while leaving open whether or not these norms are *essential* to linguistic activity or not.) Roughly following Brandom (1983, 1994), one may think of these norms as being enforced by a social order in which violating these norms makes one liable to *social sanction.* The relevant sanctions are social consequences such one's partial exclusion from the practice of assertion; e.g. the boy who cried wolf is sanctioned for his misdeeds in that nobody heeds his assertions (Brandom, 1994, p. 180).

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 that *the berries are 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.*

Brandom himself does not consider the rules related to sanction to constitute the meaning of assertion and rejection. Rather, the rules and sanctions surrounding linguistic behaviour constitute a framework in which speakers keep track of each other's *commitments* to certain contents, from which certain permissions and obligations derive. Brandom then suggests to explain the act of asserting as the undertaking of a commitment to the asserted content. This suggestion is taken up by Asher and Lascarides (2003), Farkas and Bruce (2010) and Krifka (2015), among many others. Aside from Krifka's denegations, however, not much has been said about the role of rejection in such a framework with a perspective towards rejections being possibly weak.

Recall that Price's (1990) original argument was based on the puzzle of how we can inform someone that they are *mistaken.* The normative story outlined above would suggest that a mistake is a violation of a norm and thus we may take rejection to register norm violations. This seems to hit the target. 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.)

I will now turn my attention on the *normative conception* of speech acts according to which speech acts are characterised by the norms that *essentially* apply to them. Compared to Brandom, such an account cuts out the middle man: instead of characterising commitment by norms and sanctions and then assertion in terms of commitment, we may characterise assertion directly in terms of norms. I

first elaborate my preferred understanding of the normative conception of speech acts. Afterwards, I investigate the prospects of conceiving of the *essential* function of rejections as registering mistakes.

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 normative 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. Namely, a move of a rook is a move that is subject to (Rook).[15] 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

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

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 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 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.

(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, just as (Short Castling 1) is insufficient to characterise short castling (MacFarlane, 2011). It appears we require another rule of the form *to assert is to (...)*. But appearances mislead here. There are many possible assertions and many possible rook moves, but there is only *one* move called 'short castling' (namely, what is stated in Short Castling 2). The phrase *short castling* is a mere abbreviation for this one move. Unabbreviating leads to the following rule for (Short Castling), which is 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 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. Likewise, one need not know that assertions are called 'assertions' to partake in the assertion game (and few people use the term regularly).

But this does not fully address the objection that on the normative account one cannot complete the sentence "to assert is to...". We have now seen that one can state the rule for short castling without completing the sentence "to short castle is to...", but the rule (Short Castling) still contains an

unanalysed primitive: *move*. So, in explaining *short castling* by appealing to (Short Castling), 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 explanations 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 declaration ("E2 to E4"), by sending a letter, or even by entirely mental acts (some can play a full game of chess in their head). Moreover, one can perform any act that has the *form* of a move without playing a game of chess. I can, for example, 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 from the literature on 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 be equally happy with (Speech Act) and (Assertion) being the explanations of what it means to assert and make speech acts.[16]

(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.

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[16]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 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 (Hindriks, 2007).

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." In (Assertion), I suggest to define 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.

As a matter of fact, this is the case 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. Otherwise, the very term *illegal move* would be unintelligible. 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, like (Rook), are merely regulative. But now, 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. However, I will argue, such a device cannot itself be characterised by a norm.

The need for rejection 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).[17] 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 that *p*. To make her realise her mistake, a mistake must be registered by the rejection.[18] 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 (10a); or *p* uses nonexistent properties (10b); of the speaker has insufficient evidence *p* (12). Thus, (Rejection) appears to be broad enough to capture the data from Section 2.[19]

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, 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,

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[17]Any other norm would allow analogous arguments.

[18]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.

[19]If you want to capture metalinguistic rejections like (11)—those objecting to form, not to content—under the umbrella of the norm of rejection, mispronunciations *etc* will count as mistakes as well. Whether this is the case depends on how the general norms of the language game are spelled out.

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).[20]

(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 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).

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[20]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).

(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.[21] We simply understand that a way 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 (as the act that points out that someone is liable to sanction) in terms of commitment but needs to take it as a fundamental operation that is part of the mechanisms surrounding commitment.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to win some repute for rejection as a *sui generis* speech act whose study should be of interest to linguists and philosophers. 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 is that it is 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.

Importantly (and curiously), however, the speech act of rejection cannot itself be defined by an essential norm, as the act of registering mistakes must be *prior* to the norm that governs when mistakes may be registered. 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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[21]Some games might have particular procedures for *how* to register a mistake, but this is not an explanation of *what it is* to register a mistake, which is a concept presupposed by there being rules.

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