



## ON ASKING

(Sobre las preguntas)

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### Keywords

Genuine questions  
Rhetorical questions  
Inquiry  
Information-seeking acts  
Aim-constitutivist theory of questions  
Inquiry-based sincerity conditions  
Inquiring states of mind

**ABSTRACT:** Based on a survey testing people's intuitions about questions, Lani Watson has recently claimed that the act of seeking information captures the nature of genuine questions and what distinguishes them from rhetorical ones. In this paper, I will argue that Watson's account fails to provide an accurate theory of questions. By revisiting the survey cases and results, and using Searle's conception of the illocutionary point of directives, I will first argue that the cases support and confirm a simple and straightforward aim-constitutivist theory of the speech act of asking: One asks a real question by uttering an interrogative sentence only if one's utterance is an attempt that aims to get the addressee to answer the question it expresses. Otherwise, one is asking a fake or rhetorical question. Moreover, based on Friedman's perspective on inquiring attitudes as states in which one has a question open in one's thought, I will argue that the survey cases can be taken to expand and deepen the sincerity conditions for questions that Searle had initially proposed: One sincerely asks a question if one wants the addressee to answer the uttered question to settle an inquiring state of mind, or to make a target audience enter into it. Finally, in the cases in which the survey participants recognise the presence of a question despite the absence of any apparent speech act of asking, I will argue that they recognise an inquiring state of mind rather than simply an information-seeking act: They recognise that one is in a mental state in which one is asking oneself a particular question.

### Palabras clave

Preguntas genuinas  
Preguntas retóricas  
Investigación  
Actos de búsqueda de información  
Teorías de las preguntas en términos de fines constitutivos  
Condiciones de sinceridad basadas en la investigación  
Estados mentales investigadores

**RESUMEN:** Basándose en una encuesta que comprueba intuiciones sobre preguntas, Lani Watson ha afirmado recientemente que el acto de buscar información captura la naturaleza de las preguntas genuinas, y lo que las distingue de las preguntas retóricas. En este artículo, argumento que la propuesta de Watson no consigue ofrecer una teoría de las preguntas adecuada. Mediante el examen de los casos y resultados de la encuesta, y recurriendo a la concepción de Searle del fin ilocutivo de los actos directivos, argumentaré primero que los casos respaldan y confirman una teoría simple del acto del habla de preguntar en términos de un fin constitutivo: solo se hace una pregunta genuina profiriendo una oración interrogativa si la preferencia es un intento orientado al fin de conseguir que el receptor conteste la pregunta expresada. De otro modo, estaremos haciendo una pregunta falsa o retórica. Además, basándome en la perspectiva de Friedman sobre las actitudes investigadoras como estados en los que hay una pregunta abierta en nuestro pensamiento, argumentaré que los casos de la encuesta pueden verse como expandiendo y profundizando las condiciones de sinceridad para preguntas propuestas inicialmente por Searle: hacemos sinceramente una pregunta si queremos que el receptor responda la pregunta proferida para cerrar un estado mental investigador, o hacer que la audiencia entre en un estado de este tipo. Finalmente, en los casos en que los participantes en la encuesta reconocen la presencia de una pregunta pese a la aparente ausencia de un acto del habla interrogativo, argumentaré que reconocen un estado mental investigador, más que un simple acto de búsqueda de información: reconocen que en uno está en un estado mental en el que se hace a uno mismo una pregunta particular.

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**Gako-hitzak**

Benetako galderak  
 Galdera erretorikoak  
 Jakin-nahia  
 Informazioa bilatzeko egintzak  
 Galderen teoria xede-  
 konstitutibista  
 Jakin-nahian oinarritutako  
 zintzotasun-baldintzak  
 Jakin-nahizko egoera mentalak

**LABURPENA:** Pertsonen galderen inguruan dituzten intuizioak ebaluatzen dituen inkesta batean oinarrituta, Lani Watson-ek berriki adierazi du ezen informazioa bilatzeko egintza berak jasotzen duela zein den benetako galderen izaera eta zerk bereizten dituen galdera erretorikoetatik. Artikulu honetan, arrazoituko dut Watson-en proposamenak huts egiten duela galderen teoria egoki bat eskaintzeko saioan. Inkestako kasuak eta emaitzak berriro aztertuz eta Searle-k egintza direktiboen helburu ilokutiboaz duen ikusmoldea baliatuz, lehenik eta behin, argudiatuko dut kasu horiek galdetzearen hizketa-egintzaren teoria xede-konstitutibista sinple eta erraz bat babesten eta berresten dutela: galderazko perpaus bat egiten dugunean benetako galdera bat egiten ari gara, baldin eta gure enuntziatuaren helburua bada hartzaileak bertan planteatzen zaion galderari erantzutea; bestela, galdera faltsu edo erretoriko bat egiten ariko gara. Gainera, Friedman-ek jakin-nahizko jarrerari buruz duen ikuspegitik abiatuta (galdera ireki bat, hau da, erantzunik izan ez duen galdera bat darabilgu buruan egoera horietan), arrazoituko dut ezen inkestako kasuak baliagarriak direla Searl-ek galderetarako hasieran proposatu zituen zintzotasun-baldintzak zabalatzeko eta sakontzeko: galdera bat zintzotasunez egiten dugu, baldin eta gure nahia bada hartzaileak galdera horri erantzutea gure jakin-nahizko egoera mentala asebetetzeko edo entzulea egoera mental horretara eramateko. Azkenik, itxuraz galdetzearen hizketa-egintzarik egon ez arren inkestako parte-hartzaileak galdera baten presentziaz jabetu diren kasuetan, argudiatuko dut ezen, informazioa bilatzeko egintza soil bat baino gehiago, jakin-nahizko egoera mental bat hauteman dutela: norik bere buruari galdera jakin bat egiten ari zaion egoera mentalean daudela atzematen dute.

## 1. Introduction

What is a question? Lani Watson (2021) has recently answered this question by claiming that questions are *information-seeking acts*: When one asks a question, one seeks information, and “if something is an information-seeking act, then it gets a place in the collection” (2021, p. 293) of what we consider a question.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, based on this, she implies that this information-seeking act is what distinguishes utterances that are *genuine/real questions* from those that are *rhetorical/fake questions*. Specifically, from the perspective she proposes, it follows that one asks a real question by one’s utterance when and only when one is seeking information. Instead, when asking a question rhetorically or pretending to ask a question by one’s utterance, one is not seeking information.<sup>2</sup>

Watson arrives at this intuitive conclusion by analysing the results of a survey that tests people’s intuitions about questions in everyday scenarios.<sup>3</sup> One of the central survey results is that while most participants recognise the presence of questions in the first two cases, they do not detect any real questions in the last two scenarios:

### ROAD

Sarah is trying out a new route to school. Along the route she comes to the side of a busy, unfamiliar road with no pedestrian crossing. She looks both up and down the road before crossing to check if there are any vehicles coming and then proceeds to cross safely. (Watson, 2021, p. 281)

<sup>1</sup> Watson acknowledges that there already are logical and linguistic theories of questions (for example, see Ciardelli *et al.*, 2019; Fiengo, 2007; Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1997; Krifka, 2011; and Wiśniewski, 2013). However, she argues that these logical and linguistic accounts involve such technical and formal machinery that makes them distant from what we usually consider a question. Given this, Watson proposes shifting our attention from what a question is from a linguistic or logical point of view to what we do in practice when we raise questions.

<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will adopt the following terminology: I use the terms “fake questions” and “rhetorical questions” interchangeably to refer to utterances that, although they take the linguistic form of a question, do not constitute instances of the speech act of asking. Conversely, I use the expressions “genuine questions” and “real questions” to refer to utterances that, in their constitution, do amount to the speech act of asking (see Section 3 for further discussion).

<sup>3</sup> You can fill out the survey at [www.philosophyofquestions.com/questionnaire/](http://www.philosophyofquestions.com/questionnaire/).

## COUNTRIES

Sarah, is listening to a colleague describing a lesson he has just given on countries of the world. While he is talking, Sarah realises that she doesn't know how many countries there are and, as she is interested to know, she interjects saying 'how many countries are there'. Various colleagues respond with several different figures. (Watson, 2021, p. 285)

## DISINTERESTED

Sarah has arrived at school and is walking to her classroom down a long corridor. She spots a particularly disliked colleague approaching from the other end. As they pass, despite having no interest whatsoever in his wellbeing, Sarah glances up and mutters 'morning, how are you'. (Watson, 2021, p. 279)

## RAIN

Sarah has just woken up and opened the curtains to discover that it is raining again, as it has been for the past two weeks. On seeing this she exclaims out loud 'will it ever stop raining'. Her partner, who is still in the bed behind her, shrugs. (Watson, 2021, p. 279)<sup>4</sup>

Based on this result, Watson first concludes that questions do not need to be *interrogative sentences* or *speech acts*. Namely, questions do not need to be *linguistic entities*. Indeed, she notes how the survey participants recognise the presence of a question in scenarios like ROAD, where no question is linguistically articulated.<sup>5</sup> Very intuitively, Watson explains this result by claiming that the survey participants identify the presence of a question in COUNTRIES and ROAD, although there is an interrogative speech act in COUNTRIES while there is none in ROAD, because they recognise the presence of an *information-seeking act*. Indeed, Sarah seeks whether any vehicles are coming when she looks up and down the road in ROAD. Moreover, she seeks how many countries there are when she asks her spoken question in COUNTRIES. Instead, Watson's explanation for why survey participants do not identify real questions in DISINTERESTED and RAIN is that they recognise that Sarah is not seeking information when she utters her interrogative sentences. Indeed, Sarah's question in DISINTERESTED seems just a way to respect a formal kind of politeness required in the workplace: Sarah, being totally disinterested in her colleague's well-being, is not really seeking to know anything about it. Moreover, Sarah's question in RAIN appears to be just a way to vent her frustration towards the weather: She is not really seeking to determine whether the rain will ever stop since it is evident that, sooner or later, it will.

Based on this information-seeking-act-based reading of the survey results and on the assumption that the survey participants correctly recognise when there is a genuine or a rhetorical question in the cases they are confronted with, Watson concludes that the act of seeking information captures the nature of genuine questions and what distinguishes them from rhetorical ones. Namely, it captures when a question is genuinely or rhetorically asked.

In this paper, despite the previous intuitive conclusion, I will argue that Watson's account fails to capture the nature of genuine questions and what distinguishes them from rhetorical ones. In Section 2, we will see how Watson solves a pos-

<sup>4</sup> In response to ROAD, "66% of the survey participants judge there to be a question (3,670 participants), 28% judge there to be no question (1,589 participants), and 6% are unsure (352 participants)" (Watson, 2021, p. 281). In response to COUNTRIES, "95% of the survey participants judge there to be a question (4,711 participants), 3% judge there to be no question (147 participants), and 2% are unsure (94 participants)" (Watson, 2021, p. 285). In response to DISINTERESTED, "38% of the survey participants judge there to be a question (1,955 participants), 54% judge there to be no question (2,804 participants), and 8% are unsure (407 participants)" (Watson, 2021, p. 279). In response to RAIN, "35% of the survey participants judge there to be a question (2,115 participants), 58% judge there to be no question (3,432 participants), and 7% are unsure (406 participants)" (Watson, 2021, p. 279).

<sup>5</sup> As the reader can note, in all cases Watson proposes to the survey participants, there are no *question marks*. However, the survey participants have no problems identifying questions in the previous scenarios. Watson argues that this is a "further point in favour of a definition of questions that does not rely on their manifestation in language" (2021, p. 283).

sible counterexample to her theory. I will point out that, even if her solution seems to protect her account, it actually generates other counterexamples to her own theory of questions, rendering the resulting theory unable to distinguish genuine from rhetorical questions.

However, in Section 3, by revisiting the survey cases and results and adopting Searle's (1969, 1979) and Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) idea of the *illocutionary point of directives*, I will show how Watson's survey might be used to support and confirm a simple and straightforward *aim-constitutivist theory of the speech act of asking*: One asks a real question by uttering an interrogative sentence only if one's utterance is an attempt that aims to get the addressee to answer the question it expresses.<sup>6</sup> Instead, a question is rhetorically asked when one is not making the previous *aim-directed attempt* by one's interrogative sentence.

Moreover, based on Friedman's (2013, 2017, 2019) perspective on inquiring attitudes as states in which a question is open in one's thought, I will argue that the survey cases can be taken to expand and deepen the *sincerity conditions* for questions that Searle (1969) had initially proposed: One sincerely asks a question if one wants the addressee to answer the uttered question to settle an inquiring state of mind, or to make a target audience enter into it. Said informally, using the most common inquiring attitudes human beings can have, a question is sincere when it is an act of will to solve or generate *curiosity* or a *wondering state*.

Finally, in the cases in which the survey participants recognise the presence of a question despite the absence of any speech act of asking or any interrogative sentence being uttered, I will argue that they recognise an inquiring state of mind rather than simply an information-seeking act: They recognise that one is in a mental state in which one is asking oneself a particular question.

In a nutshell, I will argue that the survey results can be seen as indicating that we recognise the existence of questions as speech acts, with their constitutive and sincerity conditions, and as mental states.

## 2. *What goes wrong with Watson's account?*

Consider the following case:

### EXPOSE

Sarah is attending a staff meeting in which a colleague she doesn't particularly like (the one that provoked the disinterested "how are you" from earlier) is being unhelpfully rude and obstructive regarding a particular issue. Sarah knows that he has not read the minutes from last week's meeting, which he did not attend, and in order to expose this she interjects at the end of his comments, saying, "what did you think of the suggestion Julia made last week to address this issue". (Watson, 2021, p. 289)

For this scenario, the survey participants agree that there is a question.<sup>7</sup> However, it appears that Sarah is not seeking information by asking her question. Indeed, she already knows well that her colleague has not read the minutes from last week's meeting. In light of this, one might argue that EXPOSE represents a counterexample to Watson's theory: Not all questions are information-seeking acts.

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<sup>6</sup> Note the distinction between questions as *speech acts* and as the *semantic content* that is expressed by one's speech act or interrogative utterance. A question as a speech act refers to a type of act done by our language, whereas a question as semantic content refers to the abstract informational structure typically expressed by an interrogative (see footnote 1 for accounts of questions as semantic entities).

<sup>7</sup> In response to EXPOSE, "62% of the survey participants judge there to be a question (3,038 participants), 29% judge there to be no question (1,391 participants), and 9% are unsure (430 participants)" (Watson, 2021, p. 289).

Watson recognises the problem. However, she holds that Sarah is asking a genuine question, and she is indeed seeking information in EXPOSE. Specifically, Watson claims that Sarah is exploiting the *function of questions* of seeking information to achieve her *practical purposes*: Exposing and embarrassing her disliked colleague to make him stop being unhelpfully rude and obstructive. Namely, from Watson's perspective, Sarah decided to seek information from her colleague by using her question to achieve her goal. However, she notes that Sarah could follow another strategy. For example, to obtain the same result, she could make an assertion like: "Stop being so rude and obstructive regarding this particular issue: You didn't even read the minutes from last week's meeting!".

Given this reading of EXPOSE, Watson can defend her position against a possible counterexample that individuates a genuine question that is not an information-seeking act. Indeed, against the potential objector, Watson claims that the information-seeking act that defines questions does not need to be determined by an *information-seeking motive*. It is not always directed at satisfying one's informational needs. Rather, it is an act that can be used for multiple purposes, such as the *practical one* of exposing and embarrassing a disliked colleague to make him stop being unhelpfully rude and obstructive. Moreover, by having this response available, Watson can still maintain her explanation as a correct account of what occurs when survey participants identify a question: They recognise an information-seeking act.

## 2.1. WATSON'S SOLUTION GENERATES COUNTEREXAMPLES TO HER OWN THEORY OF QUESTIONS

Watson's solution might appear intuitive and correct at first sight. However, it turns out to be a double-edged sword for her own theory of questions. Indeed, notice that the same argument Watson uses for reading EXPOSE as a case in which we have an information-seeking act can be extended to DISINTERESTED and RAIN: Scenarios in which the survey participants do not recognise any questions, and in which Watson claims there are rhetorical ones.

Indeed, by using Watson's own argument for EXPOSE, one might say that Sarah is seeking information in DISINTERESTED because, despite being totally disinterested in knowing about her colleague's well-being, she is using the information-seeking function of her question, "How are you?", to attain the goal of respecting a formal kind of politeness required in the workplace. Namely, in DISINTERESTED, Sarah would have decided to seek information from her colleague by her interrogative utterance to attain the previous practical goal. Moreover, one might also say that Sarah is seeking information in RAIN because, although she is not really aiming to know whether the rain will stop, she is using the information-seeking function of her question, "Will it ever stop raining?", just to vent her frustration towards the weather. Namely, in RAIN, Sarah would have decided to seek information from her partner by her interrogative utterance to express her frustration. In a nutshell, we can see that, by applying Watson's argumentative strategy from EXPOSE, we can say that Sarah's interrogative utterances in DISINTERESTED and RAIN are information-seeking acts.

However, it is easy to see how this reading of DISINTERESTED and RAIN, as a direct application of Watson's solution, would negate her own theory of questions. On the one hand, since her framework states that being an information-seeking act is a sufficient condition for something to be an instance of a question, then the interrogative utterances Sarah raises in DISINTERESTED and RAIN would be real cases of questions. However, as the survey participants and Watson herself recognise, there is no question in the previous scenarios: Sarah is not really asking a question with her interrogative utterances but rather posing a rhetorical or fake one. As a consequence, the application of Watson's argumentative strategy from EXPOSE to DISINTERESTED and RAIN would generate *counterexamples* to her own theory of questions: It would show that being an information-seeking act is not always sufficient for something to be a question. In particular, considering the previous scenarios, such an act would not be enough to make an interrogative utterance a real case of what we consider a question. Therefore, contrary to her own theory, Watson's solution would imply that not all information-seeking acts fall under the collection of what we consider a question.

On the other hand, the previous reading of DISINTERESTED and RAIN would also indicate that not only genuine but also rhetorical questions can be information-seeking acts. Indeed, in DISINTERESTED and RAIN, there would be questions we intuitively conceive as rhetorical or fake that are information-seeking acts. As a consequence, the ap-

plication of Watson's strategy from EXPOSE to DISINTERESTED and RAIN would generate counterexamples to her own conception of rhetorical questions as acts that do not seek information. Moreover, given this, it would imply that both genuine and rhetorical questions can function as information-seeking acts. Indeed, applying Watson's solution, both the real questions in cases like COUNTRIES and the rhetorical questions in DISINTERESTED and RAIN would be information-seeking acts. However, if this is true, then a simple information-seeking act could no longer serve as the distinguishing criterion between genuine and rhetorical questions, being a feature that both of them can share.

Finally, given this last point, Watson's strategy from EXPOSE applied to DISINTERESTED and RAIN would show that an information-seeking act is present in both cases where the survey participants recognise questions and in scenarios where they do not. Given this common feature between the scenarios, it would follow that the presence or absence of an information-seeking act, as defined by Watson, cannot be the contrasting feature that the survey participants intuitively and correctly recognise when they distinguish the presence or absence of a question. Rather, this commonality of the cases would suggest that the survey participants detect something beyond the simple act of seeking information when they discriminate whether Sarah is asking a question or not. Therefore, the outcomes generated by applying Watson's strategy from EXPOSE would indicate that her account cannot accurately explain what is going on with the survey participants' intuitions. As a consequence, the same participants' intuitions and responses could not serve as reliable support for her information-seeking-act-based theory of questions: The survey results, in themselves, would not support the idea that a question is an information-seeking act.

In conclusion, the solution Watson provides to explain why there is an information-seeking act in EXPOSE would *prima facie* protect her account. However, upon closer examination, we can see that it would generate counterexamples to her theory of questions, render her theory incapable of distinguishing genuine from rhetorical questions, and ultimately make her account fail to explain the survey results —thereby making them unsuitable as support for her own theory.

### 3. *Watson's survey reconsidered: Questions as speech acts and mental states*

The problems in Watson's account push us to find an alternative answer to the questions: What does Watson's survey reveal regarding participants' intuitions about questions? What does it show about a theory of questions, particularly regarding the distinction between genuine and rhetorical questions?

In this last section, I reconsider first the survey cases in which a question is verbally uttered, drawing on Searle's (1969, 1979) and Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) idea of the *illocutionary point of directives*. Based on this, I will argue that the participants' responses support a simple *aim-constitutivist theory of the speech act of asking*: One asks a real question by uttering an interrogative sentence only if one's utterance is an attempt that aims to get the addressee to answer the question it expresses. In other words, for an interrogative utterance to count as a real question, it must have *the goal* of getting the addressee to provide a statement about the relevant question expressed by the uttered interrogative sentence. Or, put differently, it must aim to make the addressee describe how things are regarding the pertinent question. Given this perspective, we can also distinguish rhetorical or fake questions from genuine ones: If one's interrogative utterance does not amount to this *aim-directed act*, then it is a rhetorical or fake question.

Moreover, considering Friedman's (2013, 2017, 2019) conception of *inquiring attitudes* as mental states in which one has a question open in one's thought, I will further argue that the survey cases can be taken to show some *inquiry-based sincerity conditions* for the speech acts of asking. These conditions expand and deepen Searle's original theorisation: One asks a sincere question by one's interrogative utterance if one wants the addressee to answer the uttered question to resolve an inquiring attitude or to generate it in a target audience. Said more intuitively by adopting the most common inquiring attitudes we can have, a question is sincere when, by one's interrogative utterance, one wants to solve one's curiosity or wondering state, or to generate it in a target audience. In a nutshell, from this perspective, a question

is sincere if it is the act of will to solve an inquiring state of mind or to generate it in a target audience. Conversely, if a question is not sincere, one is not doing this act of will.

Finally, considering this, I will argue that in survey cases where no question is verbally articulated or performed as a proper speech act, the survey participants recognise the presence of questions because they recognise that one is in an inquiring attitude. In a nutshell, the survey can be taken to show that the *act of asking* can be a *speech act* with some constitutive and sincerity conditions or simply a *mental state* by which we open a question in our thoughts.

### 3.1. QUESTIONS AS SPEECH ACTS: AIM-CONSTITUTIVISM

In Searle's (1969, 1979) famous perspective on speech acts, the *illocutionary point* (or what he also calls the *essential condition*) is what helps us individuate and define the different types of illocutionary acts we can perform with our language. In Searle and Vanderveken (1985), we find the following definition: "The illocutionary point of a type of illocutionary act is that purpose which is essential to its being an act of that type" (1985, p. 14). In other words, it is the aim that is *constitutive* of the illocutionary act: If an utterance *X* amounts to the illocutionary act of the type *T*, then *X* aims at *I*. Conversely, if one's utterance *X* does not aim at *I*, then *X* is not an illocutionary act of the type *T*. In a nutshell, the illocutionary point is the *constitutive aim* of the different types of illocutionary acts that tells us something about the very nature of each of them.<sup>8</sup>

In Searle's (1979) and Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) well-known taxonomy, questions are a type of *directive*. Directives are those illocutionary acts that are defined by the following illocutionary point: They are attempts by the speaker that aim at getting the addressee to do something. Hence, if an utterance amounts to a directive, then that utterance has the aim of getting the addressee to do something. In the specific case of questions, the speaker's utterance aims to get the addressee to answer the question it poses. Hence, following the aim-constitutivist perspective derived from Searle's original idea of the illocutionary point, an utterance counts as the illocutionary act of asking only if it aims to get the addressee to answer the question it expresses. If the utterance does not have this aim, it does not constitute the illocutionary act of asking. In other words, one is not really or genuinely asking a question if one's utterance does not amount to the previous *aim-directed act*. Notably for our purposes, this aim-constitutivist theory of the speech act of asking provides a basis for distinguishing between real/genuine and fake/rhetorical questions: If one's interrogative utterance is a genuine or real question, then it has the aim constitutive of the illocutionary act of asking. If it lacks this aim, then the interrogative utterance is a rhetorical or fake question.

Now, it is interesting to note that Watson's cases and survey responses appear to support and confirm this account and distinction when a given question is verbally articulated to an addressee in the various scenarios. Indeed, consider the following cases in addition to COUNTRIES and EXPOSE:

#### GOOGLE

Sarah, is attempting to find out where the nearest butchers to her house is, on behalf of a friend. As she is a vegetarian, Sarah herself has no interest in this information but, nevertheless, she types 'local Edinburgh butchers' into Google and notes down the location. (Watson, 2021, p. 278)

#### PENCILS

Sarah is teaching her students basic arithmetic. One student shows her his answer to a question and she sees that it is wrong. In order to correct him, rather than telling him the answer, Sarah counts out ten pencils on the table in front of him, removes two and says 'how many pencils are left on the table'. (Watson, 2021, pp. 287-288)

<sup>8</sup> See Alston (1991), Searle (1991), and Siebel (2002) for critical discussions on the concept of illocutionary point.

In all these cases, the survey participants affirm that there is a question, and it is indeed intuitive to think that Sarah is asking real questions with her sentences in these scenarios.<sup>9</sup> Relevantly, comparing these cases and in line with our theory, we can appreciate that what they have in common is this minimum relevant fact: By her utterance, Sarah is trying to get the addressee to answer the question it expresses. Specifically, she attempts to elicit a statement from the addressee regarding the question she verbalises. Or, put differently, she aims to make her addressee provide a description of how things are regarding the question expressed in her utterance.

Indeed, in COUNTRIES, through her interrogative sentence, Sarah is trying to get the expert to answer how many countries there are. In EXPOSE, she is trying to make her disliked colleague provide a statement regarding her question, namely that he did not read the minutes from last week's meeting. In GOOGLE, even if there is no human addressee but a digital one like Google, Sarah's written utterance can be seen as a shortcut interrogative sentence for the complete one, "Where are the local butchers in Edinburgh?": By posing this interrogative to Google, she tries to make it provide some results that describe where to find the local butchers. Finally, in PENCILS, by her interrogative sentence, Sarah is trying to make her student answer how many pencils are left on the table. In other words, all these cases confirm and support what is explained by our aim-constitutivist theory of the speech act of asking: Sarah's utterances are questions, as our intuitions suggest, and they are indeed aimed at getting the addressee to answer the question each of them expresses. Hence, in accordance with the survey participants' responses, our theory provides an explanation of why these cases involve the presence of questions: Sarah is simply performing the *speech act of asking* by her interrogative utterances.

Instead, in cases where the survey participants do not recognise a real question, it is notable that Sarah's utterance is not aimed at getting the addressee to answer the question by making a statement or describing how things are. Indeed, in DISINTERESTED, Sarah's interrogative sentence is not really aimed at getting her colleague to answer and describe how he is doing: Being totally disinterested in it, her question is just a formal courtesy that does not require any answer in exchange. The same happens in RAIN. The interrogative sentence Sarah utters is not aimed at getting her partner to answer the question expressed and make a statement about whether the rain will ever stop. Sarah's question is just a way to express her frustration about the weather. Given our aim-constitutivist theory, Sarah is not asking questions in DISINTERESTED and RAIN through her interrogative utterances because they lack the illocutionary point of the illocutionary act of asking. Rather, since these interrogative utterances are not aimed at getting the addressee to answer them, they represent cases of fake or rhetorical questions. Hence, in line with the survey participants' responses, our theory effectively explains why these cases do not involve the presence of questions, even though interrogative sentences are spoken aloud. Simply, Sarah is not performing the *speech act of asking* by her interrogative utterances.

Therefore, considering our analysis of the previous cases, we can see that the illocutionary point of the utterance performed in the scenarios proposed by Watson enables us to distinguish between cases of real and fake questions. In particular, we can appreciate that *when* survey participants recognise the presence of a question in scenarios where an interrogative sentence is verbally articulated, the interrogative utterance is aimed at getting the addressee to answer the question it expresses. Instead, the participants do not recognise the presence of a real question *when* the interrogative utterance does not have this aim. Given this, it follows that in cases where a question is verbally uttered, the survey participants' responses track this distinctive feature rather than simply the information-seeking act Watson describes. In other words, it is simply reasonable to conclude that, in these cases, participants recognise the presence or absence of the speech act of asking, as defined by the theory of this linguistic act we have proposed. Ultimately, given this, the survey cases and responses can be taken to confirm and support the aim-constitutivist theory of questions we have retrieved from Searle, along with the distinction it yields between genuine and rhetorical questions.

<sup>9</sup> In response to GOOGLE, "72% of the survey participants (to date) judge there to be a question (3,515 participants), 20% judge there to be no question (996 participants), and 8% are unsure (365 participants)" (Watson, 2021, p. 278). Finally, in response to PENCILS, "84% of the survey participants judge there to be a question (4,223 participants), 12% judge there to be no question (583 participants), and 4% are unsure (215 participants)" (Watson, 2021, p. 288).

### 3.2. QUESTIONS AS SPEECH ACTS: SINCERITY CONDITIONS

Beyond these conclusions, I believe the survey scenarios not only support the previously established aim-constitutivist conception of the speech act of asking but also clarify its sincerity conditions. Namely, they reveal not just what constitutes a genuine question when verbally uttered, but also what makes it sincere.

In Searle's perspective, when one performs an illocutionary act, one expresses a *psychological state*. To be sincere in an illocutionary act, the speaker must have the same psychological state expressed by the illocutionary act the speaker performs. In the case of directives, they express a psychological state that can be associated with *wants* or *desires*: The speaker wants the addressee to do what she is attempting to get the latter to do (Searle, 1969, 1979; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). Therefore, to have a sincere directive, the speaker must have the corresponding want or desire. Given this perspective, which characteristic want or desire is expressed by the speech act of asking? Following this account and considering that asking is a type of directive, the simple answer is that asking is sincere only if *one wants* or *desires the addressee to answer the question one expresses by one's utterance*. However, I think that, taking into account the survey cases, we can be more detailed about the types of wants that are characteristic of the speech act of asking. Indeed, intuitively, in all the cases we have considered in the previous subsections, Sarah wants the addressee to answer the question expressed by her utterance. But, to understand better the type of want involved in the speech act of asking, we should ask: Why does Sarah want the addressee to answer?

Considering this question, it is worth noting that one type of want that Searle recognises for having a sincere question is that one wants the addressee to answer the question because the speaker wants to find out and, therefore, know the answer.<sup>10</sup> Now, going beyond Searle's terminology and drawing on contemporary epistemology literature, this want that is expressed by the speech act of asking can be more precisely understood or explained by a type of attitude Friedman (2013, 2017, 2019) characterises as an *inquiring state of mind*: A state of mind in which one has a question open in one's thought and aims to answer it. Generalising from this perspective, we have the following insight: One asks a sincere question through one's interrogative utterance when one wants the addressee to answer the question it expresses because one is in an inquiring state of mind towards it.<sup>11</sup> Or, put more concisely, one asks a sincere question through one's interrogative utterance when one is in an inquiring state of mind towards the question expressed by the utterance.

Indeed, following this view, in COUNTRIES, it appears that Sarah wants the addressee to answer because she is in a *psychological state* in which she is asking herself the relevant question and aims to know the answer: She has the question, "How many countries are there?", open in her thought and aims to find out the answer. In particular, in COUNTRIES, Sarah seemingly exhibits a specific variety of the inquiring attitudes Friedman generally describes: She has a *state of curiosity*. As a matter of fact, when posing her interrogative sentence, Sarah can be simply described as being curious about how many countries there are and to know the answer. Therefore, following our intuitions, her question appears sincere because she is in a state of curiosity about it. In other words, using Friedman's terminology, she wants the addressee to answer the question, "How many countries are there?", because she has an inquiring attitude towards it.

Turning to GOOGLE, it is clear that Sarah is neither personally curious about the question of where the local Edinburgh butchers are nor genuinely interested in knowing the answer for herself. However, despite this lack of personal curiosity, she can still be understood as embodying an inquiring attitude when she poses her question to Google. Indeed, Sarah does aim to find out the answer and resolve the question of where the local Edinburgh butchers are. Given the details of the case, we can imagine that she is in this condition because her not-so-sensible non-vegetarian friend asked her a favour, as they do not know anything about Edinburgh. In this intuitive description of the case, although she is not personally invested, Sarah is nonetheless wondering about the previous question when she submits her written interrogative to Google. Therefore, even without personal curiosity, her question can be considered sincere because

<sup>10</sup> See Whitcomb (2017) and Haziza (2023) on the norms governing interrogative speech acts that express inquiries.

<sup>11</sup> See Drucker (2022) for a similar account that is focused on the state of wondering.

it reflects a *form of wondering* —a type of inquiring attitude— that, in the case of Sarah, is pragmatically or instrumentally motivated given her situation: She keeps the question open in her mind and seeks to settle it, not for herself but to assist her friend. Again, given this perspective, Sarah's question can be taken as sincere because it expresses the psychological state of a person in an inquiring state of mind, and Sarah herself does occupy a form of inquiring attitude.

Now, considering PENCILS and EXPOSE, it is obvious that Sarah is not in an inquiring state of mind about the questions she asks her student or disliked colleague: She already knows the answers and is totally settled about them. However, despite this, I believe that the questions uttered can be regarded as sincere under specific conditions that are always related to an inquiring attitude. Indeed, in both cases, I think Sarah wants to make a target audience —whether her student or colleagues— enter into an inquiring state of mind regarding the question expressed by her interrogative utterance, with the ultimate goal of making them know the answer.

Starting with PENCILS, by her interrogative, Sarah can be seen as attempting to make her student answer the question of how many pencils are left for the following reason: She wants him to consider that question reflectively and try to answer it by himself, thereby learning the result of ten minus two and exercising his mathematical skills. Intuitively, given this description of the case, even if Sarah is not inquiring into the question she poses, she still appears to ask her student a genuine and sincere question —provided she asks it with the kind of want we have just outlined. From this perspective, the question is sincere because, even if Sarah does not have an inquiring attitude towards it, she wants her student to enter into this very state. Put differently and more intuitively, using the common inquiring attitude of curiosity or wonder, we can describe her speech act of asking as sincere for the following reason: By her question, she wants her student to become curious or start wondering about it so that he can try to answer it by himself and come to know the answer.

Before discussing EXPOSE, it is relevant to note that there is another notable way, acknowledged by Searle (1969), by which Sarah's *teaching* or *exam question* might be sincere: She might want the student to answer her question because she wants to know whether he knows the answer.<sup>12</sup> Even if we can interpret Sarah's question in this way in PENCILS, it is important to underline that an inquiring attitude always appears to be involved and can be taken to explain Sarah's want. Indeed, Sarah can be described as having an inquiring attitude towards whether her student knows the answer to her question of how many pencils are left on the table: She is wondering about this, being a teacher who must evaluate and teach her students. In this eventuality, Sarah asks her student the question of how many pencils are left on the table to solve the inquiring attitude she has as an evaluating teacher. In other words, she wants her student to answer her question because, as Searle notes, she wants to know whether the student knows the answer. However, more specifically, this want amounts to or is explained by Sarah's state of wondering about whether her student knows the answer. In conclusion, this is a further way to expand Searle's theorisation, in the case of teaching and exam questions, by explaining the want that makes a speech act of asking sincere through an appeal to an inquiring attitude: One's question is sincere because one does want the addressee to answer the question due to one's inquiring state of mind towards whether the addressee knows the answer.

Finally, moving to EXPOSE, this case can be intuitively accounted for in a way similar to our first description of PENCILS. Indeed, Sarah can be taken to sincerely ask the question because she wants her colleagues to enter into an inquiring attitude towards the same question she poses: She wants them to consider it and become curious about the answer. In particular, she does this to make them learn that the disliked colleague did not read last week's meeting minutes. Indeed, in support of this, it is intuitive to imagine that if the disliked colleague refused to answer Sarah's question or stayed silent about it, the curiosity of the other colleagues would increase so that they themselves would require an answer from him. In this eventuality, due to the curiosity instilled by Sarah's initial question in her colleagues, the disliked colleague would then be forced to confess that he did not read the minutes of last week's meeting. Therefore, from this perspective, we can intuitively see Sarah's question as sincere, even if she is not inquiring about it due to her knowledge, because she wants her col-

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<sup>12</sup> See also Gaszczyk (2025) on the speech act of exam questions.

leagues to enter into an inquiring attitude towards it and make them know the truth. In a nutshell, following Searle's necessary condition for a sincere question, Sarah's question is intuitively sincere in PENCILS and EXPOSE because she wants the addressee to answer the question. However, more specifically, she wants this and thus asks a sincere question as she wants the target audience to enter into an inquiring state of mind regarding the same question she poses.

In conclusion, by analysing the survey cases, we can see that we can theoretically expand the sincerity conditions for the speech act of asking initially described by Searle. Generally, one asks a sincere question by one's utterance only if one wants the addressee to answer the relevant question. However, more specifically, one's question is sincere if one wants the addressee to answer the question to solve an inquiring attitude, or to make a target audience enter into it. In a nutshell, a question is sincere if it is the act of will to solve an inquiring state of mind or to generate it in a target audience. If a question is not sincere, then the speaker is simply not performing this act of will.

### 3.3. QUESTIONS AS MENTAL STATES

Reading the previous two subsections, one might note that, even though our account explains why the survey participants recognise the presence of questions when a question is verbally articulated in an utterance and a speech act is performed, it remains silent on another important point. Specifically, it does not explain why participants also recognise the presence of questions in scenarios where a proper speech act of asking does not take place. Indeed, the account proposed is a theory of the speech act of asking, which, intuitively, does not cover cases where there are no speech acts.

However, despite this possible concern, I think that the account we offered can be used to explain why the survey participants recognise a question in cases where there does not seem to be a proper speech act of asking. In order to show this, consider ROAD and the following scenarios:

#### DICTIONARY

Sarah, has arrived in her classroom and is checking through her teaching resources for the day. She notices a word that she is not familiar with and, in order to find out what it means, she looks it up in a dictionary. (Watson, 2021, p. 281)

#### SKY

Sarah is leaving work for the day and night has already fallen. She pauses at one point and looks up to the clear, dark sky above. Marvelling at the scale and beauty of the scene she says silently inside her head 'how big is the universe'. She considers this for several minutes and then continues home. (Watson, 2021, p. 293)

The survey participants say there are questions in all of these cases.<sup>13</sup> The question is now: Why?

Watson argues that Sarah is performing an information-seeking act in all the previous scenarios. Hence, based on this, her explanation was that the survey participants recognise a question in the previous cases because they recognise this information-seeking act. Even if this description seems to fit what is happening in the cases, we can retrieve a much simpler and more fundamental description from our theory of the speech act of asking. Indeed, one might ask the following question: "It is true that Sarah is seeking information in all these cases. However, again, what explains why she is seeking information?". Intuitively, the simple answer is that Sarah is *asking herself* a question: "Are any vehicles coming?", "What is the meaning of this unfamiliar word?", and "How big is the universe?". Namely, adopting Friedman's

<sup>13</sup> In response to DICTIONARY, "81% of the survey participants judge there to be a question (4,119 participants), 14% judge there to be no question (725 participants), and 5% are unsure (260 participants)" (Watson, 2021, p. 281). In response to SKY, "53% of the survey participants judge there to be a question (2,592 participants), 35% judge there to be no question (1,698 participants), and 12% are unsure (560 participants)" (Watson, 2021, p. 293).

terminology, the previous questions are open and unsettled in Sarah's mind: She has an inquiring attitude towards "Are any vehicles coming?", "What is the meaning of this unfamiliar word?", and "How big is the universe?".

Therefore, even if it might be correct to describe Sarah as doing an information-seeking act in the previous cases, it is a more robust and intuitive description that Sarah is simply in a mental state in which she is asking herself a given question —she is in an inquiring state of mind. Given this perspective, we can draw the following conclusion about the survey participants' intuitions: What they recognise in ROAD, DICTIONARY, and SKY when they say that there is a question is not simply the action of seeking information, but more profoundly that Sarah is in an inquiring state of mind in which she has the relevant question open in her thought. Put more informally, the survey participants recognise that Sarah is asking herself a question due to her curiosity or state of wondering about it. In a nutshell, we can say that, rather than simply recognising an information-seeking act, the survey participants recognise the presence of a *mental state of asking*, which motivates and guides Sarah's information-seeking behaviour.

Before concluding, I would like to add something more about the case SKY. Indeed, our description aligns well with the case if we assume that Sarah, with her silent question in her head, is not performing any *proper speech act*. However, I recognise that one could object that Sarah's question is *internally verbalised* and that she is doing an *inner speech act* by silently posing her question in her head. That said, even if we want to grant this, our theory can still account for this case and why there is a question. Indeed, we can intuitively say that Sarah is performing an *inner speech act of asking*. In particular, following the account drawn from Searle, Sarah is performing an internal variant of the linguistic act of asking, in which the addressee from whom she attempts to get the answer through her internal interrogative utterance is herself. In other words, this case can be taken to show that the illocutionary point of the illocutionary act of asking is preserved even when the speaker and the addressee coincide: By making her *inner utterance*, Sarah is attempting to get herself to answer the question expressed by her innerly uttered interrogative sentence.

Moreover, we can also account for the intuitive sincerity of her question. Always following our theory, we can say that Sarah's inner question is also sincere because she wants herself to answer it due to her inquiring attitude: She has the question, "How big is the universe?", open in her thought. Indeed, as we noted, Sarah intuitively wonders and is curious about how big the universe is. Nonetheless, we can go even beyond this simple and intuitive explanation. Based on our theory, we could also intuitively say that Sarah's inner question is sincere because, by silently uttering it in her mind, she wants to put herself in a *reflective inquiring state of mind* in which she thinks about the previous question and explores it with awareness. Namely, by making her inner utterance and aiming to get herself to answer the question, she wants to wonder in a reflective way about the question of how big the universe is.

In conclusion, putting together all our considerations about Watson's survey, we can conclude that it shows the following: We recognise the existence of questions not only as *speech acts* but also as *mental states*. In the first case, by following Searle's theorising about speech acts, we have argued that the survey cases confirm and support an aim-constitutive theory of the speech act of asking: One's utterance is a genuine question only if it is aimed at getting the addressee to answer the question it expresses. Namely, one's utterance constitutes a real question only if it amounts to this aim-directed act. Moreover, upon further analysis of the survey scenarios, we have expanded and deepened Searle's original sincerity conditions for the speech act of asking: One sincerely asks a question if one wants the addressee to answer the uttered question to settle an inquiring attitude, or to make the target audience enter into it. Finally, in the second case, by following Friedman's conception of the inquiring state of mind, we have argued that the survey cases suggest that there is a type of asking that is not linguistic but mental: One can be in a state of mind in which one has a question open in one's thought. Put differently, one can be in a state of mind in which one is asking oneself a question.

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On asking

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