

PHIL 3710/LING 3332: Philosophy of Language
Week 6: Verificationism

Understanding verificationism

1. A movement that became prominent in the 1930s and 1940s, most notably due to the Vienna Circle (containing Moritz Schlick, Rudolph Carnap, Otto Neurath, A. J. Ayer, Hans Reichenbach, Carl Hempel, Kurt Gödel, and others) (see SEP article). Also pushed by Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic*, and later revitalized by Michael Dummett in the 1980s.
2. The *verification principle*: If a sentence has no verification condition then it is meaningless.
3. What is the verification condition of a sentence? The course of experience that would show the sentence to be true. By ‘course of experience’ is meant something like ‘bunch of perceptual experiences’ – things looking, feeling, sounding, smelling, and/or tasting a certain way.
4. The following are thus meaningless:
 - The Absolute is perfect. (Hegel)
 - The Nothing noths. (Heidegger)
 - Negation negates itself.
 - Everything has just doubled in size.
 - The entire universe came into existence five minutes ago.
 - We are brains in a vat.
5. The claims of the following disciplines are meaningless:
 - Religion (‘God is omniscient’)
 - Ethics (‘It is wrong to lie’)
6. What was the motivation? A growing empiricism and scientism in philosophy – only claims that are grounded in experience are meaningful.

Hume (1777): “If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”
7. What about ‘Descartes had exactly 154 books on his bookshelf’? Is this verifiable? Must the sentence be verifiable in practice or can it be just in principle?
8. A stronger claim: the meaning of a sentence *is* its verification condition.

9. Note: it is assumed that sentences have truth conditions, and that the truth condition of a sentence is distinct from its verification condition. The meaning of a sentence is its *verification* condition, not its *truth* condition. This can thus be thought of as an *epistemic* account of meaning.
10. A sentence also has a *falsification* condition. But the claim is that its meaning is its verification condition. Later Karl Popper would make a fuss about falsification conditions. (What is an example of a sentence that is not verifiable but is falsifiable, or vice-versa?)
11. Verificationists typically make an exception for so-called *analytic* sentences:
 - No bachelor is married.
 - If Ithaca is gorges then Ithaca is gorges.
 - Five pencils are more than two pencils. (?)

These have no verification condition – there is no course of experience that would show them to be true (is that right?) – but they are nevertheless meaningful; their meaning is not their verification condition.

This commitment to a distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences is a distinction that Quine famously argued against (‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’).

12. A related but distinct claim: that every meaningful (synthetic) sentence is synonymous with (abbreviates) a sentence that describes a course of experience.
13. Another related but distinct claim: empiricism: experience is our only (or at least ultimate) source of knowledge. Verificationism does not follow from empiricism.
14. Another related but distinct claim: sentences with no verification conditions need not be meaningful, but there is no point debating their truth.

Problems for Verificationism

1. Is there an analytic/synthetic distinction? Quine: in the light of recalcitrant experience *any* sentence may be given up, so there are no analytic sentences.
2. How does the theory extend to questions and commands?

Reply: this is everyone’s problem.
3. It seems that we first have to understand a sentence in order to then check whether or not it has a verification condition. Suppose it has none – then understanding the sentence could not have amounted to grasping its verification condition (it has none). But then its meaning cannot be its a verification condition.

Reply: it is an illusion that we understand them.

4. What does the verification principle say about itself? Is it self-defeating?
5. Erwin (1970): A certain machine judges the truth value of sentences with 100% accuracy. Then every sentence is verifiable. And their meanings all include experiences associated with it being fed into this machine.
6. Just what count as the verification conditions of a sentence seems to depend on the background knowledge of the experiencer (or group of experiencers), so should be relativised to an experiencer (or group of experiencers). But that makes the meaning of the sentence a relative matter.

Reply: that's the right result.

Quine on Radical Translation

1. Quine's question: how should we properly (i.e. scientifically) engage in radical translation?
2. In short: by matching up our dispositions to verbal behaviour – our dispositions to utter certain expressions under certain conditions of sensory stimulation.
3. Start by observing the natives' linguistic behaviour. 'Gavagai'.
4. Then start to prompt assent and dissent (or neither): 'Gavagai?'
5. Should think that what does the prompting is not things such as rabbits, but stimulations, which we can take to be patterns of chromatic irradiation of the eye.
6. In some cases the stimulations will be what prompts the response, in other cases not (someone is away tracking a giraffe). We have ways of telling which (e.g. looks of recognition).
7. Better to use stimulations that have duration up to some *modulus*, which should not be too long or too short. Can use a blindfold. Should also take them to be whole scenes. So a stimulation is "an evolving ocular irradiation pattern between properly timed blindfoldings".
8. *Affirmative stimulus meaning* of a sentence for a speaker: the class of all stimulations that would prompt his assent. A stimulation σ belongs to the affirmative stimulus meaning of a sentence S for a given speaker iff there is a stimulation σ' such that if the speaker were given σ' , then were asked S, then were given σ , and then were asked S again, he would dissent the first time and assent the second.

Negative stimulus meaning of a sentence for a speaker: the class of all stimulations that would prompt his dissent. (Assent followed by dissent.)

Stimulus meaning of a sentence for a speaker: the ordered pair of its affirmative and negative stimulus meanings.

9. Note: the stimulus meaning of a sentence is relative not only to a speaker but also to a time and a modulus. It is the stimulus meaning modulo n seconds of sentence S for speaker a at time t .

The positive and negative stimulus meanings are mutually exclusive but not exhaustive. Could talk about dispositions to assent, rather than what the speaker would do.

10. *Occasion sentences* ('Gavagai', 'Red', 'It hurts', 'His face is dirty') command assent or dissent only if queried after an appropriate prompting stimulation. Not so for *standing sentences* ('There is ether drift', 'The crocuses are out', 'The *Times* has come').
11. Problem for stimulus meaning: depends on collateral information – rabbit fly, movement in the grass, mimicking others. Would be better to rule out assent and dissent elicited by anything but understanding of the sentence. But how do we do that?
12. *Observation sentences*: occasion sentences whose stimulus meanings vary none under the influence of collateral information. Comes in degrees: 'Red' at one extreme, 'Bachelor' at the other. This is a social notion, unlike stimulus meaning.
13. The more observational a sentence, the more nearly its stimulus meanings for different speakers coincide. E.g. 'Red' versus 'Gavagai'. Could use this as a definition of 'observational'. In fact Quine does.
14. Stimulus meaning does a poor job of capturing our intuitive notion of meaning for non-observational sentences. But the stimulus meanings of 'Bachelor' and 'Unmarried man' are identical *for a speaker*. *Stimulus synonymy* serves well for synonymy when we stick to one speaker, even if stimulus meaning does not serve well for meaning.
15. Stimulus meaning is what the radical translator should take as the objective reality. Must do our best with that.
16. What about meanings of words? Stimulus synonymy of 'Rabbit' and 'Gavagai' does not guarantee that 'rabbit' and 'gavagai' have the same meaning, nor even that they have the same extension: rabbit stage, undetached rabbit part, the rabbit fusion, rabbithood.
17. Not only can we not be sure whether they have the same meaning, but there is not even an objective matter to be right or wrong about (unlike whether or not 'Gavagai' and 'Rabbit' have the same stimulus meaning). Individual words or phrases do not have any determinate meaning.
18. This is his principle of *the indeterminacy of translation*.