1. Logical Positivism

Logical positivism was a movement of the early 1900’s. It rode on the coat tails of early Russell and early Wittgenstein. Logical positivism was marked by “shocking” declarations about the meaninglessness of certain philosophical problems. Working within the scientific air of the times, logical positivist argued that age-old philosophical problems could simply be dissolved. These problems, the positivists argued, are mere ‘pseudo-problems’.

2. Verification Condition:

A verification condition for a sentence S is a set of possible experiences on someone’s part that would tend to show that the S was true.
(S also has a falsification condition—the set of possible experiences that would tend to show that S is false.)

The Verification Principle:

A sentence S is meaningful if and only if S has a verification condition.

That is, according to the Verification Theory, the meaning of a sentence is its verification condition.

Consider the following sentences:

Everything [including all yardsticks and other measuring devices] has just doubled in size.
The entire physical universe came into existence just five minutes ago, complete with ostensible memories and records.
We are constantly and systematically being deceived by a powerful evil demon who feeds us specious experiences.

The Verification Theory, then, provides an actual test for what a sentence S means; it predicts S’s propositional content (or factual content, as Ayer puts it.) Unlike Grice’s program, where a sentence’s meaning was grounded in the psychological, a sentence’s meaning was grounded in the epistemic—on our ways of coming to know or finding out things.

But what about sentences that make no empirical predictions—e.g. ‘If it’s snowing, then it’s snowing’? They are true no matter what happens in the world; they are trivially true, in virtue of the meanings of the words involved. According to the positivists, these sentences do have meaning: They are the analytic sentences. Synthetic sentences are the ones to which the verification principle applies.

3. Objections

1. The theory only applies to declarative, fact-stating, language.
2. It seems that in order to determine whether a given sentence S is verifiable (or falsifiable) we have to understand what S means. But then meaningfulness is conceptually prior to verification.
3. The Verification Theory seems to imply that all of our sentences are ultimately about sense experiences.
4. What about the Verification Principle itself? Three options: (i) it is verifiable, (ii) analytic or (iii) meaningless.
5. Consider an apparently meaningless string S and a machine that is (to the best of our knowledge) totally reliable when it comes to judging the truth and falsity of syntactical strings. When we put S into the machine, it comes up with the result “True”. Now it seems that we managed to verify S, the verification
condition being the machine-reaction. Does that make $S$ meaningful? Doesn’t that trivialize the Verification Principle? Consider an apparently meaningless string $S$ and a machine that is (to the best of our knowledge) totally reliable when it comes to judging the truth and falsity of syntactical strings. When we put $S$ into the machine, it comes up with the result “True”. Now it seems that we managed to verify $S$, the verification condition being the machine-reaction. Does that make $S$ meaningful? Doesn’t that trivialize the Verification Principle?

6. The Principle presupposes a clear distinction between observation language and the rest of language. But it is not clear where this line should be draw. Also the simplest observation sentences are already “theory-laden”—the theoretical perspective prescribes how we classify our observations.

7. The verification conditions of a sentence thus presuppose a vast amount of background theories, such that a sentence is never confronted in isolation with experiences. But these background theories are all likewise fallible. But then sentences do not have intrinsic verification conditions.

8. Further elaborating this idea, one could suggest that therefore sentences do also not have an intrinsic meaning, but only relative to the whole set of beliefs that we accept at a given point in time. This is semantic holism.