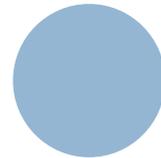


Verificationism - Lecture 3
Dummett's Verificationism

1A Meaning
Annie Bosse

- Logical positivists used verification principle to give us tool for demarcating meaningful and meaningless sentences.
- A (synthetic, non-contradictory) sentence is meaningful iff it is empirically verifiable.
- They got into trouble when trying to define 'empirical verifiability'
- We tried out strong and weak definitions of empirical verifiability and found that they ended up either under- or overgenerating meaningful statements.

Recap





Michael Dummett

- British philosopher
- lived from 1925–2011
- worked in history of analytic philosophy, language, mathematics and logic
- anti-racism and immigration rights campaigner
- devised voting system
- expert on card games and tarot cards



Theory of Meaning vs Meaningfulness

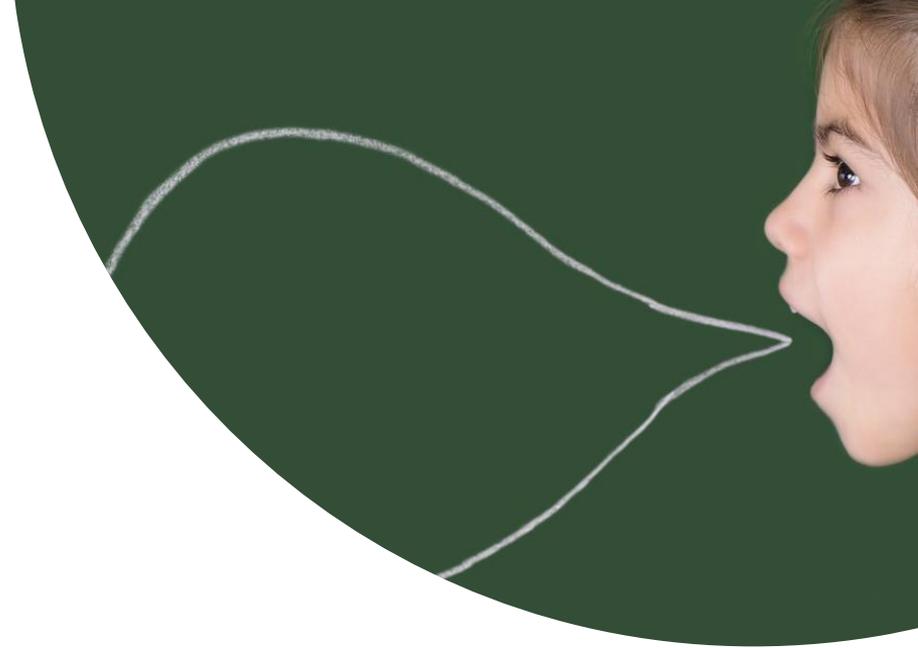
- Logical Positivists wanted to use verification principle as demarcation criterion
- Dummett not interested
- Empiricist-friendly theory of meaning based on the notion of verifiability



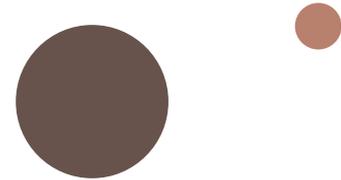
Meaning is Use

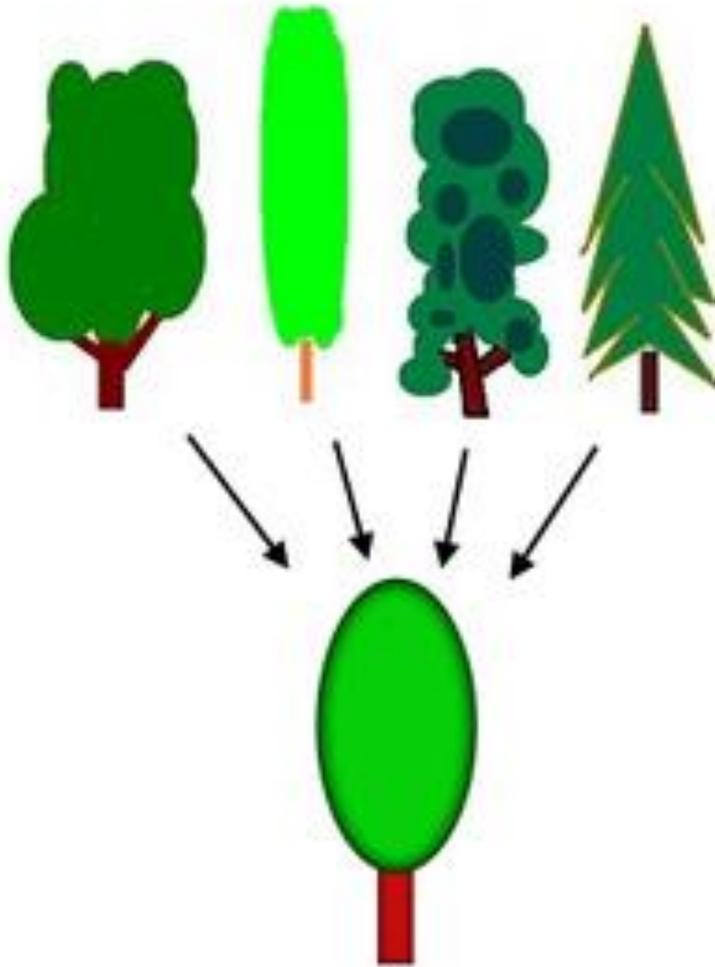
- “For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word ‘meaning’—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein, *PI* 43)
- Dummett: To grasp the meaning of a statement must be to acquire some kind of ability one has if one understands a sentence
- Theory of meaning = theory of understanding

- To learn a language we need to acquire dispositions to utter certain sentences and accept others' by linking them to evidence.
- We come to understand a concept by learning when i.e. under what evidential conditions, it's appropriate to apply it
- Meaning of expressions explained by the dispositions to utter/accept them under certain kinds of evidential conditions.



Argument from acquisition of language





Acquisition of concepts

- We learn about the concept of e.g. tree by learning under what evidential conditions it's appropriate to apply the concept.
- This acquisition determines the meaning of concepts – knowledge of which is knowledge of under what conditions we would apply it.
- Acquisition principle applies to all concepts, including logical/mathematical ones



...to verificationism

- This also applies to concept of truth/falsity. How can we know whether a statement is true or false, if not by learning under what evidential conditions we can call sentences true or false.
- So concepts of truth/falsity are only applicable by linking statements with evidential conditions which verify/falsify them
- we can't understand how concepts of truth/falsity can be applied to sentences about which there is an absence of evidence

Example: statements about people's character

- Realism about character traits
- 'Jones was brave' (1978:150)
- Jones is dead and was never in a situation that tested whether he was brave. Makes no sense to say that there's a fact of the matter.

- Other types of sentences: truths about the past, mathematical conjectures, universal generalisations, and more (See Wright paper in Misak chapter for complete list)



How to restrict verifiability



- “Of any statement about the past, we can never rule it out that we might subsequently come upon something which justified asserting or denying it, and therefore we are not entitled to say of any specific statement that it is neither true nor false: but we are not entitled either to say in advance that it has to be either one or the other, since this would be to invoke notions of truth and falsity independent of our recognition of truth or falsity.”

(1978:364)

Appiah on agent limitations

- Appiah: this is like early, bad version of verification principle. Why should our physical limitations be relevant?
- “What is required is not that there should be a test that someone with our physical capabilities could perform, but rather that there be a logically possible test , one that we human beings with our actual powers might or might or might not be able to carry out, which would, if it had been carried out, have given that person reason for justified belief. “(1986: 57)



Strong version



The meaning of a statement is its , **in practice,**
conclusive verifiability.

'in practice':

- statements about the past

Hume sneezed at 9.30am on 2nd March 1772

Later Dummett

- Admitted, that his earlier writings in which he required conclusive verification should be retracted and said that a verificationist theory of meaning :
- “must operate, not with a simple notion of direct verification, but with a more general notion of canonical grounds, qualified by what, if anything, is counted as overthrowing them” (1987:284)



Dummett on verifiability

- Doesn't need to be conclusive
- But needs to be possible in a nearby possible world as acquisition argument is about how we, and not our logically distant counterparts, acquire concepts
- Otherwise acquisition argument doesn't apply





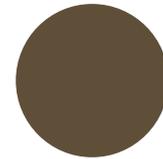
Preview

- Attacked presupposition of Verificationism, namely that sentences in isolation are the right kind of units to evaluate as either true or false
- No distinction between analytic/synthetic statements
- Positive account: web of belief
- Verificationist in spirit, but very different execution of project

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *For Truth in Semantics*. Philosophical Theory Series. Oxford, UK; New York, NY, USA
- Misak, Cheryl. *Verificationism: Its History and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 1995), ch. 4
- Craig, Edward. (2017). Meaning and Privacy. In *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (eds B. Hale, C. Wright and A. Miller). doi:10.1002/9781118972090.ch11



Reading



Link to realism



To be a realist about a domain x (e.g. ethics, maths, science) is to affirm the principle of bivalence for that domain.



Bivalence: Any given proposition is either true or false



Applied to a domain of discourse: Any ethical/mathematical/scientific statement is either true or false.

Link to philosophy of mathematics/logic

- Dummett defended intuitionistic logic
- Classical logic without:
 - LEM: $A \vee \neg A$
 - DNE: $\neg\neg A \rightarrow A$
- Truth of mathematical statements in terms of proof

Remember: Church's objection

- Prove that for any S , either S or its negation is meaningful. Can be strengthened (see Soames paper) using an additional subproof to show that any S is meaningful.
- For any S , there's a sentence $((S \vee R) \rightarrow O)$ featuring observation sentences R and O , which do not, by themselves entail one another. In combination with S , $((S \vee R) \rightarrow O)$ logically entails O .
- Either:
 - $((S \vee R) \rightarrow O)$ itself entails O
 - Or
 - $((S \vee R) \rightarrow O)$ doesn't already entail O



The proof

Subproof 1:

$((S \vee R) \rightarrow O) \neq O$



S is indirectly verifiable



$\neg S$ entails $\neg S \vee S$. So if S indirectly verifiable and hence meaningful, then $\neg S$ or S is meaningful

Subproof 2:

$((S \vee R) \rightarrow O) \models O$



$\neg S$ is directly verifiable



$\neg S$ entails $\neg S \vee S$. So if $\neg S$ directly verifiable and hence meaningful, then $\neg S$ or S is meaningful

Application to Church objection

- Church objection relies on the assumption that any statement is either true or false (argument was given in semantic guise, but TND presupposes such motivation for its validity)
- Dummett: In some domains, we cannot assume that any statement is either true or false, may be indeterminate.
- So can be used to question Church objection
- Weak version of verification potentially available, but only by rejecting realism about domains