In a conversation with the Vienna Circle Wittgenstein remarked that “the sense of a proposition is the method of its verification.” (WWK p. 66) But despite his famous verificationist pronouncements in the early 1930s, Wittgenstein never took himself to be a verificationist. As reported by Anscombe, when someone attributed the “verification principle” to him, he repudiated his authorship “in a tone of outrage.” However, most commentators seem to think that Wittgenstein was in denial when he reacted in that way, for it is widely assumed in the literature that he did in fact hold a verificationist theory of meaning, although he grew out of that verificationist phase very quickly. Max Black (1986) and Alberto Coffa (1991) argue that Wittgenstein’s short-lived verificationist semantics has a crucial significance for the development of his thought. They suggest that it was Wittgenstein’s verificationist account of meaning in the 1930s that led him to link meaning with use. In what follows I will argue that this interpretation gets things backwards, for Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning as use is not the consequence, but the source and motivation of his verificationist considerations. These considerations, I contend, can only be properly understood against the background of an inferentialist view of meaning as use. I will structure my argument against Black’s and Coffa’s interpretation in two stages: first, I will try to show how Wittgenstein’s verificationist ideas in the early 1930s are derived from his inferentialist view of meaning; and second, I will try to show that these considerations have only a methodological significance and do not amount to a verificationist theory of meaning.
In his conversations with the Vienna Circle Wittgenstein describes his new view of language as a “Satzsysteme” conception (WWK p. 64), a view in which language is conceived as composed of independent “propositional systems”. Rejecting the Tractarian concept of an elementary proposition, Wittgenstein argues that propositions do not come in atomic packages, but in clusters: they form systems. According to Wittgenstein, propositions are glued together into unified systems through inferential connections: “If I say, for example, that this or that point in the visual field is blue, then I know not merely that, but also that this point is not green, not red, not yellow, etc.” (WWK, p. 64) On this view, the interrelations that bring propositions together into systems are not formal inferential relations, but relations of material inference: inferential relations that are based on the content of the propositions involved. This inferentialist view constitutes a radical departure from the formalism of the Tractatus, according to which every inference is based on the logical form of the propositions involved and hence on content-independent rules of logical syntax. Wittgenstein now realizes that there are inferential relations among propositions that cannot be captured by the formal rules of logical syntax; and so he abandons these formal rules in favor of content-specific “rules of grammar”. As he explains to Schlick and Waismann, it was the Tractarian formalist approach to inference that precluded the emergence of the inferentialist view of language he now holds:

All this I did not yet know when I was writing my work: at that time I thought that all inference was based on tautological form. At that time I had not yet seen that an inference can also have the form: This man is 2m tall, therefore he is not 3m tall. [...] But if my present conception of a system of propositions is correct, it will actually be the rule that from the existence of one state of affairs the non-existence of all the other states of affairs described by this system of propositions can be inferred. WWK p. 64; my emphasis.

On this inferentialist view, what determines the semantic content of a proposition is its inferential role within a system of tightly connected propositions. This view faces a methodological problem: it stands in need of a method that can determine the Satzsystem-identity of propositions, for on this view every semantic question turns on the membership of propositions in propositional systems. In order to
determine the sense of a proposition “p” (or whether it makes sense), we must first determine what other propositions “p” is inferentially related to. However, there is no guarantee that all the propositions that are inferentially connected with “p” belong to the same system. The inferential connections in which “p” enters can be quite heterogeneous. So we need to know which propositional systems we have to look out for in order to be able to sort out inferential connections in the appropriate way. For instance, the proposition “A (a point in the visual field) is red” is inferentially related to the proposition “My shirt is blue” (together they imply that A and my shirt have different colors). On the other hand, “A is red” is also inferentially related to “Red has such-and-such wave-length”. Now, should we conclude that all these propositions are members of one and the same Satzsystem? Or should we say that the propositions for the ascription of colors form one system with the propositions for the description of ordinary objects, and another with the propositions for the description of colors in terms of wave-length? Unless we establish what gives unity to a propositional system, the inferentialist analysis of propositions and their component parts is doomed to wander aimlessly in the sea of language.

Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasizes that the same propositional sign “p” can figure in different Satzsysteme and hence express different propositions (e.g. PR §153). So in order to determine the sense of “p”, we need to go beyond the propositional sign; we need to find a way of linking the sign with the relevant set of propositions. But what can guide us to those inferential connections that endow “p” with a particular sense in each case? In the early 1930s Wittgenstein argues that what determines the sense of a proposition are not the conditions under which the proposition is true as he thought in the Tractatus (cf. 4.024), but rather the conditions under which we regard the proposition as true. The sense of a proposition is to be determined by examining how we go about settling its truth value: “To understand the sense of a proposition means to know how the issue of its truth or falsity is to be decided.” (PR §43) Thus the axis of Wittgenstein’s view of meaning moves from truth conditions to verification conditions. He writes:

Every significant proposition must teach us through its sense how we are to convince ourselves whether it is true or false. […] The sense would have to be revealed to us from without — since it can’t be obtained from the propositional sign alone — in contrast with its
truth, where the proposition itself tells us how to look for its truth and compare the truth with it. PR §148, my emphasis.

This passage can be read as saying: if you want to know the sense of a proposition “p,” do not ask what is required for the proposition to be true because the answer is already contained in the propositional sign (i.e. “p” is true iff p); ask, rather, what is required for the proposition to be verified and you will then find out what other propositions can be mobilized to support it or to refute it. The evidential relations among propositions determine their place within a system of propositions and hence their sense. For Wittgenstein, the cash-value of the move from truth conditions to verification conditions is that the latter (but not the former) can be used as a guide to the Satzsystem-identity of propositions. By examining the way in which a proposition is verified, we can recognize the relevant set of inferentially related propositions, namely, those that can make a contribution in settling the truth value of the proposition.

If Wittgenstein’s view were to be characterized as a kind of verificationism, it should be called a methodological verificationism, for his verificationist ideas play only a heuristic or methodological role: they are invoked to give guidance to the semantic analysis of propositions. The methodological significance of Wittgenstein’s verificationism in 1930-32 is twofold: the method of verification of propositions is used to individuate Satzsysteme and to explore their grammar. In the first place, a common method of verification is what holds propositions together in a cohesive system of description, what defines a particular way of talking about reality (cf. WWK p. 53; PR §16). In the second place, by examining the peculiar method of verification of a Satzsystem, we can identify the rules of grammar of that system. For the grammatical rules of a Satzsystem define the way in which propositions are to be compared with reality within that system. Wittgenstein characterizes grammatical rules as propositions which are taken for granted in every verification but which are not themselves susceptible of verification. For instance, “two colors cannot occupy the same visual point” is not a proposition that can be confirmed or refuted, for it is presupposed in every verification of statements of color attribution (cf. WWK p. 79). If I want to verify

2. In his analysis of Philosophical Remarks Shanker (1987, p. 8) points out that, Wittgenstein appeals to verification procedures as a way of determining the membership of propositions in propositional systems.
the proposition “A is red”, what I need to do is to go to A and observe its color. If I observe that A is blue, that suffices to disconfirm the proposition; no further verification is needed: I do not need to observe A again to check whether or not it is also red, for two colors cannot occupy the same visual point.

Wittgenstein’s methodological verificationism arises as a natural development of his inferentialist view of language and his conception of meaning as use. He frequently points out that the method of verification of a proposition reveals its sense by disclosing its use within language: it “determines the meaning, i.e. determines its use, or grammar.” (Lectures p. 29)³ That the verificationism of the Satzsystem view is at the service of an inferentialist semantics becomes explicit when Wittgenstein remarks that the import of asking of a proposition “What is its verification?” is that “an answer gives the meaning by showing the relation of the proposition to other propositions. That is, it shows what it follows from and what follows from it. It gives the grammar of the proposition.” (Lectures pp. 19–20; my emphasis) So, for Wittgenstein, verificationism seems to be a heuristic tool that enables us to analyze the content of propositions in terms of their inferential use.⁴

But once Wittgenstein adopts verificationism as a strategy to carry out his inferentialist analysis of language, isn’t he committed to a verificationist theory of meaning? It is beyond dispute that verificationism is a crucial aspect of Wittgenstein’s view of meaning in the early 1930s, but what is the status of this verificationism? To answer this question, Black has distinguished between two different senses of verificationism. According to Black, verificationism in a general sense is any view according to which verification procedures play some role in determining semantic content. In this general sense, it

³. Even in the Philosophical Investigations, verification will retain certain grammatical significance: “Asking whether and how a proposition can be verified is only a particular way of asking ‘How d’you mean?’ The answer is a contribution to the grammar of the proposition.” (PI §353)

⁴. In his inferentialist account of semantic content Brandom (1994) emphasizes that there are two central aspects of the content of a proposition: its “circumstances of application” and its “consequences of application” (cf. pp. 116–132). He argues that “verificationists, assertibilists, and reliabilists make the mistake of treating the first aspect as exhausting content.” (p. 121) Note that, according to this view, Wittgenstein does not qualify as a verificationist, but rather as an inferentialist, for he appeals to verification in order to link the content of a proposition with the propositions from which it follows and with the propositions that follow from it.

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is undeniable that Wittgenstein’s semantic view was verificationist in 1930–32. But there is a stronger sense of semantic verificationism. This is what Black calls “classical” or “radical verificationism”: the “view that identifies a proposition’s meaning with its verification-procedure.”\(^5\) This identification thesis is the threshold of a verificationist theory of meaning properly so called. Black contends that Wittgenstein held a radical verificationism in the 1930s (though not in the \textit{Tractatus} or in his later writings).\(^6\) Coffa also argues that in the lectures Wittgenstein identified the sense of a proposition with its verification conditions, thus curtailing the domain of significant speech dramatically.\(^7\) Coffa emphasizes that there is a strong convergence in intent and content between Wittgenstein’s verificationist semantics and the verificationist theses of the Vienna Circle.\(^8\) Some members of the Vienna Circle itself concluded from their conversations with Wittgenstein that he was proposing a verificationist semantics very congenial with the one they were developing.\(^9\) A canonical statement of the radical verificationism of the Vienna Circle can be found in section 6 of Waismann’s \textit{Thesen} (WWK pp. 243–246). Let’s compare the verificationist theses of the Vienna Circle as stated by Waismann with the verificationism held by Wittgenstein in the early 1930s, so as to determine whether we can actually find the strong convergence that both contemporary commentators and some members of the Vienna Circle have indicated.

In \textit{Thesen} Waismann clearly identifies the sense of a proposition with its verification conditions: “The sense of a proposition \textit{is} the way it is verified.” (WWK p. 244) What a proposition says is exactly equivalent to what is expressed in the propositions that describe its verification conditions: “If I say ‘My friend is angry’ and establish this

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{5.} M. Black (1986), p. 69.
  \item \textbf{6.} M. Black (1986), pp. 70–71.
  \item \textbf{8.} Gargani (1986) has also underscored the affinities between Wittgenstein’s view in the intermediate period and logical positivism. In particular, he argues that there are strong similarities between Wittgenstein’s and Schlick’s verificationism. However, Gargani sees both Wittgenstein and Schlick as developing a use theory of meaning on the basis of verificationist considerations. For, as he puts it, “indicating the rules of use of an expression is the same as indicating the circumstances with which it can verified (or falsified).” (1986, p. 285)
\end{itemize}
in virtue of his displaying a certain perceptible behaviour, I only mean that he displays that behaviour.” (WWK p. 244) On Waismann’s view, being verifiable is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for a statement making sense; and what is required is not simply that the statement be in principle verifiable, but rather that a definite method for its verification be available: “If I cannot specify under what conditions the proposition is to count as verified, I have not given the proposition a sense.” (WWK p. 245) On the other hand, on Wittgenstein’s view, the presence of a method of verification indicates a particular way of talking about reality, a distinctive mode of significance. So, for Wittgenstein, the availability of a verification method is a sufficient condition of significance. But it doesn’t follow that it is also a necessary condition. It is only in very restricted contexts that he claimed that propositions that cannot be verified lack sense (WWK p. 79; PR §§149–150). In these contexts Wittgenstein talks about propositional systems in science which are defined by particular methods of verification. So it may be hasty to conclude that Wittgenstein thought that every propositional system (in ethics, aesthetics, religion, etc.), if it is to be an autonomous realm of significance, must contain a method of verification.

As Coffa emphasizes,10 in the 1930–32 lectures Wittgenstein did privilege what he called “experiential” and “scientific propositions” as paradigmatic cases of significant propositions. But he may have done so simply because he thought that, having a distinctive method of verification, the grammar of these propositions is particularly easy to survey. At any rate, in Wittgenstein’s writings and lectures, there is no clear statement that verifiable propositions exhaust the category of significant propositions. According to Moore’s account of the 1930–32 lectures, after saying that verification determines the sense of propositions, Wittgenstein remarked: “This is necessarily a mere rule of thumb, because ‘verification’ means different things, and because in some cases the question ‘How is it verified?’ makes no sense.”11 So, for Wittgenstein, the possibility of significance without verification is not excluded.

But since Wittgenstein held that verification procedures determine the sense of propositions at least in some Satzsysteme, perhaps he held a restricted version of radical verificationism. Did he endorse

Waismann’s identification thesis (the epitome of radical verificationism) at least for “experiential” and “scientific propositions”? There are passages in which Wittgenstein identifies the sense of a proposition with its verification conditions (cf. esp. WWK p. 79 and PR §166). However, Wittgenstein’s formulations of the identification thesis are usually qualified in an interesting way. As reported by Moore in his summary of the lectures, after stating what looks like a formulation of the identification thesis, Wittgenstein qualified it as follows: “He made the famous statement: ‘The sense of a proposition is the way in which it is verified’; but he said this only meant ‘You can determine the meaning of a proposition by asking how it is verified.’”

For Wittgenstein, the sense of a proposition is to be determined by, but not to be understood as identical with, its verification conditions. In a conversation with Schlick Wittgenstein draws a clear distinction between the content of a statement and the verification grounds on which it is asserted (WWK pp. 158–159). Imagine, he says, that I assert the proposition “My brother is in that room” and I specify the grounds of my assertion as follows: “He told me that he would be there”, “I hear the piano being played and I recognize his way of playing”, “Just now I heard steps that sounded just like his.” (WWK p. 158) Wittgenstein contends that what my original assertion says is not the same as what is expressed by the propositions that describe my evidence. For my brother’s being in that room is certainly not the same fact as his telling me he would be there, my hearing the piano being played in a certain way, or my hearing steps that sound just like my brother’s. The latter facts are “symptoms” of the former (WWK p. 159). For Wittgenstein there is a grammatical relation between a proposition and those other propositions that specify its verification conditions: they are inferentially related in such a way that the latter determine the place that the former occupies in a propositional system. But Wittgenstein rejects the idea that the content of a proposition is what is specified by a list of verification conditions. For Wittgenstein, the relation between sense and verification is more indirect.

In a lecture from 1932 Wittgenstein is yet more explicit about his rejection of the identification thesis. He remarks that the verification conditions of a proposition about the past are typically couched in

propositions about the present and future. And, he asks, “how could the meaning of a sentence about the past be given by a sentence about the present?” (Lectures, p. 28) He answers: “My reply is to deny that the verification gives the meaning. It merely determines the meaning, i.e., determines its use, or grammar.” (Lectures, pp. 28–9) Wittgenstein emphasizes that “a distinction should be made between ‘being the meaning of’ and ‘determining the meaning of’.” (Lectures, p. 28) The verification conditions of a proposition serve as a guide to establish the use or grammar of a proposition; but they are not what the proposition “means”: “If you want to know the meaning of a sentence, ask for its verification. I stress the point that the meaning of a symbol is [...] the way it is used.” (Lectures, p. 29) For Wittgenstein, the significance of a sign consists in the inferential moves that we can make with it in a propositional system. Although the semantic view that Wittgenstein held in the early 1930s has a strong verificationist bias, the most distinctive aspect of this view is not its verificationism, but its inferentialism. So I conclude that Wittgenstein’s verificationist pronouncements were methodological considerations at the service of an inferentialist view.

References


Dept. of Philosophy,
Vanderbilt University,
Furman Hall 111
Nashville
Tennessee 37240