On the Infinite Regress of a Speaker’s Intentions

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Abstract

Intention-based semantics (IBS) serves as the paradigm in the field of speaker meaning analysis. However, it has grappled with a well-known problem: the infinite regress of a speaker’s intentions. Theorists such as Grice, Schiffer, Davis, and Green have tried to remedy the situation; however, no one has found any solutions until now. The present paper claims that the inability of IBS theorists to resolve the regress problem may be attributed to the conflict between two basic assumptions that they espouse: representationalism and the transparency of speaker meaning. When both are adopted alongside each other, as the current paper shows, the regress problem immediately emerges. It follows, then, that it would be prudent to reject IBS to sufficiently analyze speaker meaning.

Key words: speaker meaning, intention-based semantics, the infinite regress of intentions

1. Introduction

To mean something is to utter with a particular type of intention. The view that one’s meaning something is accounted for in terms of their intention has been a paradigm in the analysis of speaker meaning, which is now collectively referred to as “intention-based semantics.” The history of the analysis of speaker meaning follows the development of intention-based semantics from its beginning in Grice (1957); such analysis has been, above all, the elaboration of a theory in conformity with intention-based semantics by examining various examples. The attempt has been fruitful in several respects, and while introducing new concepts such as activated belief in Grice (1969), mutual knowledge in Schiffer (1972), indication in Davis (2003), and manifestation in Green (2007), each commentator has moved forward to consider such deviant cases as the ones where the audience already knows what the speaker means, or those

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where there is no audience who is expected to understand the speaker’s utterances in the first place.

However, intention-based semantics presents one problem that has manifested from its earliest stages and that is yet to be solved: the infinite regress problem of a speaker’s intentions. To this issue, which is a stumbling block for intention-based semantics, two general patterns of solutions have been proposed: (1) avoiding the problem by enriching what the speaker supposedly intends when they mean something—Schiffer (1972) and Davis (2003) fall into this category; (2) assuming that the speaker who means something harbors a peculiar self-referential intention, which Harman (1974) and Green (2007), as well as Kashiwabata (2016) in the domestic arsenal, have also adopted. However, as Harman (1974) and Miki (2015) have pointed out, solutions belonging to the first pattern generate exactly the same problem as before. In addition, as Davis (2003) and Miki (2017) argue, if we adopt the second pattern, we ascribe to the speaker a strange intention whose propositional content, and therefore satisfiability condition, cannot be determined—if we assume that having determinate propositional content is a necessary condition for a propositional attitude, we should call it *pseude-intention* rather than *intention*. Therefore, if we choose the first path, the infinite regress will remain unresolved; if we choose the second path, we will have “intentions” that are as problematic as the infinite regress. In the former, the problem of infinite regress of intentions is simply untouched, while in the latter, it is likely to have been merely altered in form and temporarily neglected rather than resolved. Grice (1969) chose to forbid the speaker to have certain intentions. Schiffer (1972), on the other hand, showed that the speaker can behave in a way that raises the same problem without having such intentions; in the end, he pointed out that Grice failed to respond to the problem at all. In short, at first glance, intention-based semantics seems to be making progress in complicating its analysis and adopting new concepts one after another—and in fact, such an assessment is not entirely wrong. However, if we focus on the problem of the infinite regress of intentions, almost no progress has been made in intention-based semantics from its beginning to the present day.

Why does the problem of infinite regress of intentions arise, and why does it persist so stubbornly? I argue that it is because of the structural problem of the framework on which the theories of intention-based semantics rest—in this paper, I will demonstrate that this is the case. First, in the next section, as a premise, I give an overview of the enterprise of analyzing speaker meaning and intention-based semantics, as well as an explanation of the infinite regress problem of intentions. As I see it, intention-based semanticists have fought their arguments from a loose methodological standpoint such that they simply need to identify the speaker’s intentions providing the necessary and sufficient conditions for speaker meaning. However, in order to understand the problem of infinite regress of intentions, we must review the methodology on which intention-based semantics rests in more detail. Thus, in Sec-
tion 3 I consider what we ought to do when attempting to analyze speaker meaning; I point out that the analysis of speaker meaning must be attempted in a way that aims at a broadly teleological explanation, which would require answering two questions, namely the Consequence Problem and the Connection Problem. Such a view not only clarifies the practice of intention-based semantics, but also helps us detach ourselves from a particular theory of intention-based semantics and look at the issue of speaker meaning from a more neutral perspective. In the fourth section, I take up Schiffer’s (1972) detailed discussion of the problem of infinite regress of intentions and review his diagnosis on the basis of the scheme proposed in the third section. Furthermore, after clarifying the assumptions standardly employed in the analysis of speaker meaning in Section 5, Section 6 points out the fallacy of Schiffer’s diagnosis and further provides a more credible diagnosis of the infinite regress problem of intentions. In other words, Schiffer sees the infinite regress of intentions as being about the Consequence Problem; however, there is in fact a conflict between giving an intention-based semantic answer to the Connection Problem (which we will call the “representationalist premise”) and the premise that we will later call the “transparency of speaker meaning,” and they result in the infinite regress of intentions. If we accept the transparency of speaker meaning as inevitable, it is the other premise that we must question, which leads us to cast doubt on intention-based semantics itself. Therefore, the conclusion of this paper is to declare that intention-based semantics has no hope in the first place.

2. The Analysis of Speaker Meaning and the Infinite Regress of Intentions

First, let us examine the enterprise of analyzing speaker meaning relying on intention-based semantics as its paradigm, and the problem of infinite regress of intentions that arises in intention-based semantics, one at a time.

Speaker meaning, as argued in this paper, is the act of a person meaning something by doing something. When talking about the content of speaker meaning, rather than the act of speaker meaning, we ought to make it explicit by referring to it as “the content of speaker meaning.” With respect to the act that is a candidate for speaker meaning, the subject of the act is called the “speaker,” the act that the speaker does to mean something is called the “utterance,” and the person to whom the act is directed is called the “audience.” Conducting an analysis of speaker meaning means to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions of speaker meaning. There are also attempts, such as Grice (1957) and Harman (1974), to explore the necessary and sufficient conditions of “the speaker means something (by utterance)” without specifying what the speaker means—though usually (at least ultimately) the necessary and sufficient conditions are sought with taking account of the propositional
content in the form of “the speaker means $p$ by utterance.” If the propositional content is to be considered as “$p$,” not just “something,” this makes the attempt to analyze speaker meaning more challenging, since it must also be explained that this particular proposition, rather than any other proposition, is the content of what is meant. Yet, if the notion of speaker meaning is to provide a foundation in fields such as pragmatics, we cannot afford not to tackle this difficult problem\(^1\).

Even if we give the necessary and sufficient conditions of speaker meaning, we cannot challenge it without having anything to rely on. Setting up the project of analyzing speaker meaning, Grice argues, as a first step toward the necessary and sufficient conditions of speaker meaning, that something is meant by an utterance $x$ if $x$ is “intended by its utterer to induce a belief in some ‘audience’,” and that what $x$ means is identified by stating what the belief is (Grice 1957, p.217)\(^2\). Of course, this is not yet a necessary or sufficient condition for speaker meaning, yet, by using it as a foothold, Grice explores the conditions of speaker meaning. This was the beginning of the intention-based semantic analysis of speaker meaning\(^3\). More specifically, the analysis of speaker meaning in intention-based semantics aims to identify the set of intentions that are necessary and sufficient for speaker meaning by filling in the gaps in the following scheme:

The speaker, $S$, means $p$ by uttering $x$ if and only if $S$ utters $x$ with

1. intending that...$p$...,
2. intending one of the intentions mentioned above to...,
3. intending one of the intentions mentioned above to...,

...$
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\(^1\) In pragmatics, one of its topics is how the content of what a speaker communicates beyond (or adding to) the semantic content of the uttered sentence is determined and how the audience can calculate that content. Since the content of what a speaker communicates is the one of what they mean, we cannot expect speaker meaning to work sufficiently as a basic concept in pragmatics if we simply go with “meaning something” without identifying its content.

\(^2\) In fact, this is not as intuitively certain as Grice might have thought. Indeed, Miki (2017), after distinguishing between (1) that a certain intention of the speaker must accompany the utterance, (2) that a certain intention of the speaker whose content corresponds to the content of what they mean must accompany the utterance, and (3) that a certain intention of the speaker that determines the content of what they mean must accompany the utterance, points out that while (1) is intuitively obvious, a stronger (2) or even stronger (3) requires at least an argument. It is the strongest assumption (3) that intention-based semantics presupposes.

\(^3\) Intention-based semantics is, strictly speaking, a project to explain semantic concepts in terms of the psychological concept of intention, consisting first of an explanation of the concept of speaker meaning in terms of the speaker’s intentions, and second of an explanation of the concept of conventional meaning carried by representations such as sentences, words, or non-verbal but similar expressions, in terms of the one of speaker meaning. This paper will focus solely on the first aspect.

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The intention mentioned in the first clause has a content that identifies what the speaker means and is called “informative intention” in Sperber & Wilson’s (1986/1995) terminology. The proposition \( p \) may be not directly included in the speaker’s informative intention, but embedded in yet another propositional attitude within it. The informative intention in Grice’s position, for example, is specified as “\( S \) intends that a certain audience, \( A \), believes \( p \),” in a form that includes a reference to the propositional attitude of the audience (Grice 1957; 1969). On the other hand, some, like Davis, take the position of excluding reference to an audience from the analysis of speaker meaning. The intentions left in the list are those about the manner in which another intention is realized, and are called “communicative intentions” in Sperber & Wilson’s (1986/1995) terminology. There is disagreement as to how many communicative intentions are required for speaker meaning; some theorists, such as Schiffer (1972), practically rely on only one informative intention that incorporates both the element corresponding to the relevant informative intention and that corresponding to the relevant communicative intentions within its broader scope. Alternatively, as in Harman (1974), Green (2007), and Kashiwabata (2016), a self-referential intention can be relied on that includes a reference to that intention itself in its content, in which case the informative intention is simultaneously a communicative intention as well. Thus, the positions on the analysis of speaker meaning in intention-based semantics are various and different; yet they all agree in adopting the scheme above if we include the analysis in which no communicative intention appears and the one in which a self-referential intention—informational and communicative at the same time—appears. In other words, since intention-based semantics aims to analyze speaker meaning merely in terms of the speaker’s intentions, then adopting the above scheme is what intention-based semantics is all about.

The problem of infinite regress of intentions arises with respect to communicative intentions. To look at the specific argument, let us take Grice’s (1957) analysis: as summarized by Strawson (1964), the necessary and sufficient conditions (or at least sufficient conditions) for speaker meaning with unspecified content (“\( S \) means something by \( x \)”) are given as “\( S \) intends \( (i_1) \) to produce by uttering \( x \) a certain response \( (r) \) in an audience \( A \) and intends \( (i_2) \) that \( A \) shall recognize \( S \)’s intention \( (i_1) \) and intends \( (i_3) \) that this recognition on the part of \( A \) of \( S \)’s intention \( (i_1) \) shall function as \( A \)’s reason, or a part of his reason, for his response \( r \)” (Strawson 1964, p.120). Here the audience’s intended response is stated as an unspecified “a certain response \( r \),” but Grice (1957) claims that the reaction the speaker is trying to provoke in the audience when they mean something is the formation of some belief, further arguing that the content of that belief determines the content of what speaker means (Grice

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4 In the final analysis, however, an “activated belief” is introduced instead of the audience’s belief.
Strawson challenges Grice’s position with the following argument: supposing that a speaker has all three intentions found in Grice’s analysis, but attempts to achieve their intentions by presenting evidence to the audience that successfully triggers the belief that $p$ without making the audience recognize that they hold the second intention, then they cannot be seen as meaning $p$ (Strawson 1964, p.120). Although Strawson only presents this counterargument in an abstract way, Grice (1969) and Schiffer (1972) construct and examine such counterexamples and for any one of such counterexamples, Strawson’s rebuttal to Grice (1957) was found to be reasonable.

Strawson responded to this problem by stating that counterexamples can be eliminated by introducing a fourth intention to make the audience recognize the second intention (Strawson 1964, p.121). However, the problem does not end there. Strawson’s counterargument was that a counterexample could be constituted by considering a speaker who has all the intentions required of the speaker in order to mean something, but who does not intend to make the audience recognize some of those intentions. This same technique can be directed to the third intention and also to the newly introduced fourth intention. If we consider a speaker who has all of the four supposed intentions but does not intend to make the audience recognize the third or fourth intention, we can make a counterexample in the same way. Schiffer (1972) also proposed a concrete example of this. Even though we introduce the fifth and sixth intentions in order to eliminate such counterexamples, a similar counterexample can now be constructed with respect to these new intentions. Of course, as Grice points out, such counterexamples will become too complex for us to understand in the end. However, in principle (i.e., from the perspective of an ideal analyst with unlimited comprehension), these counterexamples will continue to be created without end if we simply continue to introduce intentions in similar ways. As a result, an infinite number of intentions will be required of the speaker in order to mean anything; it is, however, absurd.

This is the problem of infinite regress of intentions that continually plagues intention-based semantics. The two major philosophers of early intention-based semantics, Grice and Schiffer, both eventually gave up on the problem, going so far as, on the one hand, to state that speaker meaning cannot, strictly speaking, hold ground; on the other hand, to declare the abandonment of the project of intention-based semantics (Grice 1982; Schiffer 1987). Harman’s (1974) proposal to rely on

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As Noya says, I also think that Grice is declaring a *de facto* defeat (Noya 1999, p.295). But on the other hand, Grice likens the concept of speaker meaning to a geometrical concept, arguing that just as we can call something a “circle” even though there is no exact circle on this earth, we can call something sufficiently close to it “meaning” even though speaker meaning does not consist strictly on this earth. It could be said that this was the last resistance to accepting defeat. However, this analogy is inap-
a self-referential intention is a way to avoid such abandonment; yet, it is pointed out that instead of causing an infinite regress of intentions, it only ends up using an intention whose propositional content is infinitely long and cannot be identified, becoming only a re-telling of the problem rather than a solution (Miki 2017). As Miki (2017) has shown, when the speaker's intention is self-referential in the way that Harman proposed, we cannot even begin a calculation of its content because a circulation arises when trying to calculate it compositionally and, therefore, we cannot reach the starting point of such a calculation in the first place. The analysis proposed by Davis (2003) and Green (2007) in recent years will eventually come down to the same failure of Schiffer and Harman, as argued in Miki (2015). She points out that where meaning something is, as Davis proposes, making an utterance with the intention that this utterance has a causal or statistical relationship to the speaker's belief, this will eventually be met with the same criticism that Herman directed at Schiffer with respect to this intention. Then, if one reuses the same self-referential intention as Herman's, as Green did, it raises the same problem as the one found in Herman's analysis. After this issue was raised against the first analysis of intention-based semantics, a solution remains to be found. Why does this problem arise, and why is it so persistent? The purpose of this paper is to explore the reasons behind the problem; in order to do so, it is necessary to look more closely at how the analysis of speaker meaning is to be conducted in the first place.

3. Methodology in the Analysis of Speaker Meaning

An analysis of speaker meaning is an attempt to give its necessary and sufficient conditions. Under what policy will this be done?

The first thing to keep in mind is that the analysis of speaker meaning aims at a broadly teleological explanation in its basic policy. For example, when analyzing speaker meaning, no one tries to describe the physical conditions that are necessary for speaker meaning. Of course, there are those, like Schiffer, whose policy is to analyze speaker meaning in terms of intentions, and then connect a physicalist analysis of intentions to ultimately seek a physicalist explanation of meaning. However, no one aims to specify physical conditions by which speaker meaning holds as its, at least direct, analysis. The reason for this is easy to deduce; depending on the situation, exactly the same behavior may or may not be said to be an action of meaning appropriate because although, on the one hand, we have a definition of the circle that is mathematically clear and understandable to those of us with finite abilities, based on which we can say we cannot actually find one that strictly follows it, the problem here is that speaker meaning, on the other, has no such definition or necessary and sufficient conditions to begin with. Even this resistance is not going well. The problems that Schiffer faced will be discussed again later.
something. For example, you may raise your hand to indicate that you want to take a taxi, but you may also stand tall and raise your hand in the same way just to relieve yourself. The description of the physical situation does not capture this difference. Therefore, it is plausible to focus on the purpose of the act rather than the description of it in this way. In such a policy, the same action of raising one's hand, if viewed in a purely physical way, can be thought of as quite different depending on whether one wants to get a taxi or not—in fact, it is probably the basic way we look at an action when we think of it.

This implies that the analysis of speaker meaning requires two major steps. First, we must identify what the speaker's act of meaning is for, generally speaking. Let us call a situation that is established by the successful execution of speaker meaning a "realization situation." In communication, the speaker does not merely mean what he means; he usually means something in anticipation of the audience's understanding. Therefore, the realization situation is not strictly a situation when the speaker's act of meaning is carried out, but rather a situation that only comes into being when the speaker means something and the audience understands it. If the realization situation is identified, then we know what the speaker is uttering for in the case of speaker meaning. This alone does not constitute an analysis of speaker meaning. The second step of using the identification of the realization situation to explain speaker meaning is necessary. In other words, we can get an explanation of speaker meaning only when we characterize a speaker's utterance in some way by connecting it with the realization situation of speaker meaning. It is then necessary to clarify how to connect the utterance with the realization situation. If we refer to the task of identifying the realization situation as the "Consequence Problem" and the task of identifying the connection between the realization situation and the utterance as the "Connection Problem," the analysis of speaker meaning comes down to the solution of these two problems.

So far, I have reflected on the enterprise of the analysis of speaker meaning by deliberately excluding the intention-based semantic way of words in order to repose intention-based semantics in the space of possible alternatives, by taking the task of analyzing speaker meaning in a way that does not assume a specific theory, i.e., intention-based semantics. In the terms I have just introduced, intention-based semantics is a generic term for a position that gives an answer to the Connection Problem by relying on the notion of intention—that is, in intention-based semantics, the connection between the realization situation and the speaker's utterance is given by their intention. Specifically, it can be said that the speaker's intention accompanying the utterance incorporates the realization situation as part of its content. Different theorists have different positions on what the realization situation is. Grice (1957; 1969) says that the audience must form appropriate beliefs or intentions in that situation; Schiffer (1972) claims that the appropriate mutual knowledge must hold
between the speaker and the audience; Davis (2003) says that “a causal or statistical relation” (p.47) called an “indication” must hold between the speaker’s utterance and their belief; Green (2007) says that propositions corresponding to what speaker means must be publicly accessible. However, all of them agree on connecting these various realization situations to the utterance through the notion of speaker’s intention.

Let us summarize it below. An analysis of speaker meaning is, in the broadest sense of the word, a teleological attempt to resolve the following two issues:

**The Consequence Problem:** identifying the realization situation that only becomes true when the speaker means something and the audience understands it.

**The Connection Problem:** identifying how the realization situation is connected to the speaker’s utterance in the case of speaker meaning.

Intention-based semantics is the position of answering the Connection Problem by the notion of speaker’s intention.

The motivation for this methodological reflection was to discover why the problem of the infinite regress of intentions arises. Based on the take introduced in this section, we can raise a question about this problem—is the infinite regress of intentions about the Consequence Problem, or is it about the Connection Problem? As we will see in the next section, Schiffer, who enriched the realization situation by incorporating the concept of mutual knowledge in it, adopted the former view, though he still faced the same problem. My point is that the issue of infinite regress of intentions should rather be considered a matter of the Connection Problem.

### 4. Schiffer’s Diagnosis and its failure

Schiffer introduced the notion of mutual knowledge as a solution to the problem of infinite regress of intentions. What, then, did he perceive the problem of infinite regress of intentions as? Schiffer’s diagnosis was as follows:

\[ \text{If } S \text{ is to mean something by uttering } x, \text{ then all of the intentions necessary for his meaning something must be out in the open; there must be no possibility of “hidden” intentions which are constitutive of an act of meaning something. (Schiffer 1972. p.39)} \]

Here Schiffer argued that once speaker meaning has held, any intentions necessary for it must be made public without being hidden. In other words, it implies that a part of the feature of the realization situation must be characterized as that all speaker’s intentions that are necessary for speaker meaning are public. Schiffer believed that none of counterexamples that raise the problem of infinite regress of intentions satisfy this condition. Therefore, the problem of infinite regress of intentions was seen as
being concerned with the consequence problem, which could be solved by taking the realization situation in the right way.

That is why Schiffer believed that he could solve the problem of infinite regress of intentions by using the concept of mutual knowledge. If we assume that “$K_A p$” stands for $A$’s knowing $p$, then the mutual knowledge of $p$ between $A$ and $B$ is defined as $K_A p \land K_B p \land K_A (K_B p) \land K_B (K_A p) \land K_A (K_B (K_A p)) \land K_B (K_A (K_B p)) \land \ldots$ (Schiffer 1972, pp.30–31). Schiffer’s analysis of speaker meaning based on this concept is in fact more complex, but it can be simplified as follows (see p.39 and p.58 of Schiffer (1972) for the rigorous analysis):

$S$ utters $x$ with the intention to make the following mutually known between $S$ and $A$:

1. $S$ intends that $A$ believes that $p$, and
2. $S$ intends that $A$’s recognition of $S$’s intention 1 is at least a part of the reason for $A$’s believing that $p$.

Schiffer’s idea was that the introduction of the concept of mutual knowledge would ensure the openness of the speaker’s intentions, which is necessary in a realization situation—therefore, the problem of infinite regress of intentions would be solved.

The fallacy of this idea has already been pointed out in Harman (1974), a book review for Schiffer (1972). In Schiffer’s analysis, mutual knowledge emerged within the intention that takes a broader scope. It was this widest-scope intention that Harman set his sights on. As for this intention, which lay outside of mutual knowledge, the condition that the speaker intends the audience to realize it did not appear in the analysis. Therefore, Schiffer’s analysis “does not imply that, if $S$ meant something, $S$ intended $A$ to recognize the whole of $S$’s intention” (Harman 1974, p.227). In short, the same counterexamples as before with respect to the intention of this maximum scope are, in principle, constructible—although of course they would be too complex for us to actually understand, making it hard for our intuitive judgment to work. Schiffer later accepted this refutation and counted it as one of the reasons for abandoning intention-based semantics (Schiffer 1987, pp.245–246).

In contrast to Schiffer’s attempt to solve the problem of infinite regress of intentions by enriching the cognition of the speaker and the audience in the form of their mutual knowledge, Davis (2003) has taken the opposite approach in the analysis of speaker meaning. He excluded the notion of the audience from his analysis by arguing that the speaker’s intention in speaker meaning is the one that a causal or statistical relation exists between the speaker’s utterance and the speaker’s belief that $p$ (pp.47, 49, 57). This also corresponds to an attempt to improve intention-based semantics by modifying the way we view realization situations. However, even this position, with appropriate modifications, falls within the scope of Herman’s rebuttal. That is, if one considers a speaker who intends that a causal or statistical relation between their
utterances and belief will arise, but does not intend that a similar relation between their utterance and the very intention in question will arise, a case similar to the one causing the problem of infinite regress of intentions would manifest itself in the end.

Of course, one could think that the problem has not been solved because of the inadequate understanding of the realization situation by theorists such as Schiffer and Davis. Indeed, Taylor, in his book review for Bennett (1976/1990), pointed out that mutual knowledge in Schiffer’s defined form is not sufficient to capture the realization situation (Taylor, 1980). Yet, it is also possible that Schiffer’s diagnosis was wrong in the first place, and that the problem of infinite regress of intentions would not be resolved in whatever way the Consequence Problem could be addressed. In the following, I will discuss this possibility. Before I do so, let me first point out two assumptions that have been employed in the analysis of speaker meaning. These are premises that I call “transparency of speaker meaning” and “representationalism about speaker meaning.”

5. Assumptions in the analysis of speaker meaning

As we have already seen, the analysis of speaker meaning was pursued as an attempt at a teleological account, with the Consequence Problem of identifying the realization situation and the Connection Problem of connecting the realization situation to the utterance as its tasks. There still are, however, too many possible explanations for this alone. The analysis of speaker meaning is actually attempted by placing constraints on possible explanations by several assumptions.

One of the assumptions adopted by the proponents of intention-based semantics can be called “the transparency of speaker meaning.” This manifests itself explicitly in the passage by Schiffer (1972) quoted in the previous section. I quote it again in the following.

[I]f S is to mean something by uttering x, then all of the intentions necessary for his meaning something must be out in the open; there must be no possibility of “hidden” intentions which are constitutive of an act of meaning something. (Schiffer 1972. p.39)

In Schiffer’s view, so long as the speaker means something and the audience understands it, all the intentions that constitute the speaker’s meaning must be overt between the speaker and the audience. His concept of mutual knowledge was introduced to capture exactly this.

Now, the phrases “the intentions necessary for his meaning something” and “intentions which are constitutive of an act of meaning something” are due to the fact that Schiffer presupposes intention-based semantics in the analysis of speaker meaning. What he is saying here, however, can be taken as a re-telling in intention-based
semantic terms of an assumption that can be adopted, and can be plausible done so, without committing to intention-based semantics. The assumption is that when the speaker means something and the audience understands it, it becomes open between them that the speaker is doing the very act of meaning something. In other words, in the realization situation it must be an open matter between the speaker and the audience that speaker meaning indeed holds. I will call it “transparency of speaker meaning.” According to this, it is impossible for the speaker to mean anything while concealing the fact that they are doing the act of meaning.

The speaker means something and the audience understands it only if it is open between the speaker and the audience that the speaker means something.

If we rewrite this right-hand side on the basis of intention-based semantics, it comes down to Schiffer’s claim. In fact, Harman also understands his claim in this way, taking “if $S$ meant something, then $S$ intended the audience $A$ to recognize that $S$ meant something” as equivalent to the earlier quoted “if $S$ meant something, $S$ intended $A$ to recognize the whole of $S$’s intention” (Harman 1974, pp.226–227).

In none of the cases that Schiffer cites as pertaining to the issue of infinite regress of intentions does the transparency of speaker meaning hold. What is always problematic in such cases is the presence of the speaker, who conceals the fact that they mean something, but speaks with intentions that, according to the analysis in question, should give sufficient conditions for speaker meaning. Hence, insofar as the counterexamples that raise the problem of infinite regress of intentions are accepted as genuine, it follows that theorists of intention-based semantics presuppose the transparency of speaker meaning. It is also hard to intuitively understand how a speaker can mean something while hiding the fact that they mean something; even apart from intention-based semantics, the transparency of speaker meaning can be considered a plausible assumption.

I want to call the second premise a “representationalism about speaker meaning” (or simply “representationalism”). That is, the connection between the realization situation and the utterance is given by the speaker’s possession of a propositional attitude in uttering whose content includes a reference to the realization situation. Since the realization situation is what the utterance is for, the propositional attitude adopted here will basically have a “world-to-mind” direction of fit, borrowing Searle’s (1983) terminology. It is clear that intention-based semantics adopts this premise, as intention-based semanticists assume that, in the case of speaker meaning, the speaker makes an utterance with the intention of realizing the realization situation.

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6 Here Harman talks only about $A$’s recognition intended by $S$, but this is a weakened concept of Schiffer’s out-in-the-air-ness.
In other words, intention-based semantics is a position that adopts representationalism and embodies the relevant propositional attitude specifically as the intention of the speaker. However, intention-based semantics is not the only option for representationalism. For example, Irie (1994) suggested employing the propositional attitude of expectation instead of intention in the analysis of speaker meaning, which is also an example of representationalism here.

The transparency of speaker meaning is a presumption that constrains possible solutions to the Consequence Problem, because it concerns the way in which the realization situation is specified. Representationalism, on the other hand, is concerned with what connects the realization situation and the utterance, and thus is a presumption that constrains possible solutions to the Connection Problem. Now, if we talk according to the terminology this paper has proposed, it follows that Schiffer thought that the transparency of speaker meaning must be ensured in the identification of the realization situation. He focused on the transparency of speaker meaning as limiting the way they answered the Consequence Problem and providing a clue to it. On the other hand, the series of counterexamples that led to the problem of infinite regress of intentions were precisely those instances where the transparency of speaker meaning was not ensured. It is inferred that these were the background to Schiffer’s diagnosis that the problem of infinite regress of intentions is related to the Consequence Problem. What I want to argue in this paper, in contrast, is that the adoption of representationalism with respect to the Connection Problem while ensuring the transparency of speaker meaning was causing the problem of infinite regress of intention. If, as I have already argued, the transparency of speaker meaning is an unquestionable assumption, then the problem of infinite regress of intentions stems from the adoption of representationalism with respect to the Connection Problem.

6. Why Does the Problem of Infinite Regress of Intentions Arise?

As we have seen, the analysis of speaker meaning has the task of resolving the Consequence and Connection Problems, and the transparency of speaker meaning as a plausible premise; so far it has been further premised on representationalism, especially the version of it that relies on the concept of intention.

First, let $C$ be the proposition corresponding to the realization situation. Furthermore, let $A$ be the propositional attitude that is said to connect the realization situation and the utterance under the representationalism. In this case, in order for the speaker meaning to take hold, it is at least necessary for the speaker $S$ to make an utterance with $A$-ing $C$:

The speaker means something $\Rightarrow A_{S}C$

Furthermore, the transparency of speaker meaning should be established in the
realization situation. What is important here is that the transparency is not a causal consequence of the realization situation, but one of its defining features. We may intend, desire, or expect an event without intending, desiring, or expecting its outcome. For example, if a person hangs a muffler near a stove with the intention of drying it, and a fire is caused as a result, they would not necessarily have intended to cause a fire. They can simply not be aware of the possibility of such an outcome. In contrast, no person wants to be first in a race but does not want to reach the goal in the shortest time among the competitors. Even if someone were to talk about such a desire, in that case, we would conclude that they would simply not understand what it means to be first in a race, and they would not know what they want. Likewise, since the transparency is included in the defining feature of the realization situation, we must have the same attitude toward the transparency of speaker meaning if we intend/want/expect/... to give rise to the realization situation. Therefore, a kind of a closure principle holds for speaker meaning that if $A_S C$ and $X$ is a defining feature of $C$, then $A_S X$. Therefore, it can be said as follows:

The speaker means something $\Rightarrow A_S C \Rightarrow A_S (\text{it is open among the speaker and the audience that the speaker means something})$

What this shows is that at the point of adopting the transparency and representationalism of speaker meaning, the analysis already involves circularity, regardless of how one specifically identifies the realization situation and what one specifically regards as the propositional attitude that links the realization situation to the utterance. If, in this circular analysis, the relevant propositional attitude is embodied as an intention, then Harman’s (1974) self-referential intention is introduced as an explanation of speaker meaning. As he argues, if we try to get hold of an analysans that plays a similar role while avoiding self-referentiality, we run into the problem of infinite regress of intentions. Schiffer regarded the purported fact that the realization situation does not reflect the transparency of speaker meaning as the source of the problem of infinite regress of intentions; in reality, the theory adopting representationalism goes into circularity as soon as the realization situation reflects the transparency of speaker meaning. Regardless of whether or not they incorporate a form of Schiffer’s mutual knowledge into their analysis, proponents of intention-based semantics have assumed the transparency of speaker meaning, at least at the intuitive level—which is why they were troubled by a set of counterexamples that raise the problem of infinite regress of intentions. However, adopting that intuition actually causes friction with representationalism, which is the premise on which intention-based semantics is established.

If the above diagnosis is correct, the choice is between abandoning the transparency of speaker meaning and abandoning representationalism. Yet, as we have already seen, the transparency of speaker meaning is a characterization of speaker
meaning at the core of our understanding of it, or at least not something that we would outright abandon. If the transparency is to be seen as an inevitable assumption, then the cause of the problem of infinite regress of intentions can only be found in the adoption of the assumption of representationalism with respect to the Connection Problem. This, however, implies the abandonment of intention-based semantics in the first place. In fact, the implication does not stop there. In our analysis of speaker meaning, we must generally abandon the policy of bringing up any propositional attitude of the speaker with respect to the Connection Problem. If we adopt representationalism, then, for the enactment of speaker meaning, we will require the speaker to hold some propositional attitude to the realization situation. Then the speaker must immediately hold the same attitude to the very fact that the speaker means something—and a cycle occurs, as argued above.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the source of the problem of infinite regress of intentions by reflecting on the methodology adopted in the enterprise of analyzing speaker meaning. The analysis of speaker meaning is made by fulfilling two tasks, namely the Consequence Problem of identifying the realization situation and the Connection Problem of identifying the connection between the realization situation and the utterance. Furthermore, the assumption of transparency of speaker meaning is adopted as a plausible assumption with respect to the Consequence Problem. In addition to this, previous theorists have made use of the concept of intention here, among other things, assuming a representationalism of speaker meaning with respect to the Connection Problem. Schiffer considered the problem of infinite regress of intentions to be related to the Consequence Problem and saw the alleged fact that the realization situation did not adequately reflect the transparency of speaker meaning as its cause. It was argued in this paper that no matter how one identifies the realization situation, the adoption of both transparency and representationalism of speaker meaning would create a cycle in the analysis that would cause the problem of infinite regress of intentions.

Is there no hope for the enterprise of analyzing speaker meaning then? I do not think so. Of course, the transparency of speaker meaning is itself a presupposition that requires a kind of circularity or self-referentiality in speaker meaning; therefore, such circularity or self-referentiality cannot be separated from the notion of speaker meaning. This will be acknowledged by many theorists. The problem is that by adopting the representationalism of speaker meaning, such circularity or self-referentiality leads to undesirable circularity and self-referentiality in the form of a propositional attitude with an unidentifiable content or an infinite number of propositional attitudes. Thus, if we detach the representationalism from the notion
of speaker meaning, there is still the possibility of carrying out an analysis of speaker meaning. To seek that possibility, however, means to break with intention-based semantics and explore a new path.

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