



On the manifold senses of reality: a model of systematic polysemy for the interpretation of the real

Sobre los múltiples sentidos de la realidad: un modelo de polisemia sistemática para la interpretación de lo real

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Abstract: The monosemic understanding of the word reality assumes it has a single meaning. This interpretation, employed by numerous authors, has generated ambiguities and semantic restrictions that limit comprehension and communication across different contexts and systems of thought. To address this issue, I propose a model of systematic polysemy as an alternative, which considers that the word reality has manifold interrelated meanings. To demonstrate the model's effectiveness, I first identify three basic senses of the word reality: the substantial, the essential, and the phenomenological. Secondly, I examine polysemy as a linguistic phenomenon and demonstrate how the word reality exhibits characteristics of systematic polysemy. Thirdly, as a result, I present a model—illustrated through a Venn diagram—that elucidates the relations among seven senses of the word, offering a more comprehensive and non-restrictive understanding of the concept of reality. I argue that the phenomenological sense can function as an asymmetric reference for understanding the others. The conclusion posits that this approach overcomes the limitations of monosemic approaches, providing a more flexible and comprehensive framework for understanding the real across various philosophical and discursive contexts.

Keywords: Reality- systematic polysemy- interpretation- language- meaning.

Resumen: La comprensión monosémica de la palabra realidad asume que tiene un solo significado. Esta interpretación, empleada por numerosos autores, ha generado ambigüedades y restricciones semánticas que limitan la comprensión y la comunicación en diferentes contextos y sistemas de pensamiento. Para abordar este problema, propongo un modelo de polisemia sistemática como alternativa, que considera que la palabra realidad tiene múltiples significados interrelacionados. Para demostrar la eficacia del modelo, primero identifico tres sentidos básicos de la palabra realidad: el sustancial, el esencial y el fenomenológico. En segundo lugar, examino la polisemia como fenómeno lingüístico y demuestro cómo la palabra realidad exhibe características de polisemia sistemática. En tercer lugar, como resultado, presento un modelo —ilustrado mediante un diagrama de Venn— que elucida las relaciones entre siete sentidos de la palabra, ofreciendo una comprensión más completa y no restrictiva del concepto de realidad. Argumento que el sentido fenomenológico puede funcionar como una referencia asimétrica para entender los demás. La conclusión plantea que este enfoque supera las limitaciones de los enfoques monosémicos, proporcionando un marco más flexible y completo para entender lo real en diversos contextos filosóficos y discursivos.

Palabras claves: Realidad- polisemia sistemática- interpretación- lenguaje- significado.

Introduction

The question *what does the word reality mean?* has been a central theme in philosophy and has received a wide variety of responses throughout the history of thought. These responses have given rise to diverse philosophical currents and schools, commonly referred to as realisms. Generally, the strategy employed by these realisms consists on defining or assuming a monosemic sense for the word reality.

Examples of this strategy can be observed in contemporary philosophers such as Gabriel (2015), Harman (2011), and Ferraris (2014), as well as in the context of physics and philosophy of science in authors like Norsen (2007), Park (2022), or Zeilinger (2005). It has also been applied throughout history by authors such as Kant (1998), Husserl (1983), Heidegger (2001), Ortega (1964) and many others. Most of these authors consider that different senses of the word reality imply ambiguity, which should be discarded, and propose or assume a specific and restrictive definition of the word reality.

This monosemic approach necessarily implies the dismissal of other possible meanings of the word, thus restricting its semantic field. The strategy of eliminating supposedly secondary or spurious senses, although aiming for precision, paradoxically produces ambiguity. This is due to the fact that the specific meaning acquired by the word in the context of a particular system differs significantly from its use in other conceptual frameworks.

In the present work, I propose an alternative approach. My claim is that the word reality is inherently polysemous (with the features indicated by Kijania-Placek 2023, and Shields 1999). I argue that a model of systematic polysemy can resolve the ambiguities of the word in various contexts through the inclusion of a *rule-based scheme* and *asymmetry of meaning* that explains the relations among the manifold senses of the word.

To develop this proposal, I identify three basic senses of the word reality: *substantial sense*, *essential sense*, and the *phenomenological sense*. I argue that the phenomenological sense can function asymmetrically as a reference of understanding for the other senses, due to the necessary reference to one's own experience as an irreducible horizon of meaning. It is important to emphasize that this does not imply a reduction to a general sense, as proposed by the literalist interpretation of polysemy, but

rather establishes a necessary reference for accessing the understanding of the word's systematic polysemy.

The crucial difference lies in the fact that some of the manifold senses may imply the negation of the phenomenological sense without entailing contradiction or ambiguity. Therefore, the phenomenological sense does not always function as the direct sense of the word, but as a reference sense. This distinction allows for a more nuanced and flexible understanding of how different meanings of reality operate in various philosophical and discursive contexts. As a result of this analysis, a model is proposed that incorporates, in a non-restrictive manner, seven senses of the word reality (three basic and four intersectional), offering a more comprehensive perspective of this concept.

The structure of the article is developed in three main parts. First, I present the three basic senses of the word reality, thus evidencing its polysemous character. Second, I analyze the phenomenon of polysemy as a linguistic fact, demonstrating how the word reality exhibits the characteristics of systematic polysemy. Finally, I present a model of systematic polysemy through a Venn diagram, whose structure allows for a coherent explanation for the relations among the manifold senses of the word. This proposal seeks to overcome the limitations of traditional monosemic interpretations, providing a more flexible and comprehensive framework for the interpretation of the real.

The Basic Senses of the Word Reality

The concept of reality has been the subject of extensive debate throughout history, giving rise to diverse interpretations and uses. In this section, I identify three senses that I consider fundamental to the understanding and employment of the word reality: *substantial sense*, *essential sense*, and *phenomenological sense*. Each of these has significantly influenced the development of various philosophical positions and contributed to the formation of varied realist conceptions.

The *substantial sense*, rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, emphasizes *independent existence* and *ontological autonomy*. The *essential sense*, emerged from medieval debates and was refined in modern philosophy, focuses on the *conceptual unity* of things, often independently of their existence. Lastly, the *phenomenological sense*, developed primarily in the 20th century, prioritizes *experiential unity*, the manifestation of phenomena in consciousness.

Based on these senses I aim to demonstrate the polysemous character of reality and then present a model of systematic polysemy that allows the organization and comprehension of these manifold senses of the word.

Substantial Sense of Reality

By *substantial sense*, I refer to the Aristotelian ontological model upon which scholasticism configured the concept of *res* from which the word reality was derived. The fundamental characteristics of the substantial concept of reality imply at least two ideas:

1. *Independent existence*: The capacity to exist independently of other things or the mind.
2. *Ontological autonomy*: The capacity for self-determination and property retention.

Independent existence corresponds to what Aristotle describes in the *Posterior Analytics* as what is shown by the demonstration: "Every demonstration proves something of something, i.e. that *it is* [ὅτι ἔστι] or is not". (90b 34-35) This aspect of substance concerns its actual existence, which is *demonstrated* rather than *defined*. It aligns with Aristotle's notion in *Metaphysics* of being "capable

of being separated from substance [χωρίζεσθαι δυνατόν τῆς οὐσίας]" (VII, 1 1028a23-24). This separability indicates the capacity for independent existence that characterizes substantial reality.

Ontological autonomy, on the other hand, relates to what Aristotle identifies as what is said by the definition: "For definitions are of what something is, i.e. of its essence [τί ἐστὶ καὶ οὐσίας]" (Posterior Analytics, 90b 31). This corresponds to the essence or what it is of a substance, encompassing its self-determination and retention of properties. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle further emphasizes this aspect when he states that despite other categories can be also defined and therefore be understood as *ousiai*, only *ousia* is "of a nature to be in its own right [καθ' αὐτὸ πεφυκός]" (VII, 1 1028a23-24). This implies that the ontological autonomy of substances is prior to other categories that can only be defined not demonstrated.

These Aristotelian distinctions provide the philosophical groundwork for understanding reality in terms of substance. The dual aspects of *ousia* - its definable essence (ontological autonomy) and demonstrable existence (independent existence) - form the core of what I understand as the substantial sense of reality.

These two ideas - independent existence and ontological autonomy - are central to Aristotle's concept of *ousia*. Shields (1997) interprets *ousia* in *Metaphysics* VII and VIII as either "free-standing" or "dependent upon an accompanying genitive." This distinction creates a dilemma: free-standing *ousia* implies the existence of non-free-standing particulars, distinguishing *ousia* from non-*ousia*, while genitive-dependent *ousia* suggests that anything definable through essence could be an *ousia*. From the latter perspective, both Socrates and the color blue are *ousia*, possessing ontological autonomy, while the free-standing view would only consider Socrates an *ousia* due to his independent existence.

Dahl (2019) concurs with these alternatives, adding that free-standing *ousiai* are basic world constituents, and genitive-dependent *ousia* includes essence, form, and substantial form. Loux (2008) identifies a fundamental sense of *ousia* in *Metaphysics* VII as that which explains other things' existence without requiring explanation itself. Witt (1989) emphasizes "separation," indicating ontological asymmetry between substances and non-substances.

Deriving the concept of reality from this understanding of substance, the real becomes that which exists independently and is ontologically autonomous - a bearer of non-autonomous properties. From Aristotle's perspective, the real would be the world's basic constituent: existing things bearing properties.

This notion of substantial realism persists in contemporary scientific realism. Park (2022) argues that affirming reality's ontological autonomy implies our theories are "approximately" true insofar as they express this autonomy contrasting with Van Fraassen's (1989) skepticism about scientific theories. The debate has intensified with Bell's Theorem challenging 'local realism.'

Norsen (2007) highlights that scientific empiricism relies on perception providing access to reality. He distinguishes between metaphysical realism (reality existing independently of subjectivity) and perceptual realism (experience composed of reality's elements). Norsen defends a form of *perceptual realism* where experience and subjectivity derive from reality's elements.

To illustrate the substantial sense of reality, consider as an example the expression "the planet Neptune is real," which refers to its discovery preceded by a mathematical prediction made by Le Verrier in 1846. In this example, *real* means *independent existence* and *ontological autonomy*. Neptune's independent existence refers to its capacity to appear in empirical frames of reference, which was corroborated through telescopic observation that confirmed its effective presence. On the other hand, its ontological autonomy consists of the planet's own characteristics, those that Le Verrier

was able to predict mathematically based on the observed perturbations in the orbits of other planets. The mathematical prediction pointed to these theoretically conceivable properties of Neptune, while the subsequent observation provided empirical evidence of its independent existence. Both elements are essential constituents of Neptune's substantial reality. Thus, the substantial sense of reality can be defined as something with *independent existence* and *ontological autonomy*.

Essential Sense of Reality

The *essential sense* of reality was originated in medieval problems concerning the distinction between created entities and the creator entity. Both Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas developed the idea that the created entity would be composed of its own ontological determinations, that is, ontological autonomy, and that its being or existence is a product of God's creative activity.

This distinction has been widely studied as the ontological difference between essence and existence. Gilson (1962) expounds in detail the intricacies of this difference in Thomas Aquinas. Likewise, Albert the Great subscribed to this difference since, as Quero-Sánchez (2011) points out, it was quite useful in explaining God's creative process and, at the same time, distinguishing between the different modes of being of the creator and creatures.

This distinction between essence and existence is consistent with how I am understanding the fundamental notes of what is said in substantial reality, that is, *essence* corresponds to *ontological autonomy* and *existence* corresponds to *independent existence*.

However, this distinction was appropriated by Meister Eckhart but with the addition that for him these two ontological moments do not have equal importance to know things. For Eckhart, what is ontologically prioritized is essence, as which is rational and indeterminate in things. As I explain in Véjar (2024), in his *Commentary on the Prologue of St. John*, Eckhart makes it clear that the existence of things is irrelevant; the only relevant thing is their essence, which is graspable through reason. For both Albert and Eckhart, the word reality (*realitas* - *Realität*) is linked to essence, that is, the determinations or properties of something, and existence would be something distinguishable, albeit with different consequences in each one's thought.

The difference between reality and existence was consolidated in Kant (1998), where both terms belong to different categories. One of the ideas in which this difference in Kant is manifested in a forceful way is "Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing" (KrV, A 598/ B626). *Being* in this statement refers to the category of modality *Wirklichkeit* while *real* refers to the category of quality *Realität*. *Wirklichkeit* refers to the concrete fact that something is experienced or perceived, while *Realität* refers to the properties that constitute what something is, therefore it consists, rather, in an affirmation of those properties. Therefore, knowing the reality of something implies, in these terms, knowing the properties of something: for example, knowing the reality of a chair would imply knowing its design, characteristics, and so on; while knowing its being (*Wirklichkeit*) is knowing whether the chair in fact is.

Despite the above distinction, there have been numerous problems of ontological understanding due to both terms being frequently translated as *reality* without taking into account these crucial distinctions; I comment on this more extensively in the aforementioned text (Véjar 2024).

Currently, Gabriel's works (2015) employ this basic idea of essential sense of reality as an affirmation of something's properties and make existence dependent of the *appearance in a field of sense* (p. 50). This implies that everything that can be understood exists, although in different fields of sense, as the

case may be. The existence of stars or fictional characters would be different only because of the field to which they refer.

Essential sense of reality is an affirmation of the properties of a thing regardless of its existence. This marginalization implies, in Kant's case, that reality is something different from existence, while in Gabriel's case, that existing is subordinated to the conceptual unity that something has by virtue of its appearance in a certain field of sense.

The subordination of *independent existence* to *conceptual unity* in Gabriel's (2015) case can be clearly seen in the strategy he follows to refute the existence of the world. First, he defines the world as "the field of sense in which all other fields of sense appear" (p. 74), but if all fields of sense appear within the world, the world in turn could not appear in a field of sense because such a field would have to be contained within the world and not the world contained in it. This absurdity proves that the world does not appear in any field of sense and consequently does not exist.

The previous reasoning shows that the *ontological* autonomy that determines the constitutive properties of something becomes a *logical* autonomy, since said properties must be shown in *conceptual unity*, that is, they must be logically comprehensible: appear in a field of sense. Essential sense of reality makes existence *dependent* of logic sense.

To illustrate the *essential sense* of reality, the expression "the number zero is real" can be used as an example. This statement does not imply an *independent existence* of zero like in physical objects, but rather points to its *conceptual unity* within the mathematical system. Real numbers, including zero, are representable on the real line and are distinguished by their properties. Their reality does not depend on physical persistence but on their conceptual definition. Unlike physical objects, real numbers are not subject to change or movement; their reality is purely conceptual. They are comprehensible, expressible, and representable within the mathematical framework, independently of any manifestation in the physical world. This *conceptual unity* is so concrete that it can be represented as a point on the real line, demonstrating how the real in this context refers to a conceptual formality rather than a tangible existence. Thus, the *essential sense* of reality can be defined as something with *conceptual unity*, which is shown as a capacity of concepts (mathematical or literary, for example) to self-determine.

Phenomenological Sense of Reality

Reality in the *phenomenological sense* was presented in an eminent way by Husserl (1983) in *Ideas I*. This ontological scheme implies the suppression of the idea of reality as something external and transcendent to experience. This is, according to García-Baró (2015), a phenomenism also known as phenomenalism. This position asserts that: "we know reality itself directly, that is, the direct objects of intentional life are not mental objects signifying extramental objects, but directly these themselves." (García-Baró 2015: 75)

In this scheme, the phenomenological difference consists in distinguishing the *noesis*, i.e., the purely intentional acts - of which I can know absolutely both their existence and their essence - from their correlate, the *noema*, i.e., the object - of which I can know its nature or essence but not its being or existence apart from the experience in which it appears. Thus, the existence that can be said of things is subject to the immanent realm of donation to the intentional acts of which they are the object: "The noema is the thing itself as immanent to consciousness, that is, insofar as I consider it, abstaining from everything else, in its pure being phenomenon" (García-Baró 2015: 78).

Existence is not denied, but rather, for the proper elaboration of phenomenology, it should not be affirmed. The *epoché* consists in suspending judgments about the existence of the world and things, and determines that the only thing that is knowable is the essence or ontological autonomy of things. Husserl (1983) says: "... I am *not negating* this "world" as though I were a sophist; I am *not doubting its factual being* as though I were skeptic; rather I am exercising the "phenomenological" ἐποχή [*epoché*] which also completely shut *me off from any judgement about spatiotemporal factual being*". (p. 61)

Although, being terminologically faithful to Husserl's terminology, *reality* does not express the fundamental ontological basis in which consciousness deals with the world and things in a mutually constituting correlation. Thus, the *phenomenological sense* I'm referring to is rather Ortega's (1964):

In short, whatever reality we want to put as primary, we find that *it presupposes our life* and that putting it is already a vital act, it is "living". It will be as surprising as you want this casualness that the only, indubitable reality is precisely "living" and not the mere idealist *cogito* —which was so surprising in its time— and not the *form* of Aristotle or the *idea* of Plato, which in their time seemed intolerable paradoxes. (...) The first attribute of this *radical reality* that we call "our life" is existing by itself, becoming aware of itself, being transparent to itself. Only because of this is it indubitable and everything that is part of it — and only because it is the only indubitable is it the radical reality. (pp. 424-425, my translation)

For Ortega, unlike Husserl, our life is *radical reality*, so it is the fundamental ontological basis in which everything that can be constituted as a thing appears. This means that a thing is such insofar as it appears in someone's life, not because at that moment it is constituted as existence but rather because the fact of its existence could not be shown without the basis provided by life.

The reality of a phenomenon is not defined by its *independent existence*, but by its significance and impact in the context of the individual's vital experience. This conception does not imply a rejection of the independent existence of entities, but rather emphasizes that their ontological relevance is determined by their interaction with life.

In this paradigm, the apprehension of the *per se* existence of objects is only feasible because these have already previously manifested in an experiential horizon. Consequently, the reality, differentiated from existence of any entity is subject to life as a condition of its manifestation and acquisition of importance.

This perspective leads to the notion of life as *radical reality*, not in a sense of supremacy or exclusivity, but as an ontological foundation from which entities acquire their status of reality. Life thus stands as the primordial context that confers reality to existences and facts.

Similar to the *essential sense*, in this case the *independent existence* is suspended and reduced to a *dependence* of appearing in the experience of an individual. In this sense to be real does not mean nor *independent existence* nor *conceptual unity*, but rather that something appears in experience. Therefore, *phenomenological reality* means something experienced, something that is a component of life.

To illustrate the phenomenological sense of reality can be used Husserl's (2001, p. 137-139) example of the *Panopticum wax-doll*. In the example, before perceiving the doll, a lady is perceived. Husserl affirms that *the lady is real* because she is the intentional content of a specific experience; the lady appears and is intended, even if only for a brief moment. This reality of the lady does not mean *conceptual unity* like the reality of numbers, nor does it mean *independent existence* and *ontological autonomy* like the reality of the planet Neptune; it means, rather, *experiential unity*. Thus, *phenomenological reality* can be defined as something with *experiential unity*.

Systematic Polysemy

Polysemy is a linguistic phenomenon that consists on the association of manifold related meanings (which I interchangeably call senses) with the same signifier. It is distinguished from other phenomena such as, on the one hand, *monosemy* which consists of the relation between a single meaning and a single signifier, and on the other hand, *homonymy*, which consists on the association of unrelated manifold meanings with the same signifier.

The distinction between polysemy and monosemy, while seemingly clear, is subject to debate among scholars. A notable example is the discourse between Jackendoff (1992) and Fodor (1998) regarding the English verb "keep". Jackendoff argues for polysemy, citing different meanings in constructions like "keep the money", "keep the car in the garage", and "keep the crowd happy". Conversely, Fodor advocates for a monosemic interpretation, attributing apparent meaning differences to contextual factors.

Bergenholtz and Agerbo (2014) propose that the polysemy-monosemy distinction might be artificial, stemming from a problematic conception of 'word' as a unit of meaning. They suggest treating each distinct sense as a lemma, circumventing the need to categorize words as polysemous or monosemous.

In this framework, the word as polysemic signifier must be the lexeme - an abstraction of various grammatical words or tokens grouped by *sense relation* and *grammatical and inflectional relation*. Sense relation occurs when multiple grammatical words share a concept; grammatical relation involves identical character sequences across categories; and inflectional relation results from morpheme alterations of a root or lexeme. For instance, "real" (adjective) gives rise to "reality" (noun) and "really" (adverb), which, despite belonging to different grammatical categories, share the lexeme's core sense. As Panman (1982) notes, conceptualizing 'word' as lexeme extends polysemy beyond tokens or grammatical words.

To illustrate:

1. bank (noun: financial institution)
2. bank (noun: river edge)
3. bank (verb: to rely on)

If 'word' is understood as token or lemma, these represent three distinct words. If 'word' means a character sequence, they're identical. However, if 'word' is interpreted as lexeme, despite sharing grammatical and inflectional relations, they constitute three words due to the absence of sense relation.

Scholars (Panman, 1982; Taylor, 2003; Falkum, 2015; Falkum & Vicente, 2015; Kijania-Placek, 2023) classify this as homonymy, where multiple senses are unrelated. Similar examples include "rose" (noun: flower; verb: past tense of 'rise') and "bear" (noun: animal; verb: to carry), where identical character sequences yield different grammatical categories and unrelated meanings, lacking both sense and inflectional relations.

Conversely, the sequence "real, reality, really, realize" represents a single lexeme. Modifications of the root "real" maintain inflectional relations between tokens while preserving the core sense. Panman (1982:113) defines lexeme as an abstraction of tokens or grammatical words united by inflectional and sense relations. Polysemy, then, is defined as the relation of a word (as lexeme or form) with multiple, interrelated senses (Kijania-Placek 2023, Falkum 2015, Panman 1982).

This conceptualization provides a nuanced understanding of polysemy, distinguishing it from both monosemy and homonymy, and offers a framework for analyzing the complex relationships between

word forms and their meanings in linguistic analysis. To illustrate the above, according to the model of systematic polysemy that I propose: *real* -in the *substantial sense* as a physical object- and *real* -in the *essential sense* as a conceptual unity- are polysemes, since they are related senses of the same word (lexeme). These senses share a sense relation and follow the same inflectional patterns (reality, really, etc.).

Polysemy has also been widely discussed in the context of specialized research on Aristotle, especially from Owen's work (1960) who called this model as *focal meaning*; Shields (1999) called it *core-dependent homonymy*, and Vigo (1999) *non-accidental homonymy*. In this work, I consider that the denomination of *systematic polysemy* better expresses the semantic logical model that allows understanding the manifold senses of the word reality, although in general it is congruent with the model employed by Aristotle.

For the specification of the properties of the systematic polysemy model of the word reality, I will base on the characteristics described by Kijania-Placek (2023) and Shields (1999). Kijania-Placek (2023) outlines six key characteristics of systematic polysemy:

1. Cross-linguistic sustainability of ambiguity (Kijania-Placek 2023:2915): The conceptual association of multiple senses of a word appears across languages, indicating an association independent of specific linguistic contexts. This is evident in the word "reality," whose basic senses are reconstructed across various philosophical traditions, languages, and epochs.
2. Productivity (p. 2916): Rules or schemes used to develop multiple meanings can be applied to other words in the same semantic category, creating new senses predictably and coherently. For "reality," this is demonstrated in ironic uses like "my pain is as real as unicorns," where the word is used to question the existence of the referenced object.
3. Comprehensive understanding (p. 2916): Unlike homonymy, where unrelated senses must be learned individually, in polysemy, a competent speaker who knows one meaning can comprehend all associated senses due to regular relational patterns. This is observed with "reality," where different sense possibilities can be detected without ambiguity.
4. Non-disjunctiveness (p. 2916): Systematic polysemy allows for simultaneous activation of multiple senses without ambiguity, unlike homonymy. For "reality," this occurs in intersectional senses, as in "Don Quixote's reality is captivating, but wooden windmill arms are unforgiving," where phenomenological-essential and substantial senses are simultaneously activated.
5. Anaphoric relations across senses (p. 2917): Polysemy allows for diachronic activation of multiple senses throughout communication without ambiguity. With "reality," this is exemplified in "taxes are real, even if you never touch them," where the essential sense (social construct) and substantial sense (physical object) are activated in different parts of the sentence.
6. Inferential relations among senses (p. 2917): Systematic polysemy establishes predictable conceptual relations among different senses, allowing for logical inferences. This distinguishes it from homonymy through conventional relational schemes. For "reality," the sense being used can often be inferred from context, as in "the number zero is real," where the essential sense is clearly implied.

Shields (1999) proposes four criteria by which the functioning of this structure of systematic polysemy could be understood —although as I mentioned before, he calls it *core-dependent homonymy*: “*a* and *b* are homonymously *F* in a core-dependent way iff: (i) they have their name in common,(ii) their definitions do not completely overlap,(iii) necessarily, if *a* is a core instance of *F*-

ness, then *b*'s being *F* stands in one of the four causal relations to *a*'s being *F* [Cajetan's proposal]; and (iv) *a*'s being *F* is asymmetrically responsible for the existence of *b*'s being *F*". (p. 124-125)

These criteria align with literalist approaches to polysemy (Falkum & Vicente 2015:8), suggesting concrete and restrictive rules for moving from literal to derived senses. Asher (2011) considers this process as "coercion," applied through rhetorical figures like metaphor that affects only in pragmatic but not semantic level of language.

I observe that Shields' proposal corresponds to Kijania-Placek's (2023) characteristics:

1. *Common names* relate to *cross-linguistic sustainability of ambiguity*, as both characteristics point to the underlying lexical unity in different linguistic contexts.
2. *Cajetan's proposal* aligns with *productivity* and *inferential relations*, due to the coherent and predictable way to transition among various senses.
3. *Asymmetry* implies that there is a basic or priority sense in systematic polysemes that allows understanding the word at once, aligning with the idea that *if a speaker knows one of the senses, they know them all*.
4. *Overlapping definitions* align with *non-disjunctiveness* and *anaphoric relations*, due to the simultaneous (overlapped) activation of different meanings.

However, I think that Cajetan's proposal, as presented by Shields, has significant limitations. By restricting meaning schemes to causal relations, it lacks the necessary flexibility to capture the full complexity of semantic relations in systematic polysemy, particularly non-causal rhetorical figures like irony or metaphor. This may limit explanations of new senses arising from unforeseen semantic rules.

While I acknowledge that Cajetan's proposal provides a useful proposal, I argue that a broader approach is necessary to explain diverse semantic relations and meaning generation processes. I affirm a rule-based sense relation scheme for the systematic polysemy of "reality," but I do not subscribe to Cajetan's proposal due to the non-strictly causal relations among reality's senses.

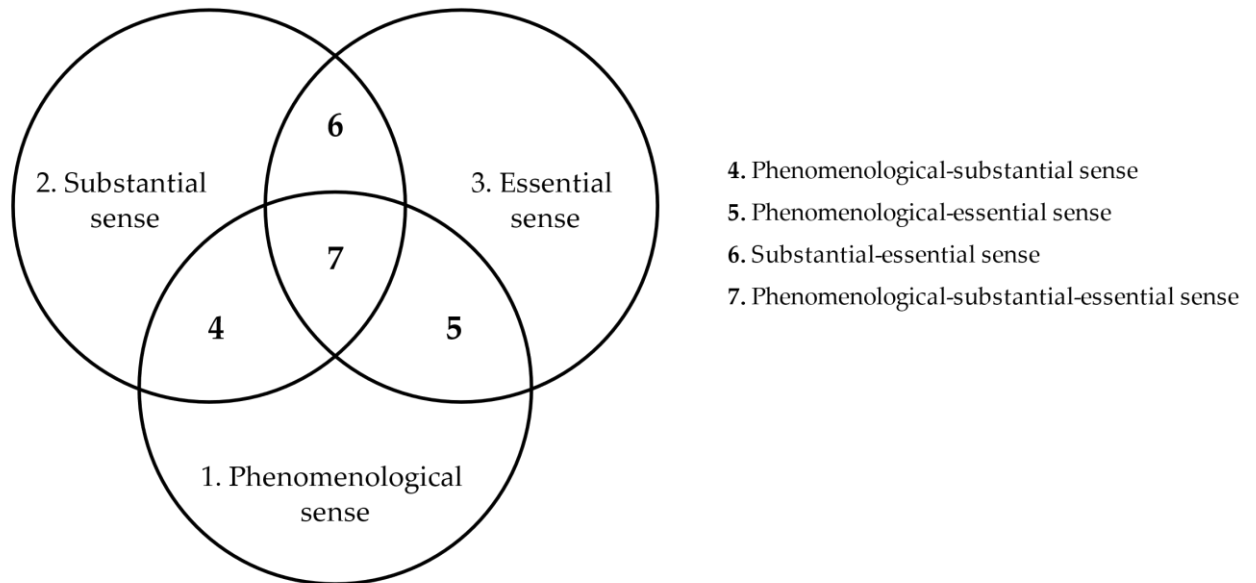
I also reject the literalist interpretation of polysemy (Falkum & Vicente 2015:8), which views polysemy as a problem to be solved through reduction to a primary sense. This aligns with Saussure's "one form, one sense" model, which Taylor (2003: 648) notes would make polysemy a negative aspect of language.

Instead, I posit that systematic polysemy expands language's semantic possibilities, enabling expression of phenomena that defy unequivocal description. My view recognizes polysemy not as a defect, but as a resource that enriches language's expressiveness and flexibility, systematizing but not dissolving its complexity.

Systematic polysemy model for the interpretation of reality

The model of systematic polysemy that I propose to interpret the relations among the manifold senses of the word reality can be represented through a Venn diagram:

Figure 1. *Systematic polysemy model of the word reality.*



In *Figure 1*, I have placed the phenomenological sense at the bottom to indicate its asymmetry for understanding the structure of systematic polysemy as a whole. This asymmetry consists in the fact that access to the understanding of reality (in all its senses) depends asymmetrically on experience; with this, I subscribe to Ortega's (1964) phenomenological interpretation according to which life is the necessary meaningful horizon for all possible understanding and experience of reality.

However, the *asymmetry of understanding* of the *phenomenological sense* of reality -which I adopt from Ortega (1964)- does not necessarily imply an ontological positioning -which Ortega does- it only indicates, from my positioning, a criterion of access to the understanding of the systematic polysemy of reality. That is, what is said by the word reality is only accessible and comprehensible from the base provided by experience, and because of this, an understanding, at least tacit, of the phenomenological sense of reality is necessary. To accentuate the not ontological character of asymmetry, as I understand it, it could also be called *hermeneutic priority*. It is not possible to access the understanding of something if it is not based on the specific horizon of one's own experience.

I have also decided not to place a rectangle outside the circles to make clear that I am not considering a universal sense of reality, this is mutually exclusive with the affirmation of the systematic polysemy of reality, i.e., a word either represents a universal sense or is polysemous, but not both. Each of the senses of a systematic polysemy does represent a generic sense, but not the structure as a whole.

In *section 2* I offered concrete examples and definitions for each basic sense, namely:

1. Phenomenological sense:

- Definition: experiential unity

- Example: *Husserl's lady is real*

2. Substantial sense:

- Definition: independent existence and ontological autonomy
- Example: *the planet Neptune is real*

3. Essential sense:

- Definition: conceptual unity
- Example: *the number zero is real*

In *Figure 1*, in addition to the *substantial*, *essential*, and *phenomenological* senses of reality, four intersections can be seen. This intersection allows for both synchronic (non-disjunctive) and diachronic (anaphoric) activation of manifold senses, resulting in altered word definitions and meanings. The following examples will demonstrate the overlapping nature of these intersectional senses, their specific meanings in each case, and the significant complexity this scheme makes possible. The intersectional senses of the systematic polysemy of reality are:

1. Phenomenological-substantial sense:

- Example: *pain is real*

2. Phenomenological-essential sense:

- Example: *Don Quixote is real*

3. Substantial-essential sense:

- Example: *Dark energy is real*

4. Phenomenological-substantial-essential sense:

- Example: *I am real*

Each of these intersectional senses can be used independently, and the examples provided will illustrate their unique meanings and implications.

The example "pain is real" as a *phenomenological-substantial* sense, *real* refers to the fact that when intense pain occurs, it transcends subjective understanding, manifesting itself as an experience that saturates and exceeds our cognitive capacities, which hinders and in many cases makes impossible the conceptual unity of what is being experienced. Inverso (2018) calls these experiences "surplus phenomena" (p. 264). The reality of pain is affirmed in two aspects: 1) *Saturating experience*: Pain is experienced immediately and overwhelmingly; 2) *Independent existence*: It is perceived as something that exists by itself.

Inverso (2018) points out: "Pain is the immanence in itself of that suffering, without horizon, without space outside itself for escape" (p. 264). This creates a radical self-affection where, as Inverso says, "It can be said that suffering is what suffers" (p. 264). This fusion between the sufferer and the painful prevents a unitary conceptualization of the phenomenon. "Pain is real" expresses both the phenomenological experience and the substantial existence of pain, situating it at the intersection of both dimensions without reducing it to a mere subjective construction or an external object.

The example "Don Quixote is real" of the *phenomenological-essential* sense, *real* refers to the way reality is understood in the artistic context: it refers to the conceptual unity of the universe of meaning created by the work, which we experience empathically. This phenomenological-essential reality has

two key components: 1) *Aesthetic experience*: Our understanding and experience of the characters' emotions within the fictional universe; and 2) *Conceptual unity*: The narrative context where fictional events occur.

Schutz's (1976) analysis deepens our understanding of how fictional realities operate within our perception. He argues that literary works like "Don Quixote" create their own "sub-universe" of reality, which readers engage with on both emotional and cognitive levels. Schutz notes: "There is the world of Don Quixote's madness, the world of chivalry, a sub-universe of reality incompatible with the paramount reality of daily life." (p. 136) This incompatibility, however, does not negate but accent on the reality of Don Quixote's world to the reader.

Schutz (1976) further explores how this fictional reality intersects with our everyday understanding of the world. He posits that our engagement with such literary realities can inform and even challenge our perception of the "paramount reality." As he states, "Neither Don Quixote's sub-universe of madness nor the paramount reality of the senses... turns out to be as monolithic as it seems." (p. 136)

The work plays with these levels of reality or intradiegetic realities, whose distinction and conceptual unity form the basis of its tragicomic narrative structure. Furthermore, *phenomenological-essential* reality in art and literature requires the active participation of the spectator or reader for the aesthetic experience to occur and to give value to the conceptual unity of the work. The reality of Don Quixote, as a character, does not refer to his *independent existence*, but to the *experience* a reader has when understanding the *conceptual unity* of his narrative being.

In the example "dark energy is real" of the *substantial-essential* sense, *real* refers to dark energy being a hypothetical component of the universe, proposed to explain the acceleration of its expansion, discovered by Riess et al. (1998) and Perlmutter et al. (1999). The substantial-essential reality of dark energy is based on two aspects: 1) *Independent existence*: Its existence is assumed as a necessary cause to explain observed phenomena; and 2) *Conceptual unity*: It is described through mathematical models that predict its behavior and explain its effects.

Unlike the discovery of the planet Neptune, dark energy still lacks direct observation that demonstrates its independent existence and ontological autonomy; in the case of the planet Neptune, observations demonstrated the existence of the planet and allow it to be referred to in a merely substantial sense because even if you don't see it or don't know it there is evidence of its independent existence and its ontological autonomy. Therefore, the reality of dark energy in contemporary cosmological physics indicates by causal inference an independent existence and a conceptual unity, but does not indicate experience because although its effects have been observed, there are still no direct observations of the cause.

In the example "I am real", the three basic senses of reality can be seen activated synchronically: *phenomenological* (by the immediate experience of the self), *substantial* (by my ontological autonomy and independent existence) and *essential* (by the conceptual unity of the self). The *ontological autonomy* of the substantial sense can be implicitly understood as the specific structure of the everyday behavior of the self, which could be understood narratively or explicitly as a *conceptual unity* through which we understand ourselves reflexively. This is the specific narrative of our daily cadence, which is exposed as insignificant in anguish, according to Heidegger (2001), showing the self as mere independent existence, something similar to the existence of the Cartesian cogito.

Husserl (1983), like Ortega (1964), argues that the experience of the self is inalienable, since no reduction or abstraction can nullify the subjectivity of conscious acts. This suggests that there is an irreducible core of the experience of ourselves that persists through any experience. The *reality* of the

self can mean *experience*, *conceptual unity* as well as *independent existence* and *ontological autonomy*; synchronically activating without ambiguity all the systematic polysemy of reality.

Conclusions

The proposed model of systematic polysemy of reality allows for clarifying, pointing out, defining, and relating the manifold senses in which the word is usually used. This modeling does not imply a limitation or restriction of possible unforeseen senses. On the contrary, the delimitation of this structure makes possible to find and explore ways of using the word reality that allow for rich communication in meanings without implying ambiguity, and thus find new models of *meaning* for understanding the real.

The *asymmetry* I propose regarding the *phenomenological sense* allows for a non-restrictive access to the unitary understanding of the word. This facilitates transitioning from it to different senses without necessarily subscribing to an ontological positioning. An investigation into the ontological model capable of explaining and leveraging the structure of meaning of the word reality is a different discussion. This should be addressed in further works, which will have to expose what ontological scheme, i.e., what realism can most successfully explain the manifold senses of the word reality.

Both *asymmetry* and the *overlap of meaning* in systematic polysemies are productive possibilities in some cases, and obstacles in others. In a productive sense, they allow for the simultaneous activation and understanding of two or more senses to achieve richer and more meaningful communication, without the need to overly specify the details of the communication. Hence, metaphor has a function rich in meanings without hindering communication; rather, it enriches it in a way that cannot be replicated through specifications. However, in a negative sense, it implies the permeability of senses, attracting undesired aspects of one sense to a context where they contaminate the required sense. This results in ambiguous and unclear communication. In this case, the specification of manifold senses is necessary to achieve successful communication.

Based on the above, research on the inherent *meaning* scheme of each polysemous word could mean advantages or disadvantages depending on the case. In metaphorical communication that pursues the productive activation of manifold senses, the schematic unveiling of these senses could imply a limitation of new unforeseen senses at the moment of the communicative act. This phenomenon is observed, for example, when reading ancient poetry, which probably activates current senses that were not in view of the poet or the community to which the communication was initially directed. In this case, the activation of new senses is not undesirable or spurious but, on the contrary, is an inherent capacity of the type of communication used. Therefore, attempting to restrict polysemy through a finite scheme represents a disadvantage. However, an analysis of the polysemic scheme of communication that does not restrict manifold senses fosters the production of unforeseen senses, which is an advantage.

In the case of ambiguity, understood as communication with permeability of unwanted senses, the schematization of manifold senses allows for the concrete elucidation of the most viable senses in a specific context, as in legal or scientific communication. Therefore, I consider that clarifying the systematic polysemy scheme of the word reality presents many more advantages for clear communication, allowing for disambiguation and the production of new senses for the word in a successful manner.

The strategy carried out by most authors associated with realisms attempts to eliminate the ambiguity of the word by establishing restrictions around a monosemic or univocal definition. This implies negative results: firstly, ambiguity is not eliminated, since the use of the word in other contexts will not be consistent in all cases with the definition proposed by each realism. This produces the inability to use the word independently of the specific context of meaning of each system, which implies an

ambiguity in dialogue, due to the word reality will be used in different contexts with completely different senses, making communication impossible.

Secondly, this strategy does not adequately address the polysemous condition of the word reality. By preferring a monosemic definition strategy, the existence of manifold senses of the word reality is dismissed, as in the case of most realisms. This implies a serious problem in itself, as it deliberately ignores the linguistic condition of the word, which is not casual, especially in such an important word. Furthermore, it makes practically impossible to understand, in a unitary way, what the word reality means, since each attempt at definition has an exclusive demarcation of the system in which it is elaborated. Consequently, it also cannot be clearly determined what exactly a realism is, generating an unproductive ambiguity appreciable in the enormous variety of incompatible realisms we can find among academics.

Therefore, my main conclusion is that the strategy of establishing or coercing a monosemic sense to the word reality is a failed and unproductive path to account for the sense of the real. The clarification of systematic polysemy and the model of its internal significant relations that I present is a more promising way to make explicit the senses in which the word reality is thought without circumscribing it to a specific meaning, making comprehensible the enormous variety of ontological theories around a unitary structure. This minimizes and resolves ambiguities in the use of manifold senses of reality.

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