I propose an account of proper names in terms of a generalized conception of polysemy, which I call rule-based systematic polysemy. The traditional theories of polysemy attempt to account for the multiplicity of stable senses for one linguistic unit, where the sense of a word determines its propositional contribution. Yet the insight that we may glean from the works of Kaplan (1989a,b) concerning the concept of linguistic meaning calls for a generalization of the understanding of the phenomena of polysemous meaning. According to Kaplan, expressions do not necessarily exhibit a meaning that provides content, i.e. propositional contribution, directly, but may instead rely on a rule that for the same word gives (possibly) different contents in different contexts. Combining the ideas of Kaplan with the traditional accounts of polysemy (Apresjan 1973; Pusteyovsky 1995; Pethö 2001), I will propose a two dimensional account of the latter that allows for connecting words not just with sets of stable senses, but also with sets of content generating rules.

Proper names are usually considered as devices of singular reference. Considered as word-types, however, they also exhibit other kinds of uses (Burge 1973, Fara 2015a,b, Jeshion 2015a,b, Elbourne 2005, Leckie 2013). I propose to regard proper names as systematically polysemous words whose linguistic meanings are comprised of the following kinds of uses and the respective mechanisms underlying those uses:

I. INDIVIDUAL uses — based on the rule of direct reference (Recanati 1993); Picasso was incredibly prolific.

II. PREDICATIVE uses — based on the rule of predicative analyses (Fara 2015a, Matushansky 2008); There were three Annas in my class in high school.

III. ANAPHORIC uses — based on the rule of anaphora; If John insists on calling his next son Gerontius, then his wife will be annoyed and Gerontius will get made fun of because of his name.

IV. BOUND uses — based on the rule of bounding; Every woman who has a husband called John and a lover called Gerontius takes only Gerontius to the Rare Names Convention.

V. DEFERRED uses — based on the rule of deferred reference (Nunberg 1993, extended to proper names); She did not enjoy hearing Yeats read aloud.

VI. DESCRIPTIVE uses — based on the rule of descriptive anaphora (Kijania-Placek 2015, 2017); If Mary had been a boy then yes, I do believe England would have remained a Catholic country.

I intend to show that the type of polysemy that is operative in the case of proper names is the rule-based systematic polysemy, in which case we do not expect a set of stable senses determining concrete contents but rather a set of rules that generate contents in contexts. Basing the linguistic meaning of a name on a set of rules will allow for an explanation of both the productivity as well as the systematicity of their uses. Each proper name may thus be used to express a virtually unlimited number of contents but, due to the systematic nature of the underlying mechanisms, the contents are cross-linguistically uniform and predictive. A rules based approach to polysemy thus allows us to account for both its conventional and generative aspects (Recanati, forthcoming).
References: