

Ontological Emptiness as Reflected by the Basque *Huts*: An Ontolinguistics of *Śūnyatā*?

Xabier Renteria-Uriarte

Abstract: Ontological emptiness, as the “active vacuity or emptiness” that acts as the hypostasis of existence, is at the core of relevant world philosophies. The emptiness ontology based on such an assumption, mostly developed in Eastern philosophies and their empiricism, was almost completely lost in Europe, especially after the so-called “scientific revolution.” However, Basque, an old pre-Indo-European language of Western Europe, keeps the term *Huts* or “emptiness” to define “nature, identity, purity” of things and beings, in what seems to be a good example of it. This paper discusses such a possibility. After recalling the ontological emptiness and one of its most precise formulations, the Buddhist *Śūnyatā* and the *Heart Sutra*, it presents the Basque *Huts* as an “emptiness/identity” contronym. A cognitive bridge and an ontolinguistic test are carried out to verify that it is not a casual homonym, but a correlated polysemy and a meaningful contronym. Accordingly, whether *Śūnyatā* and *Huts* are actually commensurable or not is discussed. And finally, *Huts* as an appropriate ontolinguistics of *Śūnyatā* and as an emptiness ontology is concluded.

Keywords: ontological emptiness, *Śūnyatā*, non-identity logic, intra-subjective empiricism

Ontological emptiness, as the “active vacuity or emptiness” that acts as the verifiable hypostasis of the “daily, ordinary, or manifest” world, is at the core of relevant world philosophies, being explored through different approaches almost everywhere, namely, by the Ancient Chinese Lao

172 ONTOLOGICAL EMPTINESS

Tzu,¹ the medieval German Meister Eckhart,² or the contemporary Basque Orixe,³ who lived in very different socio-cultural and historical environments. Almost absolutely lost in the modern Western knowledge after the so-called Scientific Revolution, it maintains force and dynamism in Eastern societies, where it has been consciously systematized and empirically tested using its own parameters over millennia.

The hypothesis of an ontological and “active” emptiness challenges the human rational and logical mind, and a number of formulas have been offered to help address it. Some of them involve “negative” arguments, in the sense that all that can be thought or expressed about it is not this “active vacuity” itself (the best known in the West is the first verse of the *Tao Te Ching*). However, when it comes to approaching it from the viewpoint of the “ordinary” or “phenomenal” world, the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* or *Heart Sutra* puts it in a synthetic linguistic form, i.e., with an aphorism and its framework: “whatever is form, sensation, perception, memory or consciousness is emptiness; and whatever is emptiness is form, sensation, perception, memory or consciousness.”⁴

Consider now the polysemy of the word *Huts* or “empty” in the Basque language:

- (1) *Bihotz hori hutsa da* or “This heart is empty” means that “This heart is empty.”
- (2) *Hori bihotz hutsa da* or “This is empty heart” means that “This is merely a heart, just a heart, only a heart.”
- (3) *Hori bihotz hutsa da* or “This is empty heart” means that “This is pure love, an absolutely good person or being, a pure heart.”

Imagine that you go to a coffee shop and order an “empty coffee,” but they do not bring you an empty cup of coffee, but a “black coffee,” that is, “pure coffee.” That’s what happens daily among speakers of the Basque language, or *euskara*, in the area known as *Euskal Herria* or Basque Country in Europe (in northern Spain and southwestern France, in the Western Pyrenees of Europe). The Basque language is widely accepted as an isolated, or unrelated to any other extant language, and an old pre-Indo-European

¹ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Poetry of Nature*, ed. by Kari Hohne (Carnelian Bay: Way of Tao Books, 2009).

² Meister Eckhart, *El fruto de la nada y otros escritos* (Madrid: Siruela, 1998).

³ Ormaetxea Nicolás Orixe, *Barne-muinetan* (Zarautz: Itxaropena, 1934).

⁴ For a critical edition, see Edward Conze, *The Prajnaparamita Literature* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2000). For modern explanations, see Gueshe Kelsang Gyatso, *The New Heart of Wisdom: Profound Teachings from Buddha’s Heart* (Ulverston: Tharpa, 2012).

language.⁵ It is still spoken by around 600,000 out of a total of nearly three million people living in the area.

Cases (1) to (3) are some of the meanings of the Basque word *Huts* or “empty.” Emptiness, the concept that *Huts* names, is used to refer to “nature, identity, purity” of things; in other words, emptiness defines existence in this language. The nature of beings and reality are defined as “empty” or “void” in an apparently absolute nonsense. Is it another example of causality of the numerous polysemies of languages, or might it be a philosophically meaningful lexical form? A serious answer requires a cross-disciplinary effort whose main pillar stands on comparative and interdisciplinary philosophy.

In fact, defining the identity and purity of something as its literal nothingness is not the only contradiction of *Huts*. Depending on the context, *Huts* has a very contradictory polysemy, as with the meanings of “void” or “empty/full” or “pure,” “nothing/all,” “total absence/total presence,” “lack/absoluteness,” etc. Existence or being cannot be based on its nothingness or emptiness, so the term and its linguistic forms seem to imply an oxymoron due to some linguistic coincidence. However, *Huts* seems to naturally reflect the hypothesis of ontological emptiness, without any conflict, and through a short linguistic form (a contronym with its grammatical contexts), as in the *Heart Sutra* (an aphorism with its framework).

This essay is devoted to testing and discussing both implications. The tenet of Emptiness as the nature of existence and the specific formulation of *Śūnyatā* are recalled (section 1). The Basque *Huts* is presented as an “Emptiness/Identity” contronym, argued as a well-founded polysemy with a cognitive bridge, and supported as an “ontolinguistic operator” that reflects an emptiness ontology (section 2). Could *Huts* be understood as a reflection of *Śūnyatā* and as its linguistic expression, as is the case with the *Heart Sutra*? Previous approaches are outlined, and new focused arguments are developed (section 3). In the conclusions, I affirm *Huts* as an appropriate ontolinguistics of *Śūnyatā* and as an emptiness ontology and point to some interdisciplinary implications.

Ontological Emptiness and *Śūnyatā*

Emptiness as the Nature of Existence

Ontological emptiness names here the “active vacuity or emptiness” that acts as the hypostasis of existence, according to relevant philosophies in the world and their intra-subjective empiricism. And *emptiness ontology* would be

⁵ Joseba Intxausti, *Euskera, la lengua de los vascos* (Donostia: Elkar, 1992), 231.

this assumption that the “daily or ordinary” world, with all of its existences and processes, is a manifestation of such “active or ontological emptiness.” In such ontology, reality or existence is a nonconceptual mystery that can be known only by direct experience or “realization.” This implies that it cannot be understood or known by the conceptual mind (in fact, mind conceptualization works by establishing differences between distinct types of existences). This “whatever is” is approached or referred to with different terms in Asian philosophy, such as *Nirguṇa Brahman*, *Nirvāṇa*, *Tao*, *Śūnyatā*, *Saguṇa Brahman*, *the Mother*, *Satcitānanda*, *Dharmakāya*, *One Taste*, *Pure Consciousness*, and so on, and also in Western translations with words like *Emptiness*, *Vacuity*, *Voidness* or *Nothingness*.

The wide range of terms referring to this hypostasis is outstanding, and one can get into endless dissertations on whether they indicate analogous or corresponding concepts. In fact, they indicate nuances in the approaches to this “whatever is,” or to a certain side of it, but their primary core or reference is always the same: an “active vacuity” of all existence. For example, Gautama Buddha used to resist requests to explain this essence of reality and used to call it *Nibbāna* or “when the last flame of desire goes extinct,” but he once tried to describe it as follows in *Paṭhamanibbānasuttaṃ*:

[It is] where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air; no base consisting of the infinity of space, no base consisting of the infinity of consciousness, no base consisting of nothingness, no base consisting of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor another world nor both; neither sun nor moon. Here ... there is no coming, no going, no staying, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not movable, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering.⁶

Some Eastern philosophical schools focus on this principle. For example, Nagarjuna, the founder of the *Mādhyamaka* school and considered to be the great fourteenth Zen patriarch, focused on *Śūnyatā* as the absolute inexistence of a being of any substance.⁷ Other schools focus more on pragmatic techniques to realize *Śūnyatā* and not on discussions about it, because, as it is widely known even in the West, “the *Tao* that can be

⁶ Gautama Buddha, *The Udāna: Inspired Utterances of the Buddha* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1990).

⁷ See Tirupattur Ramaseshayer Venkatachala Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Madhyamika System* (London: Routledge, 2013). See also Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti, “Śūnyatāsaptati the Seventy Kārikās on Voidness (according to the Svavtti) of Nāgārjuna,” in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 15:1 (1987).

expressed is not the enduring and unchanging *Tao*.⁸ In any case, although Asian philosophies propose a number of techniques, gathered as *Dhyāna* or *Jhāna* or “meditation,” by which this “supreme voidness” as “the self-character of all the manifest elements ... in absence of any living being and intention ... should be made bright,”⁹ in the final stage:

True Dhamma [in this case, true learning], no matter what part, topic, level or kind, must be one with emptiness, completely void of its self. Therefore, we must look for emptiness in all things, or as we call them, for short, dhammas ... [T]here is nothing apart from our empty nature.¹⁰

Alongside traditional Eastern studies,¹¹ and as often understood in comparative exercises,¹² Western philosophical approaches to Emptiness are continuously increasing.¹³ Implications for cross-cultural psychology,¹⁴ worldly life,¹⁵ and psychoclinical perspectives¹⁶ are also rising progressively.

In any case, the “ultimate nature,” seen as *Emptiness*, *Vacuity*, or *Voidness*, can be assessed as the underlying background and ultimate reference of different Asian philosophies, since all approaches share “the

⁸ We choose for this universal thought summit a mixture of two English translations: Lao Tzu, *Tao Te King: A tentative translation from the Chinese*, trans. by Isabella Mears (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1922) and Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, ed. by James Legge (Mineola: Ixia, 2020).

⁹ Words of the Pali author Nagasena in N. A. Sastri, “Sunyata and Its Significance in Buddhism,” in *Bulletin of Tibetology*, 2:12 (1975).

¹⁰ Ajahn Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree: The Buddha’s Teaching on Voidness* (New York: Wisdom Publications, 1994).

¹¹ Like, in Tibetan tradition, Khedrup Gelek Pelzang, “The Great Seal of Voidness: The Root Text for the Ge-lug Ka-gyu Tradition of Mahamudra (by 1st Panchen Lama),” in *Tibet Journal*, 38:2 (1976).

¹² See James W. Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire: An East-West Philosophical Antiphony* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013).

¹³ See Donald S. Lopez, *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1998) and Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967).

¹⁴ See Robert Walker Gunn, “The Experience of Emptiness in the Process of Self-Transformation in Zen Buddhism, Christianity and Depth Psychology as Represented by Dogen Kigen, Thomas Merton and Carl Jung, with Donald Winnicott and Heinz Kohut,” in *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 58:5 (1997). Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000).

¹⁵ Roshi Otani Tetsuo and Ingrid Shugetsu Appels, “Why Dogen Now?” in *Another State of Mind: Perspectives from Wisdom Traditions on Management and Business*, ed. by Robert J. Blomme and Bertine van Hoof (New York: Springer, 2014).

¹⁶ Mark Epstein, “Forms of Emptiness: Psychodynamic, Meditative and Clinical Perspectives,” in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 21:1 (1989).

insight that, in order to explain both the great mysteries and mundane facts about our experience, ideas of nothingness must play a primary role.”¹⁷ In short, this mystery or “whatever is” refers to a “deepest dimension of” or “uniquely true and certain” reality from which every being and mind “come into existence” or “merge” hypostatically. Being probably the most widely used term in modern Western writings, hereinafter it will be referred mainly with the English term of *Emptiness*. However, for Asian terms, and considering the focus here, another term is vital: *Śūnyatā*.

Śūnyatā and Its Ontological Side

The Buddha preferred to approach and explain the realization of the ultimate nature in “negative” terms, mainly *anattā* in Pāli and *anātman* in Sanskrit or no-self. For instance, in the *Suñña Sutta* or *Empty Sutra*, his attendant Ānanda asked him “[i]n what respect is it said that the world is empty?” and he replied, “[i]nsofar as it is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self.”¹⁸ This option is materialized in Western mysticism as well, as “apophatic or negative theology,”¹⁹ but it is a common place in Asian philosophies, as when Bhāviveka describes reality with “[i]ts character is neither existent, nor nonexistent; nor both existent and nonexistent, nor neither ... [T]rue reality ... is free from these four possibilities.”²⁰

Alongside the focus of Siddhārtha Gautama on *anattā* the concept of *Śūnyatā* in Sanskrit and *suññatā* in Pāli or “emptiness” was related, in early Buddhism, to this concept.²¹ However, as early as in the sources of the Pali Canon, like in the *Maha-suññata Sutta*,²² *Śūnyatā* was more widely understood as “a meditative dwelling,” as “an attribute of objects,” and as “a type of awareness-release.”²³ In the case of *Śūnyatā* as “attribute of objects,” a widely-assumed formulation is the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* or *Heart Sutra*:

¹⁷ JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger, *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), xi.

¹⁸ “Suñña Sutta: Empty (SN 35.85),” trans. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, in *Access to Insight*, last revised 30 November 2013, <<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.085.than.html>>.

¹⁹ E.g., Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

²⁰ Karl Brunnhölzl, *Center of the Sunlit Sky: Madhyamaka in the Kagyu Tradition* (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2004), 84.

²¹ See Sue Hamilton, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²² “Maha-suññata Sutta: The Greater Discourse on Emptiness (MN 122),” trans. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, in *Access to Insight*, last revised 30 November 2013, November 2013, <<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.122.than.html>>.

²³ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Translator’s Introduction to Maha-suññata Sutta: The Great Discourse on Emptiness,” in *Access to Insight*, last revised 30 November 2013, <<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.122.than.html>>.

[F]orm is emptiness, emptiness is form; emptiness is not separate from form, form is not separate from emptiness; whatever is form is emptiness, whatever is emptiness is form. The same holds for sensation and perception, memory and consciousness.²⁴

The importance given here to this *sūtra* is due to its focus of attention. Unlike the “negative” approaches that try to motivate knowledge by explaining the ultimate nature through pointing to what is not, and unlike the awareness and meditation approaches that try to motivate the practice by explaining the path to realization through pointing to its main key, the meaning of *Śūnyatā* as “attribute of objects” puts the focus on attention in (external) realities themselves, to ascertain their (inner and common) nature. This sutra acts in fact as an “ontological operator,” that is, as a brief conceptual and linguistic structure by which the world is interpreted.

The Basque *Huts*

Huts as an “Emptiness/Identity” Contronym

Huts is a term in the Basque language largely attested since the first historical writings of this language.²⁵ It means “zero” when it acts as a number and “nothingness” or “emptiness” when it acts as substantive (case (1) described earlier). However, it also means “pure,” “absolute,” “full of” when it acts as an adjective (cases (2) and (3)). Consequently, *Huts* is an absolute contradiction meaning “emptiness” or “nothingness” (1) and “fullness” or “completeness” (2). However, the contradictory nuance increases with (3), where it implicitly acts as the implementation, embodiment, or concretization of the concept of “identity,” “existence,” “being,” and “essence” of the object referred. In this sense, *Huts* implies a direct and forthright ontology about the things of existence and, generally speaking, about the “Existence.”

In the Basque language, or Euskara—or in modern Euskara at least—the main or prototypical meaning seems to be that of “empty,” or “nothing in or inside this thing” (1). *Zakua hutsa dago*, for example, means “the bag is empty.” However, when an existence, in the sense of its essence, purity, or wholeness, has to be referred to, it uses this concept of “empty/nothing” as in (2) and (3). In (2) and (3), *Zaku hutsa da* means “it is just a bag, nothing but a bag, absolutely a bag and nothing else” or “a bag in itself, a bag in its own

²⁴ Pine Red, trans., *The Heart Sutra: The Womb of Buddhas* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2004).

²⁵ OEI, *Orotariko Euskal Hiztegia* (Bilbo: Euskaltzaindia, 2015).

nature." More examples are *txirotasun hutsa* or "empty misery" as "total misery"; *egia hutsa* or "the empty true" as "the absolute true"; and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is, in Basque, *Arrazoimen hutsaren Kritika* or "Critique of Empty Reason."

Overall, the concept of *Huts* or "Emptiness" indicates *Izatea* or the "nature," "being," "identity," or "essence" of the Universe and life, including their objects, beings, and phenomena. In short, *zerbait bere hutsean* is literally "something in its emptiness," but semantically, "in itself" or "in its nature or essence."

The philosophical implication might be that *Huts*, by such meanings, reflects the same emptiness ontology as *Śūnyatā*, and/or shows it in the same way, that is, through short linguistic forms. "Reflection" would mean then that *Huts* and *Śūnyatā* share a similar or analogous view of ontological emptiness. And the "short linguistic forms" would be an aphorism and its framework in the case of *Śūnyatā* and the *Heart Sutra*, and a significant contronym in the case of *Huts*.

Problem: Huts Might Be a Casual Homonym

A *polysemy* is "a single linguistic expression having multiple related senses,"²⁶ and a *homonym* is when the senses or meanings are not related, as they were a causality or by chance. The extreme case of polysemies or homonyms are *enantiosemy*, *contronyms*, or *auto-antonyms*, when "inherently oppositional meanings"²⁷ occur "designat[ing] both an idea and the idea's antithesis."²⁸ The Basque *Huts* or "empty" implies, as (1)–(3) show, a clear enantiosemy or contronym, and the question is that it may be a philosophically meaningful polysemy or merely a homonym without any significance.

First of all, when must a lexical form be understood as a homonym or as a polysemy? A number of responses have been given,²⁹ but the first key is always some "cognitive bridge." Many polysemies and contronyms, perhaps most of them, may be cognitively explained through some object or action of existence that relates the meanings. For instance, the Italian word *feria* has the meaning "holiday, day off," as well as the meaning "workdays"

²⁶ Robyn Carston, "Polysemy: Pragmatics and Sense Conventions," in *Mind & Language*, 36:1 (2021), 108.

²⁷ N. I. Murodova and J. Sh. Djumabaeva, "Conceptual Enantiosemy," in *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 2:7 (2019), 75.

²⁸ Luke Howie, *Witnesses to Terror: Understanding the Meanings and Consequences of Terrorism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 159.

²⁹ Salvador Valera, "Polysemy versus Homonymy," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, ed. by Mark Aronoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

in informal speech. In this case, *feria* is a serious workday for a number of sellers, but a joyful day off for a number of buyers and curious people. The *feria* itself is the bridge. And the Basque *lumatu* means “to pluck” and “to steal,” in a convincing polysemy that refers to the action of taking something out; this is the cognitive bridge.

However, some cognitive bridge seems to be impossible in the case of *Huts*, since the primary reference is the “spatial emptiness” or “inexistence” itself. The discussion begins, consequently, with the elucidation of such possibility. Although cognitive bridges seem to be impossible in the case of a contronym whose primary reference is “spatial emptiness” or “inexistence,” they are present in a spatial sense: in the case of the Basque *Huts*, the term *betea* and its cognitive approach by the concept of volume operate as such.

Basque *bete* or “full, to fill”³⁰ may be understood in this sense without too much difficulty, since in English some polysemy relates meanings with the same logic, like in “full time.” For example, Basque *udaberri bete* or *negu bete* are “full spring” or “full winter,” as in English. Another close case is *kargua bete* or “to fill a position,” which means “to hold a position.” In this image, *kargua hutsik dago* or “the position is void” means that some position (e.g., in a company) is not occupied (it is *betea* or “full” when it is occupied). Accordingly, *betea* or “full” is the synonym of *osoa* or “total,” “full,” “complete,” “whole,” “perfect” and means analogously “perfection,” “abundance,” “fullness.” In sum, facing *Huts* or emptiness, the mental image of *zerbait bete* or “to fill something” is the metaphor of “take form into perceivable existence,” and *betea izan* or “to be full” is the visualization of existence versus the *Huts* as “voidness.”

Huts as an Ontolinguistic Operator of an Emptiness Ontology

Beyond cognitive bridges, *ontolinguistics* studies “ontological structure[s] reflected in ... linguistic regularities,” accompanied by a “network of cross-connected conceptualizations that the mind uses in coping with the world.”³¹ In this sense, an *ontolinguistic operator* is proposed here as a lexical form and a grammatical structure that reflects some worldview through its semantic range, semantic fields, and sociolinguistic reflections. If it is so, it would be considered an ontological and linguistic notion that reflects or proposes, in an extensive and balanced way, a certain special dimension of existence. Let us check whether *Huts* would fit the requirements.

³⁰ OEH, *Orotariko Euskal Hiztegia* (Bilbo: Euskaltzaindia, 2015).

³¹ Andrea C. Schalley and Dietmar Zaefferer, *Ontolinguistics: How Ontological Status Shapes the Linguistic Coding of Concepts* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).

First, *Huts* has a very wide semantic range. Second, the extension of the semantic field (or the lexical set of equivalent words grouped semantically or by meaning that refers to a specific subject). *Huts* has an extensive one with *Soil* or “mere,” “simple,” “pure” and *Xahu* or “cleansed,” “pure.” They are, as *Huts*, used to indicate “totality,” “unity,” “purity,” but under the same dialectic of “nothing,” “only” / “total,” “pure.” Thirdly, a network of related metaphors points out a number of sociocultural reflections of the importance of the notion of *Huts*. Basque language and culture have, among others, *Beltz*, *Ilun*, *Circle*, and *Mari* (as sociocultural mirrors), *Harrespil* and *Hilarri* (as physical materializations), and a “*lack of a concept of Identity*” (as philosophical reflection). They provide a consistent framework to exclude again the random factor in the origin of the linguistic occurrence of *Huts*. Altogether, *Huts* and its linguistic and sociocultural peers support a well-defined ontological view in which “vacuum nourishes nature and existence.”

Might *Sūnyatā* Be the Ontology of *Huts*?

Emptiness-style and Asian-style Reflections of Huts

When different authors like Barañano,³² in a study on Oteiza, are able to define *Huts* as “empty activity, active quiescence,” workshops with Asian knowledge seem inevitable; for example, with the well-known concept of *wu-wei*.³³ And perhaps it is not merely a matter of mere philosophical speculation. Compare, for example, the following responses. Once Oteiza was asked why, in his sculptures of Arantzazu Basilica, he had left the place between the Virgin and the Apostles so empty, without anything else. He answered that he did not leave it “without anything else,” but “with nothing.”³⁴ On the other side of the world, a Tantrika guru was asked what a void container had within, that is, “if the inside of [an empty] jar was empty or full.” She responded that “it was full of emptiness.”³⁵ From an emptiness onto-epistemology, they are not some casual coincidences, but a type of response that is characteristic of people who explore existence through an ontological feeling of Emptiness.

Unfortunately, even after acknowledgements of the positive meaning of “purity” of *Huts* (as Goenaga) and of the importance of some concrecences of Basque ontology with Eastern philosophies, referring additionally to *Huts*

³² Kosme Maria Barañano, “El concepto de espacio en la filosofía y la plástica del siglo XX,” in *Kobie*, 1 (1983), 159.

³³ See David Loy, “Wei-Wu-Wei: Nondual Action,” in *Philosophy East & West*, 35:1 (1985).

³⁴ EITB, “Jorge Oteizari buruz Bertsoaio batean kontatua,” in *Hitzetik hortzera*, 2-4 (2010)

³⁵ Daniel Odier, *Tantric Quest: An Encounter with Absolute Love* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1997).

(in the line of discussion of Oteiza, Ortiz-Osés, and Zulaika), and even “feelings of the void” in an Eastern sense (like in this analogy between Oteiza and a Tantrika), the ontolinguistic performance of *Huts* (as “void in nature”) here outlined has continued to be absent in the debate. No one has detailed and itemized the “empty/nature” contradiction of *Huts* as the core of a particular ontology. The Asian-style core of Basque ontology has not been brought to the fore so far.

This lack can be attributed to foci of interest that are distant, at least without the necessary closeness, from these nuances of philosophy and its Eastern formulations. Hartsuaga is theoretically interested in mythology and etymology and did not develop this core of interest even in a contribution to the subject.³⁶ Goenaga had shown interest earlier in onomasiology and intuited the philosophical wideness of *Huts*,³⁷ but he did not develop it perhaps because of his Christian creationist conceptual framework as a Jesuit. Oteiza,³⁸ Ortiz-Osés,³⁹ and Zulaika⁴⁰ acknowledged the importance and some philosophical implications of the concept, and the last two have extensive scholarly backgrounds but did not identify this implication as a key source of ontology, perhaps due to their theoretical profiles.

In this latter group, some comments are so close to the *Huts-Śūnyatā* commitment that absence of the final direct reference seems difficult to understand. On the one hand, it seems that they knew that Asian philosophy talks about Emptiness, but not how it hypostatically puts Emptiness, in the first instance, as the unavoidable genesis and ultimate goal of knowledge. Perhaps they developed their insights from introductions or handbooks, and not from focused readings like the *Udanna* or the *Heart Sutra* mentioned above; or they did not practice the Eastern “inner-mind empiria” with this focus on warning about the depth of the matter.⁴¹ One symptom is that their ontological sources include, for example and above all, Heidegger, and even Goethe’s *Faust*; but not any canonical Emptiness or Asian philosophical source. On the other hand, on that of Basque language, perhaps they accustomed themselves to working mainly with dictionaries, or grammar at

³⁶ Juan Inazio Hartsuaga, “Ontologia euskal mitologian,” in *Auñamendi eusko entziklopedia*, ed by. Bernardo Estornes Lasa Funtsa (Donostia: Eusko Ikaskuntza, 2011).

³⁷ In the last comments of Angel Goenaga, *Uts: La negatividad vasca* (Durango: Leopoldo Zugaza, 1975).

³⁸ Jorge Oteiza, *Quousque tandem! Ensayo de interpretación estética del alma vasca, su origen en el cromlech neolítico y su restablecimiento por el arte contemporáneo*, Vol. 2 (Donostia: Auñamendi, 1963).

³⁹ Andrés Ortiz-Osés, *Los mitos vascos: Aproximación hermenéutica* (Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto, 2007).

⁴⁰ Joseba Zulaika, *Tratado estético-ritual vasco* (San Sebastián: Baroja, 1987).

⁴¹ See Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso, *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness* (Zhyisil Chokyi Ghatsal Publications, 2001).

most, but not from the “feelings” and the *Weltanschauung* of the Basque language, or what Mokoroa named the “genius” of a language.⁴² Additionally, in the case of Ortiz-Osés, the issue was addressed through a hermeneutics based on mythology, and the work was not done by applying a systematic structure of onto-epistemic questions, as it is here, which could condition the lack. In fact, in the debate between Goenaga and Oteiza,⁴³ Goenaga actually seems like Schopenhauer, that is, someone who can foresee the depth of an issue, but whose negative view prevents him from seeing more.

Additionally, and more generally, “[m]etaphors of endangered languages,” as the Basque language, may unveil “conceptualisations that are deeply entrenched in the language” and that may be “overshadowed by a globalised and ethnocentric viewpoint.”⁴⁴ The lack of concern about *Huts* as semantic and grammatical performance of the “emptiness/existence ontology” may be in relation to this because, outside of Asian philosophical parameters, the idea that something is “merely this thing and at the same time not this thing” seems absurd, an absolute nonsense; and these kinds of unsurmountable oppositions tend to be shelved in a modern Western worldview. For instance, for Ortiz-Osés, *Huts* or “void” would primarily be (“before” any manifestation) “that void,” that is, beyond any phenomenal form; but Ortiz-Osés says on his own theory that “our understanding [is] the ‘void’ as the ‘otherness’ (grave, death, demonic-feminine mystery) of life.”⁴⁵

More recently, Segurola has explicitly stated the existence of concomitances between the Basque worldview and Eastern philosophies, and what is more interesting, with a specific focus on ontology.⁴⁶ His aim is to disentangle the ontological worldview that Basque language shows, and he finds that both Basque and Eastern worldviews share the same background. However, unfortunately, he ends like a number of Western authors who match Asian ontological principles with any subject (like in the extreme cases of “the *tao* of sales,” “the *tao* of coaching,” or “the *tao* of corporate finances”) without specifying the necessary chain of reasoning, often because they accept or consider which is an empirical proposal, to be tested and contrasted, just in a conceptual level, without practicing and deeply understanding it. In this case, Segurola matches Eastern ontology with the Basque pair

⁴² See Justo María Mokoroa, *Genio y lengua* (Tolosa: Mocoeroa Hermanos, 1936).

⁴³ See Miguel Pelay Orozco, *Oteiza: Su vida, su obra, su pensamiento, su palabra* (Bilbao: La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1978).

⁴⁴ Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano, “The Importance of Unveiling Conceptual Metaphors in a Minority Language,” in *Endangered Metaphors*, 2 (2012), 253.

⁴⁵ Andrés Ortiz-Osés, “Mitología de nuestra cultura (hermenéutica vasca),” in *Los cuadernos del norte*, 2:5 (1981).

⁴⁶ See Iñaki Segurola, *Sed quia sua* (Donostia: Erein, 2020).

Dena/ezDena or “which is and which is not” forgetting that, whatever is “which is not,” is always considered not absolutely independent but as a hypostasis of “which is.” And he matches the principle of *Yin-Yang* with this *Dena-ezDena*, when this Taoist principle concerns the core of the performance of the phenomenal processes, and not their relationship with the hypostasis.⁴⁷

Finally, a speaker of the Basque language might say that the parallelism between *Huts* and *Śūnyatā* is excessive, because *Huts* is not usually used in a general ontological and philosophical sense, but rather in reference to particular existences. However, it is precisely so in Eastern languages, as when Bhikkhu Analayo comments on the Pāli canon that “the adjective *suñña* occurs much more frequently than the corresponding noun *suññatā*” and “emphasizes seeing phenomena as ‘being empty’ instead of an abstract idea of ‘emptiness.’”⁴⁸

Are Śūnyatā and Huts Actually Commensurable?

After bringing important notions of Eastern philosophies to Western countries, various Asian scholars began to notice the importance of understanding concepts correctly, and perhaps the most vulnerable is the concept called here as *ontological emptiness*. Earlier Western authors, as for example Schopenhauer,⁴⁹ tend to interpret intra-subjective philosophies in negative terms: “Christian missionaries criticized [Buddhism] for its ‘pessimism’ while [Schopenhauer] saw this as its strength, realistically assessing the presence of suffering in the world,”⁵⁰ but he assumed that Buddha taught “the negation of the will to live,” and “nothing is further from the correct understanding of Buddhism than this negativism.”⁵¹

Buddhist scholars, *inter alia*, remark that the ontological emptiness is not some “spatial emptiness,” but an “active vacuity” that acts as hypostasis, as stated above. *Śūnyatā* and the *Heart Sutra* are one the most accurate formulations and a good example, because they do mean that things are “actively empty” but not non-existent, just that they do not have a stable, inherent nature or essence. In this approach, ontological emptiness is not supposed to be understood as negation and should be understood as a state

⁴⁷ Which is in fact the case with other Eastern principles, like the Shakti-Shiva of the aghori in India; see for example Vimalananda in Robert Svoboda, *Aghora: At the Left Hand of God* (Las Vegas: Brotherhood of Life, Inc., 2007), Ch. 1–3.

⁴⁸ Bhikkhu Analayo, *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pali Discourses* (Onalaska, WA: Pariyatti Publishing, 2012), 272.

⁴⁹ See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Falcon’s Wing Press, 1958).

⁵⁰ Peter Harvey, “Buddhist Reflections on ‘Consumer’ and ‘Consumerism,’” in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 20 (2013) 302, 334.

⁵¹ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011), 172.

of being beyond opposites (which, by the way, entails the core of intra-subjective empiricism, that is, crossing dualities and intra-subjectively embracing the “active emptiness”). And the same goes for related tenets like *anatta* (in Buddhism), the *four great sayings* of the Upanishads (in Hinduism), or for *reality* itself, as described by Bhāviveka above.

When a practitioner repeatedly delves into the ordinary mind and transcends its conceptuality, and experiences the existence from within, understands that “inexistence” of the everyday world is not that “it does not exist” or “it is nothing.” It is not “(spatially) empty”; this term refers only to the form manifested by our ordinary mind (“things,” “self,” and “the world” as real non-empty forms). Things are “no-things,” the self is a “no-self,” and world is “no-world,” but they are not “nothingness” as understood by the ordinary mind; they are “active vacuity manifestations.”

In this sense, when the concept of “emptiness” appears as a simple negation, it should be understood just as one of the viewpoints from which the nature of things can be approached. “Emptiness is the nature of things” appears as a contradictory statement or experience for the ordinary mind, so all kinds of viewpoints are welcome to make it approachable and understandable by such a level of mind. This is the reason why both the theoretical and the empirical proposals must be understood as a multidimensional approach. Neither of them is totally valid in itself, as they show the *catuṣkoṭi* logics of the Madhyamaka school or the *anekāntavāda* conditions of the Jain doctrine; they imply a “teamwork.” The interest of the *Heart Sutra* is that it synthesizes the core of it all in words, that is, such experience of the “active vacuity”; but it should not be read from its “negative” side with some concept of “spatial or conceptual negative emptiness.”

What then is the *Huts* case? As tested above, *Huts* reflects an emptiness ontology, since it is not a casual homonym. Would it be in an “apophatic or negative” way without referring to the “positive” viewpoints? “Not at all,” a Basque speaker would reply, because *Huts* is “empty” and “full” and “the nature of something” to the same extent. Indeed, *Huts* encapsulates the *Heart Sutra*’s axiom that whatever is form, sensation, perception, memory or consciousness is emptiness; and whatever is emptiness is form, sensation, perception, memory or consciousness in an absolute contranym that means that the nature of something is to be empty and full of its nature at the same time. Consequently, the original question of this essay can be answered in the affirmative. Is the ontological emptiness reflected in the Basque *Huts*? Indeed, the polysemy of *Huts*, supported by a cognitive bridge, linguistic networks, and a sociocultural matrix, strongly suggests an emptiness ontology and even a precise ontolinguistics of the ontological emptiness in its formulation of *Śūnyatā*.

Conclusion

The Basque term *Huts*, with its absolutely contradictory meanings, is in all likelihood to be assigned to the basket of whims or curiosities of the language without further importance, as a casual homonym and contronym. It seems to radically breach the basic Aristotelian laws of logic without any cognitive bridge, and the possibility to have reflections or analogies in other areas of the Basque culture is almost completely denied. With its performance to define the innermost nature of things as emptiness or nothingness, in the context of more logical languages of Western Europe that do not have contradictory terms in this topic, any ontological performance of *Huts* is on cards to be considered no more than an anomaly and forgotten, like it has been so far. Conversely, *Huts* is argued here as a logical tenet, with an operative cognitive bridge, that works as a wide and deep ontolinguistic operator and, as a consequence, assessed as a (very) significant contronym. And the best condition to reach such assessment is to understand its apparent contradiction from the ontological core of the Emptiness philosophies.

Tested cognitively and ontolinguistically, the Basque *Huts* appears as an excellent ontolinguistic operator of the notion of “active Emptiness is the nature of all beings,” in a definitely special semantic and grammatical case in Western Europe and unparalleled nearby. That way, it implies a reflection of the philosophy of *Śūnyatā* and its ontology concerning phenomenal world, and it describes it just as the *Heart Sutra* does. Overall, the grammatical reflection of *Huts* and its network materialize an answer to an everlasting question of World ontology through a correspondence between a philosophical and empirical issue, language expressions, and social reflections.

If correct, this proposal of the Basque *Huts* points to a faithful sociolinguistic and philosophic reflection of the emptiness ontology and its Asian formulations, which may be meaningful both as the systematization of the Basque *Weltanschauung*, where it acts as the “primal hollow or *womb* [to] the *ten thousand beings* that Taoists tell us,”⁵² and as a direct conceptual reflection and proposal of the empiricism towards the hypostatic nature of existence by Emptiness philosophies. Finally, the methodology proposed here would be useful to understand philosophic, linguistic, and social reflections of Emptiness philosophies in Western societies, and to sound common backgrounds in world philosophies and languages.

⁵² Jon Baltza, *Un escorpión en su madriguera (indoeuropeo y euskara: mito e identidad)* [A scorpion in its burrow (Indo-European and Euskara: myth and identity)] (Alegia: Hiria Liburuak, 2000), 202. Italics from the original.

References

- Analayo, Bhikkhu, *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pali Discourses* (Onalaska, WA: Pariyatti Publishing, 2012).
- Baltza, Jon, *Un escorpión en su madriguera (indoeuropeo y euskara: mito e identidad)* [A scorpion in its burrow (Indo-European and Euskara: myth and identity)]. Alegia: Hiria Liburuak, 2000.
- Barañano, Kosme Maria, "El concepto de espacio en la filosofía y la plástica del siglo XX," in *Kobie*, 1 (1983).
- Brunnhölzl, Karl, *Center of the Sunlit Sky: Madhyamaka in the Kagyu Tradition* (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2004).
- Buddha, Gautama, *The Udāna: Inspired Utterances of the Buddha* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1990).
- Buddhadasa, Ajahn Bhikkhu, *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree: The Buddha's Teaching on Voidness* (New York: Wisdom Publications, 1994).
- Carabine, Deirdre, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015).
- Carston, Robyn, "Polysemy: Pragmatics and Sense Conventions," in *Mind & Language*, 36:1 (2021).
- Conze, Edward, *The Prajnaparamita Literature* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2000).
- Eckhart, Meister, *El fruto de la nada y otros escritos* (Madrid: Siruela, 1998).
- EITB, "Jorge Oteizari Buruz Bertsoaio Batean Kontatu," in *Hitzetik Hortzera*, 2-4 ed. (2010).
- Epstein, Mark, "Forms of Emptiness: Psychodynamic, Meditative and Clinical Perspectives," in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 21:1 (1989).
- Goenaga, Angel, *Uts: La negatividad vasca* (Durango: Leopoldo Zugaza, 1975).
- Gunn, Robert Walker, "The Experience of Emptiness in the Process of Self-Transformation in Zen Buddhism, Christianity and Depth Psychology as Represented by Dogen Kigen, Thomas Merton and Carl Jung, with Donald Winnicott and Heinz Kohut," in *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 58:5 (1997).
- Gyamtso, Khenpo Tsültrim, *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness* (Zhyisil Chokyi Ghatsal Publications, 2001).
- Hamilton, Sue, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- Hartsuaga, Juan Inazio, "Ontologia euskal mitologian," in *Auñamendi eusko entziklopedia*, ed. by Bernardo Estornes Lasa Funtza (Donostia: Eusko Ikaskuntza, 2011).

- Harvey, Peter, "Buddhist Reflections on 'Consumer' and 'Consumerism,'" in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 20 (2013).
- Heisig, James W., *Nothingness and Desire: An East-West Philosophical Antiphony* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013).
- Howie, Luke, *Witnesses to Terror: Understanding the Meanings and Consequences of Terrorism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- Ibarretxe-Antuñano, Iraide, "The Importance of Unveiling Conceptual Metaphors in a Minority Language," in *Endangered Metaphors*, 2 (2012).
- Intxausti, Joseba, *Euskera, la lengua de los vascos* (Donostia: Elkar, 1992).
- Kelsang Gyatso, Gueshe, *The New Heart of Wisdom: Profound Teachings from Buddha's Heart* (Ulverston: Tharpa, 2012).
- Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. by James Legge (Mineola: Ixia, 2020).
- _____, *Tao Te King: A Tentative Translation from the Chinese*, ed. by Isabella Mears (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1922).
- _____, *Tao Te Ching: The Poetry of Nature*, ed. by Kari Hohne (Carnelian Bay: Way of Tao Books, 2009).
- Liu, JeeLoo and Douglas L. Berger, eds., *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*. New York and London: Routledge, 2014.
- Lopez, Donald S., *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1998).
- Loy, David, "Wei-Wu-Wei: Nondual Action," in *Philosophy East & West*, 35:1 (1985).
- "Maha-Suññata Sutta: The Greater Discourse on Emptiness (MN 122)," trans. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, in *Access to Insight*, last revised 30 November 2013, <<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.122.than.html>>.
- Mokoroa, Justo María, *Genio y lengua* (Tolosa: Moco-roa Hermanos, 1936).
- Murodova, N. I. and J. Sh. Djumabaeva, "Conceptual Enantiosemey," in *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 2:7 (2019).
- Murti, Tirupattur Ramaseshayyer Venkatachala, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Madhyamika System* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- Odier, Daniel, *Tantric Quest: An Encounter with Absolute Love* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1997).
- Orotariko Euskal Hiztegia* (Bilbo: Euskaltzaindia, 2015).
- Orixe, Ormaetxea Nicolás, *Barne-Muinetan* (Zarautz: Itxaropena, 1934).
- Ortiz-Osés, Andrés, "Mitología de nuestra cultura (hermenéutica vasca)," in *Los cuadernos del norte*, 2:5 (1981).
- _____, *Los mitos vascos: Aproximación hermenéutica* (Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto, 2007b).

- Otani Tetsuo, Roshi and Ingrid Shugetsu Appels, "Why Dogen Now?" in *Another State of Mind: Perspectives from Wisdom Traditions on Management and Business*, ed. by Robert J. Blomme and Bertine van Hoof (New York: Springer, 2014).
- Oteiza, Jorge, *Quousque tandem! Ensayo de interpretación estética del alma vasca, su origen en el cromlech neolítico y su restablecimiento por el arte contemporáneo*, Vol. 2 (Donostia: Auñamendi, 1963).
- Pelay Orozco, Miguel, *Oteiza: Su vida, su obra, su pensamiento, su palabra* (Bilbao: La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1978).
- Pelzang, Khedrup Gelek, "The Great Seal of Voidness: The Root Text for the Ge-Lug Ka-Gyu Tradition of Mahamudra (by 1st Panchen Lama)," in *Tibet Journal*, 38:2 (1976).
- Pine, Red, trans., *The Heart Sutra: The Womb of Buddhas* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2004).
- Sastri, N. A., "Sunyata and Its Significance in Buddhism," in *Bulletin of Tibetology*, 2:12 (1975).
- Schalley, Andrea C. and Dietmar Zaefferer, *Ontolinguistics: How Ontological Status Shapes the Linguistic Coding of Concepts* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Falcon's Wing Press, 1958). Originally published in 1818.
- Seguro, Iñaki, *Sed quia sua* (Donostia: Erein, 2020).
- Streng, Frederick J., *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967).
- "Suñña Sutta: Empty (SN 35.85)," trans. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, in *Access to Insight*, last revised 30 November 2013, <<https://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.085.than.html>>.
- Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011).
- Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Translator's Introduction to Maha-Suññata Sutta: The Great Discourse on Emptiness," in *Access to Insight*, last revised 30 November 2013, <<https://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.122.than.html>>.
- Tola, Fernando and Carmen Dragonetti, "Śūnyatāsaptati the Seventy Kārikās on Voidness (according to the Svav Tti) of Nāgārjuna," in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 15:1 (1987).
- Valera, Salvador, "Polysemy versus Homonymy," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, ed. by Mark Aronoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

- Svoboda, Robert, *Aghora: At the Left Hand of God* (Las Vegas: Brotherhood of Life, Inc., 1986, 2007). References to the 2007 edition.
- Wilber, Ken, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995).
- Zulaika, Joseba, *Tratado estético-ritual vasco* (San Sebastián: Baroja, 1987).