

1 Introduction

est autem in usu vulgo quoque et inter ineruditos et apud rusticos, videlicet quia natura est omnibus augendi res vel minuendi cupiditas insita nec quisquam vero contentus est: sed ignoscitur, quia non adfirmamus.

[Hyperbole is commonly used even by ignorant people and peasants, which is understandable, as all people are by nature inclined to magnify or to minimise things and nobody is content to stick to what is really the case. We tolerate this habit, because we are not really asserting facts. – my translation, CC]

(Quintilian VIII, 6, 75)

Hyperbole as a term has a long tradition; in the sense of ‘exaggeration’ it was already used in classical Greece. Roman rhetoricians, such as Quintilian, deal with the figure of overstatement in their handbooks and from there it has found its way into the European rhetorical tradition. It is found used in diverse sources; the *Encyclopædia Britannica* mentions love poetry, sagas, tall tales, classical mythology, political rhetoric and advertising as texts containing hyperbole, illustrating the great range of the phenomenon regarding both time and genre. Furthermore, hyperbole is not only an arcane rhetorical figure, but rather, similar to metaphor, it is a common feature of everyday language use (Leech 1983: 146f.). Just like metaphor, it may be wired in the cognitive structuring of our experience: the concept of size, to which exaggeration must primarily be connected, is a very basic and salient one. Like metaphor or in conjunction with it, hyperbole thus deals not simply with the ‘description’ of experience, but with the understanding and, especially, the evaluation of it, i.e., the subjective importance to oneself, and it thus has an important affective component. Remarks can already be found in Quintilian (VIII, 6, 75) that it was a common urge of humans to magnify things and not to be satisfied with (the description of) things as they really are (cf. the quote at the beginning of this chapter). Thus, the presence of fairly common, but largely unobtrusive instances of hyperbole in everyday language should not really come as a surprise. In simple sentences like *they’re never at home* it is a universal feature (transcending individual language communities and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76635-7 - Hyperbole in English: A Corpus-based Study of Exaggeration

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languages) and probably stays well below the threshold of stylistic consciousness. It is often only the (perceived) overuse or the novelty of an instance of hyperbole that strikes us as extraordinary.

The present study seeks first of all to trace this assumed 'commonness' of hyperbole in everyday spontaneous spoken language. How much exaggeration is actually used by people in conversation? What forms do the hyperbolic expressions employed take? And for what purposes and functions are they used? Are, perhaps, different groups of people marked by their distinctive use of hyperbole? Less spontaneous and more formal types of language will also be investigated, and there the rhetorical tradition of hyperbole will play a role. The persuasive or even manipulative aspect of hyperbole may come to the fore in public speeches and debates. Newspapers might make use of its potential for 'sensationalisation'. Literature and television might exploit hyperbolic means for their emotional appeal or for their comic possibilities. While the former two aspects highlight a potentially negative use and consequent disapproval of hyperbole, the latter two show the light or positive side of it. If hyperbole is indeed a common feature, as hypothesised above, then the historical dimension is also of interest, e.g., the questions of how long frequent hyperbolic expressions can maintain their exaggeration potential or how they contribute to semantic change.

The questions just raised make it evident that this can only be an empirical study, making use of a wide range of authentic data. Existing corpora of various regional and functional varieties of English are an obvious source of data. However, the phenomenon of hyperbole is not one that lends itself easily to a classical corpus linguistic approach as automatic searching requires a list of search terms. With this approach one tends only to find what one already knows or suspects to be the case anyway. Nevertheless, various corpora will be used, in part or whole, namely the *British National Corpus* (BNC), especially though not exclusively its spoken component, the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (SBC), as well as various diachronic corpora for the historical aspect, e.g., the *Helsinki Corpus* (HC), the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC), the *Corpus of English Dialogues* (CED) and the *Corpus of Nineteenth-century English* (CONCE). The approach taken is a mix of manual and automatic sampling: the first instalment of the SBC and a 314,725 word-subcorpus of the BNC spoken part (demographic section) have been read through to find *all* occurring instances of hyperbole, while some items identified in this way were then subjected to more comprehensive corpus searches. Where appropriate and viable, frequency investigations have been carried out, but on the whole the emphasis will be on the qualitative analysis of the data. In addition to corpora, the following sources were used to enable a more comprehensive treatment of hyperbole (cf. complete list in the appendices): a collection of British newspapers (print versions), speeches hosted on the Labour and Tory party websites, various novels, the works of Monty Python and TV series such

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as *Ally McBeal* and *Coupling*. This was supplemented by accidentally overheard examples from real conversations and from TV/radio programmes, including the odd German one.

The book is structured in the following way: Chapter 2 ‘The characteristics of hyperbole’ provides a definition of hyperbole on which the data collection is based. The connection to intensification and emphasis will be discussed as well as semantic aspects touching on hyperbole, such as the semantics–encyclopedia interface, vagueness, emotive meaning and the role of polysemy. Chapter 3 presents an inventory of possible formal realisations of hyperbolic expressions and discusses special cases such as repetitions and superlatives. Chapter 4 deals with hyperbole in everyday language. It concentrates on the functions of hyperbole, in particular its role for the speaker’s emotional expression and self-presentation, and also on the sociolinguistic implications of hyperbole usage. Chapter 5 focuses on the hearer and on the interactive process by treating the comprehension of hyperbole, hearer reactions and matters of politeness. The historical aspect will be followed up in Chapter 6, which starts with a general discussion of conventionalisation in language and then proceeds to the discussion of subjectification in semantic change based on selected case studies of historical development. In Chapter 7 the rhetorical tradition of hyperbole will be taken up briefly, followed by a more detailed discussion of the role of overstatement in persuasive, humorous and literary discourse.

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2 The characteristics of hyperbole

2.1 A preliminary definition

Let me start outlining some typical elements of hyperbole by way of an example. The following dialogue is taken from a broadcast exchange between the Beatle George Harrison and BBC journalist Alan Freeman in 1964, marked by a deadpan delivery:

- (1) **Alan:** George, is it true that you are a connoisseur of the classics?
George: No, it's just a rumour.
Alan: It's just a rumour. Do you enjoy singing 'Beethoven'?
George: No. I've been singing it for **28 years** now, you know.
Alan: For how long?
George: **28 years.**
Alan: That's **incredible**. Could you manage one more performance?
George: Possibly.
Alan: Oh, go on, say yes.
George: Yes.¹

George's claim to have been performing the song *Roll Over, Beethoven* for 28 years is an exaggerated statement in so far as the time span expressed is much longer than can be factually true and than can consequently be *literally* meant by him. In order to establish this, however, one needs some background knowledge, most crucially that George himself is no more than 21 years old at the time of speaking, or that the song itself originates only in the mid 1950s – both making the twenty-eight years factually impossible. Alan Freeman was, of course, aware of both these points, so the hyperbole should have been easy to identify for him; the same goes for the audience of the radio show. Had George made the same statement thirty years later, the interlocutor would, of course, need to know whether he kept on performing

¹ BBC Radio 'From us to you', 28 February 1964, to be heard on the CD *The Beatles Live at the BBC*, EMI/Apple Records, 1994.

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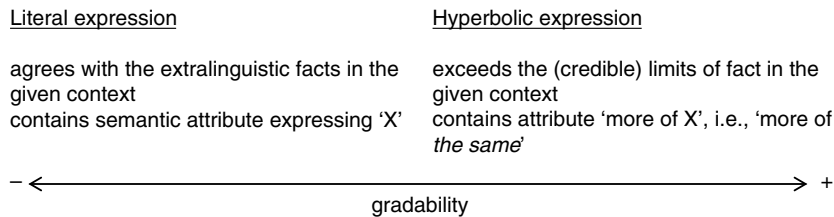


Figure 2.1: Preliminary definition of hyperbole

the song after the mid sixties – probably a less widely spread kind of knowledge. At any rate, the establishment of exaggeration is, as a rule, context- and knowledge-bound.² On this basis, I suggest the basic definition of hyperbole in Figure 2.1, which contrasts a possible literal, or unmarked, form with a corresponding hyperbolic expression in an identical context.

In (1) the corresponding literal expressions might have been, e.g., *four years*, i.e., ‘literal’ is here a shorthand for the expression that agrees as closely as possible with the state of affairs and that is, thus, factually appropriate. The literal and the hyperbolic expression have to be situated or at least viewed as being situated on the same degree scale, in the present example the numerical and/or temporal scales. The definition is basically about meaning in and out of context, the latter hinted at by the word ‘literal’, and thus places the phenomenon of hyperbole at the semantics–pragmatics interface.

The definition refers to the formal realisations of hyperbole by using the term ‘expression’. In example (1), the overstatement is basically contained in a single word, *twenty-eight*, but there is in fact a wide range of instantiations, ranging from words via phrases of varying length and type to complete sentences. It is also not impossible that a whole text (of whatever extent) or even a larger discourse represents an instance of hyperbole (cf. Sections 3.2 and 3.7 for examples). ‘Expression’ is meant to cover all of these cases. As to the type or realisation of hyperbole, there are, of course, various possibilities. The numerical hyperbole found in (1) as such seems a rather conventional form of exaggeration, but the choice of *twenty-eight* instead of a round figure, e.g., *thirty* or, more blatantly, *a hundred*, makes it less expected, as well as less clearly transparent as hyperbole, and it adds an unconventional, creative touch.

Another interesting aspect is the question about the function(s) of hyperbolic expressions. Alan Freeman, I think, plays along with George Harrison’s hyperbole: his question *for how long?* is not intended to cast doubt on or to criticise the latter’s expression but to give it greater prominence; also, his comment *incredible*, a word that in itself is often used hyperbolically (what

² Counterfactuality/impossibility and disjunction with context are also found among McCarthy and Carter’s (2004: 162f.) list of identification criteria for hyperbole.

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actually is truly impossible for humans to believe?) plays with the vacillation between a literal comment on the preceding hyperbole and a playful confirmation of it. In fact, the two of them are engaging in some kind of language play with a clearly humorous touch (they are aware of the audience, of course). George Harrison's comment, however, may also have a more serious aspect to it: he uses the exaggeration to emphasise his dissatisfaction with having to perform one and the same song too often, implying that he is fed up with it. This could be a real or a mock complaint; in any case, it transports evaluative, emotional meaning. Thus, hyperbole can have various attitudinal functions which might overlap in actual usage, like joking and complaining in this case.

The discussion of example (1) has highlighted some of the points that are of importance in discussing hyperbole and that will be taken up at various points in this study, namely

- the distinction between what is literally said (> linguistic) and what is actually the case (> extra-linguistic), creating the exaggeration on the basis of the gap between the 'meanings' of the two;
- the perception of a degree relationship between different representations of the same state of affairs;
- the role of contextual knowledge, which is necessary for identifying a potential case of hyperbole;
- the question of literal versus non-literal, figurative meaning;
- the discourse functions hyperbole can be used to fulfil, i.e., the intentions of an exaggerating speaker and their success or failure (in the light of the interlocutor's reactions);
- the forms of hyperbole and their conventional or unconventional, i.e., creative, nature.

It is the aspects concerning semantic and pragmatic meaning, context and gradability that are immediately relevant to the definition of hyperbole and that will be taken up in the following sections of this chapter. At the end of the chapter I will return to the definition above and present a revised form of it.

Before I proceed, I should pay attention to a terminological point, namely the presence of the three terms *hyperbole*, *exaggeration* and *overstatement*. *Hyperbole* is the traditional term taken originally from classical rhetoric and thus is associated with formal and persuasive speech, later with stylistics and literature. It is the term listed in dictionaries of rhetorical and literary terminology, while *overstatement* and even more so *exaggeration* are everyday terms with no clear affiliation to any domain or use.³ The former is also the oldest in this sense attested in the English language (*OED* 1989: 1529),

³ For some speakers, these two might have different connotations, e.g., of greater or lesser objectivity or emotionality.

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while *exaggeration* (OED 1989: 1565) and especially *overstatement* (OED 1989: 1803, verb 1792) are used only later in the relevant meaning. Gibbs (1994) distinguishes between *hyperbole* as intentional exaggeration and *overstatement* as non-intentional and subconscious (disregarding exaggeration itself as a denomination). While this makes sense given the origins of the two, especially of hyperbole as a means of persuasive discourse, the distinction in individual instances of use – and thus distinctive labelling – would be very difficult, as there is no clear-cut dividing line between intentionality and non-intentionality but a rather shady transition area. Norrick (2004) also distinguishes between hyperbole, overstatement and extreme case formulation, with hyperbole tending towards metaphoric and imagistic expressions. Extreme case formulations (ECFs), taken from Pomerantz (1986), include extreme expressions such as *every*, *best*, *always*, *brand new*, etc., but are otherwise linguistically unremarkable and constitute for him a separate type of exaggeration or, rather, a ‘sub-category of hyperbole’ (1986: 1728). One of his examples for the distinction is the following, describing an emotionally cold person: hyperbole *iceberg of a woman* – ECF *absolutely unfeeling* – overstatement *extremely cold* (1986: 1731). As will become clear in this chapter, his example for overstatement would not be accepted here.

I will take *hyperbole* as the primary *terminus technicus* for the phenomenon under consideration, partly because it is well established and partly because I consider every instance of hyperbole, at least in its ultimate origin, as an intentional linguistic act. I will, however, use *overstatement* and *exaggeration* as loose, non-technical synonyms, especially also for the verbal uses. ECF as a separate category and as a term will not be applied in this study; ECFs are simply seen as one of the many realisations of hyperbole.

2.2 Gradability and intensification

Let us start with what I have termed gradability in Figure 2.1, as the notion of degree is basic to hyperbole.⁴ There are basically three types of scale which may all play a role in the realisation of hyperbole: (i) semantic scales, so-called ‘Horn-scales’ (Horn 1989), (ii) pragmatic scales (Fauconnier 1975, Hirschberg 1991) and (iii) argumentative scales (Ducrot 1973, Anscombe and Ducrot 1983). Semantic scales are entailment scales, such as <all, most, many, some>, <freezing, cold, cool> and <adore, love, like>, where members unilaterally entail the members to their right in the list, and the use of rightward (weaker) members produces a quantity-based implicature as to the non-applicability of the members to the left (cf. Horn 1989: 231f., Levinson 2000: 79, 86f.). If hyperbole is based on such a scale, it depends to a large extent on a linguistic contrast, namely on contrasts within the lexicon.

⁴ The Greek word can be glossed ‘excess’ and is literally a combination of *ὑπέρ* ‘over’ and *βάλλειν* ‘throw’.

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different degrees, e.g., saying it is freezing is a more convincing argument for putting on a winter coat, scarf and gloves than saying it is cold or cool. The greater effect is partly due to the fact that hyperboles catch the addressee's attention more effectively. As argumentation usually involves knowledge of facts and relationships in the world, argumentative scales are also of a pragmatic type (cf. Horn 1989: 241f.). The following example works with a mix of pragmatic and argumentative scaling, but adds a nice twist by changing the underlying argument in mid-sequence from strength of sneeze to cleverness of using the right medicine.

- (4) TV advertisement for a nose spray. Three boys out playing:

A: [sneezes]

B: Wenn mein Papa Schnupfen hat und niest, wackelt der Tisch!
(When my dad has a cold and sneezes, the table shakes!)

A: Wenn mein Papa Schnupfen hat und sich die Nase putzt, wackelt das ganze Haus!
(When my dad has a cold and blows his nose, the whole house shakes!)

C: Wenn mein Papa Schnupfen hat, dann hat er Nasivin.
(When my dad has a cold, he uses Nasivin)

As the examples and explanations so far show, hyperbole is part of the larger phenomenon of intensification. Bolinger (1972: 20, 115) calls intensification 'the linguistic expression of exaggeration and depreciation' and lists hyperbole among the rhetorical figures used to realise it. Intensification can be more precisely defined as placement of a predication on a scale of intensity, or degree of realisation of the predication, reaching from extremely/very low to very/extremely high (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985: 589; Peters 1993: 1–8). One might assume that hyperbolic intensification is especially found at the extreme ends of the scale (cf. also Pomerantz's (1986) extreme case formulations); according to Schemann (1994) it is only hyperbole involving extremes in some way, if only by identifying a limit as a point of reference, that is definable in a non-intuitive way and therefore linguistically interesting. *Jungle* in (3) above can be said to represent such an extreme, but it is actually hard to say where *twenty-eight years* in (1) is situated on the scale – or even on what scale? The general numerical scale is open-ended, which would put twenty-eight towards the lower end (disregarding negative figures), but if one takes a person's lifespan as the relevant scale, twenty-eight lies in the first half and if one takes the 'age' of the song (at most, eight or nine years), it exceeds the scale; in neither case does it represent an extreme point but the last case at least implies it as a reference point by exceeding the extreme.

Hyperboles involving extremes are the most obvious ones to recognise (often without or with only minimal context) and perhaps the most frequent, but hyperbole could in principle use any part of the scale in order to express

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something bigger, more, etc., than is the case, as long as the contrast between the stated point and the actual point is significant, i.e., large enough.⁵ A small contrast would mean either that the hyperbole is not registered at all or that the force is so weakened as to be uninteresting for the hearer. It is impossible to fix a general lower limit for hyperbole, but if George Harrison in (1) had used ‘ten years’, the effect might have fallen flat. On the other hand, the contrast should perhaps not be too great either (cf. Quintilian (VIII, 6, 73) on the dangers of overdoing it), but the hearer should still be able to see the connection easily – Hübler (1983: 22) calls this the reconcilability of the contrast. Reconcilability means that there are commonsensical links between elements of the factual situation and its exaggerated depiction; for example, a very forceful sneeze can ‘move’ small objects, which establishes an inferable link to the shaking table in example (4) above.⁶ There is no clear boundary or cut-off point between exceeding the truth somewhat (without truly exaggerated force?) and real hyperbole, but a transitional area where the amount of contextual knowledge and personal preferences will play a role for the hyperbolic or non-hyperbolic interpretation. Some potential hyperboles involve impossibilities, either because the whole statement is inherently absurd/illogical (e.g., *make sb’s blood boil*, *be all ears*) or because norms and expectations are violated (cf. Schemann’s (1994: 499) *und wenn wir dann im nächsten Monat nach China radeln*, ‘and when we cycle to China next month’). The question is whether they fit into the system as described so far. In both cases the hyperboles exceed the scale, i.e., top the extreme even further, and they can thus be seen as exaggerating. The remaining question is then whether in a given context it is possible to see a link to the extreme, and between what is said and the literal state of affairs (reconcilability). I would argue that speakers as a rule do choose their absurd expressions to fit the context, i.e., they use ‘[well-]calculated absurdities’, to borrow the title of a book on metaphor.⁷ They are calculated to fit, and be recognisable as fitting, the context in question.⁸

Hyperbolic intensification can lie within the word or the whole proposition itself denoting an intensifiable, scalable concept (cf. *twenty-eight* (years), *jungle*, *disaster*), or in an accompanying modifier (e.g., *frightened to death*, *gigantic love bite*), e.g., an intensifier (degree adverb). Quirk *et al.* (1985: 589ff.) subdivide intensifiers into amplifiers (maximisers, boosters) and downtoners (approximators, compromisers, diminishers,

⁵ Hübler (1983: 21) makes the same point for understatements, talking about a ‘significant qualitative contrast’ between what is said and what is actually meant.

⁶ One might perhaps imagine such links as being similar to the mappings between the two input spaces in blending theory, which are established via the more abstract generic space. In most ‘straightforward’ instances of hyperbole, reconcilability is not much of an issue, but it is important for metaphorical hyperboles, as we will see below.

⁷ Christian Strub (1991), *Kalkulierte Absurditäten*, Freiburg/München: Karl Alber.

⁸ I will postpone the discussion of the pragmatics of hyperbole, e.g., how it is to be seen in the context of conversational maxims, to Chapter 5.