
This Book Will Change Your Life!
Hyperbole in Spoken English

LAURA CANO MORA

UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA
2011



ENGLISH IN THE WORLD SERIES

GENERAL EDITOR

Antonia Sánchez Macarro
Universitat de València, Spain

ADVISORY EDITORIAL BOARD

Professor Enrique Bernárdez
Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Professor Anne Burns
Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Professor Angela Downing
Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Dr Martin Hewings
University of Birmingham, Great Britain

Professor Ken Hyland
City University of Hong Kong, China

Professor James Lantolf
Penn State University, Pennsylvania, USA

Professor Michael McCarthy
University of Nottingham, Great Britain

Professor M.Teresa Turell
Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

Professor Eija Ventola
University of Helsinki, Finland

© The authors © 2011 by the Universitat de València

*Design and typeset: Celso Hdez. de la Figuera
Cover design by Pere Fuster (Borràs i Talens Assessors SL)*

ISBN: 978-84-370-8175-5

D. L.: V-4272-2011

Printed at:
Guada Impressors, S.L.



CONTENTS

Preface	
<i>Michael McCarthy</i>	11
Acknowledgements	13
1. Introduction	15
2. Figurative language: an overview	19
2.1. Figurative vs. literal language	19
2.2. Rhetoric and the study of figures	20
2.2.1. Rhetorical functions: persuasion vs. ornamentation	22
2.2.1.1. Argumentative use of figures	23
2.2.1.2. Ornamental or aesthetic use of figures	23
2.3. Modern figurative language comprehension theories ..	24
2.3.1. Cognitive psychology and the notion of contrast ..	26
2.3.2. Why do we use figurative language?	27
2.4. Some limitations in previous studies	29
3. Getting started with hyperbole: What is it? How to identify it? How many types can be distinguished?	31
3.1. Traditional and modern definitions of hyperbole	31
3.2. A working definition of hyperbole	32
3.3. Problems in the identification of hyperbole	38
3.3.1. Framework for labelling hyperbole	40
3.4. Types of hyperbole	43
3.4.1. Two dimensions: quantitative vs. evaluative hyperbole	44
3.4.2. Semantic-etymological classification of hyperbole ..	46
3.4.3. Antithetical poles in the expression of hyperbole: auxesis vs. meiosis	49
3.4.4. Linguistic repertoire: lexical vs. grammatical hyperbole	52
3.4.5. Simple vs. compound hyperbole	57
4. The landscape of hyperbole throughout history	63
4.1. Hyperbole in rhetoric	63
4.1.1. Argumentative or persuasive hyperbole	64

❁

4.1.2. Ornamental or aesthetic hyperbole	66
4.2. More contemporary studies on hyperbole	67
4.2.1. Linguistic studies: grammatical, lexical and semantic approaches to hyperbole	68
4.2.2. Cross-cultural studies	74
4.2.3. Cross-gender studies	76
4.2.4. Pragmatic studies	77
4.2.4.1. Language philosophy	78
4.2.4.2. Politeness theory	82
4.2.5. Psycholinguistic studies	83
4.2.5.1. Studies on the comprehension of hyperbole ..	85
4.2.5.2. Studies on the discourse goals of hyperbole ..	89
4.2.6. Hyperbole as an ironic cue	92
4.2.7. Hyperbole as a humorous strategy	94
4.2.8. Hyperbole in the tradition of the tall tale	95
4.2.9. McCarthy and Carter's (2004) study	97
5. Paraphrase: the link between hyperbole and literal language	99
5.1. Introduction	99
5.2. Relationship between literal and hyperbolic speech ...	99
5.3. Concluding remarks	103
6. The goals of hyperbole: Why do we exaggerate?	105
6.1. Introduction	105
6.2. Functional analysis of hyperbole	106
6.3. Identification of hyperbolic discourse goals	106
6.4. Definition and exemplification of hyperbolic functions ..	110
6.4.1. Emphasis	110
6.4.2. Evaluation	111
6.4.3. Expression of surprise	112
6.4.4. Simplification	114
6.4.5. Interest intensification	116
6.4.6. Contrast of differences	118
6.4.7. Humour	120
6.4.8. Clarification	122
6.4.9. Polite de-emphasis	124
6.5. Concluding remarks	125
7. How do we react to exaggeration? Hyperbole as an interactive figure	129
7.1. Introduction	129



7.2. Why have figures been solely studied as speakers' acts of creativity?	129
7.3. Dialogic or joint activity view of discourse	130
7.4. Interactive nature of hyperbole and other figures of speech	132
7.5. Analysis of listeners' responses to hyperbole	137
7.6. A taxonomy of listener responses to hyperbole	140
7.6.1. Positive evidence responses	142
7.6.2. Negative evidence responses	152
7.7. Concluding remarks	162
8. Are women really more hyperbole prone?	165
8.1. Introduction	165
8.2. Cross-gender studies	165
8.3. Who uses hyperbole the most: men or women?	167
8.4. Children's use of hyperbole	170
8.5. Concluding remarks	171
9. When do we exaggerate? Hyperbole and speech genres	173
9.1. Introduction	173
9.2. The notion of genre	174
9.2.1. Speech genres	175
9.3. Classification of texts: domain vs. genre	176
9.4. Speech genre analysis in the BNC	178
9.4.1. Speech genre description	179
9.4.1.1. Service encounters	179
9.4.1.2. Decision-making genre	181
9.4.1.3. Learning encounters	182
9.4.1.4. Debate and argument genre	185
9.4.1.5. Language-in-action genre	189
9.4.1.6. Comment-elaboration genre	191
9.5. Which genre is more hyperbole prone?	192
9.6. Analysis of specific genre variables	194
9.6.1. Transactional vs. interactional dimension	195
9.6.2. Goal orientation	198
9.6.3. Participant framework: power and relationships ..	200
9.7. Concluding remarks	202
10. Text forms and hyperbole. Exaggeration in storytelling, sports commentaries, advertising and politics	205
10.1. Introduction	205
10.2. Textual typologies	205

❁

10.3. Mode analysis for hyperbolic utterances	208
10.4. Hyperbolic modes	208
10.4.1. Procedural mode	209
10.4.2. Evaluative response mode	210
10.4.3. Narrative mode	212
10.4.3.1. The use of exaggeration in the art of storytelling	213
10.4.3.2. The use of hyperbole in sporting events ...	217
10.4.4. Descriptive mode	219
10.4.5. Expository-argumentative mode	220
10.4.5.1. The use of hyperbole in advertising	229
10.4.5.2. The use of hyperbole in political discourse ..	231
10.5. Concluding remarks	233
11. Conclusion	235
Bibliography	239



PREFACE

In the last twenty years or so, two branches of linguistics have shown what might be termed complementary growth: corpus linguistics and pragmatics. In the case of corpus linguistics, its evolution has taken it out of the realm of lexicography, where it bore its first major applied fruits, and literary stylistics, where early concordances of literary texts revealed patterns of style difficult to detect through intuition or traditional critical methods. From these beginnings, corpus linguistics moved firmly into the field of grammar, providing empirical evidence of usage for major reference grammars and, latterly, into the field of pragmatics. Pragmatics itself, meanwhile, where exemplification had previously rested on the not entirely reliable base of intuition and invented examples, was discovering the empirical potential of corpus linguistics. The two disciplines have linked harmoniously in a number of publications in recent years and now do so, with redoubled force, in this book.

One of the challenges facing any pragmatic study (in the sense of investigations of speaker meaning and intention) that bases itself on corpus evidence, is, how does one use computational power to get at areas of language use that are essentially context-bound and not strictly formal or rule-bound? Computers, powerful though they may be, simply count forms and can tell us how many times statistical phenomena occur, as manifested in frequency lists, collocation statistics, key-word and cluster lists, concordances, and so on. Beyond that, the computer knows nothing. Everyday features of human language such as irony, humour, exaggeration, understatement, lies, innuendos, even banal speech acts such as offers and promises, are, in our present state of science, beyond the purview of the best corpus software. What the corpus linguist has to do, therefore, is to ground a framework of analysis in a rigorously informed theory and to test reasonable hypotheses, and to support or refute, with statistical evidence, the pointers offered by non-corpus-based studies, in disciplines such as pragmatics and rhetoric.



It is thus a major achievement when a scholar manages to marry the preoccupations of rhetoric, pragmatics and the quest for meaning in context with the analytical and statistical power of the computer. In this book, Laura Cano Mora does just that. Its chapters take us from a theoretical consideration of figurative use into the rhetorical functions of hyperbole, classifying its broad typology in terms of quantitative and evaluative uses, setting it within contextual constraints such as politeness, humour, emotional reaction and other circumscriptions that keep the feet of the study firmly on the ground and anchored to the familiar. Any reader accepting the challenge of this book will be given the constant reassurance of the inner voice that says, 'Yes, that's exactly how it is!' as they read.

So apparently banal is the act of exaggeration in everyday language that it occupies those liminal zones that are the territory of things such as function-words, pragmatic markers and other features that language users are barely conscious of utilising. In everyday talk, people 'literally starve to death' (even though they seem to live to tell the tale), they can have 'millions of cousins', they may find themselves 'ready to throttle' an adversary, they may claim to have been to London 'thousands of times' and so forth. Rarely do listeners challenge or fail to understand the intent of such utterances; they are simply part of the normal weft of everyday communication.

This book takes us on a pleasant and enjoyable journey through the complex world of the ordinary, shining a light on something we all do, and which is probably a language universal, albeit the present work is a study informed by English corpus evidence. Where it leaves us is a place to which I and my co-author and colleague, Ronald Carter, also arrived in our (2004) study of hyperbole: one of those areas of creative language use where individual genius is revealed in the most banal of communicative circumstances, where users collaborate and creatively co-construct and re-construct the everyday, ordinary world to make extraordinary meanings. Great literature is also creative, also a manifestation of genius, but it is only a special case of the ordinary ability of ordinary human beings who manipulate the ordinary language of the daily round. The plain people create colourful meanings. That is the joy that is on offer in this excellent study of hyperbole.

MICHAEL MCCARTHY
*Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics,
School of English Studies
University of Nottingham, UK*



AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my deepest gratitude to my mentor, Dr. Antonia Sánchez, who introduced me to the field of pragmatics and figurative language. It was her who encouraged me to write this book. I am also grateful to Dr. Michael McCarthy for his guidance and advice in the early stages of my research.

Several friends and colleagues read various drafts of the manuscript contributing useful comments and suggestions to make it more readable. Among them I owe special thanks to Raquel Pérez, James P. Dunne, Laura Enjuto, Kayson R. W. Gilbert, Miriam Fórneas, Lidia González and Mercedes Martos. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Juan José Nebreda for helping me to calculate the statistical data in chapter eight and nine. I should also acknowledge Cristina Cano's help in the identification of hyperbolic utterances in the data examined.

My greatest thanks, however, must go to my husband and my parents, whose patience and understanding have allowed me to finish this book. I am indebted to them for their constant support and encouragement.

All data cited herein have been extracted from the British National Corpus, distributed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the BNC Consortium. All rights in the texts cited are reserved.

Introduction

An element of exaggeration clings to the popular judgment: great vices are made greater, great virtues greater also; interesting incidents are made more interesting, softer legends more soft.

W. Bagehot

Over the last thirty years there has been a renewed interest in the theories of figurative language. This attention has primarily concentrated on the reception process of figures of speech. The focus was on explaining how figures are understood given their non-literal nature. Within this framework, tropes such as metaphor and verbal irony have received the greatest amount of attention, while other non-literal forms have been largely ignored as a result of this intensive research effort on the so-called master tropes. Among them hyperbole stands out as a figure of extremity and disproportion whose study has been largely overlooked despite its ubiquity in conversation. This figure, I will refer to with the terms hyperbole, exaggeration or overstatement, is the object of study of the present book.

Since the bulk of studies has almost invariably concentrated on the reception process, in terms of how people understand and assimilate figures of speech, it is not surprising that nowadays a crucial limitation in figurative language theories is the production process of non-literal language. Thus, Turner (1998: 83) correctly argues, «the study of figure, one of the oldest bodies of knowledge in the human sciences, remains in our age still in its infancy».

Given the intensive research on the master tropes, it is not surprising that very little is known about hyperbole or exaggeration. When examined, it has often been in relation to metaphor and irony, or



even equated to them. Moreover, not all aspects of figuration have attracted equal interest among researchers. Although hyperboles have been studied by language philosophers, cognitive psychologists, linguists, rhetoricians and other scholars, most of this interest has been directed at explaining how they are comprehended, given their non-literal nature, rather than addressing their use.

This book provides a general framework for the description, understanding and use of hyperbole in interaction. All in all, it offers a portrait of exaggeration in speech. The focus is on the production process of exaggeration as a way to redress at least partly this lacuna in figurative language theories. But, because any full account of hyperbole must refer to its interactive dimension, the reception process, in terms of listeners' reactions to hyperbole, will not be disregarded. Rather than studying hyperbole in literature and written discourse, as has traditionally been done for more than two millennia, everyday speech is examined. Thus, this figure is detached from the purely aesthetic or ornamental value to acquire more pragmatic or daily uses and so it becomes clear throughout the book that hyperbole is not restricted to literary works but an everyday language practice.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. Chapter 2 is a brief overview on figurative language in order to establish a general framework in which to study hyperbole. In chapter 3 a somewhat different definition of exaggeration is provided since traditional definitions do not clearly distinguish between this and other figurative language forms. Besides, this chapter tackles the problem of identification of hyperbole in context and the different types of exaggeration that we can come across. Chapter 4 offers a summary of the study of hyperbole in different research traditions from rhetoric to psycholinguistics. Chapter 5 focuses on the relationship between literal and non-literal language in the form of hyperbole. Chapter 6 analyses the different communicative goals that this figure may fulfil in discourse. Chapter 7 focuses on the reception process in terms of the listeners' responses to hyperbole and examines its collaborative nature as a trope jointly created between speaker and hearer. Chapter 8 proves that, against what has traditionally been believed, women are not more hyperbole-prone than men. Once the question of gender has been considered, chapter 9 analyses the close relation between hyperbole and genres. Also in this line, chapter 10 focuses on text forms and links the results with the presence of hyperbole in certain speech situations such as storytelling, advertis-



ing, sports commentaries and political speeches. Finally, a conclusive chapter is offered pointing to further lines of investigation as well as possible limitations in the present study.

As for the theoretical framework, this study combines pragmatic and conversational-analytical methods with a corpus-based approach to the study of hyperbole. Exaggeration is a purely pragmatic phenomenon since it is entirely dependent on context. On the other hand, since hyperboles are not one-off but complex lexico-grammatical items, they need to be examined within the constraints of placement, sequencing and turn-taking of conversational analysis. Finally, a major benefit of corpus-based research, only recently applied to the study of figures, is that it grounds its theorising on empirical observation rather than linguistic intuition. Besides, the use of corpora grants certain benefits, such as the use of naturalistic data, automatic access to context, evidence of interactivity and hyperbolic cues, wide coverage of genres, etc.

Unlike previous research, whole conversations are examined so special attention is devoted to the interactive dimension of exaggeration and the fact that hyperboles are not one-off strategies but complex lexico-grammatical items. To date, figures of speech have been largely regarded as acts by the speaker alone, thus overlooking listeners' responses to figures and their collaboration in a joint construction of non-literal frames. This can be explained by the long-standing adoption of communication paradigms, such as the intentional view of discourse, which exclude the crucial role of listeners and readers in both the creation and interpretation of meaning as well as the fact that the object of study has traditionally been the figurative sentence, either in isolation or in the context of artificially constructed texts.

In order to examine and illustrate hyperbole, a corpus of naturally-occurring conversations, chosen at random from the British National Corpus (BNC henceforth), was examined. This corpus was created by a consortium led by Oxford University Press together with major dictionary publishers Longman and Chambers, and research centres at the Universities of Lancaster and Oxford, and at the British Library. The BNC can be defined as a collection of samples of contemporary British English, both spoken and written, stored in electronic form, although for the present study only transcribed spoken material is used. The focus is on speech, rather than writing, since an adequate characterisation of figures can only



be attained by examining their basic site: conversational exchanges, and not a great amount of empirical work exists into spoken hyperbole. Only recently has the study of figurative language been switched to the domain of everyday speech. The bulk of research has been conducted in written language or relies on artificial and elicited data.

The corpus analysed includes a list of 18 conversations selected at random, which together add up to around 52,000 words. The texts examined belong to the five domains in which the BNC spoken subcorpus is organised, namely: educational (Newcastle University lecture on word processing, Birmingham College of Food lecture, seminar presentation and science lesson), business (Nottingham constabulary meeting, medical consultation, estate agency interview and Body Shop presentation), institutional (House of Commons debate), leisure (television talkshow on drugs and Harlow history interview) and informal (conversations recorded by Angela, Ann, Anthony, Sandra, Craig, Frances and Grace). Although the size of text varies considerably—informal conversations may be only a few minutes long, while the parliamentary debate lasts for hours—I tried to collect roughly equal quantities of words for every domain. When the corpus provides no information about participants, in terms of name, sex or age, speakers are referred to as PS000. I would like to emphasise two main characteristics of the data examined: firstly, the authenticity or naturalness of the spoken material analysed and secondly, the wide variety of contexts of use and interaction environments examined. Although this is a corpus-based study, the method of data sampling is non-deterministic. The object of study is not a particular hyperbolic word or expression, nor a specific word class or grammatical category. Rather, all instances of exaggeration included in the BNC texts selected for analysis were examined.

Although the focus is on exaggeration, the different approaches from which hyperbole is analysed can be applicable to other, sometimes equally ignored, figures of speech so other figurative language researchers might also find the book interesting and useful. Some readers might be disappointed in finding that hyperbole is not analysed from a cognitive perspective but this is due to the exhaustive existing literature on the subject.