

Hyperbole and Idioms

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Outline

- Hyperbole vs. Extreme Case Formulations
- Hyperbole vs. Overstatement
- Idiomatic expressions
- Realisation forms
- Basic distinctions
- Cognitive operations
- Analysis of idioms bearing hyperbolic meaning

Hyperbole: Some examples?

- *I told you a hundred times!*
- *He's as tall as a mountain.*
- *She drove me into despair.*
- *That suitcase weighs a ton.*
- *He's as strong as an ox.*
- *His smile was a mile wide.*
- *After that amazing day, he had his head in the clouds.*

Hyperbole vs. Extreme Case Formulations vs. Overstatement (1)

- The three notions of hyperbole, ECFs and overstatement involve exaggeration, but there are significant differences among them.
- According to Norrick (2004: 1728):
- **Hyperbole** can be defined as a trope of bold exaggeration (e.g. *His head is in the clouds*), so that traditionally it has been regarded as a figure of speech related to metaphorical expressions;



Hyperbole vs. Extreme Case Formulations vs. Overstatement (2)

- **Overstatement** is defined as an amplified or attenuated exaggerated statement (e.g. *I am starving*);
- **Extreme Case Formulations** (ECFs) are extreme expressions (e.g. *Everybody loves you*) which do not follow any fixed structure or formula and which are produced by various means, including extreme adjectives (*total, absolute*), quantifiers (*all, every, no*), pronouns (*everybody*), and adverbs (*totally, never*).



Hyperbole vs. Extreme Case Formulations vs. Overstatement (3)

- Therefore, **overstatement** can be viewed as a cover term for ECFs and Hyperboles.
- **Hyperbole** is a figure of amplification or attenuation which interact with figurative meaning and is often connected with metaphor (Norrick 2004): e.g.
- *Our teacher is an iceberg of a woman.*
- We identify a human with a mountain of ice.



Hyperbole vs. Extreme Case Formulations vs. Overstatement (4)

- Thus, hyperbole and ECF differ in the **scale of exaggeration**. While ECF uses extreme absolute expressions producing extreme exaggerations, hyperbole tends to appear in the form of imagery.
- Moreover, while ECFs are blatantly false, hyperboles are not clearly false and speakers can negotiate their degree of overstatement.
- Hyperbole is often obtained by means of idiomatic expressions.

Idiomatic expressions

- **Idiomatic expressions** are fixed linguistic expressions whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meaning of their constituent parts (Kovecses & Szabó 1996). E.g. *He kicked the bucket*.
- **Motivation**: the figurative meaning of idioms can be motivated either by using conceptual metaphors and metonymies or by people's conceptual knowledge.
- **Transparency**: an idiom is transparent when it is easy to figure out its meaning on the basis of its components.

Hyperbole detection

- According to Sert (2008), there are five basic categories helping identify hyperbole:
- **1.** Expressions of number: *millions of, hundreds of...*
- **2.** Words referring to large amounts/quantities: *masses of, loads of...*
- **3.** Adjective modifications of amounts/numbers: *large amounts of...*
- **4.** Time expressions: *years, weeks, hours...*
- **5.** Adjectives of size, degree, intensity: *enormous, endless, gigantic.*

Realisation forms (1)

- Spitzbardt (1963) classifies hyperbole as:
- **Numerical hyperbole**: *millions, hundreds, thousands, billions of, a dozen of...*
- E.g. *I told you a million times.*
- **Words of hyperbolic nature**: nouns (*ages*), adjectives (*colossal*), adverbs (*astronomically*), verbs (*die*).
- E.g. *Billie ate his way through a ginormous ice cream.*



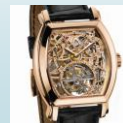
Realisation forms (2)

- Spitzbardt (1963) classifies hyperbole as:
- **Comparison**:
- - Metaphor
- E.g. *His nose is an elephant's trunk.*
- *You make my blood boil.* ('make me angry')
- - Simile
- *It's as easy as ABC.*



Realisation forms (3)

- Spitzbardt (1963) classifies hyperbole as:
- **Comparison**:
- - Comparative degree
- *He's older than the hills.*
- *in less than no time*
- - Superlative degree
- *The finest of fine watches.*



Basic distinctions (1)

- Claridge (2011: 40-41) distinguishes between:
 - Basic hyperbolic expressions:** non-metaphorical
 - It was so cold in the restaurant I was freezing.*
 - Composite hyperboles:** not just hyperbolic but metaphorical as well
 - When I saw him walking down the street I was petrified.*

Basic distinctions (2)

- Claridge (2011: 48) also distinguishes between two regular patterns to obtain hyperbole:
 - Comparison**
 - I avoid beaches like the plague.*
 - Repetition**
 - He put loads and loads of cream on his cake.*



Hyperbole and Grice

- Although hyperbole exaggerates how things are in reality, and thus involves saying something which is strictly speaking untrue, it is not considered as a form of lying.
- In terms of Gricean maxims, hyperbole can be seen as a violation of the **maxim of quality** which gives rise to conversational implicatures.
- I almost starved to death when I stayed at my aunt's house!*
- Implicature: My aunt was very mean with food/did not feed me enough so I was hungry.

Cognitive operations: Strengthening and Mitigation

- Strengthening and mitigation are two cognitive processes involved in exaggeration.
- Strengthening** expresses exaggeration by means of intensification.
- Mitigation** attenuates exaggerated statements.
- She's slower than a tortoise.* (= very slow)
- That suitcase weighs a ton.* (= weighs pounds)
- Hyperbole provides a stronger assumption that hearers have to mitigate in order to understand its intended meaning.

Hyperbolic idioms (1)

- All those different types of coffee seemed **older than the hills**.*
- SIMILE: conceptual mapping between the life duration of 'types of coffee' and that of 'hills'.
- My boss sounds tough, but **her bark is worse than her bite**.*
- METAPHOR: conceptual mapping between someone's temperament and the dog's bite.



Hyperbolic idioms (2)

- He **eats like a horse**.*
- She **eats like a bird**.*
- SIMILE: conceptual mapping between human eating habits and animal's habits.
- Cf. *He eats like an elephant.*
- She eats like an insect.*



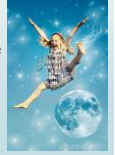
Hyperbolic idioms (3)

- *Bob's new corner office was just **the icing on the cake**.*
- METAPHOR: conceptual mapping between the 'icing on the top of a cake' and 'a positive and advantageous situation'.
- *Fixing the car is going **to cost an arm and a leg**.*
- METAPHOR: conceptual mapping between the high price for a service and the high value of body parts.



Hyperbolic idioms (4)

- *John looks as though he **has one foot in the grave**.*
- METAPHOR: conceptual mapping between 'being about to be in the grave' (close to death) and 'being very ill' (with pale skin, apathetic, weak).
- *She got the job. She was **over the moon**.*
- METAPHOR: conceptual mapping between 'a place which is impossible to reach' (the moon) and 'a job which is hard to get'.



Hyperbolic idioms (5)

- *She came home from her trip **nothing but skin and bones**.*
- METAPHOR: conceptual mapping between 'a person being skin and bones' and 'being extremely thin as a result of malnutrition'.
- *After the crash, Mary had **her heart in her mouth**.*
- METAPHOR: conceptual mapping between 'a hyperbolic situation' and 'being scared and nervous'.



Exercise

- *Curiosity killed the cat.*
- Being Inquisitive can lead you into an unpleasant situation.
- *Bill has very little contact with his brother. They see each other once in a blue moon.*
- Very rarely.
- *Picture paints a thousand words.*
- A visual presentation is far more descriptive than words.
- *She wears designer clothes that must cost the earth!*
- Be very expensive.

Exercise

- *Take enough supplies. Water is as scarce as hens' teeth where you're going!*
- Being extremely rare, to the point of non-existence.
- *She never has to worry about money; she was born with a silver spoon in her mouth.*
- Born into a very rich family.
- *Teaching was difficult today. I had a frog in my throat all morning.*
- Having difficulty in speaking clearly because of a cough or a sore throat.

Exercise

- *It's hard to believe we've been living here two years already. Time flies!!*
- Used to express surprise at how fast time passes.
- *His parents were hardworking people who encouraged their children to reach for the moon.*
- Be very ambitious and try to achieve something even if it is difficult.
- *She's trying to get into Oxford, but I think she's chasing rainbows.*
- Trying to get something she will never obtain.



References

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