

Hyperbole: A Pragmatic Perspective

Lecturer Dr. Mariam D. Saffah

Department of English/College of Education/Islamic University Najaf/Iraq

ABSTRACT

Unlike most previous studies which investigate hyperbole in literary contexts, the present review tries to portray it as an interactional pragmatic phenomenon occurring in everyday conversations. The listener's awareness that there is a difference between what is said and what is meant is essential for the recognition of hyperbole. Therefore, context is crucial for interpreting hyperbolic utterances. As a pragmatic notion, hyperbole has not been given its due attention. Hence, this review attempts to bridge this gap in the literature through answering the following questions: What are the functions, types, and forms of hyperbole? What is the relationship between hyperbole and other notions such as irony? And how it can be used as persuasive device?

Key words: Hyperbole, pragmatics, rhetoric, context, interaction, argumentation

INTRODUCTION

In the Greek traditions, hyperbole is identified as speech which exaggerates the truth either for the purpose of intensification or defamation. Moreover, Aristotle regards hyperbole as regular rhetorical figure (Anderson, 2000:123).

According to Leech (1983: 145), hyperbole signifies a case where the speaker's depiction of a situation is more intense than is warranted by the state of affairs depicted, as in *It made my blood boil*.

Hyperbole is ubiquitous in everyday conversation. Hence, the present survey aims at investigating hyperbole from a pragmatic point of view. It will employ approaches from pragmatics and rhetoric in order to pinpoint the role of and functions of hyperbole in everyday interaction.

Hyperbole: Characteristics and Functions

McCarthy and Carter (2004: 152) state that hyperbole is a type of constructing reality where there are rival versions. That is, it causes the focus of attention to be on a specific account of reality and plays down competing accounts. Moreover, it draws the listener attention to the speaker's perspective in a forceful way. Nevertheless, hyperbole is not an act of lying.

This agrees with Leech's (1969: 166) who refers to hyperbole, litotes and irony as honest deceptions because they all distort the truth. As for hyperbole, it misrepresents the truth by saying too much. On the other hand, irony usually assumes the form of indicating the reverse of what one feels to be the case.

It can be inferred that there is a degree of overlap between hyperbole and irony. In this regard, Roberts and Kreuz (1994: 162) say that when the communicative goal is one of clarification, emphasis, and humour, hyperbole and irony can occur in the same context. Both hyperbole and irony manifest a discrepancy between an utterance and reality.

According to Fahnestock (2011: 117), hyperbole is similar to irony in the sense that it involves an analogous interpretation of purposeful misstatement on the part of the speaker. However, the speaker does not mean the opposite as is the case with irony, but wants to make a statement prominent via employing extreme wording.

As regards hyperbole functions, it has been reported that hyperbole is frequently utilized for emphasis in the sense that it is used by speakers as intensifiers as in *The bag weighed a ton*. Moreover, hyperbole can be employed to express diverse emotions such as humour, excitement, distress, etc., based on the context in which it occurs (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).

Furthermore, Cruse (2006: 80) suggests that hyperbole is a figure of speech implicating an intended exaggeration for rhetorical effect. That is, it is meant to maximize impact or draw attention. Additionally, such exaggeration is probable to be negative or positive. In both cases the expression does not convey a literal truth or is meant to deceive.

Hyperbole is very common in everyday speech. For instance, people repeatedly say *I'm starving* when they mean that they are only rather hungry, and *it's miles and miles* is a usual way of complaining about fairly short distances (Allot, 2010: 88).

Realization

Claridge (2011: 40) differentiates between *basic* and *composite* hyperbole. As regards the former, the hyperbolic expression does not shift the domain of the equivalent literal expression. For instance, both *cold* and *freezing* belong to the temperature field. However, composite hyperbole is domain-switching i.e. it is a case of metaphorical hyperbole. In such cases, hyperbole gathers with another figure of speech. Examples of both types are given below (Henkemans, 2013: 3):

It was so cold in the restaurant I was **freezing**.

When I saw him walking down the street I was **petrified**.

Forms

According to Claridge (2011: 46), the only taxonomy of hyperbolic forms encountered in the literature is that suggested by Spitzbardt (1963). The latter tries to list ubiquitous lexical and grammatical features utilized in hyperbolic utterances. This taxonomy includes the following:

1. Numerical hyperbole
2. Words of hyperbolic nature:
 - a. nouns, e.g. ages
 - b. adjectives, e.g. colossal
 - c. adverbs, e.g. astronomically
 - d. verbs, e.g. die
3. Simile and metaphor, e.g. cross as the devil
4. Comparative and superlative degrees, e.g. in less than no time
5. Emphatic genitive, e.g. the finest of fine watches

6. Emphatic plural, e.g. all the perfumes of Arabia
7. Whole sentence, e.g. he is nothing if not deliberate.

In addition to her distinction between basic and composite hyperbole, Claridge (ibid: 48) suggests a further classification of hyperbolic expressions. Hyperbolic expressions can be words, phrases, and clauses. Included in the categories of phrasal and clausal hyperboles, are comparison and repetition. Examples of each category are given below:

She is allergic to **everything**.

You were, you were gonna **set bloody fire to me**.

Nobody ever learns anything.

I avoid mornings **like the plague** if I can.

But he's just **really really really strange**.

Hyperbole as Interactional Phenomenon

According to Clark (1994: 986), people speak with others in order to get things accomplished. Therefore, conversations, stories and other discourses are not produced via speakers acting independently. Rather, they are the developing products of a group of people working collaboratively. Holt (1998: 496) says that figurative expressions utilized in conversations have an interactional role. They are part of the manner in which turns are structured to fit in with the sequences in which those turns are performed

Hyperbole As Persuasive Device

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969: 169) mention that hyperbole is an extreme form of expression which almost always possesses an argumentative purpose. In this regard, they say:

We consider a figure to be argumentative, if it brings about a change of perspective, and its use seems normal in relation to this new situation. If, on the other hand, the speech does not bring about the adherence of the hearer to this argumentative form, the figure will be considered an embellishment, a figure of style. It can excite admiration, but this will be on the aesthetic plane, or in recognition of the speaker's originality.

Similarly, Fogelin (1986: 265) believes that hyperbolic utterances have rhetorical force in the sense that it, besides other related figures of speech such as irony and litotes, is recurrently utilized in arguments.

Moreover, Pomerantz (1986: 222) says that interlocutors resort to employing extreme case formulations, i. e. hyperboles, when they expect their co-interlocutors to undercut their claims and when there are in confrontational situations. Hence, they attempt to legitimize their claims via appealing to such device.

Claridge (2011: 216) states that as a notion, hyperbole has its origins in the system of classical rhetoric. Therefore, it requires to be seen within the broader context of the art of persuasion.

References

- Allott, N. (2010). *Key Terms in Pragmatics*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Anderson Jr., R. (2000). *Glossary of Greek Rhetorical Terms*. Amsterdam: Peeters.

- Claridge, C. (2011). *Hyperbole in English: A Corpus-Based Study of Exaggeration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cruse, Alan. (2006). *A Glossary of Semantics and Pragmatics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Fahnestock, J. (2011) *Rhetorical Style: the Uses of Language in Persuasion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fogelin, R. (1986). *Figuratively Speaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Henkemans, A. Fransica. (2013). Strategic manoeuvring with hyperbole in political debate. In Van Eemeren, F. and Peng, W. (eds.) *Contextualizing Pragma-Dialectics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing
- Leech, G. (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- McCarthy, M. and Carter, R. (2004). "There's millions of then":
Hyperbole in Everyday Conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36:149-184.
- Perelman, C. and Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1969). *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press.
- Pomerantz, A. (1986) Extreme Case Formulations: A Way of Legitimizing Claims. *Human Studies*, 9: 219-229.
- Roberts, R. and Kreuz, R. (1994). Why do People Use Figurative Language. *Psychological Science*. Vol. 3, PP: 159-163. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).