

DO WE EVER MAKE A MOLEHILL OUT OF A MOUNTAIN?: ANTITHETICAL EXTREMES IN THE EXPRESSION OF HYPERBOLE

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Exaggeration, the inseparable companion of greatness.
Voltaire

Abstract

This paper focuses on hyperbole, a long neglected form of non-literal language despite its pervasiveness in everyday speech. It addresses the production process of exaggeration, since a crucial limitation in figurative language theories is the production and usage of figures of speech, probably due to the intensive research effort on their comprehension. The aim is to examine antithetical postures in the expression of hyperbole: amplification (auxesis) vs. diminution (meiosis). In analysing whether speakers tend to magnify or minimize reality we expect to reach a better understanding of the nature and use of this figure in discourse. In order to analyse and classify hyperbolic items, a corpus of naturally-occurring conversations extracted from the British National Corpus was examined. Although the results suggest a clear preference for overstatement, this duality should not be overlooked in definitions of hyperbole, as has traditionally been done with meiosis in the literature on the subject. Common patterns for the expression of auxesis and meiosis are discussed via semantic fields. Finally, the constrained nature of meiosis in terms of linguistic choices and degree of deflation may help explain why speakers tend to upscale rather than downscale reality.

Keywords: *figurative language, hyperbole, auxesis, meiosis, corpus analysis.*

1. Introduction to non-literal language

Since antiquity figures of speech have been widely studied within rhetoric, although in contemporary rhetoric their study has been neglected or relegated to literary criticism. However, since the 1980s, there has been a renewed interest in figurative language not only in literary studies, but also in other fields of research. In fact, research on figuration has emerged as a new and distinct discipline, that of figurative language studies. Most of this interest, however, has been directed at explaining how figures of speech are comprehended, given their non-literal nature. Since the bulk of studies has almost invariably concentrated on the reception process, in terms of figure understanding, 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”.

Within figurative language studies, metaphor and verbal irony, often considered the master tropes, have received the greatest amount of attention, while the study of other non-literal forms has been overlooked or relegated to an ancillary position. This is certainly the case of hyperbole or exaggeration, a long neglected trope despite its ubiquity in everyday conversation. This paper focuses on the production process of hyperbole by analysing whether speakers tend to upscale or downscale reality when exaggerating. By examining the patterns of auxesis and meiosis we expect to reach a better understanding of the nature and usage of hyperbole in discourse.

2. Literature on hyperbole: from rhetoric to psycholinguistics

Given the intensive research on metaphor and irony, it is not surprising that very little is known about hyperbole. When examined, it has often been in relation to the so-called master tropes or even equated to them. In fact, some researchers seem to equate metaphor with all forms of figuration. For Aristotle, for example, metaphor represents the paradigm trope including, not only what we call metaphor, but also simile, metonymy, personification and hyperbole (*Rhetoric* 3: 10-11, *Poetics* 20-22; quoted in Dascal and Gross 1999: 122). Gibbs (1994: 76) correctly argues that there are forms of figurative language other than metaphorical that have been ignored as a result of this intensive metaphor investigation. However, Gibbs (2000: 12) also regards hyperbole together with sarcasm, understatement, jocularity and rhetorical questions as forms of verbal irony.

Although hyperbole has a long history of study within rhetoric and so persuasive written discourse, the emphasis fell on defining, illustrating and classifying this trope in relation to other figures. Within this frame, definitions generally respond to the etymology of the term in Greek and Latin, which refers to the notions of excess and exaggeration. On the other hand, the assumption that figurative language is ornamental and adds a rich aesthetic import to speaking and writing is pervasive in literary criticism. Thus, hyperbole has traditionally been examined as a creative literary device and is still nowadays almost invariably associated to the production of literary works.

In other disciplines no serious attention has been paid to hyperbole, probably because it has generally been regarded as a classic trope whose study belongs to that of rhetoric. Most of the empirical work on exaggeration involves comparisons of frequency and use in different cultures (e.g. Spitzbardt 1963; Cohen 1987; Edelman *et al.* 1989). Apart from these cross-cultural studies, most interest in hyperbole has been directed at explaining the cognitive processes involved in understanding (e.g. Winner *et al.* 1987; Gibbs *et al.* 1993; Colston and O'Brien 2000b; Leggitt and Gibbs 2000). Much of this literature can be found in the field of psycholinguistics and subsumed within theories of humour or verbal irony. Psycholinguistic research has also drawn attention to the communicative goals fulfilled by non-literal forms in discourse. Research on the pragmatic functions accomplished by exaggeration is embedded within studies of other figures, especially irony and understatement, to compare how they accomplish the same functions but to different extents or with different degrees of success (e.g. Roberts and Kreuz 1994; Sell *et al.* 1997; Colston and Keller 1998; Colston and O'Brien 2000a, 2000b).

Despite the scarce interest in hyperbole, this is a major and recurrent non-literal form within the context of figurative language. Thus, Kreuz *et al.* (1996: 91), after studying eight main forms of non-literal language in a literary corpus, offer empirical evidence of this ubiquity by showing that after metaphor, hyperbole was the most common trope and so conclude that "in terms of sheer occurrence hyperbole seems to deserve more notice than it has received to date". Its importance becomes even clearer after an inspection of the co-occurrence matrix in that study, since exaggeration was by far the figure that most often interacted with other non-literal forms. It was involved in almost 80% of the cases of co-occurrence, and it interacted with every other type of non-literal language with the exception of its logical opposite, understatement. This finding may account for the scarcity of studies focusing solely on hyperbole rather than merged with other figurative language forms.

3. Methodology

3.1. Aim

Rather than contrasting figures, this paper focuses on the production of hyperbole as the only object of study, with hyperbole being defined as a form of extremity or excess that either magnifies or minimizes some real state of affairs or fact. The aim is to classify the hyperbolic items present in our data into auxesis or meiosis, according to the extreme of the scale they occupy: upper or lower end along the continuum of some relevant dimension, in order to determine the patterns of use of this figure in discourse. Although intuitively hyperbole may be more frequently used to amplify rather than to minimize, no empirical study on the subject has been published to date.

3.2. Corpus description

In order to examine hyperbole, a corpus of naturally-occurring conversations, chosen at random from the British National Corpus (BNC, henceforth), was examined. 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 was subject to analysis. The focus is on speech, rather than writing, since 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 banal, 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 sub-corpus is organised, namely: educational, business, institutional, leisure and informal, collected in roughly equal numbers.

BNC domain	Number of texts	Word length
Informal	7	10,213
Leisure	2	10,317
Educational	4	10,799
Business	4	10,627
Institutional	1	10,234
Total	18	52,208

Table 1. BNC domain, length and number of texts examined

3.3. Items for analysis

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.

As for the criteria for identifying and labelling hyperbole, so that non-exaggerated uses of words or expressions can be excluded, in the literature the theme of identification has been overlooked or restricted to the counterfactuality or non-veridicality cue (*i.e.* a discrepancy

between utterance and reality), which presupposes knowledge of the referent situation.¹ Indeed, context plays a central role in hyperbole perception and identification. However, when the referent situation is not explicitly stated or can only be vaguely identified, the context is impoverished or ambiguous and the test of sheer impossibility is not applicable, other criteria are needed to identify and label this figure in corpora. Among the cues that may incline the researcher towards a hyperbolic interpretation of the proposition are the list of features proposed by McCarthy and Carter (2004: 162-3): disjunction with context, shifts in footing, unchallenged counterfactuality, co-creation of impossible worlds, extreme case formulations and intensification, listener take-up, relevant interpretability and syntactic support to underline the amplification.²

For the purposes of our analysis, hyperbolic items rather than utterances, which may consist of several exaggerated elements, were examined. By hyperbolic item I mean the minimal unit of sense or meaning, whether a word, phrase or expression, which *per se*, given the appropriate context, conveys an idea of excess or extremity. In turn, different hyperbolic items may co-occur within a single utterance and form hyperbolic clusters (*e.g. lots of people have got nothing to do*). Overstated items may also modify or be modified by other hyperbolic elements. This type of construction often responds to the following syntactic pattern: adverb + adjective/noun (*e.g. totally illegible, absolutely another world*), or adjective + noun (*e.g. total mess, sheer hell*). Once identified, the number of apparently hyperbolic items in our data, that is, where the overall context leans towards a hyperbolic interpretation, amounts to 343.

3.4. Procedure

Hyperbole is defined as a process of exaggeration, whether amplifying, magnifying, or just the contrary, minimising, diminishing the reality of the situation. Thus, two kinds of hyperbole are identified by Smith (1657: 55): auxesis and meiosis, that is, the exaggerated intensification, expanding or enlarging of an entity and the exaggerated reduction or attenuation of it, respectively. In order to differentiate auxesis and meiosis in our data, hyperbolic items were classified according to the extreme of the continuum they pointed to, whether the upper or lower end of some scale.

Following Spitzbardt (1965: 355), our typology was divided into two main dimensions: the predominantly objective-gradational and subjective-emotional sphere, here called predominantly quantitative and evaluative dimension, respectively.³ The former upscales or downscales a quantity or magnitude in excess. The latter involves a subjective evaluation,

¹ To convey the idea of disproportion between the state of affairs depicted in the utterance and the real state of affairs, researchers use a variety of terms: “contrast” (Colston and O’Brien 2000a, 2000b), “incongruity” (Gibbs 1994), “nonveridicality” (Kreuz and Roberts 1995), “counterfactuality” (Kreuz 1996; McCarthy and Carter 2004).

² Goffman (1979: 4-5) defines footing as “participants’ alignment, or set, or stance, or posture”, and shifts in footing as “a change in the alignment we take up for ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance. A change in footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame of events”.

³ Hyperbolic items in the evaluative domain refer to items with semantically positive or negative connotations, as opposed to quantification, and should not be confused with the fact that hyperbole is generally viewed as a powerful evaluative resource. Thus, Falk (1990: 46) notes that “an overstatement has in it an element of subjective evaluation of an objective fact”. However, as Carter and McCarthy (1997: 29) claim, “the precise attitude expressed can only be identified in the particular context”. This explains why quantities, numbers and magnitudes often acquire in context an element of evaluation.

whether positive or negative, which shows the speaker's emotions and attitudes towards the objective fact being assessed.

In order to determine common patterns for auxesis and meiosis a semantic classification proved useful. Semantic fields, according to Nida (1975: 174), consist of "a group of meanings (by no means restricted to those reflected in single words) which share certain semantic components" or, following Spitzbardt (1965: 355), "certain groupings of words whose lexical unity is determined by criteria of synonymy or semantic neighbourhood". As the possibility of complete synonymy is doubtful, hyperbolic items were analysed according to principles of semantic analogy rather than pure synonymy.

4. Results

The distribution of auxesis and meiosis in our data seems to suggest that by far speakers tend to overstate or upscale rather than downscale reality. Table 2 reveals the frequency and percentages of auxesis and meiosis in our data.

Extreme of scale	Occurrences	Percentages
Auxesis	277	80%
Meiosis	66	20%

Table 2. Distribution of hyperbolic items over auxesis and meiosis in the BNC data

The table shows an overwhelming presence of auxesis (80%) over meiosis. This result may help explain why people tend to associate hyperbole with amplification, but rarely with reduction or attenuation. Indeed, little has been said about meiosis in the literature on hyperbole, and if dealt with at all, it is often equated with or mistaken for understatement.⁴ The bulk of definitions and illustrations of this figure focus solely on the upscaling or magnifying dimension, and so overlook that hyperbole may also downscale or minimise reality.

A possible explanation for this fondness of auxesis points to the evaluative dimension of hyperbole. Apart from exaggerating quantities, one can also exaggerate traits and characteristics, conveying either positive or negative affect. In this sense Mayoral (1994: 243) deserves special attention for making explicit reference to the qualitative or evaluative dimension of the trope. He defines hyperbole as a figure characterized by "una finalidad 'enaltecedora/degradadora', o su vertiente cuantitativa 'engrandecedora/empequeñecedora' de una determinada realidad que sobrepasa [...] los límites de lo razonablemente verosímil". All hyperbolic items from the evaluative domain, which together add up to 133 and account for 38.7% of exaggerations in our data, fall under the category of auxesis since they all magnify, whether positively or negatively, some state of affairs. The excerpts below may serve to illustrate this amplification of positive or negative features.

(1) Text F7Y: leisure domain: Harlow Study Centre: oral history interview

⁴ Meiosis and understatement are two distinct figures which have often been misunderstood and used interchangeably, as synonyms, in the literature on figurative language. The basic difference between them is that understatement describes extremes situations in the real world as moderate, whereas hyperbole describes moderate situations in the real world as extreme and so meiosis downscales in excess some relatively moderate state of affairs in the real world, keeping it to a minimum.

INTERVIEWEE>: Dame Leah Manning was my very best friend! She ... came to me one day and asked me if I would stand for the council, which I did. I have her book here. She ... wro ... did an autobiography of a ... education ... and *she was the most wonderful person ... that you would ever wish to meet!* She fought for ... the working class ... she fought for education ... she fought for everything to benefit the community.

(2) Text JJC: business domain: estate agency interview

CLIENT>: I'm new to the area and I'm sort of wanting to move into the Garden City.

ESTATE AGENT>: Great. Take a seat. Is it still as cold out there as it looks?

CLIENT>: Absolutely freezing out there.

ESTATE AGENT>: Oh, yuk, oh, **horrible, horrible**. Okay, so you're looking for a house.

However, items from the quantitative realm, which together add up to 210 occurrences and represent 61.2% of exaggerations in our data, clearly prevail over the evaluative dimension. This may help explain why references to the element of quantification are pervasive in most definitions of this classic figure. Within this framework, three semantic fields can be distinguished: purity, magnitude and number or quantity, which in turn can be divided into subfields revolving around an idea or several related ideas as shown in Table 3.

Semantic fields/subfields	Occurrences	Percentages
QUANTITATIVE REALM	210	61.2%
Purity	115	33.5%
completeness, absoluteness	21	6.1%
universality, non-exceptionality	54	15.7%
non-existence, nullity	37	10.7%
veracity	3	0.8%
Number, quantity, measure	50	14.5%
time measure: period units	27	7.8%
long/linear measures	2	0.5%
numerical expressions	6	1.7%
quantity words: accumulation	15	4.3%
Magnitude	45	13.1%
greatness	37	10.7%
smallness	8	2.3%

Table 3. Distribution of hyperbolic items over semantic fields and subfields in the quantitative realm

Falling under the semantic field of purity, the subfield of universality or non-exceptionality, which represents 15.7% of hyperbolic items in our data, is the most productive technique in the creation of auxesis. This notion includes the following items, with the number of occurrences in brackets: *all* (26), *always* (3), *everywhere* (4), *throughout the world*, *everybody* (6), *everybody else*, *every one*, *every* (4), *everything* (6), *anything* (2).

(3) Text KB6: informal domain: conversation recorded by Angela

SUE>: How the hell do you keep so slim? I've completely cut out [...]

ANGELA>: Well, we've been rushing around, haven't we?

SUE>: Haven't got time to think about food.

ANGELA>: No. ... *Been here, there and everywhere*, you know what I mean?

SUE>: Yeah.

ANGELA>: [...] ... How did Ann have her hair cut then?

In order to upscale reality, speakers can also resort to the semantic subfield of completeness or absoluteness, which includes items such as: *completely* (3), *absolute*, *absolutely* (5), *total*, *totally* (3), *entirely*, *full*, *fully*, *whole* (2), *sheer* (2), *pure*.

(4) Text J8J: leisure domain: television discussion on drugs

GUEST>: I had a bereavement, a very close bereavement in the

HOST>: Yeah.

GUEST>: family and they put me onto valium, but having worked in psychiatric I knew the results of valium, so I, I gradually broke them down and got off them ... *but for six full months I couldn't sleep*

HOST>: Mm.

GUEST>: so they did put me onto some. But, I, I kno, I do use them as they're prescribed.

On the other hand, the most important semantic subfield for meiosis in our data is the idea of non-existence or nullity, which is also included in the semantic field of purity, whereby exaggeration is expressed in absolute terms of all or nothing. This subfield, which consists of *no* (4), *no one*, *no one else*, *nobody*, *nothing* (14), *nothing else* (2), *not any* (2), *not anything* (4), *never* (5), *not at all* (3), represents 10.7% of the exaggerated items identified, being by far the most productive strategy for meiosis in the BNC texts examined.

(5) Text F7Y: leisure domain: Harlow Study Centre: oral history interview

INTERVIEWEE>: we formed a resident association and we took our problems to the resident's association ... and ... and we wo, you know, if we had problems which could be ironed out ... the man, general manager of the development corporation, Mr [...] would come and listen to our complaints ... and ... we seemed, you know, we, *we got along very ... very well really for ... such a small place with nothing* ... because the only shopping facilities were in the old town ... or we had to go to Epping ... or Bishop's Stortford ... you see?

The semantic field of magnitude, which consists of natural language forms, as opposed to numerical expressions, is divided into two subfields moving around the notions of greatness and smallness as reflected in different proportions or dimensions, such as size, duration, distance, *etc.* Here the preference for auxesis (10.7%) over meiosis (2.3%) is clearly manifest too.

The list of hyperbolic items falling under the category of greatness in our data is: *great big* (2), *massive*, *vast*, *huge*, *enormous (amount of)*, *tremendous (amount of)*, *immensely*, *mammoth*, *dinosaurs*, *like a horse's nose bag*, *riding jodhpurs* (size); *moustache*, *beard* (2), *mushrooming*, *rolling in*, *coining money* (superabundance); *day in*, *day out*, *forever*, *lifelong*, *like a lifetime* (duration); *most* (3), *the most* (3), *utmost*, *extremely* (5), *infinitely* (degree, limit); *remotely* (distance). The excerpt below is representative of the way magnitudes are magnified in our data

(6) Text K6X: business domain: Nottingham Constabulary meeting

COLLISHAN>: I still think we have to have the system as such, perhaps not so intricate, but certainly keep the file probably with the bits in.

PS000>: We might, cos you won't be able to put maps and things on them.

PS000>: Eh.

PS000>: But certainly the main co-ordinators er
 STONE>: Almost like the burglar alarm [...] you just have scheme, head co-ordinators, you know deputy co-ordinator, number of 'ouses and that just a basic so you go in
 COLLISHAN>: *We, we don't want really is street co-ordinators because*
 PS000>: No.
 COLLISHAN>: *that'd be a mammoth task.*
 STONE>: If you have somebody like somewhere like that

By contrast, the repertoire of hyperbolic items conveying the idea of smallness is considerably shorter: *a flea on a dog's back, little tiny, tiny, minuscule, box room (size); next to (distance), instantly (duration); don't move (motion)*. Let us take the following illustrative sample.

(7) Text JSH: institutional domain: House of Commons debate

MR KEVIN BARRON>: Could I say to the minister and bring him back to the real world ... about regeneration? ... The Government are about to announce er at Templeborough in Rotherham a three point seven five million pounds project. The project is estimated to create a hundred and seventy-five jobs. Last year out of the two thousand nine hundred and thirty-nine that were lost in the Rotherham borough from coal, engineering and steel there were two hundred and sixty which I actually support er made by English Estates ... that jobs lost at Templeborough steel plant in November. This year seventy-five jobs lost at Brinsworth strip mill last week and there's four hundred job losses that are currently being negotia negotiated in United Engineering Steels in Sheffield and Rotherham. *That regeneration project is a flea on a dog's back into the jobs that have been lost in that ... area at the moment.* When are we going to meet the needs of those areas for jobs and not have these things where we're getting less than twenty percent job replacement through g regeneration?

Note that although the hyperbolic items examined up to this point invariably belong to the category of auxesis (e.g. *extremely, immensely*) or meiosis (e.g. *never, nothing*), in general it is only the full context which determines whether the hyperbolic item upscales or downscales the referent situation. Compare these two samples from our transcripts: *I've just gone through A division and I've got er a pile of cards, literally an inch thick* (auxesis) vs. *She made me feel about two inches high* (meiosis). This is the case of the majority of hyperbolic items in the semantic field of number or quantity, which comprises the subfields of length measure, numerical expressions and time measure.

In our data, length/linear measure consists of the following hyperbolic items: *two inches, an inch*, as exemplified in the previous paragraph. More prolific is the list of numerical expressions: *two thousand, four thousand, not half as much, half a million, one and a half million, three hundred million*. However, the most recurrent pattern for hyperbole under this semantic field is time measure, which consists of period units such as: *ten times, a second, a minute (13), ten minutes, an hour, the evening, two days, the weekend, a week, six months, months and months and months, ages (3), ages and ages and ages*. This can also be considered a productive strategy in the creation of both auxesis and meiosis as illustrated in the extracts below.

(8) Text JSH: institutional domain: House of Commons debate

MR TONY BANKS>: Is the, is the minister, is the minister aware that Barclays have laid off or declared seven thousand redundancies, National Westminster has announced four thousand redundancies and *yet you still have to wait ages in the queue at the bank?* Why is that?

(9) Text KPC: informal domain: conversation recorded by Frances

FRANCES>: Yes, we're not gonna forget to sing happy birthday today, are you?

FRANCIS>: No.

FRANCES>: When he come in and give him a big kiss. *Can somebody please go and watch Chloe a minute?* What? Er, if you don't stop eating those biscuits there'll be trouble. Go on. Go and see Chloe. ... What you drawing, Kaley?

This excerpt helps illustrate an important function of meiosis: polite de-emphasis, which refers to cases of politeness motivated mitigation. This is related to Leech's (1983: 107) tact maxim, which is formulated as follows: "minimize the expression of beliefs which imply cost to other; maximize the expression of beliefs which imply benefit to other". One aspect of the tact maxim relates to the size of imposition. One can use "minimizers" to reduce the implied cost to the hearer (Thomas 1995: 161), as in *Hang on a second*. Hence, meiosis, defined as exaggerated reduction, extenuation or diminution (Smith 1657: 56), seems a good way of minimising the expression of cost to others. Note that all instances of this function in our transcripts are time references (*a minute*) of the hyperbolic type meiosis.

This strategy is particularly useful in mitigating directives (*e.g.* orders, requests, *etc.*), as in the abovementioned example. In this sense, Bach and Harnish (1979: 47) state that in requests, the speaker expresses the desire that the listener do the action, and the intention that the listener do it because of the speaker's desire, or at least partially for this reason. The listener is asked to do the action, instead of being told to do so, and can decide to do the action or not, the outcome of which is largely or solely for the benefit of the speaker. Requests, then, are nearly always mitigated, since the action is to be done as a favour to the speaker (Koike 1994: 521).

Although invariably used for auxesis, accumulation expressions also belong to the semantic field of number and quantity. McCarthy and Carter (2004: 179) have recently shown, in a corpus of naturally-occurring conversations, that amount/quantity words, in particular words denoting accumulation of things, such as *masses of*, *stacks of*, *heaps of*, *loads of*, *tons of* and *piles of*, seem to generate very rich hyperboles. In our data, hyperbolic items denoting the idea of accumulation, such as: *a load*, *loads of* (3), *a pile of*, *compost heap*, *lots* (9), are also productive strategies in the creation of auxesis since they are invariably used to enlarge quantities.

(10) Text KDV: informal domain: conversation recorded by Sandra

DEANNE>: I don't like anything that lasts long on kids. If yo, if you understand what I mean. I'd rather

SANDRA>: Yeah.

DEANNE>: them wear it out ... I'd rather it

SANDRA>: Yeah.

DEANNE>: wear out and me throw it away than it still be good and ... don't know what to do with it, you know, you're thinking

SANDRA>: [laughing] Yeah.

DEANNE>: Oh, this is still too good to put in the rag bag basically, you know, that sort of [...]. I'd rather have it

SANDRA>: *Oh, I've got loads of people I pass stuff on to.*
DEANNE>: Yeah. Well, I
SANDRA>: I mean
DEANNE>: do if I've got anything, but I find half the time, I mean, it's like jeans

5. Discussion

In line with studies supporting that the study of the cognitive processes involved in figurative comprehension should be complemented by research on the creation and usage of non-literal language forms, this paper has addressed, in naturalistic rather than elicited data, the production process of exaggeration, analysing whether speakers prefer upscaling or downscaling reality when engaging in hyperbole. Rather than contrasting figures of speech, this paper has focused on the production of hyperbole as the only object of study because equating hyperbole with other forms of figuration only serves to blur important distinctions between the tropes (Kreuz and Roberts 1993: 155).

The classification into auxesis and meiosis in our data suggests that by far the tendency is to upscale rather than downscale reality when exaggerating. This may help explain why hyperbole has often been associated with amplification (auxesis), but rarely with reduction or attenuation (meiosis). However, the presence of meiosis in our data, although scarce, is far from being negligible. It represents 20% of the hyperbolic items in the BNC texts examined. The antithesis and counterpart of auxesis should not, therefore, be overlooked in definitions and studies on this figure, as has traditionally been done in the literature on the subject.

Although traditionally hyperbole has been equated with auxesis and even nowadays the bulk of definitions invariably focus on the overstated use of this non-literal language form, this is a twofold figure. Even if they are at opposite ends of a continuum (Fraser 1983: 34; Channell 1994: 89), with auxesis occupying the upper end of the scale (*i.e.* upscaling reality) and meiosis occupying the lower extreme of the continuum (*i.e.* downscaling reality), they are not separate or independent figures, as some scholars have claimed. Rather than emphasising one or the other, these two extremes should be brought together under a working definition of the trope. Thus, hyperbole can be defined as a figure of speech whereby the quantity of an objective fact is subjectively inflated (auxesis) or deflated (meiosis) in varying degrees but always to excess.

Although the list of hyperbolic items extracted from the BNC conversations needs to be viewed cautiously, as a sampling rather than a catalogue, since hyperbole is a creative act and, as McCarthy and Carter (2004: 150) note, “the possibilities for linguistic creativity are infinite”, the recurrence of certain semantic fields and subfields suggests significant aspects of this figurative language form in the expression of auxesis and meiosis. Thus, the overwhelming presence of items in the purity domain, which represent 33.5% of hyperbolic items in our data and whereby hyperbole is expressed in terms of all or nothing, is remarkable. This appears to suggest a preference for absolute terms, such as do not admit of variation or exception, when exaggerating. It seems that along the continuum of slight, moderate and extreme forms of exaggeration that Colston and Keller (1998: 502) distinguish speakers often prefer going to extremes. Curiously enough, in this semantic field feature the most recurrent semantic patterns for auxesis and meiosis in our data, namely the subfields of universality, non-exceptionality and non-existence or nullity, respectively. Thus, the semantic field of purity seems to be the most productive field for the creation of both auxesis and meiosis and the most radical too.

A possible explanation for the scarce presence of meiosis in our data can be found in the constrained nature of this type of exaggeration. It appears that the range of linguistic choices and degree of inflation to express auxesis is considerably wider than those to express meiosis. This is succinctly explained by Colston and Keller (1998), who compared exaggerations of a less-than-expected quantity which are constrained relative to overstatements of a greater-than-expected quantity.

The interaction between the type of comment and whether the unexpected situation involved a quantity that was less or more than expected allows an interesting insight into the nature of hyperbole. When the quantity of an ensuing event is of greater magnitude or degree than expected, a hyperbolic comment about that event is not constrained. Recall that hyperbolic comments exaggerate the ensuing state of affair, and exaggerating about an ensuing event that was of a greater quantity than expected can stretch to infinity. However, when the quantity of an ensuing event is of lesser magnitude or degree than was expected, a hyperbolic comment is constrained. One can only exaggerate a smaller-than-expected quantity of something up to the point of saying that the quantity was zero. (Colston and Keller 1998: 506)

Colton and O'Brien (2000a: 1564) provide the following illustrative example:

One can only understate the quantity of something (*e.g.* a snowfall of ten inches) up to the point of saying that the quantity was zero, (*e.g.* 'It seems we got a tiny bit of snow last night' or 'It seems that we didn't get any snow last night'). However, one can overstate the quantity of something up to infinity, (*e.g.* 'We got a hundred feet of snow last night' or 'We got ten billion feet of snow last night').

Indeed, the most recurrent pattern for meiosis in the BNC texts examined is the idea of nullity or inexistence, that is, saying that the quantity was zero. Out of 66 cases of meiosis, 34 respond to the pattern *No X* or *Not any X*. After this construction, the most recurrent item for meiosis is the period unit *a minute*, which features thirteen times in our transcripts and is mainly used for polite mitigation of directives, a prominent function of meiosis.

In analysing hyperbole in everyday speech, this paper runs contrary to traditional beliefs that figures are embellishments of literal language with little cognitive value of their own (Pollio *et al.* 1990: 142) and adheres to the view that figures provide part of the figurative foundation for everyday thought (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Gibbs 1994; Turner 1998; Arduini 2000).

6. References

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