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.
    - She's slower than a tortoise. (= very slow)
  - Mitigation attenuates exaggerated statements.
    - 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

- 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.

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.
References