Understatement
Linguistic strategies at work in specialised and non-specialised language

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Understatement: Linguistic or cultural phenomenon? (1)

• How are you doing?

• I’m really bad. I have been experiencing horrible head pain for the past 6 months and now I’m also having a terrible backache and severe leg pains. Also, last weekend I had flu-like symptoms, such as achy muscles, fever...

• I’m doing well, I’m just a bit tired. What about you?
Understatement: Linguistic or cultural phenomenon? (2)

• How are your lessons going?

• I’m soooo tired... I have more than 250 students for both courses at Economics, so my classes are overcrowded. In the meantime, I’m also having exams, office hours, regular meetings... The first term is a real nightmare!

• Not bad. A bit crowded, but rather satisfying.
Outline

• Understatement
  - Definitions and features
  - Some examples
  - Some issues
  - Understatement and figurative language: Litotes, meiosis, irony, euphemism
  - The pragmatics of understatement: Functions/effects in specialised language
  - Understatement vs. overstatement
  - Practical activity
Data

• English political speeches

British political speeches
http://www.britishpoliticspeech.org/
other online newspapers;
American political speeches
http://www.politicalspeeches.net/,
Understatement
Definitions and features

• “Minus dicere et plus significare (‘say less and mean more’)” (Hoffmann 1987: 13)
• “A statement which falls below the truth or fact” (OED)
• “Understating is a way to invite politeness inferences” (Bertuccelli Papi 2000: 82)
• “The understatement rule” is one among “the various reserve and modesty rules that govern [English] everyday social interactions” (Fox 2004: 66)
Understatement
Some examples

• *a bit of a nuisance* ‘a chronic illness’
• *not bad* ‘absolutely brilliant’
• Captain Moody’s announcement to the BA’ passengers, in 1982, when volcanic ash caused all four engines of his aircraft to fail:

  “Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. We have a *small* problem. All four engines have stopped. I trust you are *not* in *too much* distress.”
1. Is understatement a quantitative or a qualitative phenomenon?

- Hübler (1983: 23): “In understatements [...] the indetermination of what is said must produce a clear qualitative contrast to what is meant”.

- Cf. Israel (2006: 143), who claims that a) understatement is “conspicuously less informative than some other statement”, and that b) “Saying less means less work for a speaker”.
2. Is understatement consistent with Grice’s (1975) maxims?

• The speaker is not less informative than required, but he is rather deliberately untruthful, obscure, ambiguous and far from brief.

• Thus, understatements infringe not so much Grice’s first sub-maxim of Quantity, as the Gricean **Maxims of Quality** (‘Be truthful’) and **Manner** (‘Be clear’).

• E.g. *Well, not exactly what I would have chosen.* ‘a truly horrific experience’
3. Is understatement the same as meiosis, litotes, etc.?

- Israel (2006: 143) stresses the connection between understatement and its “figural cousins euphemism, allusion, meiosis, and irony”.
- Understatement is a superordinate phenomenon, which exploits the stylistic means of rhetoric – especially of meiosis, litotes, irony and euphemism – but does not conflate with any of these notions.
Understatement and figurative language (1)

**Meiosis** (Muecke 1980)

- is typically characterised by a semantic diminution or an indetermination of a concept obtained through “detensifiers” or “hedges” (Hübler 1983).
- Understatement tends to exploit the mechanisms of meiosis:

1. Those changes will make life *a little bit harder* in some areas, but we need to communicate them effectively. (‘much harder’) (J. Paice)

2. She’s *pretty sure* we’ll win this election. (‘very sure’) (B. Obama)
Understatement and figurative language (2)

**Litotes** (Ravazzoli 1978; Hoffmann 1987; Caffi 1990)

- is typically characterised by a negation of the contrary (Lat. *negatio contrarii*).
- Understatement may be obtained through negation, especially through morphologically marked negative forms preceded by a negative free morpheme *not*:

(3) Conflict is **not inevitable**. (‘should absolutely be avoided’) (T. Blair)

(4) They **don’t look very excited** to see me. (‘are bored’) (Obama)
Understatement and figurative language (3)

**Irony** (Muecke 1980; Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994)

- shows a contrast or a contradiction between what is said and what is meant (antiphrasis).
- There is no overt antiphrasis in understatement, but a covert type of irony (cf. “tongue-in-cheek” in Almansi 1984):

  (5) It was *not our finest hour*. (referred to a TB outbreak) (‘a calamity’) (J. Paice)
Understatement and figurative language (4)

Euphemism

• is the substitution of a harsh or offensive word with an expression having less unpleasant associations.

• Euphemistic periphrasis is often used to say less than one means:

(6) You don’t tell deliberate lies, but sometimes you have to be evasive. (‘avoid telling the truth’) (M. Thatcher)

(7) That boy was a nonstarter, and they threw him out. (‘loser’) (B. Obama)
Understatement and context (1)

- *He’s a bit tanned, isn’t he?*

- **Literal meaning**
Understatement and context (2)

- He’s a bit tanned, isn’t he?

- Ironic understatement
He’s a bit tanned, isn’t he?

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi described the newly-elected US President Barack Obama as ‘young, handsome and sun-tanned’...

Ironic understatement? Sarcasm?
Functions of understatement

• Self-serving/Egoistic: Protection of the speaker (cf. false modesty).

(8) If you lead a country like Britain... then you have to have a touch of iron about you. (‘great strength’) (M. Thatcher)

• Other-serving/Altruistic: Protection of the hearer.

(9) One of the things being in politics has taught me is that men are not a reasoned or reasonable sex. (‘irrational’) (M. Thatcher)
Effects of understatement

- Humour.
- Achievement of the speaker’s goals.

E.g. when Gordon Brown compares his two opponents to his “two boys squabbling at bathtime”, Nick Clegg comments:

(10) It’s a good line for rehearsal. (‘Brown’s speeches are pre-prepared’) (N. Clegg)

(10) is a humorous understatement which helps Clegg achieve his goals.
Understatement
Functions and effects (3)

- *a bit of a nuisance* ‘a chronic illness’
- *not bad* ‘absolutely brilliant’
- Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. We have a *small* problem. All four engines have stopped. I trust you are *not* in *too much* distress.

- Protection of the speaker/hearer?
- Humour/Achievement of one’s goals?
Under- vs. over-statement
Definitions and features of overstatement

• An exaggeration, a tendency to increase the strength, importance, seriousness, etc. of a concept or thing (cf. hyperbole, Ravazzoli 1978)

• The opposite, or the complementary of understatement (Muecke 1980: 81)

• Wierzbicka (2003: 277) remarks that Italian speakers “prefer emphatic overstatement to cautious understatement”

• E.g. Ho un terribile raffreddore, Mi scoppia la testa, Ho la schiena a pezzi, etc.
Under- vs. over-statement
Examples of overstatement (1)

(11) Non possiamo rinviare ancora, l’opposizione *ci fucilerebbe*. (R. Formigoni)

(12) Se Berlusconi mi telefona gli faccio sentire *il rumore del mio revolver*. (U. Bossi)

(13) Monti è l’uomo simbolo del *fallimento totale*: oggi il signor Monti equivale al *comandante Schettino* che ha portato *la nave sugli scogli*. (R. Calderoli)

**Established metaphors** of ‘war’, ‘fight’, ‘disastrous events’

**Hyperbole**

**Similes**
(14) Malato? Basterebbe vedere le cose che ho fatto in questi 15 mesi di attività di governo per chiarire che non solo non sono malato, ma che sono Superman. Anzi a me Superman fa ridere. (S. Berlusconi)

(15) Solo Napoleone aveva fatto di più. (S. Berlusconi)

(16) A Veltroni ho detto: sono il tuo Messiah, ti libero dall’abbraccio mortale della sinistra. (S. Berlusconi)

Identification with biblical/historical figures or superheroes
Under- vs. over-statement
Functions/Effects

• Unlike understatement, overstatement is neither protective of the speaker nor protective of the hearer.
• Overstatement is used either to praise oneself or to criticise others.
• However, the effects obtained through the two phenomena are comparable, in that both facilitate the achievement of one’s goals.
• As for humour, overstatement produces higher humorous effects due to its more evident contrast with the reality of facts.
Exercise 1

- How’s the weather today? What’s the weather like?
Exercise 1

• How’s the weather today? What’s the weather like?
• It’s a rainy day.
• It’s a really bad weather.
• It’s raining cats and dogs.
• It’s a sunny summer day, isn’t it?
• It’s just drizzling.
• It’s the Flood.
• It’s a downpour.
• It’s not exactly a perfect day for a trip to the sea.
Exercise 2

• How would you describe this girl or this boy trying not to be offensive?
Exercise 2

• How would you describe this boy or this girl trying not to be offensive?
  • She’s not a beauty/a hottie/a fox/a babe.
  • She’s not really foxy/hot/stunning.
  • She’s not sexy as hell.
  • She’s rather unattractive.
  • He’s not exactly a hunk/a magnet.
  • He’s not a stunner/a knockout.
  • He’s unappealing.
  • He’s not my ideal type.