Understatement and Overstatement:
Linguistic strategies at work in English language
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Understatement: Definitions

“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)
E.g. a bit of a nuisance ‘a chronic illness’
not bad ‘absolutely brilliant’

- 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”.
- 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’).
- 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.

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:
E.g. It was a bit blowy. (after a storm)
Litotes (Ravazzoli 1978; Hoffmann 1987; Caffi 1990) is typically characterised by a negation of the
contrary.
Understatement may be obtained through negation:
E.g. It was not our finest hour.
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):
E.g. Well, that was short and to the point, wasn’t it? (referred to a political candidate’s terribly long
speech)
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:
E.g. Paul Kersey: You’ve got a prime figure. You really have, you know.
Joanna Kersey: That’s a euphemism for fat.

**Understatement: Functions/Effects**

Self-serving/Egoistic: Protection of the speaker (cf. false modesty).
Other-serving/Altruistic: Protection of the hearer.
Achievement of the speaker’s goals.
Humour.

**Exercise: Identify the linguistic strategies of understatement and its functions/effects**

He’s no Hercules.
An atomic blast is somewhat noisy.
Hitler was not a nice person.
It was rather windy in New Orleans during hurricane Katrina.
Bill Gates is financially secure.
I have to have this operation. It isn’t very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain.
Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt say: “We are just ordinary persons.”
There’s been a little glitch with the dry cleaning of your skirt Madam.
I was a bit of a scrape. (referred to the loss of a limb)
I have a small bump on the brain that needs to be taken care of.

**Overstatement: Definitions**

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.
I’ve told you a million times to clean your room.
I love you a lot. I can even bring the Moon for you.

**Linguistic strategies**

I have a ton of homework.
I tried a thousand times.
I would give all my money for a pack of Oreo cookies.
These units will never end.
I could sleep for a year.
I nearly died laughing.
I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.
He’s as big as a house.
That boy runs faster than a car.

**Exercise: Identify the meaning of the following utterances.**

He is about to explode.
He is as big as an elephant.
She runs fast like a cheetah.
The coffee was so hot, I was spitting flames!
It was so cold I saw polar bears wearing jackets.
Her smile was a mile wide!
This mall is big enough to have its own zip code!
Her brain is the size of a pea!

**Overstatement: Functions/Effects**

Overstatement is used either to praise oneself or to criticise others.
Achievement of one’s goals
Humour

**Exercise: Finish the sentences with an overstated expression.**

I was so hungry I could... (eat a lot of food)
The fish was... (very large)
She jumped... (very high in the air)
You made me wait... (for a very long time)
Susan was... (very mad)
If I do not get that job... (I will be very upset)
He is so old he was born... (a long time ago)
Mom cooked enough food... (to feed a lot of people)
Lisa is... (very skinny)
These shoes are... (hurting my feet)

**References**