Metaphor, hyperbole, and irony: Uses in isolation and in combination in written discourse

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ABSTRACT

While classical theories on rhetoric cluster figurative devices like metaphor, hyperbole, and irony under the encompassing category of tropes, current theories and research typically focus on one of the tropes in isolation. To determine how these different tropes are used in combinations, we conducted a large-scale corpus analysis of Dutch printed news discourse (54,851 words). For metaphor and hyperbole, we find that typical combinations are found in nouns and adjectives, showing that such combinations differ from the use of either trope in isolation. For hyperbole and irony, we find a relation between the two tropes in that ironic clauses contain more hyperbole than non-ironic clauses. In contrast, for metaphor and irony, we find no empirical evidence that the use of metaphors differs between ironic and non-ironic clauses. Analysis of clauses containing the three tropes of metaphor, hyperbole and irony shows that these may not always reflect novel and creative word use. Instead, various cases seem to contain conventional uses of metaphor and hyperbole.

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1. Introduction

In classical theories on rhetoric, figurative devices such as metaphor, hyperbole, and irony were typically discussed as one specific class of rhetorical strategies: tropes (e.g., Quintilian, transl. 1959). This implies that these three different figures were mainly described and analyzed based on their commonalities, in that they have a literal meaning that is somehow different from their intended meaning. Furthermore, these classical treatises mainly focused on tropes as linguistic and poetic strategies that could be used by orators to persuade their audiences.

Since the late 1970s, this tendency changed with the 'cognitive turn' in linguistics (Steen, 2011). An important element of this cognitive turn was the introduction of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003), which proposed that metaphor was an element of thought as much as language. A revolutionary claim of CMT was that metaphors are ubiquitous in language, and that linguistic metaphors cluster under larger conceptual structures known as conceptual metaphors. For instance, linguistic expressions such as "Her ego is very *fragile*", "I'm *going to pieces*", and "She is *easily crushed*" all reflect the conceptual metaphor of THE MIND IS A BRITTLE OBJECT (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003, p. 28). Since its introduction,

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CMT has been a highly influential theory in metaphor studies leading scholars to move away from the classical perspective, and to view metaphor more in terms of both language and thought. This perspective has greatly advanced the study of metaphor and has led to many new and important findings (see Gibbs, 2008).

The cognitive turn, however, also had another consequence, which is that most academic literature on figurative language typically focused on one trope in isolation, rather than on the combinations of tropes. In other words, contemporary literature on metaphor (e.g., Gibbs, 2008), hyperbole (e.g., Claridge, 2011) and irony (e.g., Gibbs and Colston, 2007) typically uses its own constructs and theories to explain the workings of each trope in discourse. Nevertheless, in some cases, combinations of metaphor, hyperbole, and/or irony are used in discourse. Consider Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders talking about a "Tsunami of Islamization" (Nu.nl, 2006), which combines metaphor (immigration as waves) and hyperbole (by taking the most extreme wave possible). Such combinatory tropes ('figurative frames'; Burgers et al., 2016b) can potentially be very powerful tools in public debates.

An important topic in current studies of figurative language relates to the ways in which different tropes are related (e.g., Barnden, 2010, 2015; Carston and Wearing, 2015; Gibbs and Colston, 2012). In this debate, much of the literature on the interconnections between metaphor, hyperbole and irony is either theoretical (e.g., Burgers et al., 2016a,b; Carston and Wearing, 2015), based on experimental research (e.g., Burgers et al., 2015; Katz and Lee, 1993; Rubio-Fernández et al., 2015) and/or limited to specific grammatical constructions (e.g., Barnden, 2015; Veale, 2013). In all cases, authors present cases of metaphor, hyperbole and irony in both isolation and combination under the presupposition that these are representative for their usage in discourse. However, corpus analysts have shown that actual language use often differs from intuitive assumptions of analysts (Deignan, 2005).

Thus, to further the debate on the combinations of metaphor, hyperbole, and irony, we ask how, in natural language use, these tropes are used in combination, and how this usage differs from the use of either trope in isolation. As an anchor of how a trope is used in isolation, we focus on the relation between the use of the trope to different word classes, because, for metaphor, we know that the distribution of metaphor across word classes differs from the general distribution of word classes (e.g., Krennmayr, 2015; Pasma, 2011). To answer our main questions, we report on a large-scale corpus analysis of the three tropes within the same corpus. Below, we first present an account of the different perspectives on the interactions between metaphor, hyperbole and irony. Subsequently, we report on an analysis of a corpus of Dutch economic news discourse, which we systematically investigated for the use of the three tropes.

1.1. Metaphor and hyperbole

In most contemporary studies on metaphor, metaphor is defined as a cross-domain mapping (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003), which means that elements from a source domain are transferred onto a target domain. Thus, in a metaphor (e.g., "Her ego is very *fragile*") elements from a source domain (e.g., brittle objects) are mapped onto a target domain (e.g., the mind). When defining metaphor in this way, the trope is clearly distinct from hyperbole. After all, most definitions of hyperbole emphasize elements like extremity (e.g., Norrick, 2004) and exaggeration (e.g., Carston and Wearing, 2015). Such definitions typically imply evaluation along some kind of scale. Under this perspective, hyperbole (emphasizing extreme evaluations) is distinct from metaphor (emphasizing comparison across domains).

A first debate on the relation between metaphor and hyperbole hinges on the definition of metaphor. Within Relevance Theory (RT), Sperber and Wilson (1985, 2008) see metaphor as "simply a range of cases at one end of a continuum that includes literal, loose and hyperbolic interpretations" (Sperber and Wilson, 2008, p. 84), thereby challenging the CMT perspective on metaphor. RT proposes that the distinction between literal and intended meaning made in metaphor theories like CMT makes metaphor seem special, because its intended meaning is not wholly reflected within the propositional structure. Instead, RT argues that this is the case for every linguistic utterance, because every utterance in communication contains implications and (implicit) propositions that are not (all) reflected within the utterance's grammatical and semantic structure. Thereby, RT assumes that every linguistic utterance is underdetermined in that the speaker expects the addressee to infer certain elements from their statements.

As such, RT takes a different perspective on the relationship between tropes like metaphor and hyperbole. While most theories see metaphor and hyperbole as two distinct and discrete categories of language use (e.g., Burgers et al., 2016b; Claridge, 2011; Kreuz et al., 1996), RT presupposes a continuum between metaphor and hyperbole. To illustrate this continuum, Sperber and Wilson (2008, p. 94) provide the following example:

(1) Joan is an angel.

Utterance (1) can be read as a metaphor in that the person Joan is not literally a divine heavenly being. Yet, this utterance can also be interpreted as hyperbole, in that Joan may be a very kind person, but likely does not possess the level of kindness typically associated with angels. In any case, Sperber and Wilson (2008) propose that whichever of these two interpretations you choose, does not fundamentally alter the way in which utterance (1) is understood, making metaphor and hyperbole more of a continuum rather than two separate discrete categories of language use.

This hypothesis of metaphor and hyperbole being elements of a continuum has recently been challenged by other RT scholars (e.g., Carston and Wearing, 2011, 2015; Rubio-Fernández et al., 2015). These scholars agree with Sperber and Wilson