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Hyperbolic language and its relation to metaphor and irony

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Abstract

Hyperbolic use of language is very frequent but has seldom been thought worthy of serious analytical attention. Hyperbole is usually treated as a minor trope which belongs with one or the other of the two dominant figurative uses of language, metaphor and irony. In this paper, we examine the range of ways in which hyperbole is manifest, in both its 'pure' uses and its prevalent co-occurrences with other tropes. We conclude that it does not align closely with either metaphor or irony but is a distinctive figure of speech in its own right, characterized by the blatant exaggeration of a relevant scalar property for the purpose of expressing an evaluation of a state of affairs. The relative simplicity of hyperbole enables its exploitation of a range of independent mechanisms of non-literal linguistic communication including loose use, metaphor, simile, and expressions of ironical and other attitudes.

Keywords: Hyperbole; Metaphor; Irony; Quantitative shift; Qualitative shift; Evaluative component

1. Introduction

Hyperbole is one of the most widely used figures of speech, and yet it remains significantly understudied in comparison with other figures like metaphor, simile, metonymy and irony. The reason for this may be that it is considered a less interesting, substantial or effective use of language, perhaps even facile or trivial, as compared with these other figures, whose employment requires greater verbal skill and whose effects on hearers and readers are more powerful. But whatever its status as a figure may be, hyperbole's prevalence and familiarity are enough to raise the question of how it works, and this question, as we will indicate, has not yet been adequately answered. Equally unresolved is the question of how it interacts with the many other figures with which it appears to combine.

In the extensive existing literature on figures of speech, metaphor and irony are often taken to be the two central tropes and to be importantly different from each other in the ways they work and the interpretive effects they have. Other figures are then often classified according to whether they pattern more with metaphor or more with irony. So, for instance, simile is taken to cluster with metaphor and understatement (meiosis) with irony. There is an intriguing and quite basic point of disagreement in the scanty existing literature on hyperbole, namely, whether it works more like metaphor or more like irony, so whether it lines up with a family of metaphor-like tropes or a family of irony-like tropes. The few philosophers who have mentioned hyperbole have tended to place it with irony. For example, Nelson Goodman and Robert Fogelin both provide brief analyses of hyperbole and place it alongside irony and understatement. Josef Stern and Sam Guttenplan do

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not discuss hyperbole in its own right, but, in the course of their book-length studies of metaphor, they too place hyperbole together with irony as distinct from metaphor. Similarly, psychologists and linguists interested in the uses and cognitive effects of non-literal language or in its development in children have taken hyperbole to belong with irony, sometimes in fact assuming that it is a kind of irony, e.g. Herb Clark, Herbert Colston and colleagues, Ray Gibbs and John Legitt, Eva Filippova and Janet Astington.

Relevance theorists, on the other hand, have situated hyperbole with metaphor, treating both figures as instances of loose talk, whose interpretation requires the construction of an occasion-specific (or ad hoc) concept (Sperber and Wilson, 1985/86, 1986/95, 2008[1]; Wilson and Carston, 2007). Indeed, Sperber and Wilson have argued that hyperbole and metaphor are essentially *continuous*; that is, they are 'not genuinely distinct categories, at least from descriptive, psycholinguistic, or pragmatic points of view' (2008: 95). Irony, by contrast, works quite differently on this account: it is treated as an echoic use of language, and hence as essentially metarepresentational in a way that metaphor and hyperbole are not (Wilson and Sperber, 1992, 2012; Wilson, 2013).

Clearly, at least one of these views cannot be right. So the question presses: where does hyperbole belong – with metaphor or with irony (or with neither)? We shall use this 'metaphor or irony?' question to structure our investigation of hyperbole, but our ultimate conclusion will be that, while the reasoning of each camp provides important insights which any complete account must accommodate, hyperbolic language use is a distinctive phenomenon in its own right and one that combines in interesting ways with a range of other figures of speech.[2]

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we start with some initial (pre-theoretical) observations about hyperbole and provide some relatively clear examples to work with, including cases that involve hyperbole co-occurring with other figures; in Section 3, we set out some necessary background concerning the distinction between metaphor and irony. Then, in Sections 4 and 5, we assess the lines of thought that have led some theorists to align hyperbole with irony and others to align it with metaphor, extracting the key insights of these opposing positions. Finally, in Section 6, we draw together the conclusions of the earlier sections and argue that there are reasons to think that hyperbole is neither like metaphor nor like irony, but that it functions in a distinctive way that exploits a range of kinds of language use (loose uses, comparisons, categorizations, and expressions of ironical and other kinds of attitude).

2. Preliminary observations and examples

Let's start with a few examples of 'pure' hyperbole, that is, cases that are clearly hyperbolic and do not involve any other kind of non-literal language use:

(1) My piece of cake is *tiny*.
(said by a 10-year old boy after comparing his moderate slice of cake with the slightly bigger one on his older sister's plate)

(2) It's *impossible*.
(said by a first-year undergraduate about a challenging logic problem)

(3) There were *a million* people ahead of me in the queue.
(said after standing in a line that stretched about 40 feet)

(4) Sara's bedroom is the *size of Cornwall*.
(said while describing Sara's new living arrangements (example due to Deirdre Wilson))

Each of these examples exhibits what is arguably the *defining* feature of a hyperbolic utterance, namely, an overt and blatant exaggeration of some property or characteristic. The speaker does not intend to be taken literally and the hearer recognizes this. So, assuming the communication is successful, both parties recognize that the literal description is an overstatement of the actual state of affairs: they both take it that the piece of cake is a reasonable size for a 10-year old child; that the logic problem is difficult but unquestionably solvable; that the queue was only just

[1] The discussion of hyperbole and metaphor in Sperber and Wilson (1985/86, 1986/95) pre-dates the account in terms of ad hoc concepts, but clearly states the position that hyperbole and metaphor are cases of loose use with no discontinuity between them. This claim is carried over into the later ad hoc concept account, which is most clearly articulated in Sperber and Wilson (2008); it is this, most current, version of the theory that we are working with.

[2] We want to emphasize from the outset that the uses of language labeled by these terms – 'hyperbole', 'metaphor', 'irony', 'metonymy', and so on – are very unlikely to delineate natural or uniform classes, but, like virtually all theorists before us, we take widely agreed prototypical instances falling in these intuitive folk categories as our point of departure. The long-term goal is to achieve analyses of cases in terms of the mental processes and mechanisms employed in their expression and interpretation, and we do not expect the taxonomy thereby established to mesh perfectly with any of the pre-theoretic taxonomies, among which there is in any case considerable variation.