Mind the gap

Expressing affect with hyperbole and hyperbolic figures

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Hyperbole is traditionally understood as exaggeration. I argue instead that the point of hyperbole is *emphasis*. By overstating that things are *greater* (*lesser*) than expected, hoped, or desired, we shift the salience of the target property, thus making it more emphatic. This enables to express surprise or other relevant affect in reaction to how much, or how little, our expectations have been either exceeded or thwarted. This purpose is well suited to hyperbolic expression. This is because hyperbole naturally draws a contrast between how things are and how they were expected to be, exaggerating the gap between them. I conclude by considering the characteristics of hyperbolic figures where hyperbole mixes with other figures of speech.

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1. Hyperbole and exaggeration

Humans have a tendency to exaggerate. Not all exaggeration is hyperbole. Sometimes the exaggeration is merely error. Sometimes the purpose of exaggeration is to deceive. A speaker may be aware of this deception, or may also seek to convince himself. On yet other occasions the purpose of the exaggeration is not to deceive, but to convey a point in an emphatic manner.

In hyperbole, the speaker inflates some aspect of reality, but is transparent about this inflation. Consider the following five utterances made by fans of Taylor Swift. The background to these utterances were that these people visited her house:[1]

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1. These are read out on Graham Norton Show: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jLWyenqY5Y

(1) "We were asked to go into the living room and sit down you do not know how much I was sweating during that moment, I was like da fuq is gonna happen my poor heart could not keep up, then all of the sudden she just pops up out of nowhere she appeared out of thin air like David Copperfield and *we all died like for real.*"

(2) "So she says she will be playing her album for us let me tell you the noise that came out of my mouth was not human *I legit almost told mama swift to call me an ambulance cause I wasn't going to make it.*"

(3) "So then we took a little break to stretch our legs and she was passing around rice krispie treats and cookies and I was talking to her Mom for a little and then I walked back in and she was like 'hey babe thanks for coming, do you want a treat'. *And I was like I would but I think I'm dead.*"

(4) "Mid-sentence she stopped talking and pointed to Amanda and said, 'Amanda! I'm so glad that you're here!' *Amanda died. Right there. Died.*"

(5) "Guys just wait for the one she did with Imogen Heap cause damn. That one slayed everyone to heaven and back while listening to the song *I literally had to plan my funeral arrangements cause I wasn't going to make it*".

These are instances of creative, juicy hyperboles, albeit displaying quite dark images of trauma and death. In neither case, however, do the fans expect their listeners to take them literally. Rather, they build on the emotional and imagistic potential of the scenario of death and trauma in order to express the extent and intensity of their thrill that exceeded far more their expectations. This works as a colorful package, blending a mix of extreme experiences. As Graham Norton says, "it's borderline confusing whether they had a good time or not". But the message is clear: they did not have just a good time; they had a whale of a time.

Why choose hyperbole over a literal message? Hyperbole is more rewarding cognitively and emotionally. It has more impact and potential to grab attention in a fun and surprising way. It's rewarding for listeners too: it's much more evocative and eye-catching than just a bland "I had a great time". There is an element of dramatic performance in a well-crafted hyperbole in that the speaker is presenting things as grander, or more terrible, than they actually are. The very choice of words used as a vehicle will determine how much grand or how terrible things really are: the more hilariously ridiculous, the better.

That is useful for two reasons. For one, it indicates that what is said is not to be taken literally. For another, it widens the gap between how things are portrayed to be and how they really are, and how the speaker feels about this gap. Admittedly, some of the expressions used in (1) through (5) are metaphorical in flavour (say,

to convey a terrible experience),[2] and as such they elicit powerful emotions, even though that they are to be taken further in a different direction. The general pattern seems to be a shift in magnitude from saying something negative and morbid to meaning something overwhelmingly positive and exhilarating.

What drives this shift and what is ultimately the speaker's goal in speaking hyperbolically? Clearly, in being hyperbolic one does not mean what one is saying literally. Instead one is overstating the gap between how things are portrayed to be versus how they were expected to be, in order to show how much expectations have been exceeded, whether in positive or negative. This brings into prominence the target property the speaker cares to talk about in a colorful, evocative way. The result is an entertaining way of making the target property more salient and expressing a relevant affect depending on whether the speaker's expectations have been surpassed or thwarted. What's the argument?

In a nutshell, I argue that the essence of hyperbole is to increase the salience of the target property, thereby making it more emphatic, and expressing an attitude about it. Key to this is overstating the gap between what one says and how one would have expected things to normally turn out. This in turn has the correlative effect of increasing the gap between how things actually are and how they were expected to be, with a view to showing how much the former exceeded the latter. As a result, the target property becomes much more in focus than if it were expressed literally. Correlatively, by increasing the gap between reality and expectations, the speaker is also expressing a range of more colourful affective responses that are typically associated with surpassed or thwarted expectations. The bigger the gap, the more intense the affect expressed, because reality is less conforming to expectations. The smaller the gap, the less intense the affect will be, because reality is more conforming to expectations. Let's unpack the key ingredients in a systematic way.

2.   What's in hyperbole?

It is commonly agreed that hyperbolic speakers overtly signal that they *say more than they mean*, or they *say less than they mean*, and want hearers to recognize this. Walton (2017) and Carston & Wearing (2015) have recently made proposals as to how hyperbolic exaggeration is achieved. As Carston & Wearing (2015, p. 85)

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2.   Since the metaphors are here dead metaphors, we can forego the details of what happens in cases where metaphor and hyperbole are combined (I briefly touch on this in Section 5).

note, hyperbole requires that there is *more*, or *less,* of a property *F* than was wanted or expected.

To identify and evaluate the target property *F* that the speaker cares to talk about, we first need to set out a *relevant scale* for measuring *F* in a given context – call it *F-scale*. This can be a scale appropriate for measuring quality, quantity, length, weight, distance, time, intensity of affect, etc. To generalize, the target property *F* is a gradable concept which can be measured along a relevant scale. Notably, *F* need not always be encoded in the expression used hyperbolically, but can be accessed contextually. For example, when I say:

(6)   Last night a whole army of mosquitos was feasting on us.

(7)   We had so much food at the party we could feed the entire Roman army.

the property at issue here – the number of mosquitos, and respectively the quantity of food at the party – is accessed indirectly by inferring from general world knowledge related to the idea of "Roman army", or the metaphoric use of "army of mosquitos".

Second, in order to measure the target property *F* we need to establish the relative distance between a few key points on the *F*-scale. Our first point corresponds to what the speaker says or how things are portrayed to be. The second point corresponds to how things are or what the speaker means to get across. Now, it is well agreed that there is gap between the two (at least they are not identical), with the former point being higher, or lower, on the scale than the latter. The prime question for us is how much higher, or how much lower, and how to calculate the distance between them.

Carston & Wearing note that *F* is more, or less, than was wanted or expected, but don't provide a metric of how to calculate this gap, in particular how to move up or down on the scale with respect to what is said in order to figure out where *F* is on the scale. This gap will also be critical in figuring out what kind of affect hyperbolic speakers typically express and its relative intensity.

Walton (2017) offers a more sophisticated mechanism of scaling up the distance between what is said and what is meant, but doesn't say much about the characteristic affective evaluation. Carston & Wearing (2015) appreciate the affective evaluation that comes with hyperbole, but do not fully explore the mechanics of how that evaluation comes about. They are primarily concerned with characterizing whether the mechanism underpinning hyperbole is more akin to metaphor or irony. I'm not concerned with this question here. Instead I shall argue that hyperbole uses a shift in magnitude to make the target property more salient, thereby making a more emphatic point. The purpose of hyperbole is thus to express with force and colour that the target property is either greater, or lesser, than expected, hoped or desired, and thus express how the speaker feels about the gap.

It's worth noting that similar attention to the idea of "scaling up" with its resulting affect has been developed in a cognitive linguistics framework. Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera (2014), Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2017) and Ruiz de Mendoza (present volume), use the notions of "strengthening a scalar concept" or "scaling up a gradable concept" in order to capture the underlying cognitive modeling of hyperbole as a result of mapping conceptual structure. They take the "source domain" or what I call the vehicle of hyperbole to be a virtually impossible (often counterfactual) scenario, and argue that this is mapped onto a real-world situation ("the target") or what the speaker means to get across. The impossible scenario, they argue, is constructed by "strengthening beyond proportion a scalar concept".

It's worth noting that whereas hyperbole typically makes use of a vehicle invoking unlikely situations such as "This suitcase weighs a ton", there are cases where this need not be an impossible or counterfactual scenario. For example, when I tell you about my 10k run that "It was literally a marathon", it's neither impossible nor counterfactual that my run could have been a marathon, though clearly the point here is to convey that running 10k was harder than I expected, perhaps as hard as it would be running a real marathon.

Also, critical to the conception of these authors is the idea that the central element in the hyperbolic mapping is attitudinal (conveying anger, frustration, awe, etc.). The attitudinal element in the "source domain" is used to reason about the corresponding element in the "target domain", thus magnifying its impact.[3] This is taken to require mental simulation.

This is an interesting explanation, but it's unclear how we move from the affect elicited by what is said to the attitude the speaker seeks to convey. Clearly, what we would experience emotionally in cases such as (1) through (5), were we to take the scenarios of trauma and death at face value, is sadness and sorrow. But this is not what the fans mean, and there is no clear way of moving from such negative affect to the positive affect of excitement and exhilaration that the fans express. More generally, the question arises as to what added value we bring by going to the trouble of considering the affect associated with the "source domain", and whether there are no other more direct means to retrieve the affect the speaker

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3.   Together with John Barnden, we've developed the idea of a "transfer" of affect from the attitude characteristically elicited by the vehicle of hyperbole (were one to take what is said literally), towards the attitude the speaker seeks to express. See Barnden and Popa-Wyatt (2012), Barnden (2017, forth). I am now less convinced that this is what is going on in hyperbole, and whether the former affect brings any significant cognitive benefit that outweighs the effort. The only affect-transfer that is relevant has to do with the force or intensity of the affect, as I explain below, but not with identifying the specific affect.

is expressing. I shall argue that there are, and below I consider other resources that help us provide a more precise mechanism for measuring the target property F, together with the associated attitude.

Focusing on the shift in magnitude of F, and the corresponding affective evaluation, as the key ingredients in hyperbolic uses, I'll explain these by building on Walton (2017) and Carston and Wearing (2015), respectively.

3.   Scaling up F and expressing affect

A key idea for Walton is that to convey how large a quantity is, is to exaggerate how small it is, and to convey how small a quantity is, is to exaggerate how big it is. This involves a particular direction of movement relativized to a relevant scale for measuring the target property F. Walton identifies various points on the scale that we need in order to measure the distance between what is said and what is meant. He first distinguishes between "*explicit content*" (EC) as the content presented (what is literally said), and "*assertive content*" (AC) as the content the speaker means to indicate that it is the case (what is meant).[4] Thus, in overstating, Walton tells us, the speaker is representing F as being either larger, or smaller, than what is really the case.

But to appreciate how much bigger, or how much smaller, F is, Walton introduces a further key point on the scale, which he calls "*salient contrast*" (SC). This amounts to what the speaker is especially concerned to rule out or to deny that is the case in a given context. What makes a contrast salient? This depends on what is normally expected or ordinarily the case in a given context – i.e. what the parties to the conversation are likely to expect given what is salient in the "conversational air" (sometimes even before an assertion is made).

Why should we care about the salient contrast, given that it's something the speaker is keen to deny? What is it a contrast to and how does it help us get to what the speaker *is* concerned to convey? Critically, the way I read Walton, the salient contrast is a contrast to what the speaker wants to get across: it's the thing you might have thought was the case, and you find out it isn't. It's a bit like when I say: "Don't think of an elephant", and you can't help but think of one. Why do we go to the trouble of recovering the salient contrast? Well, knowing where the salient

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4.   The question of whether the hyperbolic content is asserted or implicated requires more attention than I can give here, so I'll continue using Walton's terminology with the caveat that I'm not taking a stance here as to the semantics/pragmatics of hyperbole.

contrast is on the scale is useful because it enables to scale up (or scale down) the gap between what is said and what is meant, by measuring the distance from each point to the salient contrast. What's essential to hyperbole, Walton argues, is that in the assumed conversational context the distance between what the speaker says (EC) and what she means to deny (SC) is *greater* than the distance between what she means to deny (SC) and what she means to indicate is the case (AC). In other words, this means that AC is a point in between EC and SC. This will come handy later on.

To see what this amounts to, let's work with a simple example. Consider the following case from Walton: I'm looking out of the window, and upon seeing a dozen policemen I say to my companion:
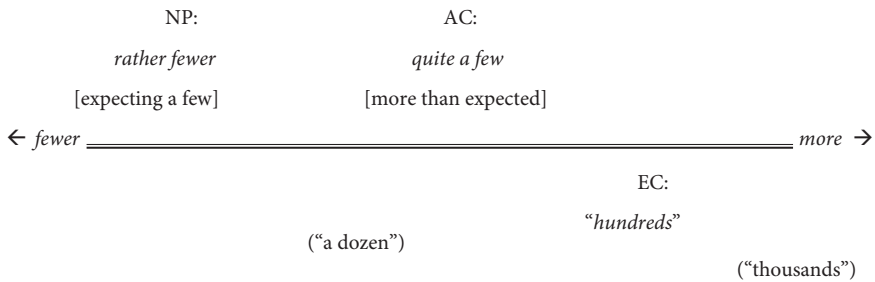
(8)   There are *hundreds* of cops out there.

The speaker is clearly not expecting her companion to understand that there are literally hundreds of cops. Instead she is exaggerating how many cops there are in order to convey that there are significantly more than normal – say, there are significantly more than two and significantly fewer that 200. If we take EC to be corresponding to hundreds of cops on the relevant scale, then we can calculate the relative location of AC – namely, some point or interval on the scale that it is lower than EC, say, there are *quite a few* cops out there.

Why is it much more natural to think that the speaker is overstating how *large* the number of cops is, rather than how *few* there are? Walton says that it's more natural to assume that what's of interest in (8) is that there are as many cops on the street as there are – i.e. the *large* number of cops, rather than how few there are. So what the speaker is keen to get across is their abundance. Normally there are one or two or none, so what's salient here, insofar as it's unexpected, is that there are significantly more cops than normal. To express this sense of surprise, the speaker is portraying reality as way more inflated than it is. She exaggerates the gap between SC – how many policemen would have normally been on the streets (say, *fewer*) – and AC – how many they roughly turned out to be (say, *quite a few*), thus conveying that there are *quite a few* cops, *rather than fewer*.

What's the underlying mechanism? Essentially, in order to locate AC on the relevant scale, we need to determine how far up, or how far down, we need to move on the scale with respect to what is said (EC). But to determine this, we need an anchoring point with respect to which we can measure the direction of movement and the distance from EC to AC. Here is where the presence of the salient contrast is important. But instead of thinking of salient contrast as what the speaker is concerned to rule out, as Walton suggests, I want to think of it as *normative point* (NP) on the relevant *F*-scale, which captures the range of expectations,

hopes and desires that are raised to salience only to convey that they have been either surpassed or thwarted.[5] This concerns what one would normally expect, hope or desire to happen, given what was said and what is generally known or salient, but which the speaker is keen to convey that it didn't happen. This need not be a specific expectation in the mind of a particular speaker/hearer, but rather a generally held base-line expectation that both speaker/hearer can understand as the normal or typical thing to happen in the circumstances. This means that conversational participants are able to easily recover such expectations from context and bring them to bear in reasoning about the point the speaker seeks to convey. This may be just a terminological variation on Walton's proposal, but I'll show that it enables us a better metric to position AC on the *F*-scale.

To illustrate, we can adapt Walton's schema by making room for the normative point on the scale, and representing the hyperbole in (8) as follows:

NP: AC:

rather fewer   *quite a few*

[expecting a few]   [more than expected]

← *fewer* ═══════════════════════════════════════ *more* →

                                                                    EC:

                                                          "*hundreds*"

                        ("a dozen")

                                                                        ("thousands")

Key here is the idea that the gap between what speakers say (EC) and how they expect things to be (NP) is *greater* than the gap between how they expected things to be (NP) and how they turned out to be (AC). This is after all the whole point of exaggerating. In order to draw attention that reality is larger than expected, speakers exaggerate the gap between what they say and how they expected things to be. This results in a *shift in salience* of the target property: it's *more* (or *less*) than normal or expected, but it's *less* (or *more*) than what is said to be. This contrast helps to bring the target property into focus and make a more emphatic point about it.

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5.   This is different from Carston and Wearing's (2015, p. 84) idea of "normative bias", which, following Wilson (2013), they take to be fundamental of irony. In particular, it explains why irony tends to be negative, criticizing rather than praising. This is because irony can easily exploit socially shared norms about how things should be, in order to draw attention at how such expectations have been thwarted. Carston and Wearing (2015, p. 85) insist that because hyperbole can convey both positive and negative evaluations, it follows that it lacks a normative bias.

Generalizing, we can think of the normative point as a counterpoint on the *F*-scale that helps locate how far up, or how far down, AC is with respect to EC. If EC is high up on the scale, we need to lower down AC, but in such a way that it's still higher than NP or what one would normally expect in the circumstances. If EC is low down on the scale, we need to raise up AC, but in such a way that it's still lower than NP or what one would normally expect in the circumstances. Thus, NP helps balance out where AC is with respect to both EC and NP. Note that AC need not be an absolute or precise point on the scale but rather a relative point that is located comparatively, either closer to EC or to NP. What matters is that even though what is meant is more (or less) than what is said (EC), it's still less (or more) than what would normally be expected (NP).

This means that in order to locate AC on the *F*-scale, we first need to establish the direction of movement with respect to EC (whether up or down), and then we need to modulate how far we go in that direction such that we are still within the confines of NP. This means not only that AC must remain between EC and NP, but also its closeness to either of them depends on how overstated the gap between EC and NP is. The bigger the gap, the bigger the contrast between expectations and reality is, and thus a greater sense of surprise the speaker is expressing. Conversely, the smaller the gap, the closer to the literal meaning we get and the less surprising it is. For example, compare two variations on (8):

(9)   There were *thousands* of cops out there.

(10)   There were *a dozen* cops out there.

The gap in (9) is bigger than it is in (10), and this correlates with different degrees of surprise that the speaker is expressing. Essentially, the more one's expectations are surpassed, or thwarted, the more forceful the affect expressed. The closer it is to what is expected, the less unsurprising it is because it conforms to one's expectations. Thus, saying something hyperbolically helps shifting the salience of what we mean to indicate, compared to making the same point literally.

The gist of hyperbole thus resides in conveying that things have turned out way better, or way worse, than what one might have expected, hoped or desired in the circumstances. This comparison is possible precisely because of the anchoring in the normative point, which enables to compare how things have turned out to be relative to how they were expected to be in the circumstances. In this way we are able to appreciate how much more the former exceeded, or conversely fell short of, the latter. This captures Carston & Wearing's intuition that the target property *F* which the speaker is keen to convey is more, or less, than expected or desired. When expectations, hopes and desires are surpassed, speakers will express positive affect: they may be surprised, amazed, thrilled, excited, or in awe. When

expectations, hopes and desires are thwarted, they will express negative affect: they may be disappointed, dissatisfied, or complain.

This affective element is important because it is the reason why speakers go to the trouble of contrasting how things are, relative to how they were expected to be, in order to draw attention how much reality fell short of their expectations, or how much it surpassed them. This is what they primarily care to get across, in addition to conveying the magnitude of the target property. Walton doesn't explicitly address the affective evaluation in hyperbole, though it's compatible with his account, if we think of the salient contrast as a normative point on the *F*-scale, which captures thwarted or surpassed expectations, hopes and desires. There is a further consequence that falls out about the force or intensity of the affect expressed. In particular, using this method of scaling up the gap between what speakers say and what they mean, we can predict that the force of the affect expressed correlates with how big or how small the gap is between what they say (EC) and how things were expected to be but didn't turn out that way (NP).

We thus reached a richer understanding of what hyperbolic speakers are up to in *saying more than they mean*. Namely, they shift the salience of the target property to make a more emphatic point, and in doing so they express how they feel about the gap between how things are and how they were expected to be.

4.   Context-relative scaling

So far, we saw that hyperbole involves evaluating the magnitude of a target property *F* along a relevant scale. This property may be positive or negative, but critically it is gradable. So, to assess how large, or how small *F* is, we need to move either up or down along the *F*-scale. As a rule of thumb, if what is said is high up on the scale, then what is meant would typically go low down on the scale.[6] Conversely, if what is said is low down on the scale, then what is meant would typically go high up on the scale. What results is a significant gap between what we say and what we mean. As I suggested above, what matters is not an absolute or precise unity for measuring *F*, but rather a comparative measure of the form: *F is more, or less, than expected or desired*. The bigger the exaggeration, the more forceful the affect expressed is likely to be.

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6.   Carston and Wearing (2015, p. 81) also point out that key to a hyperbolic use is that the description used is stronger than a "*weaker scaled-down description*" the speaker means to convey.

Now, in order to implement a scaling operation in a given hyperbolic use, we have to take into account the contextual variation of the relevant scale.[7] For example, consider (11) (from Carston & Wearing), uttered by a small boy realizing that his bigger sister has been served a piece of cake that is slightly larger than his own.
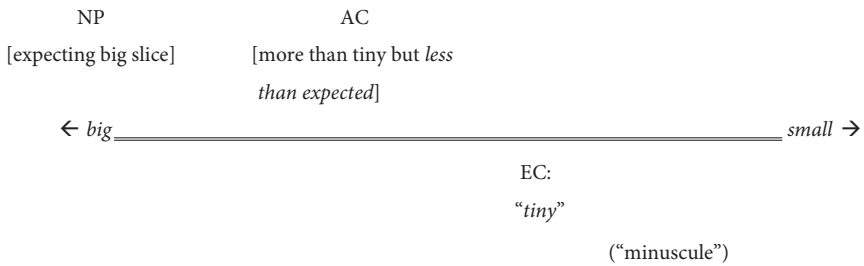
(11) My piece of cake is *tiny*.

The boy regards the size of his piece of cake as smaller than he expected or wanted. He's obviously unhappy about this. What matters here is not that the size of his cake is small, because it isn't, but rather that it's smaller compared to that of his sister's.

What's going on here? In order to evaluate the size of the cake at issue we need to invoke a conceptualized scale for cake size. This scale obviously varies depending on the purpose at issue, here what the cake *is for*. Is it for a wedding?; for a 4-yr or a 10yr child?; for someone overweight?; or someone on a diet? Clearly, different purposes for cake eating come with different expectations about what the standard or ideal size is in each context. Now, for example imagine that (11) is uttered by a 4yr old boy, complaining that her 10yr old sister got a bigger slice. So, what the boy is doing here is shifting the context from a scale of *<cake-for-small-child>* to a scale of *<cake-for-big-child>*, so that when evaluating "tiny" with respect to the latter scale, what we get is an increased differential in the cake size that the boy hoped or desired and which he didn't get.

What results is a bigger gap between the size of cake that he says he's been served (EC) and the size of cake he would have liked to eat (NP), since by contrasting what he's got compared to the expected size on the *<cake-for-big-child>* scale, he indicates he should have got a comparatively bigger size (or at least as equal to that of his sister's). Thus, by drawing attention to this increased differential between how much he says he's got (EC) and how much he would have hoped to get (NP), the boy is emphasizing how much less cake he received. That's reasonable cause for complaint, and the bigger this gap, the more forceful his dissatisfaction. We can represent this as follows:

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7. Cappelen and Lepore (2005), in a useful discussion on comparative adjectives (pp. 21, 22), discuss the reading of "That building is small." They state "… the building in question is not being said to be small for an object in general (whatever that may mean) (p. 21), implying again that the nature of such types of assessments as 'small' is uncertain. Lasersohn (2005) argues that ¨truth values of sentences containing predicates of 'personal taste' such as *fun* or *tasty* must be relativized to individuals." Perhaps comparative adjectives, additionally, should be included in such a group.

NP   AC
[expecting big slice]   [more than tiny but *less*
                                           than expected]

← *big* _____ *small* →

                                              EC:
                                             "*tiny*"

                                                     ("minuscule")

Now, if the boy wanted to make his complaint even stronger, he could have used "microscopic", "minuscule", or "infinitesimally small" instead of "tiny". In this way, by overstating the gap between what is said (EC) and what was expected (NP) even more, he would have created a bigger gap between what he was actually served and how much he would have liked to be served, thus shifting the salience of the small size as a way of expressing a forceful dissatisfaction. Of course, the limits of extending this gap are subject to considerations of reasonableness in that the chosen scale of measurement must be appropriate to quantify the target property. Had the little boy said "my cake is a grain of sand", that wouldn't work as a reasonable measure to quantify cake size that would be believable. Hyperbole must be believable in its exaggeration, if it is to succeed.
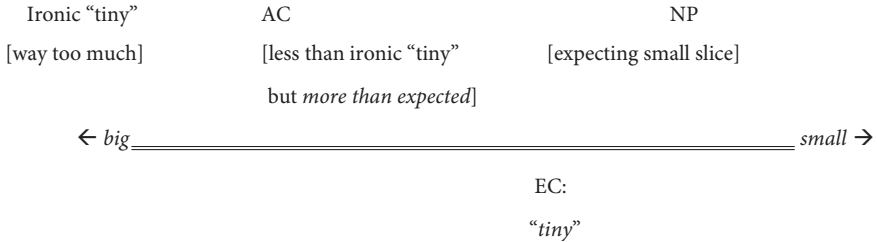
Shifting gears, imagine that I've told you I want some cake but also that I'm on a slimming diet. Now, when you bring me a full size of cake, I utter (11). Here again it's not the case that the cake is small; after all it's a normal size portion. It's just bigger than I wanted. So, if there is a sense in which I'm exaggerating, it's not exaggerating how small it is, but rather how big it is. This is because I'm ironic in addition to being hyperbolic. I don't mean what I say, but rather that you gave me a way too bigger piece of cake than I'd have liked or expected, in order to draw attention to how much this fell short of my expectations. What's the mechanism here?

As in the child's cake example, there is a context-shift in choosing the appropriate scale for evaluating the size of cake. Here we move from a *<normal-diet>* scale to a *<slimming-diet>* scale where a smaller piece of cake is expected and desirable, so that what counts as a normal size portion on the former counts as a big portion on the latter. This shift is brought about by pretence.[8] I pretend to be the kind of person who would find the size of cake that I've been served small in order to convey that it is in fact way too big. In other words, by evaluating "tiny"

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8.   Irony is explained by some authors as involving pretence. For various developments of pretence, see Grice (1975), Clark & Gerrig (1984), Walton (1990), Currie (2006), Recanati (2004), Colston (2015), Popa-Wyatt (2009, 2014, 2017, 2018), Barnden (2017, 2020), Ruiz de Mendoza (2014, 2020).

with respect to the *<slimming-diet>* scale, what we get is a scaling down from the ironic "tiny" and a scaling up from the normative point corresponding to the fact that I was expecting a small slice. We can represent this as follows:

Ironic "tiny"	AC	NP
[way too much]	[less than ironic "tiny"	[expecting small slice]
	but *more than expected*]	

$\leftarrow$ *big* ———————————————————————————— *small* $\rightarrow$

EC:

"*tiny*"

This shifts the salience of how much bigger the slice of cake was compared to what I expected or wanted. In addition to being hyperbolic, I also draw attention to how foolish one would be to take me at face value, thus complaining how insensitive the waiter was.

This shows that hyperbole is deeply contextual. The same utterance can be a hyperbole serving different purposes. This is because the relevant scale along which the target property is to be measured can vary with context. Relative to a context and the appropriate scale therein, different directions of movement along the scale are permissible to recover the hyperbolic point.

Thus, varying with context we can also see a variation in the nature of the affect expressed. We often hear people saying "I'm dead serious", or that something is "the best thing ever", "the greatest", "unbelievable", "jaw-droppingly great", "tremendous", "triumphant", and the like, as terms of praise designed to promote something as being slightly better than it actually is. We hear this way too often from certain politicians in the U.S., referring to America as "the greatest country on Earth", with the goal of selling an ideal image of America. We also hear pessimistic people for whom everything is "terrible", "the worst thing ever", "bad", "awful", and the like, and who thus seek to downgrade something as lower than it is. Such affective strategies are very effective rhetorical devices that serve to induce particular kinds of emotional responses in audience members.

5.   Hyperbolic compounds

So far, we've looked at self-standing hyperbolic utterances – so-called 'pure hyperbole' – where hyperbole operates directly on the literal meaning of expressions to increase the salience of the target property along a relevant scale. There are, however, nice examples where hyperbole combines with other figures of speech

within a single utterance. Carston and Wearing (2015, p. 81) list a wide range of possible combinations including hyperbole:

(12)   That child is the devil incarnate.   (hyperbole and metaphor)

(13)   They go about together like Siamese twins.   (hyperbole and simile)

(14)   The gargantuan paunch over there is my step-father.
                                                              (hyperbole and metonymy)

(15)   It's the end of the world.   (hyperbole and irony)
        [describing someone's angry reaction when he finds he's got a parking fine]

(16)   Those tickets cost an arm and a leg.   (hyperbole and idiom)

(17)   Money is the root of all evil.   (hyperbole and proverb)
        *[in response to a situation in which someone has claimed a little more on their
        expenses than they were strictly entitled to]*

What makes hyperbole so flexible in mixing with all sorts of figurative uses, as well as stock phrases like idioms and proverbs? My contention is that what makes hyperbole so versatile is that it's intrinsically evaluative in nature, and thus it can operate on any sort of property to make it more emphatic.

The question arises as to how these figures combine, what constraints they put on the interpretation of each other, and whether or not they a form a new encompassing compound that builds on both figures. I don't have the space to address these questions in details, but in Popa-Wyatt (2020) I argue that we shouldn't think of cases as in (12) through (17) as hyperbolic compounds along the lines of ironic metaphor – i.e. in the sense of a figurative compound where one figure builds on another.[9] Instead, I suggest, we should think of such mixes as hyperbolic figures in which the dominant figure is merely coloured with hyperbolic tinges. Here I'll confine myself to briefly laying out the characteristic features of hyperbolic figures, and unpack the implications they have.

It is very common for metaphor to combine with hyperbole. We often say of someone that she's a "saint", "angel", "star", "Maria Teresa"; that he's a "giant", "rocket", "dynamite", "towering figure", "devil", "genius", "Spartan", etc. These are hyperbolic metaphors because the metaphorical expressions have a hyperbolic quality in that they locate the target property either at a positive or negative extreme of the relevant scale. Thus, saying of someone that "*she's an angel*" conveys that she's very kind, good, and ready to help, more than anyone else, but not to an extremely high degree of helping with no fail. Thus, by placing metaphorical

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9.   See Popa-Wyatt (2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2020, 2017, 2018, ms), Carston and Wearing (2015).

features at a high point on a relevant scale for measuring kindness, the hyperbole shifts the salience of those metaphorical features, making them more emphatic. How do metaphor and hyperbole work together?

One hypothesis is that metaphor and hyperbole mesh well because they differ in nature and purpose – metaphor is about a qualitative shift; hyperbole about a quantative shift – so they complement each other well when they combine. This insight has been developed in Popa-Wyatt (2009, Chapter 9). More recently, Rubio-Fernandez, et al (2015, p. 24), Carston and Wearing (2015, p. 88) argue that "hyperbolic uses involve a shift of magnitude along a dimension which is intrinsic to the encoded meaning of the hyperbole vehicle, while metaphor involves a multi-dimensional qualitative shift away from the encoded meaning of the metaphor vehicle".[10]

Key to this conception is the idea that both metaphor and hyperbole are *descriptive* or *representational* devices. They are used to talk about some state of affairs in the world with a view to describing a situation by other means than literal. With metaphor, speakers describe how things are in the world by evoking similarities in thinking about one thing in terms of another. As a result, we can *see similarities* between distinct conceptual domains, thus seeing the world in a new, evocative light. With hyperbole, as argued above, the description of the world is exaggerated in order to convey a weaker evaluation. So hyperbole is fundamentally evaluative. This enables it to take as its object any description of a state of affairs, be that literal or metaphorical, which suggests that when combining together the hyperbole operates on the metaphor.

What's the role of hyperbole in the mixing and what kind of new figure arises out of this mixing? Let us consider a few more evocative examples:

(18)   That surgeon is a *butcher*.

(19)   Sara's bedroom is the *size of Cornwall*   (Carston & Wearing 2015)

(20)   You would have thought him a *basket of mulberries*   (Aristotle's *Rhetoric*).

(21)   His eloquence could *split rocks*.

What stands out here is that the metaphor is much more emphatic than had the speaker chosen a non-hyperbolic vehicle. For example, what we exaggerate in (18)

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10.   Carston and Wearing (2015, p. 89) also insist that in both metaphor and hyperbole the meaning is "lodged in the words", thus affecting the propositional content conveyed, and their interpretation requires an adjustment of the literal meaning of the target expression. However, they differ in purpose: "metaphor is a bid to give precise expression to a thought or experience for which there is no literal linguistic encoding, while what is fundamental to hyperbole is the expression of an evaluation (positive or negative) of a state of affairs".

is that the surgeon is extremely incompetent;[11] in (19) that Sara's living arrangements were very spacious and comfortable; in (20) that the man had an immense black eye; and in (21) that the man's eloquence was remarkable. What are the constraints that undergird such mixing?

My contention is that hyperbole in these cases works as an interpretive effect, modulating the work of the metaphor, and thereby intensifying the characteristic metaphorical effects. Essentially, the hyperbole works by placing the metaphorical content at one of the extremes of the relevant scale in order to convey that the target metaphorical property is greater, or lesser, than expected or desired. Thus, by exaggerating the metaphorical features, the metaphor becomes more emphatic with hyperbolic tinges. The role of the hyperbole in the mix is to shift the salience of the metaphorical effects, rendering them more colourful and forceful than they would have otherwise been.

Now what about when hyperbole mixes with irony?[12] Their interaction works differently than in hyperbolic metaphor because both hyperbole and irony are evaluative. They are both in the business of expressing how the speaker feels about how things turn out compared to how they were expected, hoped, or desired. Where they differ is in the object of the evaluation: hyperbole involves an exaggerated evaluation of a situation or a state of affairs, whereas irony involves an evaluation of someone's thoughts, hopes and expectations with a view to ridiculing them. If both hyperbole and irony are evaluative devices, how do they mesh together?

Various people have noted that hyperbole works to facilitate the perception of irony in that it works as a cue to the speaker's mocking attitude (Kreuz & Roberts 1995, Wilson 2006, 2017, Carston & Wearing 2015). Consider again the case of hyperbolic irony in (11) – *This cake is tiny* – said in response to the waiter who served me a considerable size of cake, after I've told him I'm on a diet. Clearly, if there is a sense in which I'm exaggerating, it's not exaggerating how small it is, but rather how big it is. Hyperbole serves to exaggerate the claim literally expressed, making it less credible in the context so that it cannot be taken at face value. By heightening its ridiculousness, it thus function as a cue for the hearer to look for an ironic interpretation to the effect that I've been served way too much cake.

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11.   The incompetence element in (16) has been discussed by blending theorists (e.g. Grady et al. 1999) as arising from integrating the butcher's way of cutting meat and the surgeon's operating on a patient into a single image.

12.   For previous work see Colston and Keller (1998), Colston and O'Brien (2000), Colston (2013), Barnden and Popa-Wyatt (2012), Barnden (2017, 2020).

The hyperbole serves here to lower down the ironic point on the scale so that it's less than what I meant ironically, but still more than what I hoped or desired. In this way, I convey my dissatisfaction by drawing attention to how much this fell short of my expectations.

More creative cases involve hyperbole deploying eccentric elaborated scenarios to produce an even more emphatic ironic point, as in the following excerpt from *Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy*:

> (22)   "It is most gratifying that your enthusiasm for our planet continues unabated. As a token of our appreciation, we hope you will enjoy the two thermonuclear missiles we've just sent to converge with your craft. To ensure ongoing quality of service, your death may be monitored for training purposes. Thank you."

By exaggerating the sense of gratitude and contrasting it with a negative way of showing appreciation, the speaker creates a contrast of a magnitude that gives rise to humorous effects. Here the hyperbole serves to intensify the characteristic ironic effects, rendering them more colorful and forceful.

6.   Concluding remarks

In this paper, I've argued that we can think of what hyperbolic speakers are doing in *saying more, or less, than they mean* in terms of a mechanism of shifting the salience of the target property to make a more emphatic point. This enabled a definition of hyperbole not just in terms of its function of exaggeration, but in terms of its other effects and purposes. I characterized its function as a shift of magnitude along a scale of measurement, together with the expression of affect about how speakers feel about the gap between how things are and how they were expected to be. In terms of its effect, it uses this magnitude shift to make the target property more salient. We've seen through examples that the key purpose of hyperbole is to express with colour and force that the target property is either greater or lesser than expected or desired. Finally, when hyperbole mixes with other figures, it works by magnifying the characteristic effects of the figure it operates on.

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