

A Pragmatic-Linguistic Study of Hyperbole in English Political Discourse

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Abstract

Within figurative language research, tropes such as metaphor and irony have received the greatest amount of attention, while other non-literal forms, like hyperbole, have been relatively ignored as a result of such intensive research effort.

Although hyperbole has been, since antiquity, one of the many figures of speech discussed within the general framework of rhetoric, the emphasis has been primarily laid on defining and classifying this trope. In contemporary language research, the paucity of studies addressing hyperbole is most notable, probably because in other disciplines it has been considered a classic trope whose study belongs to that of rhetoric. Thus, no serious attention has been paid to the study of hyperbole in the domains of linguistics, psychology, philosophy or literary criticism. Most of the empirical work on exaggeration has involved comparisons of frequency and use in different cultures.

This study focuses on the notion of hyperbole in political speeches, and attempts to offer itself as a tentative contribution to the field of figurative language and political discourse analysis. Throughout the study hyperbole will be used synonymously with exaggeration and overstatement.

The present study aims at finding out how hyperbolic expressions are identified and presented in English political discourse at linguistic and pragmatic levels.

1. Introduction

There is a belief that English people are less likely to overstate. This is explained by Ball (1970:204), but this view cannot be accepted in this study, since, as will be revealed, English politicians show a great interest in using hyperbolic expressions in their speeches.

We are not; let us face it, a gesticulatory people. We are less likely to "wear our hearts on our sleeves" than many other people, and perhaps for this reason have acquired the reputation of being reserved, aloof, passionless, and undemonstrative.

Rhetoric practice has traditionally been associated with the production of persuasive speech, and later with aesthetics and literature; however, only relatively recently has the study of figurative language been switched into domain of banal, everyday language. Thus, few studies have been addressed to "Hyperbole" whether in the domain of linguistics, psychology, philosophy or literary criticism.

Spitzbardt (1963) view the divergence of style with words and expressions of exaggeration from a socio-psycholinguistic perspective. They believe that one may easily surmise that the admiration of the big word spread from the seacoast to the frontier, where new coinages now became a sport of the unlettered, fitting in neatly with other hyperbolic characteristics of tall-talk. Such kinds of "tall-talk", "high-sounding mouth filling words" are described by Spitzbardt (ibid:280) in the following way:

..... *A form of utterance ranging in composition from striking concoctions of ingeniously contrived epithets expressing disparagement or encomium, to wild hyperbole, fantastic simile and metaphor, and a highly bombastic display of oratory, employed to impress the listener with the physical prowess or general superiority of the speaker.*

2. Hyperbole in English

Going back to the time of Socrates and Aristotle, "hyperbole" has a long history of study as a rhetorical figure in written texts. The ancient Greek students of rhetoric have given the name hyperbole (hy-PER-bol_lee) from "hyperballein", i.e., to exceed, hit beyond the mark, from "hyper" overt "ballein" to throw, cast. The word "hyperbole" in English is identified as extravagant exaggeration by which something is represented as much greater or less better or worse, or as involving a greater intensity than in reality, or beyond possibility; a statement exaggerated fancifully through excitement, or for effect. (Gibbs, 1999;17)

Hyperbole is a reflection of deliberate exaggeration to heighten an effect along with metaphor and simile. It is a figure of speech in which emphasis is achieved by deliberate exaggeration and not intended to be taken literally; for example *Hurry we are hours late* (Warren and Brooks 1970:484-85). On the other hand, Norrick (1982: 70) defines overstatement: The action or act of overstating, a statement which exceeds the limits of facts; exaggeration.

Hyperbole, actually, is an exaggeration for the sake of effect or emphasis, i.e., it magnifies and up scales reality, and, naturally up scaling products, a difference with reality. The frequency of hyperbole in everyday conversation has its testimony in many idiomatic expressions, since English people are more accustomed to speak in figures. In fact their instantaneously transpose expressions such as "million" into "many" and "hours" into "every". If one says *her eyes nearly popped out of her head*, it refers to the highest point on a scale of surprise. Other examples may reflect the rhetorical effect such as that used by Shakespeare in his play of "Lady MacBeth", where the qualitative contrast between "All" and "Little" is expressed:

Example (1):

All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand

Moreover, overstatement is highly context bound, i.e., it is sometimes difficult to identify with absolute certainty in a corpus, for example: *you let every door in the house open* might be a factually correct statement or a case of hyperbole. However, hyperbolic intention not only affects the audience, but the user too and it is not designed to embellish meaning but to constitute. Therefore, hyperbole depends on a kind of joint pretence in which speakers and addressees create activity, (see Fogelin 1998, Drew and Holt 1998, Colston and Keller 1996).

From the survey above of both *hyperbole* and *overstatement*, a question may be raised: "Are overstatement and hyperbole different or are they synonyms?". According to Douglas

(1931:23-42), "overstatement" and "exaggeration" contain the basal idea, and though they are synonyms of "hyperbole", neither is its equivalent. Thus, none of them must be confined to the meaning – making something appear greater than it reality is – since it might be the opposite. In other words, one may say paradoxically that an overstatement may be understatement, and vice versa. For instance, saying that the muster seed is *the least of all the seeds* may indicate an understatement of the size of the seed and an overstatement of the difference between it and other seeds. Hence, in either case it is exaggeration in a rhetorical figure, thus the minifying and magnifying are viewed as literal facts but make an effective illustration of truth (c.f. Spitzbardt 1963:278, Leech 1983:146, Colston 1997:44). Moreover, whether overstatement is intentional or not it is exaggeration, whereas hyperbole is an intentional exaggeration, i.e., not to deceive but to convey truth. But, still some cases are ambiguous and reveal uncertainty in knowing with which to deal.

Claridge (2011:6) believes that hyperbole is traditional term taken from classical rhetoric and thus is associated with formal and persuasive speech, later with stylistics and literature, while overstatement and exaggeration are everyday terms with no clear affiliation to any domain or use. The former is the oldest in this sense attested in the English language and the latter is used only later in the relevant meaning. Gibbs (1994:23) distinguishes between hyperbole as intentional exaggeration and overstatement as non-intentional. While this make sense given the origins of the two, especially of hyperbole as a means of persuasive discourse, the distinction in individual instances of use would be very difficult, as there is no clear-cut dividing line between intentionality and non-intentionality but rather shady transition area. Depending on the stated facts, hyperbole can be considered the life feature and the umbrella term of both overstatement and exaggeration.

3. Methodology

This study is limited to the linguistic and pragmatic analysis of hyperbole in English political written discourse selected randomly. The English sample consists of six selected speeches made by well-known British figures of politics, namely; Winston Churchill (The Sinews of Peace, March 1946- at the White House, April 1963), Margret Thatcher (Youth for Europe, June 1979- Speech to Nottingham Police Academy, July 1980), and Tony Blair (speech on foreign affairs, Tuesday 15th December 1997- speech to Parliament concerning Iraq, Thursday 17 December 1998), with a corpus above 12550 words.

The analysis of the English data under study is based on two levels: linguistics which constitutes two sub levels: lexical and sentential, and pragmatics in terms of the kinds of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) and communicative conditions for identifying hyperbole in the data. In terms of these levels, the hyperbolic expressions are analyzed and discussed according to their realization in the data.

4. Linguistic Analysis of Hyperbole

In the present study, the linguistic analysis is carried at two levels: lexical (word class) level involves investigation of nouns, verbs, adjectives and downtoners (adverbs of degree), whereas sentential level includes whole sentence (declarative and conditional), negation – exception, and clausal hyperbole. In the following discussion each form of hyperbole grasped

from the data is realized in terms of its frequency and percentage, as expressed in table (5) on page 118.

Table (1): Lexical Analysis of Hyperbole

	Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Downtowners	Total
Fr.	145	32	221	206	604
Pc.	24%	5.29%	36.58%	34.13%	100%

4.1 Nouns in hyperbole

Underlying the category of nouns denoting hyperbole, three types are recognized in the data: emphatic plural, numeral and single nouns. The total of the three types in the data is 145 with 24% out of the total occurrences of word classes. This frequency of occurrence makes nouns third in the grade of other word classes (table 1 above). [For details on the classification of nouns according to type and percentage see Table (2) below.]

Table (2) Nouns of Hyperbolic Use

	Emphatic plural	Numeral	Single Nouns	Total
Fr.	8	58	79	145
Pc.	5.51%	40%	54.49%	100%

Of the 145 instances of nouns in the data, the highest frequency rate goes to single nouns which constitute 79 instances with 54.49% as shown in the following example.

Example (2):

... Let us ensure that the Voice of Freedom speaks with firmness, and courage and imagination to a troubled world. (Churchill, 1963)

4.2 Verbs in hyperbole

In the case of exaggeration, there are 32 instances, forming a percentage of 5.29% out of the total verbs of the data (604), as in the following example,

Example (3):

Amid his heavy burdens, duties, and responsibilities, the President has travelled a thousand miles to dignify and magnify our meeting here to-day and to give me an opportunity of addressing this kinder nation, as well as my own countrymen across the ocean, and perhaps some other countries too. (Churchill, 1946)

Churchill, in this example, shows his gratitude and feelings towards the president of the United States of America, which clearly implied sense of exaggeration carried by the verbs "dignify" and "magnify" in relation to what follows.

4.3 Adjectives in hyperbole

Through the analysis of the data, the category of overstated use of adjectives comes first among other parts of speech in frequency. This has been mostly signified by two forms: single adjectives and comparative/ superlative forms. Both are used in 221 instances making up 36.58% out of the total occurrences of adjectives in the whole data (604), as displayed in table (3) below. Positive adjectives come with the highest frequency in comparison with the comparative and superlative forms. Consider the following example:

Example (4):

... In particular, we are very sensitive to the imminence of Ramadan and very reluctant to have to start a military campaign during Ramadan. (Thatcher, 1979)

Table (3): Adjectives of Hyperbolic Use

	Positive Adjective	Comparative/Superlative	Total
Fr.	187	34	221
Pc.	84.61%	15.39%	100%

4.4 Downtoners in hyperbole

Downtoners of hyperbole represent 206 instances making up 34.13% out of total (604).consider the following examples:

Example (5):

It would have been highly risky in military terms, and likely to reduce significantly the effect of our attacks. (Thatcher, 1979)

The downtoner used in example (5) is indicators of exaggeration as it intensifies the intended message.

4.5 Sentential level-hyperbole

Hyperbolic forms at the sentence level are realized by whole sentence (declarative and conditional), negation-exception, and clausal hyperbole. The analysis of the data has revealed 43 instances of this consideration. Whole sentence comes with the highest frequency. See table 4

Table (4) Hyperbolic Expressions at the Sentential Level

	Whole sentence		Negation-exception	Clausal hyperbole	Total
	Declarative	Conditional			
Fr.	85	18	0	13	116
Pc.	73.27%	15.52%	0	11.22%	100%

Declarative sentence comes with the highest frequency in the total data of the sentence level and conditional sentence comes next in use. It has 85 instances making up 73.27% out of the total (116). Consider the following examples

Example (6) declarative sentence

To give security to these countless homes, they must be shielded from the two giant marauders, war and tyranny. (Churchill, 1946)

Example (7) Whole sentence

History is being made in this month of June 1979. (Churchill, 1963)

Example (8) Conditional sentence

If the Western Democracies stand together in strict adherence to the principle of the United Nations Charter, their influence for furthering those principle will be immense and no one is likely to molest them. ((Churchill, 1946)

Clausal hyperbole : As for the hyperbolic expressions of the clausal level. They are displayed through lexical items which the clause contains. Most of these items include overstated use of adjectives or numbers. Example (20) is typical for such instances.

Example (9)

... on a massive scale hundreds of thousands, ... (Thatcher 1979)

Table (5): Linguistic Analysis of Hyperbole

	Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Downtoners	Sentence	Total
F	145	32	221	206	116	720
r						
.						
P	20.14%	4.44 %	30.69 %	28.62 %	16.11%	100
c						%
.						

5. Pragmatic Analysis of Hyperbole

In order to identify modifying devices and strategies as hyperbole, a number of acts may cause a threat to the face of either the writer/addresser or reader/addressee. These acts represent what is intended to be done by a verbal or non- verbal communication just as one or more speech acts can be assigned to an utterance. In other words, as Grice (1975) says:

A communicative act is a chunk of behavior B which is produced by S with a specific intention, which S intends H to recognize, this recognition being the communicative point of S's doing B".

In this section, the pragmatic analysis is based on the realization of hyperbole through kinds of FTAs and communicative conditions. This can be clearly seen in Table (6) on page 15.

5.1 Self-Praise Acts

Self-praise indicators of hyperbole in the data have been revealed in terms of 14 instances making up 17.5% out of the total kinds of FTAs of exaggeration in the data (80). Consider the following example:

Example (10):

I should have full liberty to give my true and faithful counsel in these anxious and baffling times. I shall certainly avail myself of this freedom, and feel the more right to do so because any private ambitions I may have cherished in my younger days have been satisfied beyond my wildest dreams. (Churchill, 1946)

The politician, in the above example, is exaggerating his action to emphasize superiority. In this respect, the addressee's face is threatened.

5.2 Criticism of Other Acts

It has been revealed from the analysis of the data under study that this type of act occurs eight times and stands at an average of 10%. Consider the following example:

Example (11):

There are two forms of Euro-scepticism. The first, for which I have no time, looks at anything that happens in Europe as an excuse to be anti-European. It was a minority sport in the last government. It is where, sadly, the majority in today's Conservative Party seems to be. (Blair 1997)

The speaker's criticism gives an evaluation to the addressee's negative attitude towards the union of Europe, which is already not appreciated by the Conservative Party.

5.3 Self-Criticism Acts

There are four instances of self-criticism acts in the data which stand at 5% out of the total FTAs of exaggeration.

Example (12)

We have become an increasingly violent and intolerant society. We have lost our traditional value. We need to return to the old truths, which some had thought that we could live without. (Thatcher 1998)

This is an example where the speaker overstates in expressing his criticism and exaggerates in telling the addressee how bad the current situation they live in nowadays is. Thus, it is an example of threat to the politician's face, but it also threatens the addressee's face who could feel that he is either included or must take an action in the future.

5.4 Praise of other Acts

Regarding overstated Praise of others, there are 11 instances found in the data making up 13.75% out of the total FTAs of hyperbole in the data. Such Praise acts can be realized in terms of hyperbolic and exaggerated expressions used by the politician, as in the example below:

Example (13):

You are members of the finest Police Force in the world. Our long and proud tradition of freedom under the law, which has been the envy of other countries, has always depended, and still depends, on a wholly impartial Police Force. (Thatcher 1998)

Mrs. Thatcher, here, overstates praising the merits of the addressee. Such a type of praise threatens the addressee's face in that it puts pressure on the addressee in future, i.e., he might be expected to do some action for the sake of preserving the values that have been mentioned by the speaker.

5.5 Request Acts

In the analysis of the data, three instances of request acts of hyperbole are realized and stand at 3.75% out of the total (80).

Example (14):

Mr. President, your action illuminates the theme of unity of the English-speaking people, to which I have devoted a large part of my life. I would ask you to accept yourself, and to convey to both Houses of Congress, and through them to the American people, my solemn and heartfelt thanks for this unique distinction, which will always be proudly remembered by my descendants. (Churchill 1963)

It is an example of an overstated request realized in the use of "and to convey to both Houses of Congress, and through them to the American people, my solemn and heartfelt thanks for this unique distinction ". It is the writer's intention to make the addressee's face threatened in terms of the pressure put the writer on him to fulfill the writer's need.

5.6 Suggestions Acts

In the data, suggestions acts of exaggeration appear five times accounting for 6.25% out of the total (80). Consider the following example:

Example (15):

None of us can practice isolation and neutralism and hope to live in safety. Only if we pool our resources and share in each other's strength will free Europe survive. Only if we speak together can we expect the world to heed the voice of Europe. (Thatcher 1979)

This example is characterized by overstatement as the speaker highly exaggerates in suggesting a number of steps to be made by the addressee. Such an act, which makes a threat to the addressee's face as a positive response, is expected.

5.7 Compliment Acts

In such acts, the speaker usually intends to make his addressees comply with what he wants them to believe or act. Consider the following example:

Example (16):

But I also believe America at its best is a powerful force for good in the world; one of a few countries willing and able to stand up for what it believes. (Blair 1998)

It is an example of overstated compliment where Mr. Blair numerates the merits of the addressee. The intention of the speaker puts pressure on the addressee to consider the implied desire; hence it threatens the addressee's face. Of the 80 kinds of the overstated FTAs, only seven instances occur in the data accounting for 8.75%.

5.8 Disapproval Acts

There are only three occurrences of a disapproval act realized in the data. This is represented in the following example:

Example (17):

I say "great sovereign state" with design and emphasis, for I reject the view that Britain and the Commonwealth should now be relegated to a tame and minor role in the world. Our past is the key to our future, which I firmly trust and believe will be no less fertile and glorious. Let no man underrate our energies, our potentialities, and our abiding power for good.
(Churchill 1946)

This is an example of the Churchill's disapproval towards several issues related to the addressee's view about the role of Britain and the Commonwealth. Thus, it threatens the addressee's face by the negative evaluation to the hearer's face.

5.9 Acts of Wishing

It has been revealed that the use of acts of wishing of hyperbole is realized in six instances with 7.5% out of the total FTAs of overstatement in the data. This means that the politician's intention threatens the addressee's face and puts pressure on the latter.

Example (18):

They would not be required to act against their own nations, but in other respects they would be directed by the world organization. This might be started on a modest scale and would grow as confidence grew. I wished to see this done after the First World War, and I devoutly trust it may be done forthwith.
(Churchill 1946)

5.10 Offence Acts

Offensive acts of hyperbole occur four times, i.e., accounting for 5% out of the percentage of the overstated FTAs in the data. The Politician's uses hyperbolic expressions in his offensive language towards the addressee,

Example (19):

When I stand here this quiet afternoon I shudder to visualise what is actually happening to millions now and what is going to happen in this period when famine stalks earth. None can compute what has been called "the unestimated sum of human pain".
(Churchill 1946)

In this example, expressions such as "shudder to visualise", "millions" "now" are exaggerated forms of offence. In this respect, the speaker is threatening the positive face of the addressee by attacking the carelessness of those who are responsible for supplying people with their essential need, i.e., food.

5.11 Sympathy Acts

It has been realized from the analysis of the data that four instances represent sympathy acts of hyperbole and stand at 5% out of the total (80), as shown in the following example.

Example (20):

... We have the deepest respect for Islamic sensibilities, here and in the region. But we have acted because we must act to counter a real and present danger from a tyrant who has never been hesitated to use whatever weapons come to hand (Blair 1998)

Both the writer and addressee share knowledge about Ramadan "an Islamic occasion". The speaker's sympathy to Ramadan threatens the addressee's face and puts pressure on the addressee to accept the speaker's excuse.

5.12 Complaint Acts

Regarding the complaint indicators of exaggeration, there are three occurrences in the data accounting for 3.75% out of the total percentage of FTAs of hyperbole.

Example (21):

Last time I saw it all coming and cried aloud to my own fellow countrymen and to the world, but no one paid any attention, no one would listen and one by one were all sucked into the awful whirlpool. (Churchill 1946)

The writer intends to make the addressee rethink, take into consideration and change some of his/her acts. This threatens the addressee's face and puts pressure on how he/she would react in the future.

5.13 Gratitude Acts

Analysis of the data reveals three instances of overstated promise acts and stand at 3.75% out of the total. This means that the politician's intention threatens the addressee's positive face and puts pressure on the latter to act in such a manner that makes people be proud of them.

Example (22)

As you embark on your careers of public service, all who have been present at this ceremony today join in giving you our thanks, our congratulations, and our warmest good wishes. (Thatcher, 1980)

5.14 Warning Acts

Warning acts of hyperbole occur five times, i.e., accounting for 6.25% out of the percentage of the overstated FTAs in the data. The Politician's uses of hyperbolic expressions in his warning language towards the addressee make him aware of the consequences of such a dangerous behaviour.

Example (23)

At the same time we and the Americans also gave Saddam the clearest possible warning that, should Saddam break his word once more, there would be no further warnings or diplomatic arguments. (Blair, 1998)

Table (6): Frequency and Percentage of FTAs

	Fr.	Pc.
Self – Praise	14	17.5%
Criticism of others	8	10%
Self Criticism	4	5%
Praise of others	11	13.75%
Request	3	3.75%
Suggestion	5	6.25%
Compliment	7	8.75%
Gratitude	3	3.75%
Complaint	3	3.75%
Disapproval	3	3.75%
Wishes	6	7.5%
Offence	4	5%
Sympathy	4	5%
Warning	5	6.25%
Total	80	100%

6. Conclusion

Built on linguistic analysis, it has been concluded that the most common realisation of hyperbole (more than two thirds of the data see tables 14) is the type where the exaggerated content is exclusively or principally found in single-word hyperbole.

The lexical level, in English data, consists of four word classes, which vary in their indication of hyperbole. What is worth noting here is that though the British people are known for their common tendency to understatement, there are many cases where their politicians overstate in expressing their ideas, feelings, and attitudes. Thus, at this level, adjectives and downtoners (adverbs of degree) are most commonly used in order to accentuate the intended meaning they would like to convey to the addressees. What is more interesting is that as the category of adjectives consists of two sub-categories namely, single adjectives and comparative/ superlative forms, single adjectives as indicators of exaggeration outnumber those of comparative superlative forms of adjectives. Similarly, nouns are used as indicators of overstatement. Moreover, the focus is on the use of single nouns more than that on emphatic plural or numeral forms. This clearly reveals a characteristic feature of the language of the English politicians in political discourse who tend to use simple and clear words and phrases for a direct translation to what they intend to state in their political discourse.

In terms of sentence level, it is concluded that declarative sentences outnumber other types of sentences. Eventually, the linguistic level of analysis of the English data has revealed

that there are variations in the way in which English politicians exploit their linguistic tools of hyperbole. This shows that hyperbole is realized directly by means of using grammatical categories.

Consequently, the pragmatic level shows that hyperbole in English language sometimes is directly or indirectly expressed through the use of face threatening acts. The politicians vary the employment of these acts according to their own intentions. There are fourteen FTAs used in the English political discourse. The use of "self-praise" and "praise of others" acts as an indicator of hyperbole outnumber the other types of FTAs. This is a distinctive feature in this research as it shows the personality of the English politicians who try to praise oneself as well as others in order to make the addressees trust and, eventually, support them. The least recurrent FTAs used in the English political discourse as an indicator of hyperbole is represented in four acts, namely, "request", "gratitude", "complaint", and "disapproval".

It is believed that English politicians are influenced by the general tendency of topics which they tackle in their speeches, i.e., whenever they talk about war, or its consequences, or ask people to support their decision, they usually tend to use hyperbolic expressions in order to carry out their aims. Moreover, they vary in preference for the use of hyperbole. This variation is maintained on the bases of interlingual and intralingual levels of analysis, where the former presents the variation of using hyperbolic expressions in English data. The later presents the variation in the choice of the type of hyperbole to suit the pragma-rhetoric purposes. But, the use of acts of exaggeration in the English political discourse may not reflect the English character. It is not a personal trait, but it might be rather a tactic universally followed by politicians for achieving their aims like: emphasizing the seriousness of the situation, the urgency of the action, criticizing the political opponent, and praising one's own party or policies.

To sum up, hyperbole does not signify the actual state of affairs of reality, but presents the latter through the emotionally coloured perception and rendering of the politician.

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