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Discussion note

## Hyperbole, extreme case formulation

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### 1. Introduction

Research on hyperbole has generally lumped extreme case formulations (ECF) together with other types of overstatement, but I present various sorts of arguments here for distinguishing the two. After relating ECF, hyperbole and overstatement in a general way, I will show that hyperbole and ECF occur in different kinds of formulaic units, with different distributions and different contextual effects. Third, I discuss the relation of ECF, hyperbole and the “non-literal.” Fourth, I will show that ECF and hyperbole are comprehended in different ways. Fifth, I present examples showing that ECF and hyperbole receive different responses in following talk. Finally, I explore comparisons with God as an example of ECF without extreme expressions.

The data for this investigation come from several sources, representing a wide range of different groups of speakers. The social and regional diversity of the corpora should insure that the constructions and interactions will be more or less familiar to native speakers of English generally. The primary source is the Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English (SCoSE), an extensive collection of audio and video recordings of free conversation and conversational interviews, involving a wide range of speakers from the United States and Britain. Narrative sections of conversations and interviews were transcribed and stories containing remarks on remembering and forgetting were investigated. I also regularly investigate and cite examples from two other generally available electronic corpora: first, the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE), and, second, the conversational sections of the London Lund Corpus (LLC). I hope that the broad scope of the data strengthens the general validity of the findings. See “Data used in the study” at the end of this article for further information about the corpora investigated.

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## 2. Hyperbole, overstatement and extreme case formulation

In a recent article in this journal, McCarthy and Carter (2004) present the results of their corpus investigation of hyperbole. They mention ECF only briefly and they make no attempt to distinguish it from other sorts of hyperbole in terms of either distribution or contextual effects, because their focus lies elsewhere. They take no special notice of ECF, even when it occurs in the examples they discuss.<sup>1</sup> This is typical of past research on hyperbole, but I hope to show here that there are significant differences between ECF and other sorts of hyperbole, and that these differences entail interesting consequences for pragmatics and discourse analysis. The literature review in McCarthy and Carter (2004) is quite recent and particularly thorough, and I could only repeat it but not improve on it; consequently, I refer interested readers to McCarthy and Carter (2004), and cite only those sources directly relevant to the discussion at hand in the following.

Hyperbole is, according to classical rhetoric, “a figure or trope of bold exaggeration” (Preminger, 1974: 359). Overstatement more generally includes any extravagant statement of amplification or attenuation used to express emotion and not to be taken literally. In Norrick (1982), I showed that overstatements should be semantically interpreted as claims that are higher (or lower) on some scale than warranted. At the far end of any scale of comparison we find ECFs built around extreme expressions such as *every*, *all*, *none*, *best*, *least*, *as good as it gets*, *always*, *perfectly*, *brand new*, and *absolutely*, according to Pomerantz (1986). Thus, ECF is a sub-category of hyperbole. Pomerantz says ECFs are

<sup>1</sup> The two examples are numbers (15) and (23) in McCarthy and Carter (2004). Both passages are cited to illustrate general points about hyperbole, and their status as ECFs receives no special notice. Example (23) contains the extreme adjective *endless*. Certainly the dress has some countable number of buttons, just as there must be some finite, though very large number of total buttons in the world, so that this statement is necessarily false from a realistic perspective.

(23)

- <\$1> Mm. And Mother would come in to say goodnight to us er wearing an evening dress you see which we were allowed to button up. I remember it had *endless* tiny little buttons all the way up the back. [laughs]. And we were allowed to button it up before she went down to dinner with Father.
- <\$2> Goodness me. And that was+
- <\$1> Yeah.

The following statement that the kids were “allowed to button it up” shows that the speaker cannot be taking the absolute formulation literally.

In this next example, the phrase “absolute minus amounts of kip” cannot be literally true. *Absolute* is an extreme expression by itself, and it serves to further exaggerate the notion of minus amounts of sleep.

- (15) [Young woman talking about a rather wild period in her life when she would get very little sleep (= *kip*)]
- <\$2> So I mean, I had like *absolute minus amounts* of kip honestly. And that’d go on night after night
- <\$1> I know.
- <\$2> [laughs]
- <\$1> And Ken like as well. I mean w=
- <\$2> He, he went for months.

Thus, both these examples involve extreme formulations, and both fit the description of clearly false and completely defeasible ECF in the following sections.

used mainly in complaint sequences to defend or counter challenges to accusations, justifications and so on, e.g.,

**You never write**  
**She always wins**  
**Nobody cares about me**  
**All players cheat**  
**Everyone hates you**

As Edwards (2000) demonstrates, ECFs do not adhere to any single logical formula or grammatical rule. They cut across grammatical categories, including statements containing extreme adjectives (*total, absolute*), all-quantifiers (*all, every, no, none*) and related nouns like *everybody, nothing*, adverbs (*always, never*), and phrases like *as good as it gets* and *brand new* as well as superlative constructions with optional expressions involving *ever*, e.g.,

**the worst storm ever**  
**the greatest story ever told**

ECF is a participants' category, part of common sense, describable through the empirical study of conversational interaction. Nevertheless, we can say that ECFs are generally recognizable even out of context as semantically extreme.

Hedges may be added to ECFs without destroying their force as overstatements, e.g.,

**You almost never write**  
**It seems like you hardly ever write**  
**She nearly always wins**  
**This is just about the biggest show ever**

But, as Edwards (2000) points out, ECFs generally occur unhedged (or unsoftened, as he says), because the force of ECFs is taken as 'doing non-literal' in any case.

ECFs make claims involving the end points on scales, but overstatement more generally occurs any time a speaker makes a claim higher (or lower) on some scale than warranted. Thus, we hear "about five thousand" in the excerpt below (from the LLC 3-1) not as a literal numerical claim, but as an aggrandizement signaling emotion.

(1)  
 <A>  
 yes I'll be all right in a minute it's just that I'm  
 <b>  
 ((what have you got))  
 <A>  
 stupid I had [@] *about five thousand books* to take back to  
 Senate House  
 yesterday

We say “five thousand books” when there are actually only ten or twenty. Overstatements also often contain hedges, like *about* in the phrase “about five thousand books” in the preceding example, but they do not thereby necessarily lose their hyperbolic effect.

### 3. ECF and hyperbole in formulaic phrases

Proverbs, known for their apodictic mode of expression, often employ ECF. Any proverb containing absolute modifiers and adverbs like *all*, *no*, *always* and *never* is likely to involve overstatement, as in:

**All’s fair in love and war**  
**There’s no free lunch**  
**The grass is always greener on the other side (of the fence)**  
**A watched pot never boils**

We understand this last to mean that a watched pot seems to take longer to boil and the previous one to mean that distant grass tends to seem greener. Proverbs incorporating ECFs, like proverbs more generally, are taken as ‘doing non-literal’. That is, participants in interaction treat proverbs with ECF as if they did not contain literally true statements. Instead, ECF signals the speaker’s investment in a point, thus emphasizing or highlighting it, and they are taken as insisting or denying in an extreme way.

Edwards (2000: 364) says that ECFs “do not have automatic rhetorical effects,” but his findings in fact jibe rather nicely with the traditional rhetorical analysis of hyperbole as a figure of amplification or attenuation by which the speaker signals emotional involvement through an exaggerated formulation. Thus, we hear *It never rains but it pours* not as a literal meteorological observation, but as an emotionally tinged statement about our perception of how troubles seem to multiply or how events generally seem to overwhelm us.

By contrast, proverbial phrases and idioms tend towards overstatement in the form of far-fetched imagery:

**work one’s fingers to the bone**  
**throw out the baby with the bathwater**

or overstated comparisons:

**as fast as lightning (lightning fast)**  
**older than the hills**  
**kneehigh to a grasshopper**

Proverbs tend to introduce or sum up arguments and stories, while proverbial phrases and idioms make speech more colorful, and characterize the *dramatis personae* of narratives, e.g., “Arabella was lame and walked slower than a snail” in example (4) below.

#### 4. Overstatement and the ‘non-literal’

Overstatement interacts with the non-literal in complicated ways. We do not take either ECFs or hyperboles generally as serious truth claims, but ECFs usually take the form of literal-seeming statements, while non-extreme hyperbole often enters discourse in figurative form. In the passage below from the LLC (3-4), the speaker mixes the metaphoric hyperbole of “fry” with the ECF of “never hear a word.”

(2)

<A>

well I take [] I take this [@m dhi dhi] I’ve had exactly the same complaint from anthropology on Rayon Street they say the noise there is intolerable and that in the summer of course it’s a question of *fry and and be audible* or [@m] open your windows and *never hear a word*

“Never hear a word” overstates the difficulty of hearing and comprehending, while “fry” both overstates on the temperature scale and shifts metaphorically from overheated rooms to pans on fires or cooking ranges.

Second, hyperbole may be just one component of a metaphor in the traditional sense. In calling a teacher “an iceberg of a woman” in the passage below (from LLC 3-1), the speaker expresses herself both figuratively, in identifying a human with a mountain of ice, and hyperbolically, in choosing “iceberg” rather than some more appropriate vehicle in temperature and size.

(3) There was A and B and some other bitchy iceberg of a woman

Instead of a colorless ECF like “absolutely unfeeling” or some simple overstatement like “extremely cold,” the speaker deploys an image with hyperbolic connotations.

Third, though somewhat less obviously, even an explicit comparison between a human and a snail, as in the example below from the LLC (3-1), creates a tension between incongruent domains.

(4)

<A> ... and Arabella poor Arabella was lame and walked [s]

<b> [m]

<A> you know *slower than a snail*

so we all had to walk at Arabella’s pace

Again “slower than a snail” is hyperbolic in overstating the slowness of the pace via comparison with a snail. Moreover, according to Ortony (1979a,b), any time the vehicle for a comparison comes from a category without obvious relevance for the object, the incongruity will have a metaphoric feel to it and may draw attention to itself. Thus, as Ortony further argues, even similes like the one in the foregoing example are metaphoric to varying degrees. Even when the explicit comparison “as slow as a snail” becomes

implicit in the phrase “snail’s pace,” in the continuation of the foregoing excerpt, the metaphor and overstatement remain.

(5)

- <A> so we proceeded ((took)) about 5 h  
 ((going)) along the corridor  
 two doors were thrown open  
 and a one hundred and eighty undergraduates were standing to attention along  
 the tables you know  
 those who were this side of the table had their backs to their chairs
- <c> ((yes))
- <A> with hands folded with eyes riveted on us and we
- <b> good Lord
- <A> walked the whole length of this vast dininghall  
*at this snail’s pace*  
 with the president going on ahead. . .

The metaphoricity and overstatement of “snail’s pace” can be seen in other more or less formulaic implicit comparisons such as “lightning fast,” “giant size” and so on. Though ECF and non-extreme hyperbole can occur together in everyday talk, and both are heard as non-literal, hyperbole tends to appear in the form of imagery, while ECFs deploy extreme and absolute expressions in otherwise unremarkable language.

## 5. ECF and hyperbole in comprehension

Gibbs (1994: 392–94) argues that hyperbole and irony differ in their mode of comprehension. First, Gibbs says that immediate comprehension is based only on relevance, so that both irony like:

**what a short line**

and hyperbole like:

**the line’s a mile long**

Receive a simple interpretation regarding the length of the line. A secondary step in comprehension involves other processes like guesses about speaker beliefs and intentions. Even in this second step, Gibbs assumes that listeners expect speakers’ statements only to resemble their beliefs, rather than to match them perfectly. Consequently, hyperbole does not violate the truthfulness maxim—what Grice (1975) calls the quality maxim—though it seems to violate the quantity maxim. By contrast, irony does violate the truthfulness maxim, because it states the opposite of what the speaker believes. The line is clearly not short; and though it isn’t a mile long, it is a very long line.

However, when hyperbole becomes extreme in ECF, it can cross the line into a violation of quality, e.g.,

**this line has no end at all**

**this line will never end**

Like the proverbs *The grass is always greener on the other side (of the fence)* and *A watched pot never boils*, the statements above are literally false on inspection. The side of the fence one occupies has no real effect on the color of the grass, just as watching a pot has no measurable effect on its temperature or the boiling point of water. Lines of people are of finite length. No measurement is necessary to determine that these statements are false.

Thus, while many cases of hyperbole would not violate the Gricean maxim of quality on Gibbs' loose definition, many ECFs would, again showing that we need a separate account of ECF as extreme hyperbole.

## 6. ECF and hyperbole as defeasible in following talk

The difference in (second stage) interpretation just identified results in a distinction in the way ECFs and other hyperboles are treated in conversation. Because they are so obviously false rather than just overdrawn, ECFs are completely defeasible, so that both current and subsequent speakers freely contradict their literal sense in subsequent talk. In the first example below (from LLC 1-12), speaker B contradicts his own statement "my brother never rings up," in confirming that the brother in fact does ring up ("when [sh@] he does ring up or when he used to") in the very next statement.

(6)

<B>

but and I I really think you know it must be terrible when she says none of us sort of go to see her or anything but and *my brother never rings up*

<c>

[m]

<B>

but when [sh@] *he does ring up* or when he used to he used to get this same tirade {like} [i] oh so you've managed to ring up have you (laughs) you did

In the next sample passage (from the SBCSAE), Harold and Jamie team up to co-produce an initial ECF "these are like the world's worst speakers, "which Harold reiterates alone in ECF form "These are the shittiest . . . speakers on earth," but then Jamie downgrades the statements with the phrase "besides the ones in the kitchen," before Harold produces an outright contradiction by saying they are "an improvement over my last ones."

(7)

MILES: [3 You must have 3] good stereo.

: Cause I feel like I'm hearing –

- HAROLD: . . . We have % –  
 : These are like,  
 JAMIE: *the [world's worst] speakers.*  
 MILES: [Where is the other one].  
 HAROLD: These are *the [shittiest2].. speakers on earth.*  
 JAMIE: [2Over here2].  
 PETE: [2XXX2]  
 JAMIE: . . . [3besides the ones in the kitchen3].  
 HAROLD: [3And these are an improvement over my3]  
 [4@last @ones4].  
 MILES: [4I thought that was the4] real thi=ng.

Non-extreme hyperboles are not generally treated as defeasible in this obvious way. Instead, current and subsequent speakers negotiate the degree of overstatement, as in the next example (from Norrick, 1993: 91–92). Sandra mockingly repeats the exaggerated dollar value Greg mentions for a shirt in a claim letter he is composing for a business writing class.

(8)

- Greg: your miracle product.  
 your miracle detergent,  
 that was supposed to get the stain out,  
 just ate my shirt away,  
 and I now want the money back  
 for my *five hundred dollar silk-shirt.*  
 Sandra: *five hundred dollars* {laughing}  
 Greg: *okay, a hundred and fifty.*  
 Sandra: *okay* {laughing}.

Sandra's laughing repeat shows her surprise and disagreement with the inflated price Greg suggests, and reflects her disapproval of his habitual tendency toward hyperbole. Thus challenged, Greg immediately admits his exaggeration with "okay", then revises his estimate drastically downward. This reaction shows that Greg hears Sandra's laughing repeat as an objection to the hyperbolic form of his utterance, which he can remedy with a simple reformulation.

Similarly, in the passage (from the SCoSE "Lynne") below, when Annie reports that "Philip said he was going like ninety," two listeners respond with laughter and skeptical comments, forcing Annie to retract her claim.

(9)

- Annie: It must have been a new bus driver,  
 the fellow the other day.  
 . . .  
 the guy would say to the kids on the bus,  
 "Is that one of ours?"  
 {General laughter}

- Jean: Did he pass it?  
 Annie: Yeah.  
 You know, “Oh, well.”  
 And he just kept going.  
 And he- *Phillip said he was going like ninety.*
- Jean: {laughing} well it wasn’t, I mean  
 Lynn: {laughing} yeah  
 Annie: *It probably felt like it.*  
 Then he, finally, he. . .

Instead of revising the speed “ninety” downward, however, Annie suggests that Phillip must have erred in his estimation based on his feelings. Either way, the original hyperbole is toned down to a believable statement.

In a nice example from McCarthy and Carter (2004: 174), a speaker first retracts an ECF, “there’s always something wrong,” saying “well not always but there’s things wrong.” Then, after producing a non-extreme hyperbole, “just inches away from one another,” the speaker negates that, too, and adds a metalingual comment, confessing, “I do exaggerate now and then,” all without any audible prompting from the listener.

- (10) [Speakers are chatting about air traffic congestion]  
 <\$3> They go crashing into one another. And er you know *there’s always something wrong well not always but there’s things wrong* with planes that shouldn’t be wrong.  
 <\$1> Right.  
 <\$3> And er er they they’re having a pathway now. They used to all have a flight+  
 <\$1> Mm.  
 <\$3> +er and well *just inches away* [laughs] *from one another* aren’t they.  
*Well not inches. I do exaggerate now and then.*  
 <\$1> [laughs]

The confession, “I do exaggerate now and then,” can be heard as a direct comment on the claim of “just inches away” or as a comment on the other claims as well, both the overstated “they go crashing into one another” and the retracted ECF “always something wrong.”

ECFs are so obviously false that they are completely defeasible. Both current and subsequent speakers freely contradict ECFs in subsequent talk. Non-extreme hyperboles are overstated rather than clearly false, so that speakers generally revise them downward when challenged by listeners. Speakers may also comment on their own tendency to exaggerate as a way of toning down hyperboles.

## 7. Extreme comparisons with God

Extreme comparisons involving God are fairly frequent in conversation, but they are conspicuously absent in discussions of ECF and hyperbole more generally. Comparison

with God creates ECF all by itself, even without the usual extreme lexical items. Certainly, some speakers use a range of more or less formulaic expressions such as “like God almighty” and “to think someone is God” as well as adjectives like “godly,” “godawful,” “godlike,” and “divine,” and the noun “godsend.” God represents not only the supreme being and creator, but also presumably the absolute high point on whatever scale we view as appropriate, so that comparisons with God must count as ECFs. Like other ECFs, comparisons with God seem not to elicit laughter, though they clearly express an incongruity.

In the excerpt below from LLC (1-1), the speaker produces a direct identification of a person with God in line 9, thus grossly exaggerating on the literal level in his attempt to express derision for the behavior of Potter. Both the identification as “God almighty” and the assertion that “he knows everything” represent extreme formulations, the first metaphoric, the second a simple ECF. Speaker <B> has already used the phrase “God-damnation” and “I’ll crown that bastard” in line 3, so that the stage is set for comparisons with God and for extreme formulations generally.

(11)

- <A> [dhi] the other the other the other the other man [@m]  
 ((who [rou] to sylls)) I thought was going to get you wild was  
 Potter
- <B> God ((damnation))  
 I’ll crown that bastard  
 ((before I’m finished with him  
 it used to be)) the same {with the board} as well
- <A> (laughs)((oh no I could see you sort of seething)) what
- <B> the same at the board meetings too you know I mean he takes over
- <A> ((yes))
- <B> the whole bloody ((thing))
- <A> he he *he is really God almighty he knows everything*
- <B> ((if) I don’t crown ((the)) bastard
- <A> (laughs) he amuses me  
 I I don’t I don’t find myself getting getting as as as irritated  
 I’m more amused you know  
 he [@] sort of looks at one  
 [so] almost crosseyed with those great glasses ((of his))  
 and [@m] it just strikes me as odd {sort of thing}  
 but he certainly has a hell of a high opinion of himself

Here the speakers clearly do not themselves agree that Potter is God or all-knowing; they instead convey the feeling that Potter acts or sees himself that way. The final line of the excerpt expresses roughly the same attitude in less extreme terms “he certainly has a hell of a high opinion of himself.” Just before and after the ECF, speaker B calls Potter “that bastard” (line 3) and “the bastard” (line 10) as well—again a non-literal expression of his contempt—but in stark contrast to the identification with God at line 9. Notice that the laughter in the passage follows turns containing the expressions

“crown that bastard” (line 3) and “crown the bastard” (line 10), rather than the comparisons with God.

In the excerpt below from SCoSE (Babe Burton), the speaker similarly refers to God to express an overwhelming feeling from her childhood. Here the “to me” makes it clear she is trying to describe her feelings rather than any objective reality.

(12)

‘cause you have to understand  
 I had one favourite uncle  
 Whose name was George DEAN.  
 and *he just to me was GOD*.  
 He was . . . wonderful.  
 He had no children  
 and he just adored ME.  
 So when I was about ten-years-old

The whole passage is characterized by overstatement: Notice also the adjective “wonderful” in line 5 and the expression “adored me” in line 7, both expressions originally associated with divinity. Direct comparisons with God in everyday talk along with the various formulas and lexical items associated with God suggest that speakers naturally have recourse to gross overstatement in their expression of strong feelings. Speakers can realize ECF through reference to God without the standard lexical markers.

## 8. Conclusions and directions for future research

We have seen that ECFs differ from non-extreme hyperboles in a number of ways. ECF matches the typical apodictic tone of proverbs, while hyperbolic imagery fits the colorful character of proverbial phrases and idioms. Further, ECF and hyperbole are comprehended differently: ECFs violate the truthfulness maxim, while non-extreme hyperboles violate only the quantity maxim or are heard as approximations to the speaker’s beliefs. We investigated examples showing that ECFs and hyperboles receive different responses in following talk. Any participant in a conversation, including the one who produces an ECF, may contradict it with impunity in immediately following talk. The speaker who produces a non-extreme hyperbole may scale it down, if other participants question its validity. While both ECF and non-extreme hyperbole are heard as defeasible and non-literal, and can occur adjacent to one another in everyday talk, ECFs generally embed extreme expressions in otherwise literal-seeming talk, while hyperbole often takes the form of imagery and is surrounded by obviously non-literal talk. Finally, we explored comparisons with God as examples of ECF without any of the usual extreme vocabulary.

A number of questions suggest themselves for future research. The interpretation of ECF and hyperbole with relation to the maxims of quality and quantity requires additional study. The differential defeasibility of ECFs and non-extreme hyperboles along with the

responses they elicit in conversation invite further research as well. We looked at various ways of retracting ECFs and toning down hyperboles, including direct negation, substituting a value lower on the scale in question, and commenting metalingually on the hyperbolic character of the claim or the speaker's own tendency to exaggerate; but are there other methods of disclaiming and revising overstatements? And what are the relative frequencies of these strategies in various discourse types and contexts? Comparisons with God were seen to be intrinsically extreme, because God represents the end point on scales of might, wisdom and so on; but, depending on one's beliefs, other terms may designate end points on appropriate scales, for instance: concepts of heaven, hell, specific deities and so on. Are intrinsically extreme statements based on these entities found in certain language communities or communities of practice? What are their distributions and functions? We also noted the relation of laughter and hyperbole in several examples, and exaggeration is often cited as a source of humor, but what is the relation between ECF and non-extreme hyperbole with regard to humor? And how do bare overstatement and hyperbolic imagery compare as vehicles of humor? Indeed, hyperbole in general, and ECF in particular, suggest endless avenues for future research.

## 9. Data used in the study

The Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English (SCoSE) began as a collection of recorded conversations between family members and friends, primarily from the Midwestern United States. The corpus contains interactions between both working-class and middle-class speakers. It has since been extended to include older speakers from a wide range of backgrounds as well, because they were not well represented in other corpora. Steadily increasing numbers of transcribed excerpts from the SCoSE are available online at: <http://www.uni-saarland.de/fak4/norrick/sbccn.htm> (last access 16 February 2004). Some audio files and transcriptions are available on-line in TalkBank: <http://www.talkbank.org/media/conversation/SCoSE/> (last access 16 February 2004) as well.

The Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE) features primarily interactions between undergraduates from the western United States; audio files and transcriptions from the SBCSAE are also available in TalkBank: <http://www.talkbank.org/media/conversation/SBCSAE/> (last access 16 February 2004). The conversations transcribed in the London Lund Corpus (LLC) derive mainly from recordings of interactions between British English speakers, many of them academics.

I have left the transcriptions in their original formats as far as possible, and I refer interested readers to the relevant websites for transcription conventions.

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*New Publications:*

- Humor, tellability and conarration in conversation. *Text* 24 (1) (2004) 79–111;
- Remembering and forgetfulness in conversational narrative. *Discourse Processes* 36 (1) (2003) 47–76;
- Issues in conversational joking. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35 (2003) 1333–1359.