


# Journal

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## A Linguistic Analysis of Overstatement

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## 1.1 Overstatement : Definition and Uses

Overstatement is a figure of speech in which intentional exaggeration is deliberately used for emphasis rather than deception (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2005:3).

It is, according to Wikipedia Dictionary (2006:3), a rhetorical term in which statements are exaggerated or extravagant. It may be used due to strong feelings or is used to create a forceful impression and is not meant to be taken literally as in :

1. I nearly died laughing.
2. I'd walk a million miles for one of your smiles.
3. We drove for hours looking for a parking spot.

Such statements are not literally true, but people make them to sound impressive or to emphasize something such as feeling, effort or reaction.

The synonymous word used for overstatement is hyperbole. Originally, hyperbole comes from Latin *hyperbole*, from Greek *hyperbole* "excess, exaggeration", from *hyperballein*, formed from *hyper-*+*ballein* "to throw" in Indo-European roots (Mifflin, 2000:2).

When overstatement or hyperbole used as a literary device, it is an exaggeration that still describes a situation or image that is at least feasible or possible. It is simply exaggeration in the service of truth, for instance:

4. I have been waiting for hours for the end of your short coffee break.

while saying :

5. I have been waiting for ages for the end of your short coffee break.

is an exaggeration that is considered impossible and it is, according to Wikipedia

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Dictionary (2006:2), called adynation.

Auxesis is a kind of hyperbole used to refer to something with a name disproportionately greater than its nature like

6. The **wound** given to my client... (when referring to a **scratch**)

(ibid.)

Overstatement, as all figures of speech, can be used for a variety of effects. It can be humorous or grave, fanciful or restrained, convincing or unconvincing. When Wordsworth (the romantic poet) reports of his daffodils that they "**stretched in never-ending lines/a long the margin of a bay**", he reports faithfully a visual appearance.

(Burton, 2003:1)

Overstatement can be employed for the sake of emphasis as exemplified in :

7. His eloquence could split rocks.

8. I could sleep for a year.

9. This book weighs a ton.

Such examples are not intended to be taken literally, they are used as a means for emphasizing the truth of statements by exaggerating them .

In the following extract, Robert Burns uses a series of overstatements to emphasize the strength of his love (ibid.:2):

10. I will love thee still, my dear,

Till a' the seas gang dry,

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,

And the rocks melt wi' the sun!

And I will love thee still, my dear,

While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee wel, my only love,

And fare thee wel a while!

And I will come again, my love,

Though it were ten thousand mile!

Sometimes overstatement is used for one thing to show how really different it is from something supposed by similar to which it is being compared (Harris, 2005:9):



11. This stuff used motor oil compared to the coffee you make, my love. It can be employed to poke fun at someone or something in a light-hearted way as in the following description of a young boy and a dull town respectively (Dowling,2006:1):

12. Take all day-and sometimes two-to get to school.

13. It's a slow bury-I spent a couple of weeks there one day.

Part of the uses of overstatement is to describe a person's emotions. As in the following example when a boy is pulling a man up from a deep hole (ibid.):

14. It was not a mere man he was holding, but a giant; or a block of granite. The pull was unendurable. The pain unendurable.

Here overstatement is used to describe the boy's thoughts as he struggles.

Moreover, overstatement is employed as an exaggerated language that distorts facts by making them much bigger than they are. As in the media which uses it a lot to make stories seem more important or interesting than they really are. An apparently unfair boxing decision was described as the crime of the century by a newspaper which seems excessive when compared to murder (Harris,2005:9).

Bach and Harnish (1979:67) maintain that even advertisers make systematic use of overstatement in slogans :

15. Paul Newman is Jesse James. (c.f. Paul Newman plays the part convincingly, or with conviction)

16. The future is now. (c.f. You should prepare now for the future)

Unskillfully used, however, overstatement may seem strained and ridiculous, leading us to react as Gertrude does to the player-queen's speeches in *Hamlet* : "the lady doth protest too much" (ibid.).

## 1.2 Overstatement : A Syntactic-Semantic Perspective

Syntactically speaking, rhetorical exaggeration is often accomplished via comparison by the use of as.....as :

17. He is as big as a house! (Wikipedia Dictionary,2006:3)

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18. He is as old as the hills. (Thakur, 1987:326)

Overstatement is often confused with a simile or a metaphor because it compares two adjectives. But the difference is that the overstatement is an exaggeration. For instance, the following sentence (Harris, 2005:10) :

19. His feet are as big as a barge.

looks like a simile since it compares the foot size to the size of a barge.

Further illustrations are the following :

20. The skin on her face was as thin and drawn as tight as the skin of onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two picks.

21. That boy's eyes are so big, they look like they're going to jump out and grab you! 5

Bach and Harnish (1979:69) state that one can exaggerate a metaphor. For illustrations, speaker can utter :

22. She is a gazelle today.

referring to someone who does not move too gracefully on the court, but is doing better today. The hearer can infer :

a. She is moving most gracefully today.

b. She is moving well (better) today.

Moreover, many overstatements use superlatives, since superlatives are a standard device for expressing extreme evaluation (ibid.:67) :

23. That was the worst food I've ever had (c.f. It was very bad)

Leech (1983:146) points out that overstatement is also accomplished by the exaggerated use of universal quantifiers and references to the extremities of scales :

24. I'm completely broke.

25. There's absolutely nothing on the telling this evening.

The frequency of overstatement in ordinary conversation has its testimony in many idiomatic expressions, as in :

26. Her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

27. It makes my blood boil.

28. He was all ears.



29. That'll cost the earth.

30. I've been working my fingure to the bone for you.

Almost all these examples make reference to an absurdly extreme position on a scale : as in (26) which refers to the highest conceivable point on a scale of surprise and (27) which refers to highest conceivable point on a scale of anger (ibid.).6

Furthermore, Amirault (2006:3) indicates that exaggerations like the ones before are not to be taken literally. The hearer should pay attention to the true meaning behind the phrase or sentence. If these exaggerations are taken *literally*, one will misinterpret what the speaker says. Further illustrations are the following :

31. You strain out a gant but swallow a camel. (c.f. You pay close attention to little things but neglect the important ones)

32. The rock poured me out rivers of oil. (c.f. He had an abundance of good things)

33. The cities are great, and walled up to heaven. (c.f. They were very high)

### 1.3 Overstatement : A Pragmatic Perspective

#### 1.3.1 Gricean Conversational Maxims

According to Grice, any conversation is governed by a general principle of cooperation. Speakers must respect certain conversational maxims if they want to pursue with success a conversation without being liable to mislead. Grice proposes that many aspects of speaker's meaning result from the assumption that the participants in a conversation are cooperating in an attempt to reach mutual goals. He enshrines this observation in a principle called cooperative principle. It states: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the exchange in which you are engaged" (Steedman,2006:2).

The cooperative principle can be explained by the four underlying rules or maxims :

1-Quantity maxim : A contribution should be as informative as is

required for the conversation to proceed.

- 2-Quality maxim : Speakers should be truthful and sincere. They should not say what they think is false, or make statements for which they have no evidence.
- 3-Relevance maxim : Speaker's contribution should relate clearly to the purpose of the exchange.
- 4-Manner maxim : Speaker's contribution should be perspicuous, clear, orderly and brief. (Renkema,1993:10)

However, these conversational maxims may overtly and blatantly be violated. Grice points out that certain utterances take on their meaning from the blatant flouting of one or another of these maxims. The violation of these maxims gives rise to many of the figures of speech, one of which is overstatement (Venderveken,1997:8).

The following section will show how this violation, concerning overstatement, is carried out.

### 1.3.2 Overstatement : A Case of Maxim Exploitation

Hancher (1978:5) states that Gricean maxims are not categorical rules but normal expectations. They are not always obeyed. The speakers may "quietly and unostentatiously violate a maxim". Nearly all cases of blatant violation of the conversational maxims are what Grice calls "floutings" or "exploitations" of the maxims. Bach and Harnish (1979:167) stress the idea that exploitation of a maxim does not mean unwillingness to cooperate. The maxims can be exploited so as to produce particular effect. Levinson (1983:169) notes that if a speaker drastically and dramatically deviates from maxims-type behaviour, his utterances are still read as underlyingly cooperative. By

overtly infringing some maxims, the speaker can force the hearer to do extensive inferencing to some set of proposition.

To understand this pragmatic strategy, it should be appreciated that truthfulness is not always a matter of making a straightforward choice between truth and falsehood. Just as truth conditions are often to be represented in terms of values on a scale, so telling the truth may itself be judged as a matter of degree, according to how accurate speaker is in



representing such scalar values. Overstatement refers to a case where the speaker's description is stronger than is warranted by the state of affairs described (Leech,1983:145).

Similarly, Bach and Harnish (1979:67) state that in overstatement, one purports to claim what is in fact more than one intends to claim as in :

34.No one understand me. (c.f. Not enough people understand me)

35.A pig wouldn't eat this food. (c.f. A person wouldn't eat it if he had a choice)

36.Her eyes opened as wide as a saucers. (c.f. Her eyes opened very wide)

So overstatement constitutes a violation, in some degree of the maxim of quality. In the case of an exploitation of the maxim of quality, the speaker intends that the hearer recognizes that there are in the conversational background certain facts which are incompatible with felicity conditions of the literal speech act. Moreover, the speaker also wants that the recognition of his intention be part of mutual background knowledge. Whenever the hearer recognizes this, he understands that the speaker does not mean to perform the literal illocutionary act but another primary illocutionary act with felicity9

conditions different from those which are violated in the conversational background (Venderveken,1997:10).

Thus, if someone addresses his friend as :

37.You are the cream in my coffee.

The utterance has its effect, according to Grice, precisely because the hearer recognizes that the speaker cannot literally mean what he says, and therefore looks for another meaning (Steedman,2006:3).

Very often, particular non-literal meanings are conveyed by appearing to violate or flout the conversational maxims. This special kind of meaning is what Grice calls "conversational implicature". Conversational implicature, as defined by Moore (2001:8) is exploiting the cooperative principle to convey more information than is actually contained in an utterance, i.e., it is a message that is not found in the plain sense of the

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sentence. However, Leech (1983:145-6) indicates that this violation of the cooperative principle is only a superficial matter, one would not rank overstatement with utterances that are actually used to deceive the addressee. Moreover, the best safeguard against deceit is to make sure the utterance is so much at variance with context that no one could reasonably believe it to be "the whole truth, and nothing but the truth". Hence, overstatement is an illustration of the by now familiar pattern of conversational implicature. The indirect force of speaker's remark is reached by means of an obvious face-value violation of the cooperative principle.

### **1.3.3 Overstatement and Politeness**

Politeness is defined as forms of behaviour that establish and maintain comity. That is the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in interaction in an atmosphere of relative harmony. Some cases of overstatement can be explained by reference to their role in enhancing politeness. There is naturally a preference for overstating polite beliefs. For instance, exaggerations such as :

38. That was a delicious meal!

39. What a marvelous meal you cooked?

40. Her performance was magnificent.

are favoured in praising others, and they are highly valued according to approbation maxim which states "minimize dispraise of other; maximize praise of other"(Leech,1983:146).

### **1.3.4 Overstatement and Interest Principle**

A conversational principle which seems to underlie overstatements is the principle which enjoins the speaker to "say what is unpredictable, and hence interesting". It is an interest principle, by which conversation which is interesting, in the sense of having unpredictability or news value, is preferred to a conversation which is boring and predictable. One common way in which this principle manifests itself in our everyday linguistic experience is the temptation we feel, when retelling a personal anecdote, to embroider on the anecdote various kind of elaboration and exaggeration. Another sign



of this principle is the way in which hyperbolic expressions become weakened through a process of diminishing returns (ibid.:147). If overstatements are used frequently, an addressee inevitably adjusts his interpretation so that they lose their interest value and become predictable. There is thus a perpetual tug-of-war, in human conversation between the maxim of

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quality (of which overstatement is a case of exploitation) and the interest principle.

### 2.1 Analysis

This section deals with the application of what has been presented in the previous section. It is going to trace overstatement in Jonson's play *Volpone* or *The Fox*. Jonson's *Volpone* is considered as the sharpest and funniest comedy about money and morals. The satire is devastating. It depicts unprincipled selfishness thinly covered by sanctimonious speeches, lust and possessiveness poorly disguised as love and marriage, cynical legalism passing itself off as pure justice, boastful name-dropping that pretends to be cultural sophistication, snobbery congratulating itself that it is decorum, and greed deluding itself that it is really prudence, responsibility, even religion (Watson, 2003:3).

The play's primary satiric target is greed, but it also recognizes that greed is merely one facet of the insatiable human desire to continue desiring, and of the fundamental human tendency to live in grandiose egoistical fantasies rather than in the real world (Chaudhuri, 1985:22).

*Volpone* likes to be flattered that he is not like the misers despised in medieval literature, but this evasion only casts him as a more modern version of the figure. The modern mega-billionaire unaccountably determined to acquire further billions, whatever the ethical and social costs, if only to assert his superiority to his fellow-billionaires. This modern self is defined by its performances and its acquisitions, with no stable or satisfactory person at the center of it, and is surrounded by a

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sterile caricature of family, and protected by the illusion that wealth can claim priority even over death (Watson, 2003:3).

Scott (1985:25) indicates that many commentators believe that Volpone is a retelling of old beast-fables about clever fox who outwits the birds of prey and finally entraps them by feigning death. This parable resembles the typical satiric city-comedy, with the cleverest creature feeding himself fat or gulls whose over confidence has made them vulnerable.

**Text 1**

Corvino :

O, my dear Mosca. Does he not perceive us ?

Mosca :

No more than a blind harper. He knows no man,

No face of friend, nor name of any servant,

Who't was that fed him last, or gave him drink.

Not those, he hath begotten, or brought up

Can he remember

(Act I, Scene V:38-43)

Volpone is a rich Venetian nobleman who compounds his wealth by feigning fatal illness while promising several greedy friends to be his heir. Heirless Volpone attracts the greedy and wealthy to his house; they try to attain his favour by bringing him gifts that they hope will be returned tenfold after his death. The gift-giving competition is whetted by Volpone's clever feigning of serious illness (Chaudhuri,1985:25).

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Corvino is one of these greedy rivals who is persuaded by his greed to look like a cuckold. Here, Mosca, Volpone's servant, tells Corvino that Volpone does not recognize anyone in his present condition. He describes Volpone as a blind harper, he can neither see nor hear anything. He cannot remember anyone. In fact, all what is said by Mosca is not true. Volpone is not sick, he is feigning sickness. Mosca here is exaggerating Volpone's condition. Mosca's use of hyperbole has special ironic power. Jonson's use of hyperbole enriches the meaning of dramatic situation because the audience are aware of the fact that what is said by Mosca is not right.



**Text 2**

Mosca :

The blazing star of Italy ! a wench  
 O' the first year, a beauty, ripe, as harvest !  
 Whose skin is whiter than a swan, all over !  
 Than silver, snow, or lilies ! A soft lip,  
 Would tempt you to eternity of kissing !  
 And flesh that melteth, in the touch, to blood!  
 Bright as your gold ! and lovely as your gold !

(Act I, Scene V:108-114)

Mosca encourages Volpone to think of seeking a greater treasure than gold : The wife of Corvino, Celia. Mosca amplifies Volpone's interest in Celia with the most hackneyed sort of romantic imagery as if he knew that Volpone could not resist writing himself wholeheartedly into this sort of bodice-ripping love-story. Mosca makes a hymn to the

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beauty of Celia. He exaggerates her description by a series of overstatements to make Volpone preoccupied with her beauty. Syntactically speaking, overstatement is carried out by means of comparison. Mosca has pictured Celia's almost statuesque purity- **whiter than a swan...silver, snow...lilies**. To bring warmth and colour to the portrait he hastens to add that she will be responsive to Volpone's embraces. "**melteth, in the touch, to blood!**". Overstatement is also accomplished by simile. Mosca describes Celia's flesh as bright and lovely as Volpone's gold.

**Text 3**

Sir Politic :

...They are the only knowing men of Europe !  
 Great general scholars, excellent physicians,  
 Most admired statesmen, professed favourites,

And cabinet counselors, to the greatest princes!

**The only languaged men, of all the world !**

(Act II, Scene II:9-13)

The speaker, Sir Politic, is an English knight whose mind and notebooks are filled with naive intrigues and playbook political plots.

(Watson,2003:10)

In these lines, Sir Politic exaggerates the profession of the mountebanks by describing such simple and naive persons as "great general scholars" and "excellent physicians". Syntactically speaking, overstatement is carried out by the use of the superlative marker *most*, in "most admired statesmen", which is a device for expressing

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extreme evaluation. In "They are the only knowing men of Europe" and "The only languaged men of all the world" overstatement is indicated by the exaggerated use of the universal quantifiers "only".

#### Text 4

Volpone :

...Here is a poulder, concealed in this paper, of  
which, if I should speak to the worth, nine  
thousand volumes were but as one page, that  
page as a line, that line as a word : so short is  
this pilgrimage of man (which some call life)to  
the expressing of it.Would I reflect on the price?  
Why, the whole world were but as an empire,that  
empire as a province, that province as a bank,  
that bank as a private purse, to the purchase of it.

(Act II, Scene III:228-236)

Here Volpone disguises as a mountebank. He promises to give Celia a power which



can cure every disease or, as he claims, it can cure everything from dandruff to athlete's foot (Chaudhuri, 1985:25).

Volpone claims that his power is so expensive and worthy. He exaggerates his claim by saying that "If I should speak to the worth, nine thousand volumes were but as one page". This extreme evaluation is an overstatement. Syntactically it is accomplished by a simile. This simile is exaggerated because nine thousand volumes are compared to a page. He continues overstating : "that page as a line,

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that line as a word". What's more, life itself is too short to give it its due worth.

In his saying of "the whole world were but as an empire, that empire as a province, that province as a bank, that bank as a private purse, to the purchase of it", Volpone exaggerates the value of his power declaring that one needs a bank to buy it.

#### Text 5

Volpone :

...They baths shall be the juice of July-flowers,  
 Spirit of roses, and of violets,  
 The milk of unicorns, and panther's breath  
 Gathered in bags, and mixed with Cretan wines.  
 Our drink shall be prepared gold, and amber ;  
 Which we will take, until my roof whirl round.

(Act III, Scene VII:213-218)

Volpone woos Celia by recommending to her his own accomplishments and virility and by listing some of the limitless riches that can be of hers. He promises her a set of participatory literary allusions which they will consciously control to maximize their own pleasure. Volpone uses a series of overstatements as a means to seduce Celia. He

claims that her bath will be the juice of July-flowers, spirit of roses and of violets. Gold and amber are to be drunk and alluring prospects are envisaged. Such kind of statements are not to be taken literally but they are used to create a forceful impression on Celia.

### Conclusion

Overstatement, or hyperbole, is a rhetorical device of exaggeration for effect, and not to be taken as literal speech. It refers to a case where the speaker's description is stronger than is meant by the state of affairs described. Consequently, it constitutes a violation of the maxim of quality.

Usually, overstatement is used as an ornament to speech. Like all figures of speech, it can be employed with a variety of effects. Its use is especially ironic and effective. In Jonson's *Volpone*, it is an essential part of the dramatic fun. In other words, its use as a rhetorical device in *Volpone* enriches the meaning of the dramatic situation.

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#### ABSTRACT

This study deals with overstatement as one of the linguistic communicative devices which are concerned with achieving a certain intended meaning or effect. Overstatement is a figure of speech in which sentences are exaggerated or extravagant. It is to create a forceful impression and is not meant to be taken literally.

To explicate the linguistic phenomenon at hand, various definitions and uses are first introduced. Then, the study sets out to investigate the relationship between overstatement as a grammatical and semantic entity and overstatement as a pragmatic entity arguing that a contextually-conditioned association holds between the former, as exaggerated sentences, and the latter, as an illustration of the conversational implicature. The practical part includes illustrative texts extracted from Ben Jonson's play *Volpone or The Fox*. The findings of the paper are summed up in the conclusion.

#### الخلاصة

لُغى هذه الدراسة بالمبالغة بوصفها إحدى أدوات التواصل اللغوية التي تهدف إلى تحقيق معنى ضمناً أو تأثيراً المبالغة هي إحدى أشكال الكلام التي فيها جعل مبالغ فيها. حيث تستعمل لخلق انطباعاً وتأثيراً قوياً لا إن تؤخذ حرفياً. لغرض شرح هذه الظاهرة اللغوية قدمت تعاريف واستعمالات مختلفة أولاً ثم حاولت الدراسة تقصي العلاقة بين المبالغة كمفهوم نحوي ودلالي وبينها كمفهوم تداولي مبنية إن هناك ترابط سيميائي مشروط بين مفهومها النحوي والدلالي كجمل مبالغ فيها ومفهومها التداولي كمثل على التضمنين. أما الجزء العملي فيتضمن عينات توضيحية مأخوذة من مسرحية بن جونسون فولفوني أو الثعلب. إيمان نتائج البحث فقد أُلحقت في الخاتمة.

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To explicate the linguistic phenomenon at hand, various definitions and uses are first introduced. Then, the study sets out to investigate the relationship between overstatement as a grammatical and semantic entity and overstatement as a pragmatic entity arguing that a contextually-conditioned association holds between the former, as exaggerated sentences, and the latter, as an illustration of the conversational implicature. The practical part includes illustrative texts extracted from Ben Jonson's play *Volpone* or *The Fox*. The findings of the paper are summed up in the conclusion.

#### الخلاصة

تعنى هذه الدراسة بالمبالغة بوصفها إحدى أدوات التواصل اللغوية التي تهدف إلى تحقيق معنى ضمني أو تأثير المبالغة هي إحدى أشكال الكلام التي فيها جعل مبالغ فيها. حيث تستعمل لخلق انطباعا وتأثيرا قويا لا إن تؤخذ حرفيا. لغرض شرح هذه الظاهرة اللغوية قدمت تعاريف واستعمالات مختلفة أولا ثم حاولت الدراسة تقصي العلاقة بين المبالغة كمفهوم نحوي ودلالي وبينها كمفهوم تداولي مبيحة إن هناك ترابط سيميائي مشروط بين مفهومها النحوي والدلالي كجمل مبالغ فيها ومفهومها التداولي كمثل على التضمين. أما الجزء العملي فيتضمن عينات توضيحية مأخوذة من مسرحية بن جونسون فولفوني أو الثعلب. إيا نتائج البحث فقد أخصت في الخاتمة.