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A Linguistic Analysis of Understatement

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Abstract

This study deals with the linguistic analysis of understatement. Understatement is a figure of speech which deliberately expresses an idea as less important than it actually is. To explain this device, its various linguistic aspects are explored. Syntactically, the fact that this device is mainly triggered by negation is highlighted. The semantic perspective sheds light on its unformativity and the pragmatic one is elucidated by examining Grice's theory of conversational implicature and cooperative principle. Understatement will be explicated as a manifestation of a violation of Grice's maxim of quantity. The relation between understatement and irony on one hand and politeness on the other will also be given. The practical part includes certain texts extracted from various books of the New Testament in the Holy Bible, namely: Mark, Luke, Acts of Apostle and Corinthians. The study ends with some concluding remarks.

1. Understatement: Definition and Uses

Understatement is a figure of speech that intentionally understates something or implies that it is lesser in significance or size than it really is as shown in the following examples (Nordquist, 2008: 3):

1. "It's just a flesh wound".

(Black Knight, after having both of his arms cut off, in Monty Python And The Holy Grail).

2. "I have to have this operation...It isn't very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain"

(Holden Caulfield in The Catcher In The Rye, by J.D. Salinger)

3. "The Troubles" as a name for decades of violence in Northern Ireland.

4. "The Recent Unpleasantness" used in Southern American idiom to refer to the American civil war and its aftermath.

The term litotes is used as a synonym for understatement. Naming this device by its classical name brings to mind its role in traditional rhetoric (Leech, 1983: 145)

Wouden (1995:2) states that in understatement the speaker uses a weaker term than s/he might without violating the truth, and the listener is aware of this.

5. Her performance is satisfactory.(superb)

6. He is rather well off.(filthy rich)

A particular form of understatement is generated by denying the opposite or contrary of the word which otherwise would be used. Johnson uses such forms to make a modest assertion, saying "not improperly" rather than "correctly" or "best" (Harris, 2008: 5).

7. This kind of writing may be termed not improperly the comedy of romance .

Occasionally such a construction conveys an ironic sentiment by its understatement .

8. We saw him throw the buckets of paint at his canvas in disgust, and the result did not perfectly represent his subject.

Usually, such an understatement intensifies the sentiment intended by the writer, and creates the effect of strong feelings moderately conveyed.

9. If can tell the fair one's mind, it will be no small proof of your art, for I dare say it is more than she herself can do...

10. He who examines his own self will not long remain ignorant of his failings.

In fact, such an informative denial - a typical device of understatement- is frequently used in criticism(Leech, 1983: 146).

11. I wasn't overimpressed by her speech.

12. Praise you not, for " I blame you".

Sometimes, as it is stated by Gibbs (1994: 392), understatement seems to involve intensification, suggesting that the speaker's feelings are too deep for plain expression, as in :

13. He's no Hercules.

14. He's not exactly a Pauper.

Understatement , according to Wikipedia (2008: 5), is a staple of humor in English-speaking cultures, especially in British humor. For example, in Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, a suburban dinner party is invaded by death, who wears a long black cloak and carries a scythe. He is the Grim Reaper; the party is over; the guests must all go with him. "well" says one party guest, "that's cast rather a gloom over the evening, hasn't it?" In another scene, an army officer has just lost his leg, when he asked how he feels, he looks down at his bloody stump and responds, "stings a bit".

Harris (2008: 5) points out that the writer may choose to understate the fact as a means of employing the reader's own powers of description. When the reader can be expected to know the true nature of a fact which might be rather difficult to describe adequately in a brief space, the writer can use an understatement. For example , instead of endeavoring to describe in a few words the horrors and destruction of the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, a writer might state:

15. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake interrupted business somewhat in the downtown area.

The effect is not the same as a description of destruction , since understatement like this necessarily smacks of flippancy to some degree; but occasionally that is a desirable effect.

2. Syntactic Aspects

Ravazzoli (1978:75) and Leech (1989:148) maintain that understatement is syntactically marked by negation. For instance:

16. The meeting was not particularly well attended.

As a negative proposition is assumed to deny a positive expectation, (16) takes as its norm the corresponding positive proposition "the meeting was particularly well attended ", hence even if the meeting had been quite well attended, it would be truthful to assert (16). In this way, the understatement disguises a bad report in a form on the face of which permits a good interpretation. The unfavorable interpretation is arrived at indirectly by an implicature , and is thus weakened.

Furthermore, Burton (2006: 13) indicates that double negation is one of the syntactic clues for understatement. More specifically, an antonym (a negative word) is negated to give an understating sense.

17. He lifted his hat with respect ,and not without gallantry.

18. She doesn't look too bad.

19. I don't deny she is right.

20. You are not wrong.

21. I couldn't disagree.

The negated antonym can also be indicated by the use of the "not-un" construction (ibid.).

22. The attempt is not unsuccessful.

23. He was not unfamiliar with the works of Dickens.

24. She is not so unkind.

25. I am not unwell.

George Orwell points out in "Politics and the English Language" the "not-un" construction should not be used indiscriminately. Rather, one should find an opposite quality which as a word is something other than the quality itself with an "un" attached. For instance, instead of saying, "we were not unvictorious", one can say, "we were not defeated or "we did not fail to win" or something similar (Harris, 2008 : 7).

A further technique for understating pessimistic evaluation is the use of minimizing adverbials of degree such as a bit, a little and a little bit which are specialized towards negatively evaluated terms

26. The paint was a bit dirty.

A special restriction, which seems to have become institutionalized in grammar, is that a bit and a little can occur with the negatively evaluated adverb too (Leech, 1983:147).

27. She is a little too young for the job.

Wouden (1995: 7) maintains that the understating context is characterized by the use of negative adverbs such as never, nowhere and not at all in addition to the use of the negative conjuncts neither...nor

28. Overall the flavors of the mushrooms, herbs, and spices combine to make the dish not at all disagreeable to the palate.

29. Of course, some acts may be neither unjust nor immoral.

Weak adverbials and determiners some, somewhat or weakly intensive ones fairly, pretty, rather, seldom, hardly trigger the effect of understatement since they often implicate negative evaluations and tend to add a down toning effect to the terms they modify (Leech, 1983: 148, Wouden, 1995: 7).

30. The weather was seldom uncomfortable.

31. The employees were rather unenthusiastic about the move.

It should be noted that many understating expressions are subject to fossilization or grammaticalization, sometimes even to the degree that the negated element becomes a negative polarity item. Cases such as "not bad", "it is beyond doubt" and "little wrong" have developed into fixed clichés or idioms (Wouden, 1995: 16).

Many polarity items, both negative and positive, are constrained to appear where they are conspicuously uninformative. The positive polarity items in (A) and the negative polarity ones in (B) below, according to Israel (2008:7), are called attenuators; they are a motley syntactic set, including auxiliaries, determiners, degree modifiers and idiomatic predicative constructions. What they share is a certain modesty i.e. they are only appropriate where they weaken the force of the proposition to which they contribute. On the other hand, Wouden (ibid.:17) explicitly mentions understatement as a defining property of at least some negative polarity items.

A. some, somewhat, sort of, kind of, a tad, a mite, a smidgen, a handful, a hint, a couple, one or two, a while, a whiff, a ways, might, may well. B. much, a whole hell of a lot, all that much, all that many, much of a N, exactly a N, overmuch, all that, any too, so very, be great shake.

3. Semantic Aspects

The phenomenon of understatement reflects a common strategy speakers use to frame the content of what they say. Furthermore, as a figure, understatement is all about informativity, or more precisely, about its absence. To construe something as an understatement is to see it as lacking some informational content. In effect, an understatement involves a way of framing the content of what is said against the background of some informationally stronger content which might have been said, but wasn't (Israel, 2008: 3).

Understatement is paradoxical on the face of it: 'say less and mean more. It is a statement which, somehow, because it is conspicuously less informative than some other statement, can be used to express the meaning of the more informative statement. It depends on a hearer's ability to enrich the content of some indeterminate meaning. Such a figure can be difficult to understand, but it has real advantages as well. Saying less means less work for a speaker: fewer words articulated and fewer explicit constraints on meaning construction. Saying less and meaning more frees both the speaker from assuming full responsibility for what s/he communicates, and the hearer from any undue strain on his/ her credulity(Israel, 2008: 1).

Understatement depends on a more general phenomenon of attenuation or semantic weakening. While understatement says less and means more, attenuation simply says less. But funnily enough, in order to say less, a speaker may have to do more. People regularly go out of their way to express themselves in ways that are less than fully forthcoming, and to do so, they can use a variety of linguistic devices which effectively minimize the content of what they say. This phenomenon is a mainstay of work on rhetoric and linguistic pragmatics, but it is easily underestimated. Attenuating constructions may seem insignificant, and in a real sense they are- only their insignificance is in fact central to their meaning (Caffi, 1999: 885).

Basically, an understatement can be triggered by the use of an attenuated proposition. Ironically, because attenuators only appear where they minimize what is said, they often give rise to an implicature that a speaker did in fact mean more. For instance, the use of attenuating negative polarity item "exactly +NP" hints strongly at understatement, that is, the superficially contradictory negation here is prone to interpretation as a strong contrary one.

32. Patrolling the ku-dam in the heart of West Berlin isn't exactly a hardship.

"Patrolling in(32) sounds like not just a non-hardship, but actually something of a pleasure (Israel, 2008: 10).

This sort of negative understatement involves a kind of implicature in which a superficially weak contradictory expression is used to express a stronger contrary meaning; this is what Horn(1989)calls "contraries in contradictory clothing". In certain contexts, implicatures like this have a tendency to become a default inference, so perhaps it is not surprising that a sizable class of superficially attenuating constructions appear to be used only or overwhelmingly in the expression of negative understatement. For example, the following constructions literally denote an extreme scalar attribute and are used in denials to implicate an attribute at the opposite end of the scale(*ibid.*:11).

VP Construction	Denies	Implicate
Be (any)great shake significant	be very good	be quite bad
Grow on trees	be trivial	Bear comment be
Be skin off one's nose	be very common	be quite rare
Be born yesterday	be a big problem	be no problem
Be something to sneeze at	be very naïve	be quite savvy
	be trivial	be significant

All of these constructions are strong negative polarity items; they are licensed in various negative constructions. These constraints seem to reflect the fact that their associated implicatures only arise in the context of a denial of some sort. It is worth noting that one finds among these constructions both evaluatively positive and negative predicates. That is, while it would be a good thing to be "great shakes" or to "set the Thames on fire", it is clearly not so desirable to have been "born yesterday" or to have lost any "skin off one's nose"- at least not within the commonsense logic of these idioms. On the other hand, while both evaluatively positive and negative predicates can be conventionalized as negative polarity item understaters, they may not be equally likely to do so. And it appears that the evaluatively – positive negative polarity items here are the ones in which the understating implicature is most strongly felt and most likely to be conventionalized. Thus, while the inference from "not the brightest bulb" to "really quite stupid" seems really quite strong, the inference from "not born yesterday" to "really quite savvy" seems a bit more tenuous. While the former is reliably insulting, the latter seems merely less than complimentary (Horn, 1989: 353-355).

Wouden(1995: 5)states that there is some uncertainty about the exact meaning of understatement, especially in the case of double negation or the use of "not-un" construction, the rhetorical tradition states that the understating construction is strongly positive, whereas the linguistic tradition maintains that the doubly – negated expression is somewhat weaker than the straightforwardly positive one. Wouden's (ibid.) analysis of this kind of understatement points in the direction of the correctness of the latter option. The truth-functional meaning of a lexical item such as "unwise" is vague: It covers the area between "rather wise" and "extremely wise". The independent mechanism of understatement that was already mentioned must be held responsible for the fact that the understating constructions may be used occasionally to express strong positive statements. Thus, via understatement, weakly positive expressions such as "nice" and "not bad" can be used to express a very positive attitude of the speaker : "extremely beautiful" or something along these lines.

However, according to wikipedia (2008: 5), the interpretation of understatement can depend on context, including cultural context. In speech, it may also depend on intonation; for example, the phrase "not bad" can be said in such a way as to mean anything from "mediocre" to "excellent".

A sentence such as:

33. It is better than nothing.

is quite a striking case of understatement. Depending on the context in which it is uttered, it may both convey an extremely positive meaning and refer to somewhere in the middle area. In a situation where a person needs \$1000, the offer of helping him with a \$100 bill may elicit this utterance, and then the message is "well, it's not exactly what I wanted, but it's at least something". But if a person wins \$1000000 in a lottery, the same sentence can be used (with the help of understatement or conventionalized irony) to express the meaning "it is an enormous amount of money". Moreover, a sentence such as:

34. His performance was less than ideal.

can be used to criticize the subject's behaviour both mildly "it was rather good" and severely "it was terrible" (Wouden, 1995: 13).

4. Pragmatic Aspects

Some scholars have argued that understatement cannot be studied in decontextualized situations, it needs to be examined within the discipline of pragmatics, which is generally defined as the study of "meaning in interaction" (Thomas, 1995: 22).

Norrick (1982: 168) highlights the fact that understatements are syntactically and semantically flawless; they only become odd in context. Consequently, he prefers the term "contextual" figure to refer to it.

Likewise, Ravazzoli (1978: 70) defines the trope as a semantic-pragmatic process. In considering the semantic process or change of meaning affecting understatement, he points out that one cannot minimize objects or concepts without confronting them with others from which monotonic sense can be derived through lexical conversion. Hence, for Ravazzoli, understatement is typically a referential trope since it cannot be recognized without resorting to its referent.

Kreuz (1998: 96-7) has stressed the importance of world knowledge to determine whether a statement should be interpreted as understatement or not. This helps him explain that what is understatement in one situation may be non-understatement in another, so a listener must be sensitive to these differences. Although knowledge of scripts and schemata helps listeners make sense of literal statements, this information plays an even greater role in helping to identify non-veridical or non-literal statements. World knowledge allows listeners to correctly detect statements that are meant figuratively and to have greater certainty about these interpretations.

4.1 Grice Co-operative Principle

Language philosophers have concentrated on the comprehension of understatement from a pragmatic viewpoint. Within this framework, Grice's (1975) co-operative principle, where understanding is a matter of inference from what is said to what is meant, has been extremely influential. Indeed, the most influential ideas about trope understanding come from his theory of conversational implicature.

Grice (1975: 45) notices that participants in talk exchanges generally work on the assumption that certain conversational rules are observed. His principle of co-operative conversation runs as follows: "make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged". In turn, the principle falls into four maxims, namely quantity, quality, relation and manner, according to which speakers must speak informatively, truthfully, with relevance clearly and unequivocally, respectively. But he notices that there are occasions and circumstances where speakers fail to observe the maxims. One reason is to prompt hearers to seek for another level of interpretation, for the purpose of generating a conversational implicature.

In Grice (ibid.: 25), non-literal language forms represent deviations from the principle of standard communication, falling under the category of "examples that involve exploitation, that is, a procedure by which a maxim is flouted for the purpose of getting in conversational implicature by means of something of the nature of a figure of speech". Dascal and Gross (1999: 122) state that the figure of speech of understatement is regarded as a matter of inference since speakers urge addressees to seek an implicature beyond the straightforward literal interpretation of what is said.

4.2 Deviation From Grice's Maxims in Understatement

Gibbs (1994a: 392) remarks that understatement is traditionally viewed as a violation of Grice's maxim of quantity (i.e. contribute as much to the conversation as is required). Bannister and Harnish (1979: 66) indicate that in understatement, one purports to claim what is in fact less than one intends to claim. Since understatements are true if what is intended to be communicated is true, recognition of speaker's communicative intention cannot depend on saying something a speaker obviously does not believe, and so they do not violate the

conversational presumption of sincerity- one has told the truth. Rather , one has not told the whole truth and so has violated the presumption of quantity as in:

35. It's OK. (Good)
36. Not bad !(Very good ! Great !)
37. He's getting by.(He's doing well)

Likewise , saying less than one means may exist in what one says or merely in how one says it. If, for instance upon sitting down to a loaded dinner plate, one says, "this looks like a good bite", one is actually stating less than the truth; but if one says, with Artemus word, that a man who holds his hand for half an hour in a lighted fire will experience "a sensation of excessive and disagreeable warmth", one is stating what is literally true but with a good deal less force than the situation might seem to warrant. This is not an untrue proposition , but merely a highly uninformative one. Hence the maxim of quantity is most directly violated. (Perrine, 1978: 651)

The disproportion involved in an understatement naturally produces a contrast with reality. Understating utterances present a contrast between the state of affairs depicted in the utterance and the real state of affairs, between the semantic or "utterance meaning" of the comments and the referent situation (Colston and O'Brien, 2000a: 19).

The contrast in understatement is one of magnitude. In contrast of magnitude, however, the mentioned and the referent situations belong to the same category, but there is a difference in degree , concerning understatement, it is down along the continuum within that category. With understatement, moderate comments are made about extreme situations. For example, describing someone as "a little bit intoxicated" when in fact s/he is "very drunk". In this case a moderately negative comment is made about a very negative situation, or describing someone as "quite intelligent" when in fact s/he is "a genius". Here a moderately positive comment is made about a very positive situation (ibid; 2000b: 179).

Fogelin (1988: 16) refers to this contrast in the study of non- literal language in describing understatement as "a contrasting figure of speech" since "the speaker says something mutually understood to be in need of correction". The indirect content of this figure of speech is given by the form of corrective judgment. This is succinctly explained by Fogelin (ibid.: 14):

In understatement ,I say something weaker than I am in a position to say; for example, I say that someone has had something to drink when; in fact he is utterly intoxicated. The corrective judgment goes: "what do you mean he has had something to drink? He's plastered". My remark counts as understatement when it is mutually recognized that I have spoken with the intention of invoking this corrective judgment...my impression is that people will call something understatement if it invokes a mutually recognized corrective judgment towards the extreme(on the scale). Understatement invites a strengthening correction.

4.3 Understatement and Irony

Fogelin (1988: 3) and Gibbs (1994: 391) note that understatement is one of the figures that cluster around irony. In classical rhetoric, understatement is closely related to irony in that each misrepresents the truth. They distort the truth in that speakers assert less than and the opposite of what is objectively warranted, respectively. So they both function by invoking mutually recognized corrective responses. Probably because of this corrective judgment understatement has sometimes been considered an ironic trope .

Colston and O' Brien (2000a: 1563) state that understatement is a statement that is restrained in an ironic contrast to what might have been said. They highlight the idea that with

understatement "the situation is described in terms that fall between the opposite and the reality of the situation".

Leech (1983: 143) says that the ironic force of a remark is often signaled by understatement, which makes it difficult for the hearer to interpret the remark at its face value. In an ironic understatement such as,

38. Some of his words were not Sunday school words.

By negative uninformative, the speaker politely implicates that "one expects all of his words to be Sunday school words". But clearly this is a false expectation. Therefore, the opposite state of affairs is inferred to be the true one: that the man was given to using bad language. Ironic understatement typically, by negation, makes a claim which is manifestly far weaker than a claim that could be made.

In every day speech understatement is sometimes used in gentle irony, especially when describing something very spectacular or impressive as "rather good" or words to that effect (Cuddon, 1979: 389).

Colston and O'Brien (2000a: 1557) remark that both irony and understatement make use of a potential contrast between expected and experienced events. This points to an important existing relation between irony and understatement in terms of understanding. Since they both refer to the expected event, they create a contrast with the ensuing event, that literal comments, because they genuinely reflect what happened, do not.

At this point, it is important to note that the contrast created by these two tropes is of a different nature. Colston and O'Brien (ibid) note that the contrast in understatement is one of magnitude as it is mentioned earlier, while irony typically produces contrasts of kind. Irony exhibits a contrast of kind because positive comments are made about negative situations or vice versa.

Understatement, as it is indicated by Nordquist (2008: 2), is a form of irony in which something is intentionally represented as less than it is :

39. Hank Aaron was a pretty good ball player.

It can be converted into irony by suppressing negation. Thus, they underline that of the same misshapen man of whom one would say, using understatement, "he is no Adonis", one might say ironically, "he is an Adonis". Indeed, understatement is often treated as a category of irony, since they express superficial indifference and underlying commitment.

4.4 Understatement and Politeness

Harris (2008 : 6) indicates that understatement can be used as a tool for politeness modesty and tactfulness. Whenever the speaker represents his own accomplishment, and often when he just describes his own position, an understatement of facts will help him to avoid the charge of egotism on the one hand and of self-interested puffery on the other. People are always more pleased to discover a thing greater than promised rather than less than promised or as Samuel Johnson puts it, "it is more pleasing to see smoke brightening into flame, than flame sinking into smoke". And it goes without saying that a person modest of his own talent wins the other's admiration more easily than egotist. Thus an expert geologist might say "I know a little about rocks", rather than "I'm an expert about rocks".

It can be seen, then, that understatement is a way of underplaying aspects of meaning which are pragmatically disfavored. In the following examples of modest self-praise, it is impoliteness that it is mitigated (Leech, 1983: 148)

40. Actually, I'm rather good at crossword puzzles.

41. We're rather proud of our classless profession.

5. Analysis

This section is going to trace the use of understatement in the Bible. Certain texts are extracted from different books of the New Testament mainly, Mark, Luke, Acts of Apostle, and Corinthians. These specific books are chosen because together they provide good varieties for indicating understatement

Text 1

"He did not speak to them without a parable"

(Mark,4:34)

Mark teaches people by using certain parables. Mark's parables are only a few of the parables Jesus used to correct popular erroneous ideas about the kingdom. The parables are similar to bait for the multitudes (Constable, 2008: 54).

The understatement in this text is indicated by the use of double negation. The words not and without are used to mean with. It confirms the fact that Mark uses parables in teaching his people. Rather than making this statement directly, the speaker expresses it even more effectively by denying its opposite. i.e. rather than merely saying that " he spoke to them only with a parable, the speaker says" he did not speak to them without a parable".

Text 2

"I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward"

(Mark,9:41)

Not only would the exorcist receive God's blessing, but anyone who does anything to help another person using even the name of a disciple of Jesus would receive his reward. This helps extend to the almost insignificant act of giving a cup of cold water to some thirsty persons (Constable,2008 :102).

Syntactically, understatement is indicated by the use of the attenuator by no means followed by the negative verb lose. The combination of these negative words give the positive meaning "... will certainly get a reward".

Text 3

"you are not far from the kingdom of God"

(Mark,12:34)

Jesus is talking with a man telling him that he is not far from entering the kingdom of God. That man's openness to scriptural revelation and his positive orientation to Jesus if continued would bring him to faith in Jesus and ultimately entrance into his kingdom (ibid.: 132).

Syntactically speaking, the negation of the negative word far results in the positive meaning "you are close to the kingdom of God" . Hence, a positive meaning is expressed by using a negative construction.

Text 4

"Nothing is impossible with God"

(Luke,1:37)

This verse is said by the Angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary when he told her that she would give birth to a son whose name is Jesus. Mary asked "how will this be since I am a virgin" (Luke, 1: 34). Mary's questioning response is a denial of sexual relations and is used by Luke to lead to the angel's declaration about the spirit's role in the conception of this child. The angel confirms that the virginal conception of Jesus takes place through the holy spirit,

the power of God implying that there should be no doubt about Mary's pregnancy for "nothing is impossible with God". This confirmation is carried out by means of understatement.

Syntactically, this understatement is indicated by the use of double negation nothing and impossible. Negating the negative word results in a positive one. Semantically, this strongly affirms that "everything is possible with God". Paradoxically, the understatement is used as a means of intensification.

Text 5

"And the people brought the young man alive, and were not a little comforted"
(Act,20:12)

It is an established custom in the churches that the disciples with Paul, Luke, and Timothy meet together with all the brethren to "break the loaf" on the first day of the week. Paul spoke to the people and because he intended to leave the next day he spent the whole night in religious discourse and conversation. At midnight, the religious discourse was interrupted by a death of a young man whose name is Eutychus. Paul went down, and fell upon Eutychus, and embraced him, and said, "be not troubled, for his life is in him". This should be understood only as a modest way of declaring that he had restored him to life. In order to state more particularly the gratification which the brethren felt at Eutychus' recovery, Luke here remarks: "and the people brought the young man alive, and were not a little comforted" (McGarvey,2008:263).

This understatement is syntactically carried out by the use of the minimizing adverbial of degree a little in a negative context. Semantically, it is employed to mean "they were greatly comforted".

Text 6

"Paul said to the chiliarch, may I say something to you? He said, do you understand Greek? Are you not that Egyptian, who formerly made an insurrection, and led out into the wilderness four thousand Assassins? Paul said, I am a Jew, of Tarsus, in Cilicia; a citizen of no ordinary city".

(Act, 21:39)

Paul's own brethren in Jerusalem has become prejudiced against him on account of his teaching in reference to the law, and it was not surprising that the hatred of the unbelieving Jews toward him should be intense. It is not the custom of mobs to investigate the charges heaped upon their victims; hence, without knowing or caring to know, whether Paul had really brought Trophimus into the temple, they seized him and dragged him out into the court of Gentiles (ibid.: 277).

This conversation shows that the chiliarch was utterly ignorant of the character and history of his prisoner. Paul told him that he was a Jew of Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Paul calls his hometown of Tarsus "no ordinary city". He uses the understatement as a means of reflecting the positive meaning "a very impressive city". Instead of describing his city by using the adjective impressive, the negative of its contrast no ordinary is used to express it more effectively.

Text 7

"I was not disobedient to the vision from God"

(Act, 26:19)

By using an understatement, Paul talks about his characteristics saying that "I was not disobedient to the vision from God". Grammatically, the understatement is expressed

negating the negative word disobedient. In other words, double negation is used to highlight the positive meaning "I obeyed the vision from God".

Text 8

"Not many of you were wise by human standard; not many of you were influential; not many were of noble birth".

(Corinthians, 1: 26)

It was not the leading classes of Corinthian society which had furnished the largest number of the members of the church. The majority were poor, ignorant and slaves. God shows thereby that He has no need of human wisdom and power to support His work (Codet, 2008: 81).

This idea is carried out syntactically by negating the quantifier many. Semantically not many means a few. So this understatement implicates "a few of you were wise by human standard; a few were influential; a few were of noble birth".

Conclusions

Understatement is a rather round about way of saying things. It refers to a statement whereby speakers use a negative expression where a positive one would have been more forceful and direct. It downscopes some relatively extreme situation in the real world to a moderate one. Consequently, its communicative functions are to moderate or mitigate, to de-emphasize and to show negative emotion.

Understatement is a pragmatic phenomenon. Given the impossibility to understate without contrasting the utterance with its corresponding referent situation, understatement is entirely dependent on context. It can not be understood in decontextualized situations. It is not a particularly cooperative sort of figure of speech, its purposeful informativity runs counter to the Grecian principle that one should do what one can to make oneself understood. It is a figure whereby the quantity of an objective fact is intentionally deflated in varying degrees. Hence, it can be considered as an example of the exploitation of Grice's maxim of quantity.

Understating utterances depict in disproportionate terms some real state of affairs. From it, it follows that it is a subjective act. It includes an element of subjective evaluation of an objective fact. Moreover, it is noted that it corresponds to the philosophical attitude of pessimism and cynicism. From the analysis of the chosen texts it is concluded that understatement shows up not infrequently in the Bible. Mostly it is triggered by negation.

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الخلاصة

تتناول هذه الدراسة التحليل اللغوي لظاهرة التعبير عن واقع الأمر بصورة تخفف وطأة ثيره. إنها وسيلة من وسائل الكلام تعبر عمدا عن فكره بصورة أقل أهمية مما هي عليه في الحقيقة شرح هذه الظاهرة اللغوية، فصلت جوانبها المختلفة. تركيبيا تبرز هذه الوسيلة بصورة رئيسية من خلال استخدام النفي . يوضح الجانب الدلالي صفة الإقلال من قيمة القول. تناول الجانب التداولي صفي نظرية كرايس للتضمنين الكلامي والمبدأ التعاوني وتعد هذه الظاهرة اللغوية خرقا لمبدأ كرايس كمية. وتتناول الدراسة أيضا العلاقة بين هذه الظاهرة و السخرية من جهة و التأدب من جهة أخرى . فمن الجانب العملي بعض النصوص المأخوذة من كتب مختلفة من العهد الجديد من الكتاب المقدس Mark, Luke, Acts of Apostle, Corinthians. التي انتهت الدراسة ببعض الاستنتاجات.

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