

On hyperbolic scenarios, hyperbolic load, and the potential communicative impact of hyperbolic uses of language

M. Sandra Peña-Cervel & Francisco J. Ruiz de Mendoza-Ibáñez
University of La Rioja (Spain)
sandra.pena@unirioja.es, francisco.ruizdemendoza@unirioja.es

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This proposal starts off from the claim that hyperbole is not simply a rhetorical or communicative phenomenon. It should also be addressed from the point of view of cognitive modeling. Within this context, it has been proposed that hyperbole involves an upscaling cognitive operation carried out on a scalar concept (Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña 2005, Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza 2017). In cognitive and communicative terms, the situation in which the speaker upscales a magnitude out of proportion calls for a collaborative hearer getting involved in bringing the magnitude down to a less extreme value compatible with a real-world situation. This adjustment task results in the special meaning impact of hyperbolic expressions. Hyperbole, like metaphor, has also been regarded as a cross-domain mapping, where an upscaled conceptual representation is used to set up an imaginary source domain that helps us reason about the target domain capturing a real-world situation (Ruiz de Mendoza 2014: 190). For instance, in *John can smell pizza from a mile away*, the imaginary source domain contains a fictitious scenario with a person that has an extraordinary sense of smell. This domain lends its structure to the target domain, the real-world situation in which a person can smell pizza from a long distance. The hearer's attention is drawn to John's unique sense of smell and prompts an emotional reaction of astonishment. Finally, Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza (2017) have distinguished between constructional and inferential hyperbole. The former is a highly-conventional, cognitively entrenched, form-meaning pairing invariably describing a (virtually) impossible state of affairs based on a disproportionately magnified scalar concept. It rests on identifiable syntactic units like 'a billion times.' The latter, by contrast, derives from contextual incongruity (e.g. *I was quaking from head to foot, and could have hung my hat on my eyes, they stuck out so far*). On the basis of an analysis of 300 hyperbolic examples taken from the COCA we go beyond this typology and claim that both constructional and inferential hyperbole result from incongruity. Thus, the difference between constructional and inferential hyperbole simply lies in the source of such discrepancy, whether mainly triggered by specific syntactic patterns (and to a lesser extent by context) or exclusively by contextual factors. The degree of inconsistency is another issue that needs to be addressed. Whether hyperbole is constructional or inferential is immaterial to assess its degree of incongruity. The higher its degree of incongruity, the greater the hyperbolic import of an expression. We also observe that the higher the degree of probability of the imaginary scenario of an utterance, the lower its degree of hyperbolic impact. Moreover, the higher the hyperbolic import of an expression, the greater its emotional impact. In sum, we put forward three dimensions along which hyperbolic expressions should be considered: the likelihood of the hyperbolic scenario, the degree of hyperbolic load of the linguistic expression, and the degree of its emotional impact on the hearer. These dimensions relate as portrayed in the following table:

Likelihood of hyperbolic scenario	Degree of hyperbolic load of the expression	Degree of emotional impact on the hearer
Impossible/unconceivable	high	high
Hardly conceivable but likely	moderate	moderate
Conceivable but far-fetched	low	low

As part of a development of the previous accounts in terms of cognitive modeling, we discuss examples drawn from our corpus along the lines of this three-fold characterization of hyperbole.

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