Claudia Claridge

Hyperbole in English

A Corpus-based Study of Exaggeration

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Non-literal language is ubiquitous in everyday life, and while hyperbole is a major part of this, it has so far remained relatively unexplored. This volume provides the first investigation of hyperbole in English, drawing on data from genres such as spoken conversation, TV, newspapers and literary works from Chaucer to Monty Python. Combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, it uses approaches from semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis and classical rhetoric, to investigate in detail both speaker-centred and emotive aspects of hyperbole, and also addressee-related aspects such as interpretation and interactional uptake. Illustrated with a range of diachronic case studies, hyperbole is also shown to be a main means of linguistic creativity and an important contributor to language change. The book concludes with an exploration of the role of hyperbole in political speaking, humour and literature. Original and in-depth, it will be invaluable to all those working on meaning, discourse and historical linguistics.

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Contents

vii

Figures

Tables

Acknowledgements

Hyperbole is still a largely under-researched field, in particular in contrast to the wealth of material available on other figures of speech such as metaphor and irony. This book aims to shed new light on a number of interesting aspects of hyperbole.

While researching and writing the book, I have received generous assistance, which it is my pleasure to acknowledge here. Many conversations with colleagues at the Universities of Greifswald and Kiel (both linguists and literary scholars) have helped me to clarify my ideas on the topic of hyperbole and also to get ideas I might never have had without their input. I would also like to thank my students at Kiel University for being patient while I tried out my ideas on them and for their constructive criticism. A few people need to be mentioned explicitly: I thank Thomas Kohnen not only for his always helpful comments but especially also for his moral support. Lucia Kornexl provided constructive questions and ideas during the early stages of the project, while I was trying to get a grip on the topic. Ursula Lenker and Merja Kytö read draft chapters of the book, which helped to improve these considerably. Raymond Hickey carefully read the whole manuscript and added many helpful suggestions. I am also grateful to two anonymous readers for their very valuable feedback. Needless to say, all remaining shortcomings and errors are my own.

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1   **Introduction**

> est autem in usu vulgo quoque et inter ineruditos et apud rusti-
> cos, videlicet quia natura est omnibus augendi res vel minuendi
> cupiditas insita nec quisquam vero contentus est: sed ignoscitur,
> quia non adfirmamus.
>
> [Hyperbole is commonly used even by ignorant people and peas-
> ants, which is understandable, as all people are by nature inclined
> to magnify or to minimise things and nobody is content to stick
> to what is really the case. We tolerate this habit, because we are
> not really asserting facts. – my translation, CC]
>
> <div align="right">(Quintilian VIII, 6, 75)</div>

Hyperbole as a term has a long tradition; in the sense of 'exaggeration' it was
already used in classical Greece. Roman rhetoricians, such as Quintilian,
deal with the figure of overstatement in their handbooks and from there it
has found its way into the European rhetorical tradition. It is found used in
diverse sources; the *Encyclopædia Britannica* mentions love poetry, sagas,
tall tales, classical mythology, political rhetoric and advertising as texts con-
taining hyperbole, illustrating the great range of the phenomenon regarding
both time and genre. Furthermore, hyperbole is not only an arcane rhetorical
figure, but rather, similar to metaphor, it is a common feature of everyday
language use (Leech 1983: 146f.). Just like metaphor, it may be wired in the
cognitive structuring of our experience: the concept of size, to which exag-
geration must primarily be connected, is a very basic and salient one. Like
metaphor or in conjunction with it, hyperbole thus deals not simply with the
'description' of experience, but with the understanding and, especially, the
evaluation of it, i.e., the subjective importance to oneself, and it thus has an
important affective component. Remarks can already be found in Quintilian
(VIII, 6, 75) that it was a common urge of humans to magnify things and not
to be satisfied with (the description of) things as they really are (cf. the quote
at the beginning of this chapter). Thus, the presence of fairly common, but
largely unobtrusive instances of hyperbole in everyday language should not
really come as a surprise. In simple sentences like *they're never at home* it
is a universal feature (transcending individual language communities and

languages) and probably stays well below the threshold of stylistic consciousness. It is often only the (perceived) overuse or the novelty of an instance of hyperbole that strikes us as extraordinary.

The present study seeks first of all to trace this assumed 'commonness' of hyperbole in everyday spontaneous spoken language. How much exaggeration is actually used by people in conversation? What forms do the hyperbolic expressions employed take? And for what purposes and functions are they used? Are, perhaps, different groups of people marked by their distinctive use of hyperbole? Less spontaneous and more formal types of language will also be investigated, and there the rhetorical tradition of hyperbole will play a role. The persuasive or even manipulative aspect of hyperbole may come to the fore in public speeches and debates. Newspapers might make use of its potential for 'sensationalisation'. Literature and television might exploit hyperbolic means for their emotional appeal or for their comic possibilities. While the former two aspects highlight a potentially negative use and consequent disapproval of hyperbole, the latter two show the light or positive side of it. If hyperbole is indeed a common feature, as hypothesised above, then the historical dimension is also of interest, e.g., the questions of how long frequent hyperbolic expressions can maintain their exaggeration potential or how they contribute to semantic change.

The questions just raised make it evident that this can only be an empirical study, making use of a wide range of authentic data. Existing corpora of various regional and functional varieties of English are an obvious source of data. However, the phenomenon of hyperbole is not one that lends itself easily to a classical corpus linguistic approach as automatic searching requires a list of search terms. With this approach one tends only to find what one already knows or suspects to be the case anyway. Nevertheless, various corpora will be used, in part or whole, namely the *British National Corpus* (*BNC*), especially though not exclusively its spoken component, the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (*SBC*), as well as various diachronic corpora for the historical aspect, e.g., the *Helsinki Corpus* (*HC*), the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (*CEEC*), the *Corpus of English Dialogues* (*CED*) and the *Corpus of Nineteenth-century English* (*CONCE*). The approach taken is a mix of manual and automatic sampling: the first instalment of the *SBC* and a 314,725 word-subcorpus of the *BNC* spoken part (demographic section) have been read through to find *all* occurring instances of hyperbole, while some items identified in this way were then subjected to more comprehensive corpus searches. Where appropriate and viable, frequency investigations have been carried out, but on the whole the emphasis will be on the qualitative analysis of the data. In addition to corpora, the following sources were used to enable a more comprehensive treatment of hyperbole (cf. complete list in the appendices): a collection of British newspapers (print versions), speeches hosted on the Labour and Tory party websites, various novels, the works of Monty Python and TV series such

as *Ally McBeal* and *Coupling.* This was supplemented by accidentally over-heard examples from real conversations and from TV/radio programmes, including the odd German one.

The book is structured in the following way: Chapter 2 'The character-istics of hyperbole' provides a definition of hyperbole on which the data collection is based. The connection to intensification and emphasis will be discussed as well as semantic aspects touching on hyperbole, such as the semantics–encyclopedia interface, vagueness, emotive meaning and the role of polysemy. Chapter 3 presents an inventory of possible formal realisations of hyperbolic expressions and discusses special cases such as repetitions and superlatives. Chapter 4 deals with hyperbole in everyday language. It concentrates on the functions of hyperbole, in particular its role for the speaker's emotional expression and self-presentation, and also on the sociolinguistic implications of hyperbole usage. Chapter 5 focuses on the hearer and on the interactive process by treating the comprehension of hyperbole, hearer reactions and matters of politeness. The historical aspect will be followed up in Chapter 6, which starts with a general discussion of conventionalisation in language and then proceeds to the discussion of subjectification in semantic change based on selected case studies of histor-ical development. In Chapter 7 the rhetorical tradition of hyperbole will be taken up briefly, followed by a more detailed discussion of the role of over-statement in persuasive, humorous and literary discourse.

2   The characteristics of hyperbole

2.1   A preliminary definition

Let me start outlining some typical elements of hyperbole by way of an example. The following dialogue is taken from a broadcast exchange between the Beatle George Harrison and BBC journalist Alan Freeman in 1964, marked by a deadpan delivery:

(1) **Alan:**   George, is it true that you are a connoisseur of the classics?
     George: No, it's just a rumour.
     Alan: It's just a rumour. Do you enjoy singing 'Beethoven'?
     George: No. I've been singing it for **28 years** now, you know.
     Alan: For how long?
     George: **28 years**.
     Alan: That's **incredible**. Could you manage one more performance?
     George: Possibly.
     Alan: Oh, go on, say yes.
     George: Yes.[1]

George's claim to have been performing the song *Roll Over, Beethoven* for 28 years is an exaggerated statement in so far as the time span expressed is much longer than can be factually true and than can consequently be *literally* meant by him. In order to establish this, however, one needs some background knowledge, most crucially that George himself is no more than 21 years old at the time of speaking, or that the song itself originates only in the mid 1950s – both making the twenty-eight years factually impossible. Alan Freeman was, of course, aware of both these points, so the hyperbole should have been easy to identify for him; the same goes for the audience of the radio show. Had George made the same statement thirty years later, the interlocutor would, of course, need to know whether he kept on performing

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[1] BBC Radio 'From us to you', 28 February 1964, to be heard on the CD *The Beatles Live at the BBC*, EMI/Apple Records, 1994.

Literal expression	Hyperbolic expression
agrees with the extralinguistic facts in the given context	exceeds the (credible) limits of fact in the given context
contains semantic attribute expressing 'X'	contains attribute 'more of X', i.e., 'more of *the same*'

$$- \longleftarrow \hspace{6cm} \longrightarrow +$$
gradability
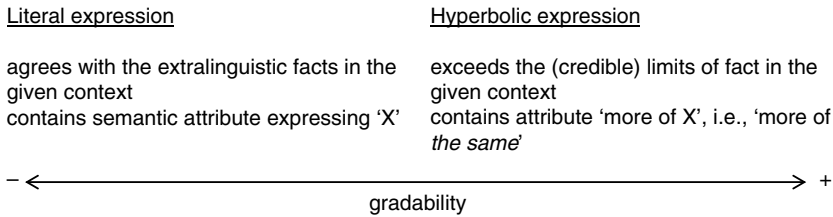
Figure 2.1: Preliminary definition of hyperbole

the song after the mid sixties – probably a less widely spread kind of knowledge. At any rate, the establishment of exaggeration is, as a rule, context- and knowledge-bound.[2] On this basis, I suggest the basic definition of hyperbole in Figure 2.1, which contrasts a possible literal, or unmarked, form with a corresponding hyperbolic expression in an identical context.

In (1) the corresponding literal expressions might have been, e.g., *four years*, i.e., 'literal' is here a shorthand for the expression that agrees as closely as possible with the state of affairs and that is, thus, factually appropriate. The literal and the hyperbolic expression have to be situated or at least viewed as being situated on the same degree scale, in the present example the numerical and/or temporal scales. The definition is basically about meaning in and out of context, the latter hinted at by the word 'literal', and thus places the phenomenon of hyperbole at the semantics–pragmatics interface.

The definition refers to the formal realisations of hyperbole by using the term 'expression'. In example (1), the overstatement is basically contained in a single word, *twenty-eight*, but there is in fact a wide range of instantiations, ranging from words via phrases of varying length and type to complete sentences. It is also not impossible that a whole text (of whatever extent) or even a larger discourse represents an instance of hyperbole (cf. Sections 3.2 and 3.7 for examples). 'Expression' is meant to cover all of these cases. As to the type or realisation of hyperbole, there are, of course, various possibilities. The numerical hyperbole found in (1) as such seems a rather conventional form of exaggeration, but the choice of *twenty-eight* instead of a round figure, e.g., *thirty* or, more blatantly, *a hundred*, makes it less expected, as well as less clearly transparent as hyperbole, and it adds an unconventional, creative touch.

Another interesting aspect is the question about the function(s) of hyperbolic expressions. Alan Freeman, I think, plays along with George Harrison's hyperbole: his question *for how long?* is not intended to cast doubt on or to criticise the latter's expression but to give it greater prominence; also, his comment *incredible*, a word that in itself is often used hyperbolically (what

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[2] Counterfactuality/impossibility and disjunction with context are also found among McCarthy and Carter's (2004: 162f.) list of identification criteria for hyperbole.

actually is truly impossible for humans to believe?) plays with the vacillation between a literal comment on the preceding hyperbole and a playful confirmation of it. In fact, the two of them are engaging in some kind of language play with a clearly humorous touch (they are aware of the audience, of course). George Harrison's comment, however, may also have a more serious aspect to it: he uses the exaggeration to emphasise his dissatisfaction with having to perform one and the same song too often, implying that he is fed up with it. This could be a real or a mock complaint; in any case, it transports evaluative, emotional meaning. Thus, hyperbole can have various attitudinal functions which might overlap in actual usage, like joking and complaining in this case.

The discussion of example (1) has highlighted some of the points that are of importance in discussing hyperbole and that will be taken up at various points in this study, namely

- the distinction between what is literally said (> linguistic) and what is actually the case (> extra-linguistic), creating the exaggeration on the basis of the gap between the 'meanings' of the two;
- the perception of a degree relationship between different representations of the same state of affairs;
- the role of contextual knowledge, which is necessary for identifying a potential case of hyperbole;
- the question of literal versus non-literal, figurative meaning;
- the discourse functions hyperbole can be used to fulfil, i.e., the intentions of an exaggerating speaker and their success or failure (in the light of the interlocutor's reactions);
- the forms of hyperbole and their conventional or unconventional, i.e., creative, nature.

It is the aspects concerning semantic and pragmatic meaning, context and gradability that are immediately relevant to the definition of hyperbole and that will be taken up in the following sections of this chapter. At the end of the chapter I will return to the definition above and present a revised form of it.

Before I proceed, I should pay attention to a terminological point, namely the presence of the three terms *hyperbole*, *exaggeration* and *overstatement*. *Hyperbole* is the traditional term taken originally from classical rhetoric and thus is associated with formal and persuasive speech, later with stylistics and literature. It is the term listed in dictionaries of rhetorical and literary terminology, while *overstatement* and even more so *exaggeration* are everyday terms with no clear affiliation to any domain or use.[3] The former is also the oldest in this sense attested in the English language (*OED* 1989: 1529),

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[3] For some speakers, these two might have different connotations, e.g., of greater or lesser objectivity or emotionality.

while *exaggeration* (*OED* 1989: 1565) and especially *overstatement* (*OED* 1989: 1803, verb 1792) are used only later in the relevant meaning. Gibbs (1994) distinguishes between *hyperbole* as intentional exaggeration and *overstatement* as non-intentional and subconscious (disregarding exaggeration itself as a denomination). While this makes sense given the origins of the two, especially of hyperbole as a means of persuasive discourse, the distinction in individual instances of use – and thus distinctive labelling – would be very difficult, as there is no clear-cut dividing line between intentionality and non-intentionality but a rather shady transition area. Norrick (2004) also distinguishes between hyperbole, overstatement and extreme case formulation, with hyperbole tending towards metaphoric and imagistic expressions. Extreme case formulations (ECFs), taken from Pomerantz (1986), include extreme expressions such as *every, best, always, brand new*, etc., but are otherwise linguistically unremarkable and constitute for him a separate type of exaggeration or, rather, a 'sub-category of hyperbole' (1986: 1728). One of his examples for the distinction is the following, describing an emotionally cold person: hyperbole *iceberg of a woman* – ECF *absolutely unfeeling* – overstatement *extremely cold* (1986: 1731). As will become clear in this chapter, his example for overstatement would not be accepted here.

I will take *hyperbole* as the primary *terminus technicus* for the phenomenon under consideration, partly because it is well established and partly because I consider every instance of hyperbole, at least in its ultimate origin, as an intentional linguistic act. I will, however, use *overstatement* and *exaggeration* as loose, non-technical synonyms, especially also for the verbal uses. ECF as a separate category and as a term will not be applied in this study; ECFs are simply seen as one of the many realisations of hyperbole.

2.2 Gradability and intensification

Let us start with what I have termed gradability in Figure 2.1, as the notion of degree is basic to hyperbole.[4] There are basically three types of scale which may all play a role in the realisation of hyperbole: (i) semantic scales, so-called 'Horn-scales' (Horn 1989), (ii) pragmatic scales (Fauconnier 1975, Hirschberg 1991) and (iii) argumentative scales (Ducrot 1973, Anscombre and Ducrot 1983). Semantic scales are entailment scales, such as <all, most, many, some>, <freezing, cold, cool> and <adore, love, like>, where members unilaterally entail the members to their right in the list, and the use of rightward (weaker) members produces a quantity-based implicature as to the non-applicability of the members to the left (cf. Horn 1989: 231*f.*, Levinson 2000: 79, 86f.). If hyperbole is based on such a scale, it depends to a large extent on a linguistic contrast, namely on contrasts within the lexicon.

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[4] The Greek word can be glossed 'excess' and is literally a combination of ὑπέρ 'over' and βάλλειν 'throw'.

Levinson (2000: 99) mentions other 'scales' which are based on lexical contrasts but do not involve entailment; some of these may include the notion of degree, such as his example of a 'pseudo-scale' (<mountain, hill>), and are thus also relevant for exaggeration. Bolinger's (1972: 279) example of a synonymic degree scale is such a pseudo-scale:

(2)   non-attainment   failure   fizzle   fiasco   disaster (fig.)
                                                                          →
                                         flop   debacle

Linguistic scales are especially relevant in cases like (2), where the evaluative semantic content is prominent (i.e., how serious a case of non-attainment is depends on the speaker's attitude), or where the concept denoted is a relative one, e.g., in the field of size descriptors (e.g., the range from *tiny* to *gigantic*) where the terms are relative to each other but also to a certain extent to the items to which they are applied. Where a *failure* turns into a *flop* and from there into a *fiasco* lies very much in the eye of the beholder and thus, to a large extent, in the linguistic content of these words (cf. also Section 2.6 below).

Pragmatic scales, in contrast, are not grounded in linguistic structure, but in speaker assumptions and expectations about the world leading to the (nonce) creation of a partially ordered set in a given context. Levinson (2000: 105) gives the examples of progress made on a trip from the West to East Coast (scale, e.g.,: <New York, Chicago, Salt Lake City, Reno>) and of the autograph prestige of actors (scale, e.g.,: <Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward>). Extralinguistic facts inform these scales and a change in the world or in speaker assumption will lead to different scales; the latter highlights the potentially subjective nature of hyperbole. Plant life and greenery is such an extralinguistic example; to name just a few items, there are *potted plants – garden – park – fields – forest – jungle*, etc, where there is a clear contrast in the quantity of flora, but additionally also in its quality. Quantity is of course crucial for hyperbole, but the other differences can also be relevant in an individual instance of overstatement. In (3) the potted plants found in a house are described as a jungle, clearly indicating the large amount of plants present, but also implicitly commenting on the near impenetrability of jungle environments and thus providing an excuse or justification for knocking over the plant.

(3)   **Norrine**   That's Edward Fox on the radio.
      Chris   Aaargh. Brushing past the plant and it fell over, that's all.
      Susan   This place is turning into a **jungle**.
      Chris   It is, it is a **jungle** already.
      Susan   It's lovely isn't it? (*BNC* KBK 3328)

The third type of scale is based on the ranking of argumentative strength. Utterances used for arguing for the same conclusion will support it to

different degrees, e.g., saying it is freezing is a more convincing argument for putting on a winter coat, scarf and gloves than saying it is cold or cool. The greater effect is partly due to the fact that hyperboles catch the addressee's attention more effectively. As argumentation usually involves knowledge of facts and relationships in the world, argumentative scales are also of a pragmatic type (cf. Horn 1989: 241f.). The following example works with a mix of pragmatic and argumentative scaling, but adds a nice twist by changing the underlying argument in mid-sequence from strength of sneeze to cleverness of using the right medicine.

(4)   TV advertisement for a nose spray. Three boys out playing:
    A: [sneezes]
    B: Wenn mein Papa Schnupfen hat und niest, wackelt der Tisch!
        (When my dad has a cold and sneezes, the table shakes!)
    A: Wenn mein Papa Schnupfen hat und sich die Nase putzt, wackelt das ganze Haus!
        (When my dad has a cold and blows his nose, the whole house shakes!)
    C: Wenn mein Papa Schnupfen hat, dann hat er Nasivin.
        (When my dad has a cold, he uses Nasivin)

As the examples and explanations so far show, hyperbole is part of the larger phenomenon of intensification. Bolinger (1972: 20, 115) calls intensification 'the linguistic expression of exaggeration and depreciation' and lists hyperbole among the rhetorical figures used to realise it. Intensification can be more precisely defined as placement of a predication on a scale of intensity, or degree of realisation of the predication, reaching from extremely/ very low to very/extremely high (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985: 589; Peters 1993: 1–8). One might assume that hyperbolic intensification is especially found at the extreme ends of the scale (cf. also Pomerantz's (1986) extreme case formulations); according to Schemann (1994) it is only hyperbole involving extremes in some way, if only by identifying a limit as a point of reference, that is definable in a non-intuitive way and therefore linguistically interesting. *Jungle* in (3) above can be said to represent such an extreme, but it is actually hard to say where *twenty-eight years* in (1) is situated on the scale – or even on what scale? The general numerical scale is open-ended, which would put twenty-eight towards the lower end (disregarding negative figures), but if one takes a person's lifespan as the relevant scale, twenty-eight lies in the first half and if one takes the 'age' of the song (at most, eight or nine years), it exceeds the scale; in neither case does it represent an extreme point but the last case at least implies it as a reference point by exceeding the extreme.

Hyperboles involving extremes are the most obvious ones to recognise (often without or with only minimal context) and perhaps the most frequent, but hyperbole could in principle use any part of the scale in order to express

something bigger, more, etc., than is the case, as long as the contrast between the stated point and the actual point is significant, i.e., large enough.[5] A small contrast would mean either that the hyperbole is not registered at all or that the force is so weakened as to be uninteresting for the hearer. It is impossible to fix a general lower limit for hyperbole, but if George Harrison in (1) had used 'ten years', the effect might have fallen flat. On the other hand, the contrast should perhaps not be too great either (cf. Quintilian (VIII, 6, 73) on the dangers of overdoing it), but the hearer should still be able to see the connection easily – Hübler (1983: 22) calls this the reconcilability of the contrast. Reconcilability means that there are commonsensical links between elements of the factual situation and its exaggerated depiction; for example, a very forceful sneeze can 'move' small objects, which establishes an inferable link to the shaking table in example (4) above.[6] There is no clear boundary or cut-off point between exceeding the truth somewhat (without truly exaggerated force?) and real hyperbole, but a transitional area where the amount of contextual knowledge and personal preferences will play a role for the hyperbolic or non-hyperbolic interpretation. Some potential hyperboles involve impossibilities, either because the whole statement is inherently absurd/illogical (e.g., *make sb's blood boil, be all ears*) or because norms and expectations are violated (cf. Schemann's (1994: 499) *und wenn wir dann im nächsten Monat nach China radeln*, 'and when we cycle to China next month'). The question is whether they fit into the system as described so far. In both cases the hyperboles exceed the scale, i.e., top the extreme even further, and they can thus be seen as exaggerating. The remaining question is then whether in a given context it is possible to see a link to the extreme, and between what is said and the literal state of affairs (reconcilability). I would argue that speakers as a rule do choose their absurd expressions to fit the context, i.e., they use '[well-]calculated absurdities', to borrow the title of a book on metaphor.[7] They are calculated to fit, and be recognisable as fitting, the context in question.[8]

Hyperbolic intensification can lie within the word or the whole proposition itself denoting an intensifiable, scalable concept (cf. *twenty-eight* (years), *jungle, disaster*), or in an accompanying modifier (e.g., *frightened to death, gigantic love bite*), e.g., an intensifier (degree adverb). Quirk *et al.* (1985: 589ff.) subdivide intensifiers into amplifiers (maximisers, boosters) and downtoners (approximators, compromisers, diminishers,

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[5] Hübler (1983: 21) makes the same point for understatements, talking about a 'significant qualitative contrast' between what is said and what is actually meant.

[6] One might perhaps imagine such links as being similar to the mappings between the two input spaces in blending theory, which are established via the more abstract generic space. In most 'straightforward' instances of hyperbole, reconcilability is not much of an issue, but it is important for metaphorical hyperboles, as we will see below.

[7] Christian Strub (1991), *Kalkulierte Absurditäten*, Freiburg/München: Karl Alber.

[8] I will postpone the discussion of the pragmatics of hyperbole, e.g., how it is to be seen in the context of conversational maxims, to Chapter 5.

minimisers), of which Bolinger (1972: 265) calls boosters 'by definition hyperbolic'.[9] However, in this generality it is an overstatement: not every instance of *perfect, terribly, hopeless* or the like is necessarily an exaggeration. It is, rather, that maximisers, boosters, diminishers and minimisers *can* all be hyperbolic in suitable contexts.

The plus and minus at the arrow ends in Figure 2.1 are obvious, indicating a greater and lesser extent, respectively. The literal expression is, in fact, in the neutral zone, indicating neither less nor more. Going on in the direction of minus will lead to the various types of understatement, saying less than what is intended. Hyperbole is always more of something and what 'more' precisely implies depends on the semantic content of the literal expression. This concerns that part of the definition given in Figure 2.1 above, which specifies 'contains attribute "more of X", i.e., "more of *the same*"'. In (5) the difference between fairly normal weight (potentially implied by Mark's first utterance) or even *fat* and *obese* is literally more: more pounds. *Obese* in the strict, i.e., medical, sense is being pathologically overweight (definable in numerical terms) and in everyday language it still denotes a very pronounced degree of fatness. After the denial of Mark's statement 'you're not fat' and his subsequent insistence, *obese* is clearly intended as an escalation by Joanne.

(5) **Mark**   *You're not fat*
      Joanne   *I am*
      Mark   You're not
      Anon.   (unclear)
      Helena   Oh I know it's huge
      Joanne   I am, it's grotesque isn't it?
      Helena   Mm
      Joanne   I'm **obese** (*BNC* KCE 6870)

(6) I'll be back **in a second** (*BNC* KPP 1141)

In a second in (6) at first glance scales downwards, a second after all is a very brief time segment, the smallest one in common use. If one takes as a literal version something like 'five minutes', *second* represents a lesser amount of time. However, if one takes, e.g., 'soon, shortly' as literally intended expressions, it becomes obvious that the feature to be scaled is the briefness of the absence and in so far as *in a second* is explicitly briefer it increases or magnifies this semantic aspect.[10] Hyperbole of small 'things' intensifying their

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[9] Bolinger's (1972: 17) classification of intensifiers is less detailed than Quirk *et al.*'s, including only boosters, compromisers, diminishers and minimisers, which means that his boosters must comprise maximisers as well.
[10] Quintilian VIII, 6, 67 speaks explicitly of *augendi atque minuendi* 'increasing and decreasing' as the two directions of hyperbole. McCarthy and Carter (2004: 151) also mention Smith's (1657) types of *auxesis* (exaggerated enlargement) and *meiosis* (exaggerated reduction).

smallness is less common, as the range for overstatement is more restricted here than is the case with 'greatness'. While the latter can be expressed by many different items as well as by piling them up, the limit for exaggerating smallness is a quantity of zero (cf. Colston and Keller 1998: 506). In some instances, however, there might be the possibility in metaphorical hyperbole to go beyond zero in surface structure, as in the description of Nell, a character in the series *Ally McBeal*, as 'sub-zero Nell' referring to her lack of emotionality.

What role does the degree scale play in the interpretation of hyperbole? Fogelin (1988: 13) points out that hyperbole is uttered 'with the intention of having it corrected away from the extreme, but still to something *strong*' (emphasis original), e.g., *famished* or *starving* would be corrected to *very hungry*. This is certainly the case, and the amount of contrast that exists between literal and hyperbolic expression will determine how strong an interpretation is chosen. The greater the contrast, the greater the force or intensity of the utterance will be. The contrast thus carries the attitudinal content of the message. In (5), Joanne probably wants the others to understand that she is (i.e., finds herself) very/unpleasantly fat – but not, strictly speaking, obese.

While hyperbole is one means of intensification in the sense of gradability, the preceding paragraph indicates that it is also intensification in the emotional sense, i.e., emphasis or what Labov (1984) calls 'intensity'. Emphasis as such is not dependent on a degree scale, but generally heightens the force of the proposition and marks the intensity of speaker involvement and commitment. This means that while the speaker is certainly not bound to the literal meaning of his utterance, s/he is committed to the deeper emotional and interactional, thus social, truth of the statement. Emphasis or intensity is an automatic effect of hyperbole and certainly its *raison d'être*, but it belongs more to the discussion of the functional aspects and will be treated in Chapter 4.

2.3 Context

It is a crucial aspect of the definition given in Figure 2.1 (p. 5) that the hyperbolic statement is contradicted by the actual facts, in so far as these stay below the limits of what is expressed. In other words, hyperbole is a highly contextually determined phenomenon. The notion of context to be used here is a wide one, embracing (i) the extralinguistic, primarily physical context of the speech situation and also of the situation(s)/thing(s) talked about, (ii) the characteristics of the participants of the linguistic interaction, including their psychological states, (iii) the social relationships of the participants, as well as (iv) mutual knowledge of the participants of various kinds (cf. Auer 1995 for a similar listing).[11] As to (i), the extralinguistic facts can, of course,

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[11] I am leaving aside linguistic co-text here, as it is not relevant to the point in hand.

license the choice of very intensive vocabulary, including items that inhabit the upper parts of the scale in their respective word fields and are thus not infrequently used hyperbolically. Thus, the lexical items *tremendous, colossal, very dramatic, devastating, catastrophe/-ic* and *disastrous* used in a programme on super volcanoes (BBC World, *Horizon*, 13 September 2003) were clearly appropriate with regard to the danger they represent (e.g., large-scale global climatic consequences). Also, if a potentially hyperbolic expression is couched in counterfactual terms and thus disconnected from reality, as in (7), it cannot take on truly hyperbolic force (although it of course adds emphasis).

(7) He [Jonathan Edwards, jumper] said: "If **someone had offered me a million dollars,** I still couldn't have jumped 17 metres in Brussels last Friday." (*Sun* 4 September 2002, 47)

Regarding contextual factors named in (ii) and (iii) above, it is not only the physical state of Joanne (specifically her weight) that is relevant in example (5), but also the way she feels about it, i.e., her psychological disposition. It is also important to note that context and the relationship of context to speech is potentially and even very probably interpretable in different ways by the participants of an interaction, e.g., Mark and Joanne either have different views on the contextual question of Joanne's weight, or maybe not and Mark is using cultural norms of politeness in denying her being overweight (cf. social relationships). Different interpretations, or contextualisations, of facts and events can lead to an expression being meant/understood as hyperbolic by the speaker but not the hearer(s) and vice versa. Needless to say, different hearers or readers can have different understandings, hyperbolic or non-hyperbolic, of the same utterance. While I regard the following description of a football match as hyperbolic, an informant argued that it was not; to him (who in his own judgement is *not* a football fanatic) it seemed a quite appropriate description for the losing side in a match ending with the result 4:0.

(8) As soon as that first goal went in, however, scored by LuaLua after Nolberto Solano's corner was headed on by Jermaine Jenas, **the wheels not only came off but the chassis collapsed and the big end blew as well**. (*ES* 20 August 2002, 82)

It is interesting to note that there are instances where speakers signal explicitly that they are aware of some conflict between what is said and an aspect of the context, and thus of having employed hyperbole or an utterance that is interpretable in this way. They do this either by explicitly confirming their statement, cf. (9), or by quasi correcting themselves, cf. (10, 11)

(9) **Chris** And I took it to the people up on Royal Parade, who are **constantly** having burglaries, *no*, *that's that's true, they have had several quite* chunky burglaries

David Mm.

> **Chris** and erm, eh, they have <unclear> must be absolutely horrific, you have to pay for all that sort of thing don't you?
>
> **David** Yes of course you do, yes. (*BNC* KBK 4860)

(10)   Warum soll sich die SPD nicht mit einem Thema beschäftigen, dass **die ganze Welt** interessiert? – *in Deutschland zumindest.* [Why shouldn't the SPD concern itself with a subject matter that is of interest to **the whole world**? … *in Germany at least.* – my translation, CC] (Wolfgang Clement, in the TV talk show *Sabine Christiansen*, *ARD*, 11 August 2002)

(11)   Billy [about Ally]: We were high school sweethearts. We're still close. That might make me less objective, but it also means I know her better than anyone else **in the world** – *room.* (*Ally McBeal*, 'One hundred tears away')

Note that there is still a contrast between *constantly* and *several quite chunky burglaries* in (9), but for the speaker the explanation apparently licenses his use of *constantly*. He apparently wants to ensure that his statement is not taken as a blatant overstatement. In (10) the speaker follows his hyperbole with a clear pause (reflecting on his usage?) and then delivers the relativisation of his previous statement in a markedly different tone – less agitated, more sober. Clement probably realised while speaking that it is certainly not the case that *the whole world* is interested in the report of the so-called Hartz Commission on the reform of the social security system in Germany. In (11), a fictional example, the correction follows on the spot, practically without a pause, perhaps indicating an awareness that the hyperbole is not only not completely true, but also not appropriate in the legal context in which it was uttered.

Another indication that language users are aware of the context-boundness is the occurrence of explicit references as to whether something is hyperbolic/exaggerated or not. These references are made not only by speakers themselves, but also by addressees.[12] It is the latter that are of interest here.

(12)   Paul Pritchard's article on Tasmania (Tasmania's ancient forest in danger, 24 April) is unfortunately **long on hyperbole and short on fact**. Old-growth forests do not take thousands of years to regenerate; they actually take 400 years. I have observed forests logged by Gunns, and the forest is now generally logged selectively or in patches rather than clear-felled. The forest is then allowed to spontaneously regenerate, not napalmed and replanted with pine. (…) (Dr) Ian Arthur,

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[12]   In these cases, the purpose is often highly rhetorical and goes beyond the problem of contrast to context. I will deal with these examples in Chapter 4. Addressee reaction will be investigated in more detail in Section 5.2.

Sawtell, NSW, Australia (*Guardian Weekly*, 8–14 May 2003: 13 letters to the editor)

(13)   **Die Überschrift**[13']' **ist maßlose Übertreibung**. Es macht einen großen Mann doch nicht kleiner, wenn man vor ihm und neben ihm noch andere und anderes in der jungen Bundesrepublik gelten lässt in Bezug auf Humanismus und Aufklärung, Demokratisierung und Widerstand gegen die Verschleierung der jüngsten Vergangenheit. Dr. Günther Braun, Mainz [**The headline is an excessive overstatement**. It does not belittle a great man in the least, if one accepts other people and events as equally or even more important than him with respect to humanism and enlightenment, democratisation and resistance against the covering up of the recent past. – my translation, CC]

(*Die Zeit* 47, 14 November 2002, letters to the editor)

(13')   Der Mann, der die Bundesrepublik war. [The man who was West Germany – my translation, CC]

In (12), the author sets out to correct the facts that he considers exaggerated, but looking more closely one finds that only the first point involves hyperbole (thousands versus 400 years), while the second is rather a case of misinformation (if one believes the letter writer) – but both cases are apparently subsumed under the term 'hyperbole'.[13] What is at issue in (13) is that the letter writer objects to the evaluation contained in the title 'The man who was West Germany', which is made by the newspaper/journalist about Siegfried Unseld (founder of the Suhrkamp publishing house), as it contradicts the facts in his opinion.

From what has been said so far, it might be concluded that one can identify hyperbole only if one has sufficient contextual knowledge. This would also mean that an empirical study of hyperbole is difficult, because it would be hard to identify instances of hyperbolic expressions of speakers and in contexts about which one lacks knowledge. Norrick (2001: 88) points out that 'there is nothing intrinsic' marking a sentence like (14) [his 16] as necessarily hyperbolic, but that its use to a colleague at 11.45 makes it sound exaggerated.

(14)   I have about a **thousand** calls to answer by noon.

If by 'intrinsic' he means some clear linguistic marker or some obvious abnormality, he is of course right. However, we clearly recognise the overstatement, even if we are not a colleague of the speaker and it is not 11.45,

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[13]   This might be due to politeness considerations; accusing somebody of exaggerating is less face-threatening than accusing the person of getting the facts wrong or even of lying. On the other hand, explicit identification of hyperbole might be of more general interest in dealing with the perception of hyperbole by participants (cf. also the following example in the text above), and I will come back to this point in Chapter 4.

i.e., if we do not have 'first-hand' contextual knowledge of the kind specified above. General world knowledge providing us with information about the average length of a working morning (3–4 hours) and the average or possible minimum length of telephone calls (probably not less than a minute) makes the sentence sound highly improbable. Furthermore, it is part of our communicative/linguistic competence to know that high round figures are not uncommonly used hyperbolically. If somebody utters (15), it is really impossible, without the necessary contextual knowledge, to be certain whether *every single* door was open (unless the person admitted it in the conversation, which is not the case here), but it is nevertheless unlikely, especially if one includes the bathroom door (normally shut when somebody is having a bath) and the house door.[14]

(15)   Says 'er last night who went and got a bath and left **every door in the house** open. (*BNC* KB1 105)

General world knowledge and expectations about recurrent situations working as a kind of probability sensor are sufficient in many, perhaps the great majority of, cases to detect hyperbole. The link to reality of course has to be there in principle, and be neither too far-fetched nor too close (cf. reconcilability). This means that a reasonably huge number of calls within the time span will have to be made in the case of (14) and for (15) a few doors will need to have been open, not just one probably. It is of course possible that one would miss extremely context-specific hyperboles, such as (16), which I can identify only because I was present and know the relevant background.

(16)   **National Trust car park attendant:**   You know you can get rid of this [i.e., paying car park fee] by joining the National Trust.

      Mike: We know. This is about the **fourth time** we've heard it today. (CC)

This dialogue took place during a Cornwall holiday around noon (before lunch-time) and this was only the second National Trust car park we had used that day, so for the speaker and me it was clear that the remark was slightly overstated, but to the car park attendant it probably was not. The time of day and Cornish country roads may make *fourth time* unlikely but not completely impossible, and the hyperbole (*second* versus *fourth*, or generally *fourth* on the numerical scale) is not blatant enough, the contrast being

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[14]   Instances such as (15), where, strictly speaking, one cannot be completely certain whether it is hyperbole, are included in the data when a high degree of improbability was likely and when the surrounding context made it reasonably clear that a hyperbolic interpretation fit functionally (the co-text of (15) is a verbal argument between husband and wife). Needless to say, there is a certain amount of intuition involved.

too small and no extreme point being involved either (cf. Section 2.2). A further interesting point here is the presence of a hedge (*about*) and the downtoning effect this may have on a hyperbolic interpretation. In contrast, some statements can sound like hyperbole, because they are blatant enough, and conflict with our picture of the world (however idealistic) – but are in fact true or so close to the truth as perhaps not to be really overstated, like the following headline from the front page of the *Daily Telegraph*:

(17)   You **must lose sight in one eye** before NHS will treat you (*DT* 13 June 2002: 1)

As the text of the article following this headline makes clear, this is what indeed may happen to people if a guideline by the National Institute for Clinical Effectiveness for the treatment of age-related macular degeneration is strictly enforced. However, there is arguably some epistemic overstatement here (such as *may*/likelihood > *must*/certainty),[15] even if no clearly factual exaggeration is involved. Hyperbole with respect to degrees of certainty is not uncommon. The following headline occurred during the 2002 World Cup in the *Daily Express*:

(18)   Fears over Becks. Doctors **say** injured foot **won't** last more than 45 minutes (*DE* 17 June 2002: 1)

In the article on the following page, one finds that the expressions are more carefully worded; instead of *say* we find *fear* or *advise* and the statement itself turns out to be *he should not play more than 45 minutes* (*DE* 17 June 2002: 2), so that *say* and *won't* in the headline are epistemically overstated. Thus, the co-text itself here provides the necessary contextual information for the interpretation of the example. In conclusion, one can say that hyperbole is a 'contextual figure' (Norrick 1982: 169) to a certain extent, but that many overstatements are reasonably clear with minimal or no immediate context nevertheless.

Appropriateness of a statement or a way of expression is also a clearly contextual matter and another area where overstatement is possible. In the following example, which has as its topic the actual tape-recording for the *BNC* going on, Helena tries to make the others believe that she is not having fun at their expense but that research is being involved.

(19)   **Joanne:**   where did you see this then in a magazine or something?
        Helena: No, my, they came round to my house [laugh]
        Anon: […]
        Helena: honestly **I swear it on my mother's grave**
        Anon: […]

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[15]   It would be necessary to see the mentioned guideline in order to decide about the extent of epistemic hyperbole here.

> **Helena:**   it's not it's my Walkman, they gave me a Walkman, they
> gave me twenty tapes, I'm not joking (*BNC* KCE 6796)

In doing so she resorts to a rather strong formulation for her assertive speech act. Performative *swear* itself is already fairly forceful, more so than a simple *it's really true* or *promise*, for example, but the phrase *on my mother's grave* certainly pushes the statement beyond anything required for the present context, i.e., makes it contextually inappropriate. This example shows that speech acts other than assertions, e.g., warnings, congratulations, etc., can be – and often are – exaggerated as well. In these cases the mismatch of expression to context is linked to the felicity conditions, in (19) in particular to the sincerity condition: the speaker feels that she has to use an exaggerated formulation in order to seem more credible.

Two other aspects concerning the relationship between context and hyperbolic expression are important here, namely (i) the distinction between truth and deception (cf. also McCarthy and Carter 2004: 152*f.*) and (ii) the problem of factual truth versus emotional truth.[16] Leech (1969) heads the chapter dealing with hyperbole, litotes and irony 'honest deceptions', because, on the one hand, they give a wrong representation of the truth ('deception') and, on the other hand, they give some indication of the true state of affairs ('honest'), which is in fact necessary for reaching their desired effect. One problem here is that clear indication is a matter of degree: many everyday hyperboles are in fact not blatant but rather fairly unobtrusive. The only safe evidence is as a rule the 'conflict' between what is said and what is meant, which the addressee identifies on the basis of thought processes such as those illustrated above for example (14). However, the conflict is especially clear in those cases where a statement is grossly overstated, quasi advertises itself as an untruth and is therefore definitely not a lie – whereas small-scale exaggerations, which are harder to detect, can be (employed as) lies more easily (cf. Weinrich 1966: 738). Another relevant aspect is intentionality, which clearly divides lies from hyperbole (or other figures of speech). Lies are used with the intention of misrepresenting the facts and of making the addressee believe the misrepresentation (cf. Weinrich 2000 [1966]: 12 and *passim*). Hyperbole is employed with the intention of transporting an attitude of the speaker to the facts, without misrepresenting the facts themselves. However, only the speaker can know or make known his or her intentions, as a rule. The two headline examples above (17, 18) misrepresent the facts in so far as they state things in a more absolute way than (perhaps, cf. (17)) justified, but, given the accompanying texts, this is not done in order to intentionally mislead the reader. It is, rather, a hyperbolic twisting

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[16] I am aware that truth is neither an unproblematic (philosophically) or an absolute concept: it can be a more or less (rather than an either–or) question and it is relative to the perceiver. Also, truth is not always an issue or at least not the right term, as not all hyperboles involve statements or, rather, assertions.

of the truth, here in order to catch the readers' attention more effectively.[17] The Iraq War of 2003 and the reasons given for it, i.e., primarily the presence of weapons of mass destruction and their probable use by Iraq, may serve as another example. Whether we are here dealing with exaggeration or an untruth depends not only on the facts (e.g., that no weapons of mass destruction were subsequently found), but also on what the people producing the justifications and the addressees believed to be the case or thought to be likely. Coseriu (1988: 94) makes the point that a lie must be 'coherent', i.e., must be credible generally and with regard to the subject matter and not exhibit any incongruence. Again, small-scale hyperboles can of course make a 'coherent' impression. The line between lies and exaggeration is at times a very fine one and may in some instances be intentionally blurred. This point may be important for sophisticated, rhetorical exploitations of hyperbole, less so or not at all for everyday uses.

The second point listed above is the distinction between factual and emotional truth, which brings psychological context into play. Another look at example (5) (p. 11) can illustrate this: the speaker Joanne, who is maintaining that she *is* fat and in fact *obese*, is a 13-year old teenager and it is not unlikely that she really feels what she literally says. Female teenagers frequently think that they are inadequate, often considerably so, with regard to the beauty standards (thought to be) expected of them. This would make such statements a mirror of a psychological, emotional reality and thus true in some respect, cf. also Leech (1969: 168), who says that the statement 'from the speaker's viewpoint may be utterly serious'. If a statement is a heartfelt truth for its speaker can it then still be hyperbole?[18] On a definition that worked only or to a great extent with speaker intention, this would perhaps be problematic. However, on the definition used here, the relationship statement versus facts plays an important role as well as the perception of the addressee(s) – in addition to speaker intention. If Joanne is not obese, not even fat (if one believes the statements of her friends, beyond the politeness function which is certainly present to some extent), then it is hyperbole. Also, speakers who use such emotionally charged overstatements would probably admit to the exaggeration if confronted with the common definition of their words, here obesity (in terms of body-mass index) in contrast to their own actual weight. A trickier case than the objectively verifiable example we have just discussed are hyperboles with wholly subjective content, such as (20).

(20)   I **love** that passport. This passport is just fucking excellent, I **love** it. (*BNC* KC7 71)

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[17]   In the newspaper data used here (cf. Appendix 2), about 12 per cent of all hyperboles occurred in headlines, which highlights the attention-grabbing function.

[18]   This question was raised (and tentatively negated) by Mira Ariel when I presented a talk on hyperbole at the 2002 ICAME conference. I am grateful to her for making me aware of that problem.

Loving one's passport seems overstated, but it can neither be proved nor refuted – there is no objective standard for love and the speaker might possibly feel that way. However, our ideas of and standards for 'normal' people do not include the love, nor even the liking of passports, but instead, that people see passports as a necessary and useful commodity; that is, it is again a case of making use of our general world knowledge. In this very subjective emotional sphere, the existence of 'graded synonyms' mentioned above, one of which is used in a particular instance, will also play a role in determining possible hyperbolic use, cf. *like – love – adore* (cf. also Section 2.4 below). According to classical definitions of hyperbole, it sacrifices credibility in order to express a deeper truth, or at least one more relevant to the speaker than a 'superficial' factual truth (cf. Bertau 1994, Gans 1975: 489) – namely the emotional truth.

The question of emotional involvement (and effect) is an important one for hyperbole, which has been classified as a figure of affect in rhetoric (e.g., Lausberg 1960: 299, Leech 1969: 170). Emotion, or more generally, attitude, is why overstatement exists in the first place. The *OED* definition for hyperbole, but interestingly not for overstatement or exaggeration, states that it is 'used to express strong feeling or produce a strong impression', i.e., emotional involvement both of the speaker and the addressee is the point here. In Norrick's (1982) semantic explication of (lexical substitution) hyperbole, speaker involvement becomes a crucial point. He proposes that by using hyperbole, the speaker communicates 'that his utterance *seems to him* to literally represent the objective state of affairs, given his emotional involvement' (1982: 172, emphasis original) and that therefore the expression 'approximately equals in the eyes of the emotionally involved speaker' (1982: 173) can be used in paraphrasing hyperboles. Speakers certainly communicate their emotional orientation, as a rule positive or negative evaluation, towards a state of affairs and they do so by the implied contrast between literal and hyperbolic expression, e.g., Joanne in (5) communicates her intense displeasure at being (supposedly) too fat. The extent of contrast in each hyperbolic instance probably correlates in some way with the strength of the emotion to be expressed. Whether speakers construct any kind of equivalence relationship between the hyperbole and the objective reality is another matter – given the outrageous nature of quite a few hyperboles, I think it rather unlikely. Example (21) is a warning spoken from an older to a younger brother, but *literal* killing is certainly not an issue for either of them – and it is not clear to me what 'I'll do something to you that approximately equals killing' would mean.

(21)   Ah, see if I catch you round there I'll **kill** you. (*BNC* KD9 270)

(22)   I wouldn't have got this **in a month of Sundays**. (CC, comment on crossword clue solution)

The problem with linking the hyperbolic expression in such a way to the state of affairs is compounded by absurd hyperboles such as the one in (22). Nothing even approximately equals *a month of Sundays* – the reason it can

work as a hyperbole is the contrast between literal *never* and the exceeding of the scale by saying the completely impossible.[19] A similar case is the Beatles song title *Eight Days A Week*, where the factual impossibility intensifies the love felt for the person addressed.

To sum up the definition so far, hyperbole is represented by an utterance exceeding the facts by piling up too many semantic features of the same kind, which is recognisable via contextual or general word knowledge and which transports emotional meaning. There now remain various semantic points to be discussed which are relevant for exhaustively defining and, in particular, for identifying hyperbole in actual use.

2.4   An encyclopedic approach to meaning

The point to be raised here concerns the type of semantic theory to form the background to the present discussion of hyperbole. As overstatement is a contextual phenomenon (in the widest sense), speakers will be using quite extensive knowledge in the production and comprehension of hyperbolic expressions. The question is how this touches on semantics. One answer might be: not at all; namely, if one left it to pragmatics to deal with the contextual and general world knowledge problem. For various reasons, this is not an ideal approach. It would be difficult to subdivide neatly the relevant knowledge into purely linguistic (semantic) knowledge on the one hand, 'meaning *per se*' (Leech 1981: 70), and extralinguistic knowledge on the other hand; the line could only be drawn fairly arbitrarily (cf. Cruse 1986: 19, Langacker 1987: 147). It is hard to think of any (part of) word content that is completely disconnected from and understandable without human experience (cf. Taylor's 1995: 82 discussion of the supposedly 'analytic' sentence *Dogs are animals*). In fact, the sheer presence of figures of speech such as hyperbole, irony and the all-pervasive metaphor, and their routinisations, i.e., conventionalisations, as well as many examples of semantic change speak for a semantics that is to a certain extent encyclopedic (cf. Haiman 1980, Langacker 1987: 157 on semantic extensions). In order to avoid overloading semantics with too specialised or too idiosyncratic/individualised knowledge, Taylor (1995: 83) proposes to 'regard the relevant background information for the characterisation of word meanings as a network of shared, conventionalised, to some extent perhaps idealised knowledge, embedded in a pattern of cultural beliefs and practices' (cf. also Fillmore 1985: 233 for the encyclopedic nature of frame semantics). A case in point is the use of proper names becoming quasi-generics, e.g., the original (potentially hyperbolic)

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[19] Strictly speaking, *never* is semantically already an extreme (and an absolute) and cannot be further maximised propositionally, but it can be overstated by substituting an absurd expression. One could argue that there is a difference between 'propositional' (content-based) hyperbole (e.g., literal *sometimes* > hyperbolic *always*) and 'formal' (expression-based) hyperbole (e.g., literal *never* > hyperbolic *a month of Sundays*). In the latter case it is a question of the manner of expression (here: an idiom), for which (8) with its fanciful metaphor may be another example.

application of the term *vandal* to somebody wreaking havoc needs to be based on some historical knowledge of what the Vandals did and how their actions were viewed.[20] Given the reputation of the Vandals, it is not unlikely that *vandal* was used hyperbolically early/from the start, as in the following rather playful example:

(23)   **Annette:**   now what you've done say er little **vandal**'s here again
         Teresa: Yeah Becky the **wrecker** been at it again
         Annette: Rebecca the wrecker, give me a kiss (*BNC* KB9 1068)

Within each knowledge network some elements will be more and others less central for the normal use of the word (Fritz 1998: 20), but nevertheless the latter are part of its meaning. Example (24) is part of the mocking narration of a couple about their son 'cheaply' buying an upmarket car in Germany and bringing it home to Britain.

(24)   **Carlos:**   So he got this super de-luxe model **with 25 wheels** …
         Marie: … for the price of an Austin Mini <laughs> (CC)

In contrast to Leech (1981: 84), who stated that 'the oddity of propositions like "The dog had eighty legs" is something that zoology has to explain rather than conceptual semantics', I think that the fact that dogs tend to have four legs and cars four wheels is relevant to the linguistic meaning of the respective words. The question may be, how central the feature in question is; with regard to car (even more so than with dog) I would argue that it is rather essential: a two-wheeled engine-driven vehicle is not a car, but a motorcycle, and the rare three-wheeled vehicles would probably not be referred to simply as 'cars' without adding the relevant modification.[21] Also, in cases where the car loses a wheel, the car drastically ceases to function. Thus, four wheels are very important for the functionality of the car, and it is in this way that *twenty-five wheels* can make a car seem hyperbolically 'better'. Leech's dog example quoted above made me think of the logo of the AGIP company, which consisted of a dog with six legs and which can, like the car example in (24), be taken to indicate speed, power, etc. through its hyperbole. There is a 'norm' to things, actions, etc., based on experience and expectation, which cannot be ignored in the semantics of the terms referring to the former. This explains why some sentences are 'normal' in an everyday, but also a linguistic, semantic sense, e.g., *the dog barked* or *the dog wagged its tail*.[22] Wierzbicka's

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[20]   In modern English the transferred sense is part of the established meaning (cf. *OED* meaning B 2).

[21]   While Wierzbicka's (1985: 143) definition of car specifies no exact number of wheels, only their positions ('underneath, on both sides and in two successive rows'), she says on page 131 that three- or five-wheeled cars are imaginable.

[22]   An unanatomised meaning such as 'an animal of the species *dog*' (cf. Leech 1974: 88) would not account for 'normal' sentences and collocations either, which raises the question of its linguistic usefulness.

(1985: 169f.) quasi-encyclopedic lexicon entries, as illustrated by (25) for *dog*,[23] capture language users' ideas and expectations related to concepts, i.e., their semantic competence, rather well and can be taken as an instance of a network of knowledge as quoted from Taylor above.

(25)   DOGS

A KIND OF ANIMAL[24]

IMAGINING ANIMALS OF THIS KIND PEOPLE COULD SAY THESE THINGS ABOUT THEM:

they live with people, near or in people's houses and people look after them	HABITAT
they can be so big that when they stand on their hind legs they don't look much smaller than people	SIZE
they can be small enough for a person to be able to pick one up easily with the hands and hold it in the lap …	
the lower part of the front part of their head sticks out forward	APPEARANCE
their ears either are pointed and stick out on the top of the head or are rounded and hang down on both sides of the head	
… they like to eat meat	BEHAVIOUR
they lift a hind leg to piss against things sticking out straight above the ground …	
they make a characteristic sound, repeating a short loud sound many times …	
they move their tails from side to side …	
they can be useful to people because they can frighten away people and animals …	RELATION TO PEOPLE
[animals of this kind can bite people they don't live with …]	

Wierzbicka (1985: 222) states that her definitions (concepts) agree completely or to a large extent with those of many native speakers of English,

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[23]   The definition, which in the original runs over two pages, is heavily abbreviated here (marked by …).

[24]   The concept *animal* includes such elements as tail, fur, four (!) legs, etc., which thus do not need to be repeated in the definition of *dog* (1974: 210).

pointing to a shared, conventionalised knowledge in Taylor's sense. His 'cultural beliefs and practices' are also clearly in evidence, in particular in Wierzbicka's 'relation to people' aspect, which highlights the important point of the anthropocentricity of language (something which becomes even more pronounced in its figurative use). As Wierzbicka (1985) repeatedly points out (e.g., 1985: 171), the type of definition exemplified above differs from a truly encyclopedic one, such as found in, e.g., the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, in so far as it is less comprehensive/complete, less objective, less precise, less specialised/technical, etc. – or in other words, it excludes things that are not *generally* culturally, and thus not communicatively and *linguistically* relevant (e.g., the exact biological classification of the species dog, the precise length of dog pregnancy, etc.). Thus, she sees her approach as describing linguistic/semantic meaning, but note that it is a far cry from the narrow semantic approach exemplified by Leech above and is in fact quite close to Langacker's and Taylor's notion of encyclopedic meaning. The lines she tries to draw between her semantic knowledge and truly encyclopedic knowledge, e.g., the above explanation together with linguistic evidence (e.g., the existence of such words as *mew*, *purr* mean that these types of behaviour are included in the concept of *cat*, 1985: 200f.), can help to get a grip on a potentially very unwieldy notion of encyclopedic knowledge. Furthermore, her distinction into 'concept minimum' and 'concept maximum' (1985: 118) can nicely account for both highly conventional parts of meaning and differences in an individual speaker's understanding of a term. This quasi-encyclopedic – and to a large extent commonsensical – notion is the general idea of semantics on which the present work will also be based.

The concepts of domain, frame and script (among others) have been used to describe the cognitive structures in which word meanings are embedded, and these can also be used in the understanding of hyperboles. According to Langacker (1987: 147–50) domains are the conceptual contexts for understanding individual semantic units; they are either basic, irreducible (e.g., the domain space) or abstract, defining higher-order concepts (e.g., the domain of trade). For Langacker (1987: 150, n.4), domains are potentially the same as frames or scripts. However, frame is defined by Minsky (1977: 355) as 'a data-structure for representing a stereotyped *situation*' (my emphasis, CC), while script is similarly characterised by Schank and Abelson (1977: 422), but in their case with more emphasis on chronologically unfolding action. In both cases, we seem to deal clearly with smaller-scale cognitive entities than the domains envisaged by Langacker. I will take domain to be a large-scale representational superstructure in which various different concepts are anchored, whereas frame (which is taken to include script) concerns the usually smaller-scale experiential embedding of one concept, more closely tied to experientially based knowledge of situations and structured around or triggered by lexical units (cf., for example, Fillmore and Atkins' (1992) frame-based treatment of *risk*). If we look again at the song title *Eight Days*

A Week, it is clear that its hyperbolic interpretation depends on the cultural knowledge that a week has seven days: the days and weeks are part of the domain of segmented time, a larger cognitive configuration from which other concepts such as *year, month, week, day, Sunday*, etc., derive their individual meanings (cf. Taylor 1995: 84). In republican Rome or for some time following the French Revolution, *eight days* with respect to week would not have been hyperbolic, because the relevant part of the domain was an eight-day and ten-day week, respectively. *Sunday* in our temporal domain is understood as the seventh (last) day of the week, as the work-free part of the weekend and, to some, probably diminishing, extent as a day of religious relevance, i.e., a special day. *A month of Sundays* ((22), p. 20) is set hyperbolically against the normal four or five Sundays per month as understood in the time domain and the extraordinariness or overstatement is enhanced by the fact that not just any day, say Tuesday, is used, but the rather special Sunday.

The term *bomb* in the next example, a dialogue between mother and daughter-in-law, refers to the two domains of war and of terrorism and is here metaphorically transferred to the domain household.

(26) **Wendy**   Ah tidy up this house, it's an absolute
      Norma   Is it a tip?
      Wendy   tip, absolute tip.
      Norma   Really?
      Wendy   Yeah. **A bomb hit us in the night**, d'ya not know that?
                 That's what it looks like! (*BNC* KP8 2679)

What is more important for the hyperbolic interpretation here than the domain, however, is the immediate frame this word evokes, i.e., a 'coherent segment … of human beliefs, actions, experiences or imaginings' (Fillmore 1977: 63, cf. also Fillmore 1985: 223).[25] It is especially that part of the frame that deals with the *effects* of a bomb that is relevant or perspectivised here (cf. Taylor 1995: 90) – just knowing what a bomb as an object is (i.e., a narrow semantic approach) would not elucidate anything here. We have expectations about what the site of a bomb explosion looks like, which involves rather drastic destruction, things being broken, debris lying all over the place, and everything looking chaotic and soiled. This picture stands hyperbolically for a house that is, in the view of the speaker, in an extremely disorderly and filthy state. What is not perspectivised are the potential casualties on the scene of a real bomb explosion nor the wider perspective of who planted the bomb and for what reason or aim. Perspectivisation is quite common in hyperbolic expressions; in the case of individual lexical items it is a question of which of its semantic attributes will be used for magnifying – as it can hardly ever be the whole semantic circumference of a lexical

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[25]   Note that Fillmore (1977) uses 'scene' in the sense of 'frame'.

item. In *monster BMW* in (27) the link to the literal meaning of *monster* highlights some semantic attributes and backgrounds or ignores others (cf. Cruse 1986: 53).

(27)   Bill, next door, he's d … company d … boss of a plastics company. Yes I agree. He had a perfectly good Audi when he moved here last year, so why in the heck does he need a **monster BMW** like that then? (*BNC* KBK 2707)

From the *OED* definition (s.v. *monster* 3a.), taken as reflecting speakers' knowledge,

an imaginary animal … having a form either partly brute and partly human, or compounded of elements from two or more animal forms … the word usually suggests the additional notion of great size and ferocity, being specifically associated with the 'monsters' victoriously encountered by various mythical heroes

it is the 'great size' (and potentially 'ferocity', if understood more generally as powerful') that is relevant for the hyperbole in (27), whereas, e.g., the unnaturalness of a monster's hybrid form does not play a role here. Thus, if the expression *big BMW* were to indicate size L or XL, *monster BMW* indicates size XXXL, i.e., the same feature present in both expressions is multiplied.

Frames can have a quasi-visual quality to them (albeit in the mind); in fact Fillmore's (1977: 63) original explanation contains the phrase 'visual scenes'. In this context it may be interesting to note that hyperbole cannot only be realised verbally but also pictorially, as the advertisement example in (28) illustrates.

(28)   *Large picture*: Asian elephant standing on the roof of a completely undamaged car, shown in side view.
        Headline: A smooth ride whatever the load.
        Beginning of body copy: The new Citroen C5 Estate has an exceptional 1658 litre load space and up to 630 kgs payload. (*DM* 17 June 2002: 12)

The body copy text is purely factual, giving exact measurements, while the headline may only carry a trace of hyperbole (*whatever*). An Asian elephant, however, weighs about 5,000 kgs on average and thus exceeds the loads specified in the text by far; thus, the picture is the truly hyperbolic element in this ad. The addressee's expected picture (frame) would be a clearly damaged car after a heavy elephant has climbed on top of it,[26] which is violated

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[26]   In order to motivate such a frame, one could activate hypothetical safari contexts with wild animals attacking vehicles.
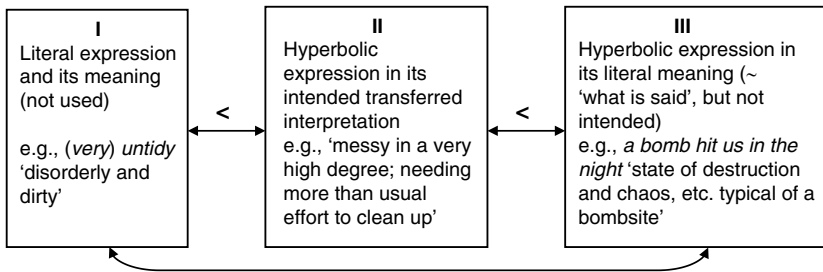
Figure 2.2: Semantic relationships of hyperbolic expressions

here and thereby hyperbolically makes the point of the exceptionally heavy loads one can carry with this car model and its general stability.

2.5   The problem of literal meaning

A consequence of an encyclopedic semantic model, as sketched in Section 2.4, is that the boundary between semantics and pragmatics becomes blurred (cf. Fillmore 1985; Allan 1992). Connected to this point is the problem of literal versus non-literal meaning. In the definition given in Figure 2.1 (p. 5) I used the term 'literal expression' for the factually more adequate expression which is not used, e.g., in the case of (26) above, something like 'the place is very dirty and in great disorder'. However, the literal/non-literal distinction is also important for the hyperbolic expression itself: it in turn has a literal meaning which is not intended to be understood in the context. Thus, the literal meaning of *bomb*, 'weapon designed to explode at a particular time or when it is dropped or thrown' (*OALD*), is not intended in (26); nor does *thousand* in (14) refer to the exact numerical value of '1,000'. The existence of the literal meaning of a hyperbolic expression is nevertheless very important. It is the anchor for the contrast to the corresponding non-hyperbolic literal expression and it is this contrast which leads to the intended meaning. Figure 2.2, which uses the hyperbole from example (26) on page 25 for illustration, tries to capture the three-sided relationship between two expressions (with their senses) and one inferred meaning, which is involved in every instance of overstatement.

The bidirectional arrows indicate that all three meanings stand in contrast to each other, while the mathematical symbol < ('smaller/less than'), taking up the metaphor of magnifying used for hyperbole above, signifies that the gradable/graded part of the meaning is amplified if one moves rightwards in the diagram. The degree of semantic distance between I and III will influence the strength of inferred meaning in II. If the right-hand side of the diagram (III) is missing, because a hyperbolic expression has become established and conventionalised and perhaps as a result lost its former literal meaning,

a true hyperbolic understanding is no longer possible. This has happened to various intensifiers in the history of English, e.g., *terrific*. Thus, *terrific* can no longer be used to mean 'terror-inducing', but only 'great, excellent' (i.e., has generalised II as its standard meaning), whereas the perhaps more recent intensifier *dead* still has a clear literal use, 'not alive', as well. Cases like *terrific* were thus not included as hyperbole in the present data, as the important force-carrying contrast between I and III is absent in these cases.

There is, furthermore, the problem of which literal meaning the hyperbolic use derives from, cf. the example of *age/s*, as in (29) indicating a very/overly long time span.

(29)   we haven't had any salmon **for ages**, have we? (*BNC* KSS 4125)

The *OALD* lists five meanings, namely (i) the number of years that a person has lived or a thing has existed, (ii) a particular period of a person's life, (iii) a particular period of history, (iv) the state of being old, and (v) a very long time (i.e., the hyperbolic understanding). The latter cannot really derive from meanings (i) or (ii), but can be linked to (iii) and (iv). If one looks more closely at data (here, the spoken part of the *BNC*), it becomes evident that the hyperbolic use of this word is restricted: Of 1,293 instances of singular *age*, only one instance (*took us an age to cut it* (KB1)), is clearly hyperbolic,[27] whereas plural *ages* is used hyperbolically in 399 out of 488 cases. Due to such frequency, McCarthy and Carter (2004: 151) think that *ages* does not usually have an exaggerated force any longer, whereas I would say that the force is there, but weakened. The plural *ages* is more likely to occur in sense (iii) than in the others, cf. *Dark Ages*, *Middle Ages*, which also happen to refer to long periods, and is thus semantically the more fitting connection. The most common literal reference (of the singular) is, however, to the age of people: about 1,100 instances in all; that is, in cases where a word has more than one meaning, hyperbolic uses contrast with all of them but link up to a particular one of these, which can also be a less frequently used one. The literal meaning of *for ages* in (29) is something like 'a period of a hundred/hundreds of years', which receives its hyperbolic force by contrast to weeks, months or even some years, i.e., to whatever is factually correct for (29).

The discussion so far has neglected the more fundamental problem of defining 'literal' meaning in the first place. This is a complicated and controversial issue, which has a long history in linguistic discussion. Here is not the place to present a detailed treatment of this issue, as it would be a separate study. Instead, I will restrict the discussion here to points that I consider relevant to hyperbole. In Allan's (1992: 358) view the distinction literal and non-literal needs to take account of aspects such as 'human experience, convention, custom, myth, and language use (i.e., pragmatics)', in other words

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[27]   There are also some occurrences of *age-old*, which in the examples found is vague rather than clearly hyperbolic.

it is not simply a matter of the linguistic system or linguistic competence in a narrow sense. Also, the term 'literal' should not be taken too literally; I think that the term in itself can contribute to confusion in this area. First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between literal word meaning and literal expression meaning (phrases and sentences) (cf. Gibbs 2002: 468), particularly as the latter presupposes (establishment of) the former. For the present purpose, literalness of word meaning is the more important one, as many hyperboles reside in single words or – if longer expressions are involved – are crucially determined by the particular contribution of one word. Of the traditionally used defining features for literal meaning which Ariel (2002: 361–2) lists, coded, conventional and context-invariant are applicable to word meaning, while compositional,[28] direct, sentential, truth-conditional and (again) context-invariant are relevant for sentence meaning. Ariel (2002) shows how these features are either problematic in themselves and/or contradict each other, and accordingly proposes to replace the concept of one literal meaning with three types of minimal meaning (2002: 392–8), which are minimal either from the linguistic perspective (literal$_1$), the psycholinguistic perspective (literal$_2$), or the interactional perspective (literal$_3$). It is the first two that are important here, as literal$_3$ is already non-minimal in so far as it combines decoding with inferencing. Literal$_1$ represents meaning that is coded, conventional, mostly compositional (with the exception of lexicalised idioms), unaffected by context, obligatory and automatic (2002: 392). Hyperbole can misfire or be challenged if addressees inadvertently or intentionally understand only this linguistic meaning, as in the following example (Ariel (2002) calls this falling back on absolute literality the 'wise-guy reaction'):

(30) **Lucy [S. Bullock]:**   George, I think you're **the most selfish human being on the planet**.

      George [H. Grant]: This is silly. Have you met everybody on the planet? (Film: *Two Weeks Notice*, 2002)

Literal$_2$ is the most salient meaning, in the sense of Giora's (1997) concept of graded salience, i.e., that meaning which is most present in speakers' minds. According to Giora (1997: 185, 187), the salience of a meaning is determined by its conventionality (which means that there are degrees of conventionality), familiarity, frequency or givenness status in a linguistic or non-linguistic context[29] and as such it cuts across the figurative/literal distinction as both types of meaning can be (equally) salient. Dirven and Verspoor (1998: 31) furthermore add that the sense is more salient that can be used to clarify the other senses, i.e., one of the meanings of an item is perceived as more basic compared to other derived senses – this is the

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[28] Words can be compositional as well, but simplexes never are and complex items are often lexicalised or at least institutionalised, which reduces or removes compositionality.

[29] Powell (1992: 334) similarly presumes that aptness, i.e., the appropriateness or correctness of an item in a given instance is involved in a speaker's view of its literalness.

synchronic perception of meaning extensions on the basis of, e.g., meta-
phor or metonymy. The notion of salience of meanings is similar to Cruse's
(1986: 68ff.) gradient of establishment of senses, i.e., more or less established,
well-utilised senses of a word. He supposes that established senses are both
more frequently used and presented differently in the mental lexicon than
less-established senses. In his example *novel*, the sense 'narrative text' is
fully established whereas the sense 'physical object (embodying a narra-
tive text)' is not. But what exactly do the criteria for saliency listed above
mean? For conventionality and familiarity, the 'basicness' (in some respect)
of a sense will play a role. How close and important a sense is to (everyday)
human experience is very relevant: given the centrality of death to human
experience, the meaning 'end of life' will always be the most salient for the
terms *death, die, dead*, as opposed to, e.g., *die of embarrassment*, where *die*
only indicates a highly unpleasant emotional situation, or *dead* as an intensi-
fier. Concrete senses are probably also more basic than abstract extensions,
e.g., the meaning of 'a unit for measuring length, equal to 2.54 centimetres'
for *inch* as opposed to any 'small amount, distance' as in *he escaped death by
an inch*. In these cases, the concrete meaning would be necessary in clari-
fying the abstract, transferred sense, thus rendering the former more sali-
ent. In a short-term diachronic perspective, such as an individual speaker's
temporal linguistic horizon, it might be that language users regard older,
in the sense of more-established meanings as more salient and thus some-
how more literal than more recently arisen meanings whose 'genesis' they
have witnessed (a mix of all the criteria mentioned may be involved here).[30]
World knowledge, in particular also in the sense as it is already part of lin-
guistic meaning (cf. the discussion of encyclopedic meaning in Section 2.4)
will also be involved in salience: we know that biological *jungles* precede the
jungles of modern cities or of the business world (in the sense of dangerous
places involving competition/fighting), also and partly because the former
is crucially necessary to clarify the senses of the latter. However, derived
senses like the metaphorical *jungle* can be completely conventional, highly
familiar and frequent – and not be clarified by any other sense, cf. *the end of
the world*, 'something completely disastrous', being the most salient sense,
literal$_2$ in Ariel's scheme. Giora's criterion of givenness in context also means
that very often a figurative meaning will be the most salient one. Finally, a
note on 'what is said' used in Figure 2.2 (p. 27) as a paraphrase of the 'literal'
meaning of the hyperbolic expression is in order here. According to Grice
(1989 [1975]: 25) what is said is *closely related to* the conventional meaning
of the expression, i.e., it is not necessarily exactly the same as the linguistic,
coded meaning. In Gibbs' view (2002: 475f.) what speakers regard as 'what

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[30]   Speakers are sensitive to semantic change and may react in a 'conservative' way, witness
the not uncommon letters to the editor complaining about new and 'wrong' senses of
words.

is said' is a kind of enriched pragmatic meaning, e.g., if somebody says *Jane has three children*, then what is said is 'exactly three children' and not the coded meaning 'at least three children' (Gibbs) or 'three – in general' (cf. Ariel 2002: 397). A similar view is found in Cruse (1986: 69), who also sees the 'exact' reading of £10 as the established sense.

Going back to the *age(s)* example, all of the meanings on p. 28 above, *including* the figurative hyperbolic one, can be regarded as Ariel's literal₁, i.e., linguistic coded meanings (a case of polysemy). Knowing that *age(s)* means something like 'a very long time' is part of the native speaker's competence, this sense need not be inferred in context but only selected.[31] The most salient of all the meanings of *age* can be assumed to be the age of a person in years, on the grounds of frequency and familiarity (and the general anthropocentric nature of language) – at least for the singular of the item. With regard to the plural, the frequency data from the *BNC* would point to the hyperbolic meaning being the most salient one. The immediate cotext will work in the same direction; occurrence in the syntactic frames *take _, for _* increases the salience of the hyperbolic interpretation (also, for the singular, cf. *take an age*). The fact that the figurative hyperbolic meaning may in some cases, like this one, be the most salient one does not invalidate the existence of a contrast to another salient, but less figurative meaning. Gibbs (2002: 461) quotes psychological research about the activation of (literal or minimal) senses, although they are inappropriate in the given context, in particular if these are frequent or dominant in some way (salient), i.e., the various meanings of *age(s)* may be mentally present even in hyperbolic contexts. Similarly, the non-hyperbolic senses of, e.g., *dead* or *kill* would thus be mentally present in hyperbolic contexts; in both these cases I would also argue that the hyperbolic uses would represent less salient meanings and thus, the contrast to the other linguistic meanings is stronger. There are, of course, also hyperboles, as a rule the more innovative ones, which do not have a salient or even coded hyperbolic meaning, e.g., *twenty-eight* of example (1) above or *jungle* in (3); in these cases we are concerned with clearly contextually inferred meanings which contrast maximally with the coded meaning(s).

Another example involves a special use of quantifiers, here the quantifier *all* in (31), termed 'loose interpretation' (versus 'strict interpretation') by Labov (1984) and falling into the category of extreme case formulations (Pomerantz 1986):

(31)   I didn't bring none of my clothes back … I left 'em **all** down there. That's right. I left **all** of 'em down there. (Labov's example (14c), p. 48)

(32)   The High Synagogue now houses a textile museum and you may buy tickets here for **all** the museums in the ghetto. (*BNC* APT 1689)

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[31]   The listing of this sense in dictionaries, and also incidentally its use in crossword clues, while no proof, is indicative of this state of affairs.

Whereas (32) requires the strict interpretation in the sense of 'the whole number of museums; every one of them', (31) would be false on this interpretation; its actual meaning is something like 'almost all my clothes' + intensity. In other words, loose interpretation is called for in the case of hyperbolic use of the quantifying term. In Labov's data this loose interpretation is fairly common, which is true also of my material. How does the evidence of *all* (and other quantifiers such as *never, always, every* [e.g., example (15), p. 16]) fit in with the discussion of 'literal' meaning above? I will argue that the strict interpretation equals Ariel's literal₁, i.e., the linguistic meaning. This is the only constant and context-independent meaning. The loose interpretation is a common context-bound sense, which is certainly among the salient ones (literal₂). It is frequent, familiar to many speakers from their own or others' use and it is a conventional use. But *all* is not strictly speaking polysemous in the way that *age* is.

As has become obvious in the preceding discussion, the hyperbolic sense can be *one of* the conventional senses of a word (cf. Chapter 6 on conventionalisation). That means that it is not a reading that depends always and entirely on purely pragmatically determined interpretation mechanisms. Many hyperbolic readings have to be regarded as sub-senses of a polysemous word and are also actually listed as such in dictionaries, e.g., *age, always, dead, hopeless, kill, load*. Hyperbolic extensions, like metaphorical ones and often in combination with them, produce what has been called 'unsystematic polysemy' (Pethö 2001 and references there), which means that the resulting polysemous relation is not entirely regular and thus not predictable. Being an established sense may detract somewhat from the potential force/impact of the overstatement, but not invalidate it completely. It is possible to classify synchronic hyperboles in a similar way to metaphors, cf. Goatly's (1997: 34) categorisation into dead, inactive and active metaphors. Dead hyperboles are extremely bleached items, where the original literal meaning is no longer available (*terrific* mentioned above). Inactive or latent hyperboles are those which are based on polysemous items and can be easily overlooked but also easily evoked as in fact hyperbolic. This group will contain items of various degrees of bleaching. Active hyperboles are truly new and creative instances.[32]

2.6   Vagueness and hyperbolic interpretation

Polysemy and the ambiguity resulting from it have often been treated in conjunction with or, rather, in contrast to vagueness.[33] Vagueness of lexemes also plays a role for the interpretation of some instances of potential

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[32]   Cf. Section 4.2.2.1 and 7 for further discussion and a somewhat different classification.
[33]   Cf. Geeraerts (1993) for a discussion of the problem of distinguishing between polysemy and vagueness, an aspect which will be neglected here.

hyperbole. Apart from extralinguistic indeterminacy and communicative, i.e., pragmatic vagueness,[34] several further types of linguistic vagueness can be identified (e.g., Margalit 1976: 211; Pinkal 1980, Schneider 1988: I, 133f.). Usually, vagueness is discussed in the context of sentence semantics and truth functionality, but here it is lexical vagueness that is of particular importance. In Devos' (2003: 123) definition, vagueness is 'an intrinsic uncertainty with regard to the application of a word to a denotatum'. Schneider (1988: I, 141) defines lexical vagueness (*Unschärfe* in his terms) as the inherent indeterminacy and the lack of absolute precision of certain parts of the meaning of a lexeme within a limited range. There is only one meaning, thus there is no necessity of disambiguation in context and no possibility for misunderstanding. Instances of lexical vagueness of interest here include (i) the vagueness inherent to a certain extent in all abstract lexemes (cf. Schneider 1988: I, 133), e.g., *desperate*, *love*, (ii) indeterminacy due to scalar features on a continuous, non-discrete scale, e.g., *big/small* (1988: I, 133, 142; cf. also Margalit's (1976: 211) 'indefinite' cases and Pinkal's (1980) 'Relativität'), and (iii) unclear boundaries between features/lexemes which are not due to the existence of a scalar continuum (cf. Pinkal's 'Randbereichsunschärfe' and Margalit's 'indeterminate' cases), e.g., *mountain/hill*.

Let us look at a scalar example involving the word *huge*. It is primarily part of the size scale including words like *small, big, giant*, etc., and its dictionary definition runs 'extremely large in size or amount; great in degree' (*OALD*), i.e., it is situated somewhere in the upper part of the scale, which makes it 'eligible' for hyperbolic use. But where exactly it is found on the scale and how it can be delimited from other terms roughly in the same area, such as *enormous, vast*, is not easy to determine; this would be relevant for determining the extent/intensity of the hyperbole. Example (33) illustrates a further problem:

(33) **Matthew**   How many sides did you, you wrote like four sides.
    Anon.   Yeah
    Matthew   How the fuck did you do that? I've only got like two and three quarters
    Anon.   No I write **huge**
    Matthew   Yeah.
    Anon.   my writing's **huge**. (*BNC* KPP 680)

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[34] Extralinguistic indeterminacy is based on the properties of objects in the world which are such as not to allow clear dividing lines, e.g., where/when does a hill turn into a mountain, a girl into a woman or green into blue? Communicative or pragmatic vagueness, in contrast, is not or need not be based on objective vagueness, but on the degree of a speaker's knowledge about a given topic and on how (im)precise the speaker wants to be.

Whether *huge* is an attribute of handwriting as in this case or, say, of a building, will have consequences for the semantic interpretation of *huge*, i.e., the actual size referred to is very different in both instances because it is relative to the standard set by the modified element. A kind of adaptation of its sense to the context, the words with which it co-occurs, takes place, reminiscent of Cruse's sense modulation (1986: 81) or Ross's semantic contagion (1992: 144). If this is so, it would be difficult in many cases to argue for a hyperbolic use of scalar terms, and cases like (33) would be perfectly normal, indicating just that the handwriting in question is fairly large as handwriting goes, but nothing more unusual. On the other hand, sense modulation (or focal adjustment, according to Langacker 1987: 118) has its limits, cf. Langacker's example of *minute molecule, minute diamond, ?minute nation, minute galaxy* versus *tiny molecule/diamond/nation/galaxy*, where the scale to which *minute* can possibly be applied is restricted. It can be argued that *minute* refers to a greater degree of smallness than *tiny* and definitely *little/small*, and that beyond a certain cut-off point, adjustment does not work any more.[35] In word/semantic field theory (Trier 1934), words and, in particular, word meanings are bounded and delimited by their neighbours, which in the case of size (e.g., the above examples *huge; tiny, minute*) partly means ordering according to degree. With respect to a list such as *large, big, massive, vast, immense, enormous, colossal, gigantic, giant, bulky, monumental*, one can argue that at least the first two items denote a lesser degree of size than *huge* does. The fact that *huge* was preferred over *big* or *large* thus makes a point, admittedly a smaller one than *gigantic* or *colossal* might have made, but nevertheless a somewhat hyperbolic point. Furthermore, collocations of *huge* are often words for concrete things which are objectively of really big proportions or (in a figurative use) for abstract things that are felt to be really important (e.g., *hospital, company, industry, explosion, reward, value* – *BNC* examples). Where neither of these apply an element of surprise at the unexpected great size of the thing described is noticeable, e.g., *a huge swollen nose* (*BNC* CHR), *huge terrible eyes* (*BNC* FU6). Taking together instances of unlikely or impossible sense modulation/adjustment, word field limitations and typical collocational patterns, I think it is possible to assume hyperbolic use of such vague scalar terms even if the effect may be more muted than in other cases. Note that the context and assumed function of (33) point towards hyperbole as well: the anonymous speaker may intend to assuage the ill-feeling of Matthew at having written so much less by exaggerating the size of the handwriting and thus diminishing the difference in length between the two compositions.

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[35]   This does not preclude that, e.g., *minute galaxy* works in some suitable science fiction context or even as hyperbole in a factual scientific context.

With regard to vagueness of abstract lexemes and, in particular, unclear boundaries between lexemes, the items *love*, already mentioned above, and *hate* provide suitable examples. What is the precise meaning of these two words and can they be clearly delimited from *like* and *do not like* in current linguistic usage?[36] The more they overlap in their extension, the more difficult it may be to posit hyperbole in individual cases. Is it possible to say where (*not*) *liking* stops and *loving/hating* starts? The point is crucially linked to the psychological question of the nature and the intensity of the relevant emotional states being denoted. Dictionary entries point to *love/ hate* as clearly more intensive than *like*, e.g., 'strong affection', 'passionate attachment' (*OED*, s.v. *love*), 'very strong dislike', 'detest' (*OED*, s.v. *hate*). The prototypical meaning of *love* seems to involve the romantic/sexual idea of love, as visible, for example, in Kövecses' (1988) discussion of what common metaphorical expressions reveal about the concept. Tissari (2003: 153) in her study of the LOB and BROWN corpora found sexual love to be by far the most frequent use (64 per cent of all instances) followed by love of things (19 per cent), friendship love (6 per cent), religious love (6 per cent), and family love (5 per cent). On that evidence, *love* would be fairly clearly distinguished from *like*, but in about 20–30 per cent of all cases it is nevertheless found in contexts where it overlaps or competes with the latter.

As the evidence for *love* is restricted (written language) and non-existent for *hate* and *like*, a study was carried out on the spoken part of the *BNC*, comparing the verbs *love–like*, *hate–don't like* with regard to their objects. The romantic/sexual concept of *love* is notably absent in this data and *love/ like* show a close correspondence in their choice of objects. Both are used to roughly the same extent for activities, situations and experiences and in both cases concrete things as objects are the biggest group (37.8 per cent *love*, 57.4 per cent *like*). The things loved are most prominently food items (e.g., bacon, cheese, lemon sorbet, plaice, tea) and trivial things (e.g., tape, books, jacket, phonetic script, passport, cf. example (20) above), all of which can or do also occur with *like*. On the other hand, *love* is much more likely to be used for persons as objects than *like* is (24.6 per cent versus 5.9 per cent). The picture presented for *love* by written and spoken evidence is thus fairly different. In the case of *hate/don't like*, the correspondences in behaviour are less close, but again objects are the largest group (30.2 per cent *hate*, 51.6 per cent *don't like*), in the case of *hate* followed closely by activities (24.8 per cent). Again, there is a similar range of objects, but not to the same extent as with *love/ like* and with a clearer intensity difference inherent in the examples. The objects of *hate* are often such as cause some or even considerable discomfort or annoyance to the speaker (extractable from the context), e.g., spiders, maths, messy saucepans, putting animals to sleep, having mistakes pointed

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[36] I restrict the comparison here to *like*, as the inclusion of other terms, e.g., *adore, dislike, detest*, etc., would additionally involve the discussion of styles and registers.

out, etc. What does this state of affairs mean for potentially hyperbolic use of *love* or *hate*? *Love* in everyday spoken usage seems in fact to have weakened/bleached considerably, which may of course have arisen from overuse of originally hyperbolic employment. The result is that it may in some cases be hard to pin down any difference between *love* and *like*, cf. the following two examples where speakers more or less randomly switch between the two verbs.

(34)   I have been a er a parliamentary candidate twice, in nineteen eighty seven in Stockport and in nineteen eighty three in Denton and Reddish. As I I **love** being a candidate, I **love** talking to voters, I **like** being active and doing things and that's the reason basically that I want to be your Euro candidate, I'm ready to be a candidate again. (*BNC* G5G 121)

(35)   Activists **like** things which involve other people as well so they **like** team work, they **like** team activities, they **like** discussion groups … they enjoy the sort of bouncing ideas off other people. Activists also **like** … they **love** the opportunity in training to have a go … but they do **like** getting involved, they **like** a action. (*BNC* HYV 469)

The sheer frequency of such bleached uses of *love* would speak against the word's use in hyperbolic ways. However, the different frequency evidence from written corpora and the fact that romantic/sexual love is certainly a conventional and salient meaning do not preclude hyperbolic use completely. The force of these hyperboles, i.e., the intensification achieved, will not be very pronounced. In contrast, *hate* seems to have retained its full meaning and thus a clear amount of intensity. Examples (36) and (37) also show that speakers are aware of the degree difference to *dislike* and *don't like* and may exploit it to transport greater force.

(36)   I **hate** Marmite, well *I don't, no, just dislike* it. (*BNC* KP4 1334)

(37)   **Valerie:**   Jacqueline, finish off your dinner.
         Jackie: I *don't like* it!
         Valerie: Jacqueline, I'll smack you! Come on!
         Jackie: I **hate** it!
         Valerie: Come on Jacqueline. (*BNC* KE4 428)

Hate is thus a better candidate for hyperbolic usage than *love*, as the contrast to the factually appropriate expression, i.e., *don't like/dislike*, is still reasonably clear in everyday spoken language. The aspects discussed with the help of *love*, *hate* and *huge* above are typical for vague lexical items and their possible hyperbolic use. As vagueness is a fairly common phenomenon in

the lexicon, deliberations like the above had to be made in many cases in the course of the present study.

2.7   Summing up: a revised definition

After the foregoing discussion of various, partly problematic aspects of hyperbole, it is now time to present a more comprehensive definition of hyperbole, in which the more important of these aspects are included. This definition is presented in Figure 2.3. The following comments on the diagram will not repeat aspects that have already been treated sufficiently.

The most crucial aspect for the whole mechanism of hyperbole is the two large arrows in the middle of the diagram. The contrast between hyperbolic expression and 'literal' expression triggers the transferred interpretation. Of course, one could say that the contrast exists directly between hyperbolic expression and the context, but I think the context is better accessible for the present purpose via a (potential) verbalisation. The nature of the contrast, i.e., its size and its perceived fit, will determine both the ease with which the transferred interpretation is reached by the hearer as well as its strength. If the contrast is not well chosen and/or the hearer chooses not to accept it as such, the intended hyperbole fails. Once the basic contrast has succeeded, the transferred interpretation stands in secondary contrast to both the 'literal' and the hyperbolic expression (cf. the broken-line arrows), taking up a middle position, whose closeness to either end is determined by the primary contrast. The resultant transferred interpretation is established either by completely context-based inferencing or by context-induced choice of *one* of the salient meanings of a polysemous expression. Hyperbole is thus a phenomenon that is both semantic and pragmatic in nature. No matter how the transferred meaning is arrived at, it will carry an evaluative or, more generally, attitudinal/emotional component. This makes overstatement one of the means for subjectivity in language. The transmission of this subjective meaning is the ultimate reason why hyperbole is used in the first place – although the emotional factor need not be either fully intentional or even fully conscious on the part of the speaker nor perceptually very pronounced for the hearer. The more conventional a hyperbolic interpretation is, the weaker will be its emotional impact.

As regards the relationship to the context, I thought it useful to include the phrase 'as seen by' and the construct of the 'objective observer' in order to create an explicit link to human participants. Context ultimately exists only in the form in which it is perceived by people. As emotional involvement can of course cloud people's perception of reality, it is not necessarily the case that the speaker (S) automatically sees given and excessive views of context in the way presented in Figure 2.3. The context situation will be perceived roughly as represented in Figure 2.3 by the hearer(s) – both addressees, side

Gradability – direction: magnifying

- extralinguistic: inherent (?) or perceived/constructed
- linguistic: graded word fields

'literal' expression
i.e., what is not said but could have been said
semantics:
- used in its coded, (most) conventional understanding
- contains among others semantic attribute(s) expressing 'X'
context:
- agrees with the extralinguistic facts in the given context and/or is appropriate to the situation (e.g., epistemic or speech act force) as seen by an 'objective observer', by H and potentially by S

contrast:
- reconcilable
- sufficient?

related to size and/or type of contrast

hyperbolic expression
semantics:
- 'what is said': non-context-bound coded, salient meaning(s)
- often denoting extreme/absurd levels
- picks up/perspectivises attribute(s) 'more of X', i.e., 'more of the same'
context:
- exceeds the limits of fact or the appropriateness of expression in the given situation/in the light of common world knowledge and expectations about the 'normal' state of affairs, as seen by an 'objective observer' and H
- excess in principle acknowledgeable by S
function:
- not intended to deceive
- transmission of emotion/intensity

transferred interpretation
of hyperbolic expression:
- inferential
- salient meaning
- evaluative component

Figure 2.3: The definition of hyperbole

participants and bystanders – and objective observers[37] (i.e., all recipients/listeners, including the researcher), all of whom are less emotionally involved than the speaker. 'Objective' is thus to be understood as not being affected by the disposition and motives of the speaker and the immediate communicative situation. The speaker will, as a rule, also be able to take a step back from his/her emotional involvement, especially if challenged, and admit that the expression used and the context do not make a perfect match.

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[37]   The set-up of the communicative situation here is based on Clark's (1996: 14) model of participants and non-participants.

The definition given here forms the basis of the data used for this study and its discussion in the chapters to follow. Needless to say, the decisions to be taken in individual cases about whether or not hyperbole is involved are often tricky and certainly not uncontroversial. On the whole, I have aimed to keep the balance between being over- and under-inclusive – and in doubtful cases have tended to opt for the former. Going to(wards) the top and then over the top is fairly common. Just where intensification and grading turns into hyperbole in the strict sense is a fuzzy area rather than a clear line, something which is interesting in itself.

3 Realisations of hyperbole

The definition given in the preceding chapter was based on the term 'expression', leaving it open as to which forms hyperbole uses. As has also been visible in the examples presented so far, the realisations cover a fairly wide range. It is the purpose of the present chapter to deal with the formal, i.e., lexical, semantic and syntactic, repertoire employed with hyperbolic function and thus to elucidate which forms are more or less likely to serve partly or even primarily in such use. Furthermore, the frequency of attested realisations will be provided and commented on, based on spoken corpus data and newspaper language evidence.

3.1 Basic and composite hyperbole

Let me start with a distinction that has been noticed since antiquity (e.g., Quintilian VIII 6, 69), and that is visible in the following examples:

(1) a. **Christopher** It wasn't we were right against the window, cold backs, I mean we were I was **freezing**! (*BNC* KP8 3662)

  b. **June** if I have to wait for you I'll wait **forever** cos your eggs are not done

   Arthur oh they will be in a minute (*BNC* KSS 3964)

(2) a. When Sergio Garcia arrived at Bethpage yesterday for the final round of the US Open he was met by a couple of locals asking him for his autograph. It made a pleasant change from the previous day, when they were **asking for his head**. (*DM* 17 June 2002: 61)

  b. One of the most famous sightings [of UFOs, CC] happened on Albert Pennisi's Queensland farm in 1966 – and it left neighbour George Pedley **petrified**. (*Sun* 4 September 2002: 17)

In the examples in (1), the hyperbolic expression does not leave the domain of the corresponding literal expression, *cold* and *freezing* both belonging to the (felt) temperature field and *forever*, *minute* or the like being part of the domain of time. In (2), however, the domain is transcended in

both cases: disliking, booing, wanting to get rid of or blaming somebody (2a) and being temporarily shocked or surprised as to be unable to move and speak (2b) are located in different semantic/cognitive provinces from executing somebody (2a) and changing one's qualitative substance (2b). Example (1) thus represents domain-preserving hyperbole, which I will term basic hyperbole, while (2) illustrate domain-switching, i.e., metaphorical hyperbole. Further examples of the latter, given in Chapter 2, are the football car metaphor, *kill*, *bomb* or *monster* (examples 8, 21, 26, 27 above). Those cases in which hyperbole combines with another process or figure of speech will be termed composite hyperbole, while instances such as (1) represent basic hyperbole.

Both Lausberg (1960: 299) and Plett (2000: 183, 188) regard hyperbole as such as a case of metaphor, the latter explaining that it is based on the relation of similarity and the substitution of the feature (+/-big). However, in my opinion, the involvement of different conceptual domains should be seen as *the* major defining element for metaphor, and this makes the cases in (1) above certainly non-metaphorical. Similarity, contained in the multiplication of one or several attributes, is there in all cases (cf. also the aspect of reconcilability in the definition in Chapter 2, p. 10), but it is a more complicated semantic relationship in the truly metaphorical cases than in the straightforward ones. Lausberg (1990: 75) makes a distinction between (a) pure hyperbole ('reine Hyperbel') and (b) combined hyperbole; (b) is a combination of different tropes, of which one most commonly finds (i) metaphorical hyperbole and (ii) ironic hyperbole. Pure hyperbole denotes the use of amplifying synonyms beyond the limits of credibility and is said by Lausberg to be especially common for spatial categories. Combined hyperbole, in contrast, is employed mostly for non-spatial (as a rule, abstract, CC) categories. Leaving aside the postulated semantic field of use, the distinction between (a) and (bi) is basically the same as the one drawn here. I will not follow Lausberg, however, in recognizing (bii) as a formal type, as I think his distinction in (b) is based on different aspects: while in (bi) the hyperbole is linguistically, i.e., semantically *realised by* metaphor, in (bii) hyperbole is *used for* the effect of irony, which means that (bii) belongs to a discussion of functions (cf. Chapter 4), not to a formal typology of hyperbole.[1]

It may not be always optimally clear whether an instance is of the basic or the metaphorical type. *Jungle* used to describe the potted plants in a room (example (3) in Chapter 2, p. 8) was explained above to have both quantitative (i.e., basic) and qualitative (i.e., metaphorical) aspects – the membership of both expressions involved in the (super-)domain plants/flora and the fact

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[1] Lausberg (1960, 1990: 299; 454f.) also distinguishes between hyperbole as a verbal trope, concerned only with the use of words (the one referred to in the text above), and 'thought-hyperbole', concerned with the amplification of the *evidentia* and realised by various verbal means (cf. the argumentative scales mentioned in Chapter 2). The present study deals with both these types, in so far as they leave clear linguistic traces.

that qualitative differences may be regarded as non-essential here speaks for basic hyperbole in this case. But what about the following example?

(3) **Chris** Tough, tough little beasts [=Austin minis, CC] aren't they?

    David Yeah, yeah.

    Chris And of course they've actually made eh, the bodies with er *metal* not **tissue paper** in those days didn't they?

    David Yes. But they don't seem to have some of these sort of inherent problems that other cars have had since, with eh, sections of the body that tend to rust. (*BNC* KBK 4579)

The contrast between *metal* and *tissue paper* in (3) might be basic (super-domain: materials) or metaphorical (domains: (i) metal, (ii) wrapping material), but here the super-domain seems too diverse to make it plausible. Example (3) involves too much qualitative difference to make it basic.

Metaphorical hyperbole is the more complex type. The hyperbole can be more difficult to recognise as such and the relationship between what is said and what is the factual case may not be easily extractable in all cases, leaving a certain ambiguity or open-endedness of interpretation. It is certainly notable that the example illustrating hearer disagreement on hyperbolic function (example (8) in Chapter 2, p. 13) involved a metaphorical instance. There will be cases that (some) people only recognise as metaphors, perhaps rather outrageous and extravagant metaphors, but not really strictly speaking as hyperbole. Example (4) is such an example, where informants found it hard to see exactly which attributes might be overstated, i.e., they could not reach perfect reconcilability between what was going on in the Wimbledon tennis event, on the one hand, and the death imagery employed, on the other hand.

(4) While all around him are falling on their swords, Henman had just come close to **Centre Court suicide** himself, so he certainly knew what it looked like to be **staring death in the face**. (*Times*, 1 July 2002: 21)

However, the advantage of metaphorical hyperbole can be found in the fact that such examples can also have a greater effect on the audience, often because more than one semantic attribute plays a role, a fully rounded picture/concept is evoked and/or the surprise value is greater. Thus, the hyperbolic effect is achieved in a more striking way. Example (5) where the metaphorical rendering also contributes to the humorousness of the statement, is a case in point, cf. the laughter (encoded by @) following the utterance in question.

(5) **Pamela:** N=o. ... Think about the kids. What are – who are, who are these kids. ... <W Who are these kids W>... @ (H) ... These little seedpods, ... (H) that have been sent [our way].

Darryl: [(H)] (Hx) … Well, .. **sometimes for me, they are a whip and a hairshirt**.

Pamela: @[@@@@@]

Darryl: [<WH @@@@ WH>]

Pamela: (H) They're little, .. little, … little lessons. @@@ (H) (*SBC5*)

As (5) makes clear in contrast to (2) above, metaphorical hyperbole occurs in everyday conversation as well, but this type represents a minority in this genre: in the *BNC*-subcorpus it amounts to somewhat above one fifth of all cases, and in the *SBC* it is even rarer with only about 14 per cent of all instances. What is additionally striking is that by far the most of all metaphorical examples are fossilised or conventional metaphors – which are covered by the definition of hyperbole used here and outlined in Chapter 2. To this group belong the already mentioned *kill* and *monster*, as well as, e.g., *hell, end of the world, on fire, inch, die, death* and *dead*. The intensifier use of *dead*, as in (6), is especially common.

(6) **Helena**   You're **dead** disappointed, aren't you, mum?
    Sheila   I liked that one! (*BNC* KCE 1813)

Dead here stands hyperbolically for *very* and it does so by means of the feature 'completion, final degree'. *Dead* as the end of life represents a final point, a sort of completion and thus forms a metaphorical synonym to *completely/totally/utterly*, etc. What will also play a role in example (6) are the negative connotations of *dead*, but this would not be the case in a collocation like *dead easy*. In conventionalised cases such as this, the effect of metaphorical hyperbole might, of course, rather be weakened than enhanced in any way (cf. Chapter 6).

Some instances of composite hyperbole, such as the following two, are metonymic in nature.[2]

(7) a. **Not a word**. **Not a cheep**. And I, it's now ten days, they're onto some scam, and erm, I've, I had a letter from Marion erm, course, well to say they were no wiser and er she sent me some of the … (*BNC* KP8 2265)

   b. Well I'm not kidding you, you know when we went in fish shop last time we were there? That Pakistani, or Indian, whatever he is, that's got a fish shop, he's bought, *we were in there five minutes and before we came* **she knew his whole life history**! Was he living in flat by himself? Did his mum and dad live round here? (*BNC* KB1 4003)

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[2] I owe the suggestion to pay more attention to metonymy in hyperbole to an anonymous reviewer.

Cheep in (7a) clearly is the amplification of *word* and both comment on an apparently uninformative letter received by the speaker. Both items stand for verbal communication and the concomitant transmission of information, by virtue of referring to component parts of communicating, namely to sound and to linguistic items, respectively. As such, the metonymy could either be seen as PART FOR WHOLE or as INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION (e.g., Radden and Kövecses 1999: 37). The former option may suit better, as here hyperbole of 'smallness' (cf. 2.2) is intended: informative text < one linguistic item < meaningless sound. Example (7b) indicates that the person referred to managed to get a surprising amount of personal information from a shopkeeper in a very short time. *His whole life history* thus stands metonymically for substantial parts of it, such as those mentioned as examples afterwards (WHOLE FOR PART). As the whole is always more than any of its parts, and can often also be construed as an extreme (as in 7b), it is a fairly logical type for hyperbolic use. Nevertheless, it does not occur to any substantial amount in the present data except for in the case of (universal) quantifiers/descriptors used hyperbolically, such as *all*, *every, never, always* (cf. Sections 2.5 and 3.2.1). Two other metonymical types were found in the data. One is (prototypical) PROPERTY FOR OBJECT, as in *it's time for me to become a priest – it's too dangerous out there* (*SBC* 2), referring to careful sexual behaviour in the face of AIDS and using the celibacy typical of Roman Catholic priests as the metonymic source. The other type is EFFECT FOR CAUSE, as treated by Feyarts (1999: 321) for the field of stupidity and its hyperbolic expressions, for example. A person saying *I nearly passed out on floor!* (*BNC* KB1 3963) uses a potential effect to say actually that s/he was very surprised or shocked (cause). Similarly, *she misses more words out than she gets in!* (*BNC* KB1 4248) stands as an effect for the cause of incompetence. Also, calling a person *a horror* (*BNC* KB9 1134) takes the emotional effect the addressee has on the speaker for the cause, thus referring to a prototypical experiential frame (cf. Koch 2001: 206f.). The overall frequency of metonymic hyperboles seems to be even lower than that of the metaphorical type in the present data, hovering in the range of 12 to 15 per cent. It is important to realise that metonymy usually does not *create* the hyperbole (except possibly the type WHOLE FOR PART), but that we simply have a case of 'hyperbolically *used* metonymies' (Feyarts 1999: 323). Metaphor, on the other hand, can create the hyperbolic effect.

3.2   Hyperbolic forms

This section is essentially concerned with the formal realisations of hyperbolic expressions, both basic and composite, below and up to the sentence level. However, before I come to that, it is important to point out that overstatement can occur on a much more comprehensive level. Whole texts and even whole discourses can be instances of hyperbole. Ritual insulting as a

speech event often works with extremely overstated or absurd claims, which need to be topped by the addressee and thus may lead to extended verbal duelling. American tall tales and the German Münchhausen narratives are fictional examples of exaggerated stories, where the plot itself or parts of it are greatly overstated or even absurd.[3] Large-scale exaggeration is not restricted to fictional contexts. Two sociopolitical examples, the Iraq War of 2003 (mentioned in Section 2.3) and the German *Waldsterben* discourse can be used here. If one sees the justification for the Iraq War as overstatement (and not as misrepresentation),[4] then this is made up of many interrelated texts and statements, including US and British secret service documents (including the published British *Dossier*), speeches and statements of both US and British politicians as well as sympathetic press reports. The other example is the discourse about the so-called *Waldsterben* ('dying of the forests' due to pollution, in particular through carbon dioxide) common in Germany in the 1980s. The diagnosis of the state of German forests and the resulting prognosis for their future was dramatised to the extent that the first large forests would be dead within the next five years (roughly by the mid-1980s) and that there was no way of saving them. What followed the warning of a scientist was a classical hype supported by the press, which successfully spread through most of German society and was taken up in political discourse. It resulted in something like common (and certain) knowledge that the forests were dying. However, it seems now that this account had never been entirely supported by the facts, i.e., the scientific evidence, in the way that it was presented to the public and, furthermore, it was certainly not undisputed in the scientific community at the time. The large-scale hyperbole served its purpose, however: shocking people, including politicians, into action and thus helping the forests. In cases of such discourse-size hyperbole, it is interesting to see how it is internally constructed.

With regard to the Iraq discourse, the resulting overstatement 'Saddam Hussein is too great a threat for the Western World to ignore' is not so much the result of various small-scale hyperboles but rather of half-truths, untruths (e.g., the Africa–uranium connection), ambiguities and statements put into wrong/misleading contexts (e.g., the 45-minute claim for long-range missiles instead of for battlefield weaponry). This mixture is reflected in a statement made by British politician Charles Kennedy at the time (July 2003) talking about 'hyped intelligence and even false intelligence' being used. The *Waldsterben* discourse, in contrast, arose out of and consisted of

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[3] Ritual insulting will be treated in more detail in Section 5.2.1. Chapter 7 will be devoted to hyperbole in larger contexts, among them literary uses in Section 7.3.

[4] Hans Blix's comments made on BBC's *Breakfast with Frost* (8 February 2004) and quoted in the *Guardian Weekly* (12–18 February 2004: 1) point to both cases: 'The intention was to *dramatise* it, just as the vendors of some merchandise are trying to *exaggerate* the importance of what they have. But from politicians or our leaders in the western world, I think we expect more than that. A bit more *sincerity*.'

individual hyperbolic statements, e.g., the headlines *Über allen Wipfeln ist Gift*[5] ('Poison hanging over all forests', *Stern* magazine, September 1981) or *Der Wald stirbt* ('The forest is dying', *Spiegel* magazine, November 1981).

These last instances of smaller hyperbolic expressions bring me back to the aspect mentioned at the beginning, namely the forms in which they occur. Formal classification in itself is not as trivial as it may seem. First, shorter hyperboles, in particular individual words, have little or no internal structure, i.e., are less complex, and may thus be easier both to produce, to process and to retain. They are (fairly) easy to slot into utterances, in the same way as non-hyperbolic items or expressions. Because of this simplicity, they may be more frequent than longer, more complex cases. Longer hyperboles, i.e., (complex) phrases and sentences, as well as non-lexical, but morphologically based ones, need more effort on the part of the participants. They are less likely to be repeated in the same form and with the same meaning. Formal matters thus link up with the aspects of creativity and conventionality (cf. Chapters 4 and 6).

The only classification of hyperbolic forms to be found in the literature that I am aware of is given by Spitzbardt (1963).[6] His categories (with one each of his examples) are the following (1963: 278ff.):

(1)   numerical hyperbole (*1,000 per cent*)
(2)   words of hyperbolic nature:
    a.   nouns (*ages*)
    b.   adjectives (*colossal*)
    c.   adverbs (*astronomically*)
    d.   verbs (*die*)
(3)   simile and metaphor (*cross as the devil*)
(4)   comparative and superlative degrees (*in less than no time*)
(5)   emphatic genitive (*the finest of fine watches*)
(6)   emphatic plural (*all the perfumes of Arabia*, Shakespeare)
(7)   whole sentences (*he is nothing if not deliberate*)

First, his classification is apparently not based on a corpus or on any extensive textual basis, although he quotes a few attested authentic examples – and as such it must remain hypothetical. Secondly, it has some flaws, e.g.,

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[5] This is an intertextual reference to Goethe's text for a German *Wanderlied* (hiking song): *Über allen Gipfeln / Ist Ruh. / In allen Wipfeln / Spürest du / Kaum einen Hauch; / Die Vöglein schweigen im Walde! / Warte nur, balde / Ruhest du auch.* Hyperbole here gains additional force by cross-referencing to commonly assumed (cultural/textual) knowledge (suggested by Ray Hickey, p.c.). The reformulated use also gives a more sinister interpretation to the last line of the poem to readers making the connection: 'sleep' in the original but, rather, 'die' in the headline.

[6] Quintilian (VIII, 6, 68–69) also gives a list of five types (*pluribus modis*), which is mostly semantically motivated, however: (i) saying more than is factually the case, (ii) amplification through similitude, (iii) comparison (cf. Section 3.2.6), (iv) amplification through certain indications (signa) and (v) metaphorical amplification.

numerical hyperbole is usually single-word based, metaphor can be anything from single words to whole sentences (and is semantic rather than formal, versus simile), (3), (4) and (5) show potential overlap in the examples provided and other categories may be missing. A further interesting point that Spitzbardt did not address (or could not in the absence of a corpus) is how frequent the various realisations are.

For the classification attempted here, two aspects are of importance: (i) it should be based on clearly formal, i.e., syntactic and/or morphological (not semantic[7]) considerations and (ii) it should be empirically based on the available data. Concerning (i), Spitzbardt's scheme already contained a promising approach, if one used his hyperbolic words (2) and whole sentences (7) and supplemented it by the missing intervening level – thus taking word, phrase and clause as supercategories, depending on how many (connected) items in an utterance contributed clearly or decisively to the overall hyperbolic effect and interpretation. This can be tested by omission or substitution of the items in question. Phrases stay within the limits of one syntactic/functional constituent and can be sub-classified into NP, VP, AdjP, AdvP and PP. The category clause comprises everything containing more than one syntactic constituent within a clause and can go up to a complete sentence with several clauses. As it turned out, the great majority of the data investigated let itself be sorted easily into the three mentioned categories. Two additional categories proved necessary, however. Repetition, although as a rule the repetition of individual words, needed to be kept as a separate type, as often words are used that are not hyperbolic in themselves but only acquire hyperbolic value through the repetition. The introduction of comparison as a separate category might be problematic, as all such cases could be distributed among the phrase and clause categories, respectively. However, as these cases all share the formal property of an explicit comparative marker (*as, like, than*), it was thought better not to obscure this connection.

Table 3.1, which summarises the classification scheme and the frequency findings (tokens), is based on data from three different sources: (i) a sub-corpus extracted from the spoken part of the *BNC*, demographic section, (ii) the *SBC*, Part 1 and (iii) newspaper data (cf. Appendices I and II for a more detailed description).[8] While the *BNC* and *SBC* are roughly comparable as regards type of discourse (representing spontaneous spoken language), the newspaper data adds a different and also very mixed textual perspective.[9] Neither of these three sources (as used here) is strictly speaking representative of any part of the language and the size of three sources

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[7] These have already been dealt with in the distinction made in Section 3.1.
[8] Frequency information provided below will only be based on those sources, whereas individual examples quoted may be drawn from a wider range of material.
[9] About 18 per cent of hyperbolic newspaper data occurs in quoted material, however, and is thus more closely related to the corpus data.

Table 3.1 *Formal realisations of hyperbole*

	SBC		BNC		Newspapers			
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Word	35	53.8	284	75.3	156	52.7	475	64.4
Phrase	15	23.1	44	11.7	65	21.9	124	16.8
Clause/ sentence	11	16.9	31	8.2	66	22.3	108	14.6
Comparison	0	0	13	3.4	9	3.0	22	3.0
Repetition	4	6.1	5	1.3	0	0	9	1.2
Total	**65**		**376**		**296**		**737**	

differs considerably. Thus, the information to be given should be seen not as hard quantitative evidence in a corpus-linguistic sense, but rather as evidence for probable tendencies.

As concerns frequencies, Table 3.1 clearly shows that single-word hyperboles are by far the most frequent ones, reflecting their greater simplicity, ease of use and, partly, their conventional nature. Phrasal and clausal realisations both fall far behind and it is only in newspapers, representing more deliberate and intentionally creative language use, that overstated clauses take second place. Phrases, in contrast to clauses, are more multi-functional and more likely to conventionalise, explaining their lead over clauses in the spoken data. Comparisons and repetitions are on the whole very minor groups, with the latter being restricted to spoken language in the present data set.

In comparison to Spitzbardt's classification, the following points are of interest: numerical hyperbole is here seen as a subtype of the category 'word', though some number instances gain their hyperbolic force only in combination with other items and thus are more phrase- or clause-hyperboles. As to comparative and superlative degree (understood as morphological or analytic comparison), the former was not found in hyperbolic function at all, unless in comparisons where it was not the carrier of hyperbole as such. The superlative *on its own* hardly ever carries hyperbolic meaning in the present data, but does so most commonly in phrases and in some clausal contexts. Instances involving superlatives have thus been sorted into the relevant categories. Nevertheless, the superlative merits a more detailed treatment within the context of overstatement, which will be provided in Section 3.2.5 below. Neither Spitzbardt's emphatic genitive nor his emphatic plural were traceable in the present data, which may be a consequence of the data base used here (his examples are from advertisements and literature, respectively), but it is also very likely that the genitive and the plural are not sufficient on their own for hyperbolic effect, but rather add cumulatively

to it within the context of larger hyperboles. In his examples the absolute superlative (*the finest of fine watches*) and the universal quantifier and the *of*-postmodification (*all the perfumes of Arabia*) crucially contribute towards the hyperbole. Accumulation of hyperbole-contributing features will often be the case, leading to phrasal and clausal overstatement. In Sections 3.2.1 to 3.2.7 I will go through the different categories used here and the two special cases in somewhat more detail.

3.2.1   Single-word hyperbole

The most common realisation of hyperbole (more than two thirds, cf. Table 3.1) is the type where the exaggerated content is exclusively or principally found in one word only of an utterance and if one substituted a more 'contextually appropriate' word or phrase for that particular item, the overstatement would completely disappear. In the *BNC* data this form accounts for three quarters of all occurrences (tokens), while in the *SBC* and the newspaper data it comes to only somewhat over half. All lexical word classes are represented here, but nouns and adjectives are most commonly used (overall, 28.6 per cent and 27.4 per cent, respectively).[10] If a person about to go out says '… put some clothes on first … got *pneumonia*' (*BNC* KCE 4834), this could be easily rendered non-hyperbolically by substituting *a cold*. *Second*, as well as its clipped form *sec* (both found in (8)), is a fairly common spoken hyperbole that can be paraphrased non-hyperbolically with any expression denoting a short, but not quite that short time interval, e.g., *minute(s)*, or a (vague) time adverbial.

(8) **Mikila:**   They're gonna interrupt our lunch break again … [shouting] alright Emma … will you wait just a **second** I'll come with you, I'll just and get my money? … Er … Maggi []!

   Anon: Are we going out a third time?

   Anon2:   Never mind.

   Mikila: [shouting] Hang on! … I'll be down in a **sec**, cos Maggi's gone … I I'll see you down there … (*BNC* KDB 1038)

The clipped form specialises completely in the (conventionalised) hyperbolic function, at least according to the evidence from the *BNC* spoken section, where sixty of eighty instances are hyperbolic, while the rest represent false/repeated starts for, e.g., the ordinal number *second*, the word *secretary*, etc. As it is here the shortness of the interval that is emphasised, the form can be called iconic. Iconicity is also present in plural forms, where the hyperbole is intended to maximise, e.g., *ages* versus *age* or *loads* (*of*) versus (*a*) *load* (*of*) (the singular forms occurring only once each hyperbolically in the

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[10]   Nouns are also the most common/typical realisations of vehicle-terms in metaphorical utterances according to Goatly (1997: 83ff.).

BNC subcorpus[11]). Spitzbardt's (emphatic) plural is thus a characteristic of some one-word hyperboles, but not in itself a carrier of hyperbolic meaning. *Load(s)* is additionally phonetically iconic in contrast to *lot(s)*, its more sober substitute, where the greater phonetic substance of [əʊ] (with the added ease of even further lengthening) against [ɐ] also expresses maximisation.

Man-mountain, often used in the British press during the 2002 World Cup to describe German goal-keeper Oliver Kahn, is another, though because of its metaphorical nature,[12] less easily paraphrasable example of one-word nominal hyperbole. 'An *endless* 90-minute trauma' (*Times* 1 July 2002: 2, Extra), referring to a soccer match, clearly advertises itself as hyperbolic through its paradox and could be either left out or rephrased only by something taking up the function of the hyperbole, e.g., 'felt as if it would never end/much too long subjectively'. A not uncommonly used, perhaps overused, adjective/adverb in hyperbolic sense is *incredible/~ly* – so much so that a contributor to a medievalists' email discussion list remarked in a thread on the 'trivialisation' of words that 'most people no longer realise, e.g., that *incredible* means unbelievable' (the latter is also found in hyperbolic use). The point of the hyperbole is usually that something may be 'hard(er than usual/expected) to believe', probably because of a certain surprise or extraordinariness factor and the concomitant cognitive and emotional impact or effort of grasping it. In line with the statement just quoted, the adverb is indeed involved in semantic bleaching and is shading off into intensifier uses, witness statements such as 'I'm absolutely really pissed o- I'm *incredibly* pissed off' (*BNC* KPP 1218) – but it still seems to be perceived as fairly strong, as it is here used to top the combined force of *absolutely* and *really*, both of which could be possible non-hyperbolic substitutes. Adverb hyperboles come to only 9.5 per cent in the present data, which may be due to the fact that intensifiers, as the classical adverbial hyperbolic slot, bleach fairly fast and that thus many instances were not eligible any more for classification as hyperbole. In the *BNC* data, which supplied more adverbs than the others, this category is dominated by the intensifier *dead*. One-word hyperboles are economic, as often the best paraphrase might be longer and certainly less effectual, as the advertisement statement '*Kill* for a ticket M.O.S.' (*DT* 13 June 2002: 14) for the musical *Chicago* illustrates: 'do whatever you can in order to get a ticket'. Verb overstatements like this one amount to 22 per cent of the present data. Distinct from the nominal and adjectival subgroups, there is not much variation in this area, with only a few verbs being really common, e.g., *die, kill, love* and *hate*. Many particular instances of one-word hyperboles occur more than once, i.e., in accordance with the statement made above, they are more likely to freeze as conventional(ising) hyperboles.

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[11]   Cf. also the data on *age(s)* given in Chapter 2.
[12]   Originally this term is found in *Gulliver's Travels*, employed by the Lilliputians to describe Gulliver, in which context it can be almost seen as literal, at least not hyperbolical.

Two other subgroups of one-word hyperboles need comment here, namely numbers and what I will term 'universal descriptors', of which the former will be dealt with in Section 3.2.4 below. Universal descriptors account for almost 10 per cent in the data. The term used for them takes its cue from universal quantifiers, such as *all, every* (whose 'loose', hyperbolic use was already mentioned in Section 2.5), which share characteristics with pronouns such as *everything, -where*, etc., *nothing/anything, nobody*, adverbs such as *always, never, ever*: they all make a strictly speaking absolute claim and have potentially universal scope. As long as no restriction of their scope is explicitly provided in the cotext, they are all prone to taking on hyperbolic interpretation, as in the following two examples.

(9)   Oh, oh God they're **never** in, they're not. (*BNC* KB1 45)

(10)   she's allergic to **everything** (*SBC*1)

In their strict (literal,) sense, both are highly unlikely. What is meant in (9) is that they [= relatives of the speaker] happen to be 'never' there *at those times when the speaker tries to reach them by telephone* – which is a very restricted subset of temporal *never*. As to (10), multiple allergies are apparently on the rise, but 'to everything' would imply the impossibility of leading any sort of normal life, which is obviously not the case for the person talked about. The overall context is that of talking about horses and riding, and horsehair, horse sweat are mentioned as allergy triggers, but *everything* would imply every substance found around horses and in stables, which again is rather unlikely. Needless to say, these uses touch on the grey area between hyperbole and vagueness/imprecision. Alternatively, they might be treated – in some instances at least – as cases of contextual ellipsis. However, I think they can equally well be included in the definition of hyperbole used here; moreover, the functions they apparently fulfil would not be explained by alternative approaches. Hyperboles based on these universal descriptors are fairly unobtrusive and it may thus be likely that they are underrepresented in the present data: they are easy to miss. It is likely that often stress is used to make them more prominent in their hyperbolic function, though this is not the case in the *SBC* example quoted here for which the sound file is available (cf. also Labov 1984: 48ff.).

Coming back to two examples mentioned above, namely *ages* and *loads*, some one-word cases might actually look as if they are phrases, cf. *for ages, take ages, a load of/loads of*. Nevertheless, the hyperbole is inherent only in the word itself, while the syntactic frame is that one usual for the semantic construction in question. Time expressions are commonly formed with the preposition *for* and the verb *take*, e.g., *for two days, take three weeks*, while quantity and measurement statements work with *a … of/*plural-noun *of*, e.g., *a lot of/lots of, heaps of, one/two tons of*. If words are used metaphorically,

Table 3.2 *Phrasal realisations of hyperbole*

	SBC	BNC	Newspapers	Total
NP	4	14	32	50
AdjP	1	—	2	3
AdvP	—	3	—	3
VP	—	8	1	9
PP	—	—	1	1
Incl. superlative	3	—	29	32
Incl. number	6	—	—	6
Incl. universal descriptor	1	19	—	20
Phrase total	15	44	65	124

they will 'borrow' the syntactic frame of the semantic target domain, as is the case for *be dying to* or *for*:

(11) a.   Bren was **dying to** go to the pub. (*BNC* KD8 6027)
      b.   I'm **dying for** a cig! (*BNC* KBL 4284)

In both cases it is only the *ing*-form, no other form of *die*, that can serve in this meaning. The frames are taken over from 'want/need to do sth.' and from 'eager for sth.', for which *dying* is a (much stronger) synonym here.

3.2.2   Phrasal hyperbole

Here, it is the particular combination of words and senses that produces the overall hyperbolic meaning. As Table 3.2 shows, this category is subclassified into NP, AdjP, AdvP, VP and PP as well as, probably more surprisingly, into those phrases including either a superlative, a number or a universal descriptor. The three 'including X' categories, which will reappear in clausal hyperbole, highlight the fact that some items are fairly prominent or salient in hyperbolic usage, but often do not cause the overstating effect on their own.

Overall, it is mostly noun phrases that tend to carry hyperbolic meaning, in particular if one takes into account that the last three categories will very often be realised within an NP-frame as well. It may be that it is conceptually simpler to magnify something that is already treated as a 'sizeable' object, entity or a (fairly persistent or at least salient) state, as concrete NPs typically are. Example (12) expresses the process of a person drinking too much in the form of its potential outcome (a liver problem) in nominal, i.e., concrete object form.

(12) **Wednesday:**   keep off drink after a friend describes me as having **'a liver of the size of New Hampshire'**. (*ES* 20 August 2002: 23)

It is an example of NP, rather than PP, as only the contrast *liver – size of New Hampshire* produces the hyperbole, while the PP would be perfectly normal in, e.g., *an island of the size of New Hampshire*. Similarly, both *avian* and *pigs* on their own might be perfectly normal, but in their paradoxical union in (13) they create a peculiar effect, namely that of producing a very positive and enthusiastic evaluation of an extraordinarily good sports season.

(13)   Brazilian artistry, English fighting-spirit, Henman grit. Oh, and **avian pigs**. (*Tim* 1 July 2002: 16)

Moreover, this phrase is the telescoped version of the common saying 'and pigs can fly', thus again transforming a process into a more easily and briefly describable entity. The next instance presents an NP including the universal descriptor *all*, reinforced by an intensifying expletive and an all-embracing relative clause.

(14)   **Karen**   I mean, I don't think Colin's unhappy where he wants to do, then an offers an offer, like either they go in and make share, but if they work all day.

     Albert   No, it's not er, it's so much I mean, he's at work all day, and he works **all bloody hours that God sent**, when they want, when they got down,

     Karen   Yeah. (*BNC* KB1 1675)

Reducing the phrase simply to 'all hours' would clearly not have the desired exaggerated effect. Other examples for NPs include the fairly conventional *the end of the world*, *the whole world*, *the holiday of a lifetime*, as well as *the Mongol hordes* (describing newcomers to Alaska), *last week's Black Friday* (referring to the 2002 stock market events), *Damascene force* (referring to a personal revelation) or *second coming* (referring to footballer Ronaldo).

All other phrases fall far behind NPs. Adjective phrases are fairly uncommon in the present data. A rather unobtrusive example is provided by (15), which could only be identified through the contradiction to the immediately preceding statement of the speaker. In contrast, (16) is a more extravagant case with the counterfactual adjective phrase producing the hyperbole.

(15)   **ALINA:**   *@@@@@* (H) *But there was hardly* [*anybody there*].
     LENORE: [<WH @@@ WH>]
     ALINA: It was the matinee=, the place was **completely empty**.
     LENORE: … [R=eally=].
     ALINA: [(H)] .. That's why !Marcia and !J=im could get up and mo=ve. (*SBC6*)

(16)   When particularly outraged, or pretending to be, Mr Cook affects a
       stammer and his voice enters a strange falsetto range **audible only to
       bats**, before swooping down. (*Tim* 27 June 2002: 2)

Just as rare are adverb phrases and it is probably indicative that one of the
examples is an established idiom, cf.:

(17)   **Angela:**   Well we've been rushing around haven't we?
       Sue: Haven't got time to think about food.
       Angela: No. Been **here there and everywhere**, you know what I
                     mean?
       Sue: Yeah. (*BNC* KB6 1550)

Verb phrases are somewhat more frequent, but as a rule the simple verb is
enough to carry some hyperbolic sense (cf. Section 3.2.1. above). An instance
is (18) including modal verb and negation, or another involving a verbal
idiom (19):

(18)   **Matthew:**   I'm getting some of them [=caterpillar boots].
       Ryan: I think they're horrible. Er.
       Matthew: They go good with baggy jeans.
       Josh: Yeah but you **can't lift your foot up**. (*BNC* KPP 75)

(19)   **June:**   Er fag
       Albert: I'm not touching you with your
       June: You were, you **were gonna set bloody fire to** me
       Albert: Well move then.
       June: you bugger (*BNC* KB1 209)

The one and only prepositional phrase that works on its own comes from
an advertisement in a newspaper. Only something that is truly unique might
be 'beyond compare' (and this is, of course, the point the advertisement
intends to make), but of course no car, especially no affordable car, is unique
in that sense.

(20)   [picture of car] **Beyond compare**. But not beyond reach. (*Tim* 1 July
       2002: 1)

Some phrases found in the data represent cases where a single-word
hyperbole might have sufficed with the remaining material serving as fur-
ther reinforcement of the hyperbolic meaning. Thus, one finds instead of
single *die* the phrase *died and gone to heaven* or *everything* expanded to
everything from the universe. Piling up individual items in order to reach the
overstated effect or to further increase it is found in quite a few cases (cf. also
McCarthy and Carter's (2004: 163) complex modification, e.g., *really great
big long pole*). While the speaker in (21) may be convinced of what he says

and makes it follow from what he said earlier, the very extravagant phrasing of his point pushes it to exaggerated extremes.

(21) **ROY:**   …When=, you know, … they [found] pollution on top of Mount Everest,

  PETE: [Right]. mhm.

  ROY: … and at the very bottom of the ocean.

  PETE: … Right.

  ROY: … <FOOD Well, that's it FOOD>.

  PETE: … [Mhm].

  ROY: [Man] has had .. some effect. … **On the entire absolute absoluteness of the globe**. (*SBC*3)

Needless to say, piling up often spreads throughout a whole clause (and thus leads over to the next section), as in (22), where *never, anything, in my life* work together to create the overall impact. It can be argued that at least *in my life* is superfluous, and instead of objectivising the statement by a 'precise' time reference, it in fact subjectivises it further by framing the statement within the very extremes of the person's experience.

(22) I went to see the Chippendales well I've **never seen anything like it in my life**. (*BNC* KCA 171)

Such piling up is also made use of in the following Peanuts cartoon:

(23) **Charlie Brown:**   Can you cure loneliness?

  Lucy: For a nickel, I can cure anything.

  Charlie Brown: Can you cure **deep-down, black, bottom-of-the-well, no-hope, end-of-the-world, what's-the-use** loneliness?

  Lucy: For the same nickel?! (C. M. Schulz, *You're so smart, Snoopy*; No. 42)

3.2.3   *Clausal hyperbole*

Clausal hyperbole encompasses all those cases in which the hyperbole is created only by the combined effect of items in two or more clausal constituents – as the minimum requirement. As pointed out above, the hyperbole can spread over several clauses within a sentence. In some cases it may be difficult to attribute hyperbolic contributions to individual items, although the sentence meaning is literally unlikely or even absurd; these cases need to be included here as well. With (24) the cumulative effect of individual items can be nicely illustrated: (i) the thrice-repeated *really*, (ii) the drastic and informal *scoff one's face*, (iii) the three premodifiers for *opportunity* reinforcing each other, (iv) the contrast between *not eating very much* and *scoffing*

and (v) finally the word *dramatically* constituting almost a meta-comment – with (ii) and (iii) making the major contributions. On the whole, the sentence thus is rather 'overdone' contentwise and gets its message across very emphatically.

(24)   I'm **really, really, really** changed **dramatically** from not eating very much to **scoffing my face** at **every single available** opportunity. (*BNC* KC7 247)

The pessimistic statement of (25) is made in the context of a discussion of development and humanitarian aid and derives its overstated categorical force from the combination of three universal descriptors.

(25)   **Nobody ever** learns **anything**. (*BNC* KBK 7047)

As it stands, even given the many mistakes that were probably made in development aid, it is certainly not correct in its extremely universal nature. In the following two examples, it is harder, if not impossible, to pin down individual items as being responsible for contributing to the hyperbolic meaning; it is, rather, the way the whole proposition is based on a semantic incongruity. Example (26) is part of a story told by a woman about her daughter's and husband's holiday in France and their return to Britain.

(26)   They visited so many vineyards she had to declare him. (CC)

The hyperbolic effect is due to two points: namely, first, the allowances for legal alcohol imports between EU countries being considerable (the limit is not that easy to reach) and secondly, the idea of a man as a receptacle for 'declarable' alcohol being absurd as such. A person complaining about the fact and unfairness of gaining weight without actually eating too much is the context of (27).

(27)   I was the only kid who only had to walk past the bakery to gain weight. (CC)

Like (26) it expresses an impossibility and implicitly sets it against a scale of alternatives, namely, entering the bakery and buying one, two, three, etc. pieces of food and actually eating them. In both (26) and (27) one could not exchange certain items and reduce or remove completely the overstatement – one could only completely rephrase the whole clause (26: she had …) or the whole sentence (27).

As a last case, let us look at a rather extensive example comprising various clauses and separate sentences (enclosed within [ ] in (28)). It is probably noteworthy that this example is not from the corpus used so far – it would certainly be too elaborate for most spoken language – and also that it is from a literary author, namely Franz Kafka, writing a letter to Max Brod in which he explains why he may have problems accepting an invitation from Oskar Baum:

(28)   wenn ich mich aus meinem Zeug herausgearbeitet habe, tue ich
       Donnerstag nichts lieber als hingehen … Denn was ich zu tun habe!
       [In meinen vier Bezirksmannschaften fallen – von meinen übrigen
       Arbeiten abgesehen – wie betrunken die Leute von den Gerüsten
       herunter, in die Maschinen hinein, alle Balken kippen um, alle
       Böschungen lockern sich, alle Leitern rutschen aus, was man hin-
       auf gibt, das stürzt hinunter, was man herunter gibt, darüber stürzt
       man selbst. Und man bekommt Kopfschmerzen von diesen jungen
       Mädchen in den Porzellanfabriken, die unaufhörlich mit Türmen von
       Geschirr sich auf die Treppen werfen.]

       (… should I be finished working myself through my stuff, I would
       like nothing better than to go there on Thursday … For I have so
       much to do! [In my four areas – apart from my remaining tasks –
       people are dropping from scaffoldings like drunkards, right into the
       machines, all the beams are falling over, all the embankments are
       coming loose, all the ladders are sliding away, whatever is put up is
       tumbling down again, whatever one puts down one promptly trips
       over. And one gets a headache from thinking of these young girls in
       the china factories, who are constantly throwing themselves down
       the stairs with heaps of crockery. – my translation, CC)
            (letter from Franz Kafka to Max Brod, quoted in *Die Zeit* 49, 28
                                                      November 2003: 43)

For an insurance company clerk (as Kafka was) such a quantity of misfor-
tunes might concur well with the subjective impression derived from his
professional experience – but nevertheless he would have known that life
consists of more than insurance cases. What makes this large-scale example
hyperbolic are, on the one hand, the universal descriptors employed (*alle*,
unaufhörlich 'constantly'), the combined details in the last sentence but, on
the other hand, even more the improbable accumulation of accidents in a
row. In other words, while each clause individually might not be at all (e.g.,
people are dropping …) or only mildly (e.g., those including *all*) hyperbolic,
the clauses support each other, in their kind of staccato sequence thus pro-
ducing the overall hyperbole. It was probably this type of hyperbolic effect
that Quintilian (VIII 6, 70) had in mind when he wrote that sometimes a
hyperbole only grows when a further one is added.

   As the preceding discussion and especially the examples (26) and (27) have
shown, there is hardly any generalisation possible for the forms of clausal
hyperbole. The 108 cases found in *SBC*, *BNC* and the newspapers are very
diverse in form. While (24), (25) and (28) contain categories already men-
tioned above, these do not make up a substantial amount of all. Clauses con-
taining universal descriptors come to 9.3 per cent, those with comparisons to
7.4 per cent, those with superlatives to 5.5 per cent, and those with numbers
to 4.6 per cent – in sum only 26.8 per cent of the total. About three quarters

of all cases in the present data are unpredictable forms, which testifies to the creative nature of clausal hyperbole.

3.2.4   Numerical hyperbole

The most basic category for numbers is the single word as it is in this category that they occur somewhat more frequently than in other categories (word: ten instances, phrase: six (*SBC*), clause: five (newspapers)) in all three corpus sources. Example (29) represents a simple one-word hyperbole, for which something in the range of ten to fifteen roundabouts would represent a more factual statement.

(29)   We go via Truro. The **15,000** roundabouts, you know. (CC)

Numbers contribute to larger-scale hyperboles as well. In (30) we find a phrasal numerical hyperbole (NP), as overstatement is already contained in the noun *years*, while the modifying number exaggerates this even further, producing a clear difference to the simpler *take me like years*.

(30)   **Kevin:**   Cause she has a co=ld. [She's gonna] b=low it all [2over the2] cake.

      Wendy: [@][2@2]

      Kendra: [3@3][4@4][5@@5]

      Marci: [3@3]

      Ken: [4@4][5@@5]

      Kevin: [5Gross5].

      Kendra: <@ Well, plus that, It's gonna take me like *eight* **years** to blow these [2ou=t @>2].

      Kevin: [2Just use a2] [3filter3].

      Wendy: [3(H) Let's3] everybody. [4R=4]eady? (*SBC*13)

The whole subordinate clause in (31) contains the hyperbole (a description of tennis player Andre Agassi), which could have been equally well expressed non-numerically (e.g., his heart is bigger than his body); the further exaggerating effect of *twice* is only slight, whereas something like *five* or *ten times* would be clearly more striking.

(31)   I have since discovered that **his heart is *twice* the size of his body**. (*Tim* 1 July 2002: 21)

As the above examples show, both fairly high and round (*15,000*) as well as smaller and more precise-sounding figures (e.g., *eight*) are found in hyperbole. The high round ones, especially multiples of hundreds, thousands, etc., are certainly the more striking and effectual ones, as they are easy to recognise even without detailed contextual knowledge (cf. the discussion of

the *thousand calls* in Chapter 2 above). The choice of hyperbolical number may, of course, be adjusted to the context, so that one might use 'there are *thousands* of people in town', but 'there are *hundreds* of shops in the mall'. This is linked to the aspect of reconcilability mentioned in the definition of hyperbole in Section 2.3, p. 10).

With only twenty-one instances overall (2.8 per cent of all hyperboles in the present corpus) numerical hyperbole is not especially common. This is a rather counterintuitive result, as many people, in my experience, think of (too) high numbers, in particular 'round' ones, as prototypical examples of hyperbole. Invented or authentic examples involving numbers are not uncommonly quoted in the literature (e.g., Norrick 2001, Clark 1996) and a recent study of hyperbole in conversation using the CANCODE corpus (McCarthy and Carter 2004) singles out number as one of four fields of investigation, doubtlessly due to the assumption that it is a promising area. McCarthy and Carter's tables in their Appendix A (p. 179) list *dozens, zillions, millions, hundreds, thousands, billions of* and *a dozen, million, thousand, hundred, billion* and in many cases find considerable hyperbole-proneness, e.g., 100 per cent for *dozens of*, 77 per cent for *millions of*, 51 per cent for *hundreds of* or 30 per cent for *a million*.

Repeating the exercise with the spoken part of the *BNC*, but using only the bare singular and plural words (no *a _* or *_ of* frames) as search items, I cannot quite confirm their results. As Table 3.3 shows, the hyperbolic realisations of all items stay well below the 10 per cent level, with the exception of *trillion*, which, however, is too infrequent to go by. What is missing in most instances is reasonably clear evidence that the numbers given really conflict with reality. A not inconsiderable amount of the instances occur in economic or sociopolitical contexts, often referring to amounts of money. Like example (32), many instances are (highly) imprecise, often because they may also be used for ulterior motives (such as propaganda), but that does not necessarily make them 'wrong' or exaggerated.

(32)   Like, instead of, you know, spending erm, in the **hundreds of millions of, or billions of** pounds that we spend on agriculture, supporting agriculture, we could use those resources to produce a lot more of other goods. (*BNC* HYL 125)

The statement in (32), made by a lecturer in a tutorial, may be roughly right – verifiability, however, is difficult as the reference frame remains unclear: such as, which geographical area is intended: only Great Britain or the EU? Which time period? In all such cases, to which many monetary examples belong, I have opted for the decision not to count them as instances of hyperbole proper. Nevertheless, most or many of them belong in the borderline area of overstatement, at the least representing a maximisation strategy. If somebody paints the scenario that *millions of working people will be open to exploitation* (*BNC* HLU 76), this prediction may turn out to

Table 3.3 *Numerical hyperbole in the BNC, spoken part: selected items*

	Total	Hyperbolic	%
Trillion	2	1	50
Billion	137	1	0.7
Billions	17	1	5.9
Million	1,623	18	1.1
Millions	204	9	4.4
Thousand	2,000*	5	0.25
Thousands	376	3	0.8
Hundred	2,000*	3	0.15
Hundreds	317	6	1.9
Dozen	267	6	2.2
Dozens	46	3	6.5

* The real total for *thousand* is 5,347 items and for *hundred* it is 10,520; the 2,000 instances in the table were randomly selected for the investigation (with the help of SARA). In contrast to McCarthy and Carter's data, *zillion(s)* does not occur in the *BNC* spoken at all. With regard to this item, positing hyperbole may also be problematic, as *zillion* does not have any literal numerical meaning to which the hyperbolic one could contrast.

be correct *or not* (i.e., no clear hyperbole); whichever way, the choice of such a high figure is definitely intentional and done for argumentative, polemic, etc. purposes. In many instances, like (32), the high figures, even if vague, must be accepted at face value. An interesting point about (33) is the use of *literally*, whose non-literal, quasi-intensifying use in overstatements has been remarked on (e.g., Powell 1992, McCarthy and Carter 2004: 173): it is here in fact used in its strict (literal$_1$) sense and stressing the non–hyperbolic intention of the utterance.

(33)   Let's harp back to what you were saying earlier about information storage on a very large scale. You mentioned the explosion of information, particularly in the science area where there are **thousands**, *literally* **thousands**, of publications and scientists producing more information, more data, every day and pumping into these things. (*BNC* KRF 45)

Finally, (34) represents one of the clear cases of numerical hyperbole included in Table 3.3 above.

(34)   **Jackie:**   I can't find a bit that […] … Give me the pencil and let me show you.

Christine:	I'll get … you'll have to go just go right to the back … just at the back … otherwise you're gonna be flipping through **millions** of pages.
Jackie:	Okay. … Can I do it on there?
Christine:	Yes … yes okay. (*BNC* KE3 8496)

In sum, the results in Table 3.3 may be somewhat lowered by 'conservative' sampling (if in doubt, against hyperbole), but even a more 'liberal' approach would not have produced high percentages similar to McCarthy and Carter's. Thus, this study corroborates the general low instance of numerical overstatement found with the original corpus used here.

As it is not only the round high figures that are of interest, but in fact especially less predictable hyperboles based on 'precise' and lower numbers, a further study was undertaken using twenty-two randomly selected files from the *BNC* spoken demographic section.[13] In this case, all utterances containing tags for cardinal and ordinal numbers were checked for potential overstatement. This approach makes it possible to set exaggerated numbers in relation to the occurrence of all numbers and of literal numbers. The chosen subcorpus contained 3,862 cardinal number tags and 682 ordinal number tags, where compound numbers, such as 21, receive 2 separate tags (and are thus counted separately), and where ordinal number include such instances as, e.g., *next, last*. Of cardinal numbers, 17 instances (involving 22 tags) and only 1 example (1 tag) of ordinal numbers were classified as potentially hyperbolic, i.e., 0.6 per cent and 0.15 per cent, respectively, of all number occurrences. This again confirms the low incidence of numerical hyperbole. On the whole, the examples are unspectacular, there are some round high figures represented again (seven instances), and some other types, including the following two examples:

(35)   have a chat to him about what you could do I said don't worry I said. All, all my windows have got locks on and I said I'm about **six foot four** and anyone gets in here I'll kill them. <laughter> (*BNC* KDY 391)

(36)   And all of the Indians in Slough say *innit*? *Innit*! It's **every second** word. (*BNC* KPR 1517)

When numbers are used in such a way they are used in what Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005: 286–9) call the symbolic function. This can differ even for the same number in various instances of figurative expressions; in hyperbolic use the symbolic function will always be 'especially numerous; numerous exceeding expectations'. In this symbolic function different numbers can be synonymous, which they could never be in their literal use.

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[13]   Cf. Appendix 1 for the file list.

3.2.5   *The role of the superlative*

The superlative marks a potential high point suggested by the sequence plain/positive-comparative-superlative; Spitzbardt counted it among the hyperbole-prone items and Bolinger (1977: 28) remarked more generally that 'the superlative can jump any adjective to the outer limits of its scale'. The question is whether this outer limit is already sufficient for hyperbole – and also how to establish this outer limit. One important aspect here is that superlatives are relative to the set being compared (e.g., Rusiecki 1985: 140, Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1161f.), so that *the tallest of the three boys* need not necessarily be a *tall* boy in a general sense at all, as, e.g., all three of them might be quite small for boys of their age. Thus, there is clearly nothing extreme, let alone exaggerated, about an instance like this. This goes for all superlative cases which are comparative in a strict and even objectivisable sense, like *The oldest Swiss institution in Britain* (*BNC* KCV 60): *Swiss* and *in Britain* clearly delimit the set and *old* is easily measurable given appropriate contextual knowledge (it might be 200 to 300 years in this case, i.e., nothing very extreme for institutions). Then there are intensifying uses of the superlative, a formally clear case of which is the periphrastic superlative preceded by the indefinite article (Rusiecki 1985: 137, 140ff.), such as *a most acceptable present* (*BNC* KBF 5711), meaning 'an extremely acceptable present'. Other formal realisations (periphrastic superlative with zero or definite article, inflectional superlative) can be either superlative or intensifying (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985: 466; Halliday 1994: 184; Hawkins 1978: 236).[14] Like the comparative type, the intensifying use does not go to or beyond any outer limits. This leaves absolute uses[15] of the superlative to be considered for potential hyperbolic effects. By the term absolute I intend what Farkas and Kiss (2000: 437) term '"absolute" absolute superlative', e.g., unmodified, unrestricted *the highest mountain*, where the relevant set can only correspond to the largest one possible and identifiable within our general world knowledge. Fauconnier's (1975: 354–6) 'universal or modified existential quantified readings' of superlatives (e.g., *the faintest noise* (= any noise) *bothers my uncle*) make an extreme claim, not with regard to the referential world, however, but to the epistemic world of the speaker (cf. Veloudis 1998: 233f.). With these last two cases, we thus have superlatives making extreme points – which are therefore potentially interesting for hyperbole. These absolute uses are by no means infrequent (Claridge 2007).

[14] Rusiecki (1985) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1165) largely reject the intensifying reading in those cases.

[15] For a more detailed discussion of the various interpretations of the superlative and for their respective frequencies, cf. Claridge (2007). Note that the use of terms in this respect – absolute, relative, comparative, intensifying – is not comparable throughout the literature.

The following example is from a description of learning to shoe horses, in this case by practising on frozen horse legs. The thrice-repeated superlative of an already fairly strong evaluative item (*'very* unpleasant') is of the absolute variety, completely unrestricted in the second two instances and being given explicit universal scope (*of everything*) in the first occurrence. It also contrasts with intensified variants of *gross* occurring twice in this passage.

(37)   (H) And you know what we start out with? This is **the**] **grossest of everything**. [...(ca. 170 words intervening, CC)] oh, God, it's *so=gross*, because, (H) .. sometimes if you get one that's been thawed out a little bit, .. they start really stinking and stuff? Oh, it's **the grossest thing**. Oh, it's just so icky. (H) <HI I mean, you have this HI> (H) ... piece of @horse @@@@ – <@<HI I mean this leg that's @> HI>, oh, it's *just gross*. (H) And like in some of em? ... (TSK) blood will spurt out, you know, and I mean, oh. (H) It's @nothing @ – <@SM (H) **it's the grossest thing** SM@>. (H) And that's why – ... that's probably why they have to make that class mandatory, because at the beginning of the year, it's just the% – it's the pits. (*SBC1*)

The latter two aspects make an intensifying reading highly unlikely. The impression that emerges is something like 'the grossest possible, imaginable, ever etc. experience', i.e., the adjective is indeed pushed to the very outer limits of its scale in Bolinger's sense. Thus, this is clearly a means of maximisation – but is it also hyperbolic? The speaker leaves the scope wide open and does not even explicitly restrict it to her personal experience; in its universality the statement is strictly speaking not appropriate (there are many 'gross' things on earth) for the speaker to make.

A construction that is specialised for absolute use is the Sup-*of*-N construction as in *the briefest of meetings* (BBC World Service News, 31 July 2002 referring to the Israel–Palestine context), which implies 'the briefest of *all possible* meetings'. Being an infrequent and marked construction it has a great impact that makes for emphasis (cf. Leech and Culpeper 1997: 369) and for a touch of overstatement.

Most commonly, however, it is not the superlative on its own that leads to maximisation or overstatement, but its occurrence together with modifying elements that are all-encompassing rather than restricting. Examples are *the most weird day I've ever seen in my entire adult life* (*SBC1*), *the world's worst speakers* (*SBC2*), *the most spurious device ever invented* (*SBC3*), and *the ugliest set of shoes I ever saw in my life* (*SBC6*). A nominal or prepositional phrase referring to the whole world, an indefinite/timeless temporal reference (e.g., *ever*) and generalising relative clauses are common in such uses. In other cases, the superlative co-occurs with terms that are themselves hyperbolic, such as *withdrawal symptoms* in (38), and only reinforces them.

Table 3.4 *Hyperbolic superlatives*

	BNC	SBC	Newspapers	Total
Word*	1	2	3	6
Phrase	3	3	29	35
Clause	—	2	4	6
Total	4	7	36	47

* 'Word' is to be understood as the superlative on its
own, i.e., *fastest* and *most beautiful* count equally as
one-word hyperboles.

(38)   And I'm I'm when I wrote to Marion I said, er I'm ge I am getting
the **most terrible withdrawal symptoms**! I haven't seen two
sweeties for er, well I haven't seen Jonathan since the the third of Ja
erm January is it, or the second of January or whatever and er (*BNC*
KP8 2861)

Table 3.4 shows the frequency of superlatives in hyperbolic contexts. They
are very infrequent in the *BNC* data (as compared to overall hyperbole), but
of greater and comparable frequency in both *SBC* and newspapers (10–12
per cent of all hyperboles).

3.2.6   Comparison

The recognition of this category goes back to antiquity, where, for example,
Quintilian (VIII 6, 68–9) mentions the two categories of similitude and of
comparison. This category here includes non-metaphorical comparisons
which contain explicit comparative particles, such as *like, as, than*. As a rule,
the entity within the comparative phrase is either highly unlikely or com-
pletely impossible, or the juxtaposition of the two things being compared
produces a highly incongruous result. By comparing the entity or aspect
in question in such a way, it is being maximised. Very often the hyperbolic
potential is contained solely within the comparative phrase. *Like the plague*
in (39) is such a case; the phrase which could actually be left out from a syn-
tactic point of view or be substituted by weaker *usually, mostly*, etc. works in
itself like a hyperbolic intensifier.

(39)   And I never phone unless I can … erm, well you know if I can pos-
sibly avoid it I never phone at the most expensive time of day, I avoid
mornings **like the plague** if I can … possibly manage (*BNC* KP8
1911)

Expensive telephone rates (the thing to be really avoided) and the plague
are of course worlds apart and if it was not for the conventional nature of the

comparison, it would make for a very forceful exaggeration. An interesting aspect about hyperbolic comparisons, however, is that a fair number of them has been conventionalised and thus weakened to a considerable, though not complete, extent (cf. also Chapter 6). Similar established examples in the data set are *different as chalk and cheese, good as gold* or *shake like a leaf.* As fossilised building blocks they can be used again and again in various contexts. There are also instances where an idiom is somewhat adapted, e.g., *like a (hot) knife through butter* is shortened and transformed in (40), which is part of a discussion of blades.

(40)   And it went whoomph! Straight through it li **like it was cutting (…) bloody butter!** (*BNC* KB9 4915)

In (41) the comparison is realised by the item *tantamount to*, which is actually more forceful than the usual items, and an originally non-comparative idiom is adapted and expanded.

(41)   The surprise move, part of Royal Mail plans to save £1.4 billion over three years, was condemned last night as 'absolutely disgraceful' and **tantamount to a 'loaded gun held to the heads of small firms'**. (*DM* 11 July 2002: 1)

Not all comparisons are brief and conventional or based on established ones, however; one finds, e.g., in a discussion of fashionable swimwear *looking like a beached whale in a jungle print* (*Times* 27 June 2002: T2, 6), emphasising what an unattractive figure the swimwear produces. A somewhat more complex example is (42), which involves a comparative adjective and *than*.

(42)   Well I don't know who she is that sends letters out to your nana, but she's bloody useless! She **misses more words out than she gets in**! And she just writes over them in, in pen! (*BNC* KB1 4248)

Thus, comparisons are the place where Spitzbardt's comparative degree comes to play a role in hyperbole, which, however, it can never establish on its own. Like most comparisons, including those presented so far, (42) is rather counterfactual and improbable: if this example were taken literally, the letters would contain a negative number of words. The innovative nonce-comparison in (43), while partly working with *like*, is not contained only within the *like*-phrase, but the whole of the first clause is compared to the second one.

(43)   They have fought such a determined rearguard on this case, **they make Horatio on the bridge look like a guy with a white flag**. (*Tim* 27 June 2002: 39)

In contrast to the preceding examples, historical knowledge is necessary to make sense of (43). It refers to Roman officer Publius Horatius Cocles, who almost single-handedly held a decisive bridge against the Etruscans,

thus allowing the Romans a safe retreat. If the rearguard is said to outdo this feat, commemorated in Macaulay's well-known *Lays of Rome* (1842), it is elevated to the utmost. As the idea is surely not to detract from Horatio's deed, it can only be intended hyperbolically. Equally complicated as (43) and requiring contextual knowledge, such as the identity of the MP for Lewes and the speaker's relation to the latter, is (44).

(44)   He told the Prime Minister: 'May I say, as a Bevanite who aspires to be a Blairite, that there are those of us who **would rather undergo root canal surgery without anaesthetics, be cast away on a desert island with the member for Lewes** [Norman Baker, Lib Dem; CC] **with no ear plugs and even entertain a full and frank discussion with the Whips' office, than accept such a description** [of Britain as becoming Thatcherite, CC].' (*DT* 13 June 2002: 12)

The list following 'would rather' contains worst-case scenarios and playful improbabilities, which highlight hyperbolically the impossibility of the *than*-clause. Both preceding examples aim for a certain kind of wittiness or ironical touch, which often characterises the written or at least not-quite-spontaneous instances.

Not all hyperbolic comparisons make sense to everybody or reach their aim, however. Thus, in the discussion of whether the threat posed by Al-Qaida justified the passing of emergency laws, the *Guardian* newspaper made the following comment:

(45)   But is the al-Qaida threat truly in the same league as the Kaiser's advance into Flanders or the Wehrmacht's arrival at the Channel coast? (*GU* 1 August 2002: 17)

In effect, the writer is here rejecting by way of rhetorical question the essentially hyperbolic claim (made or implied by others) that Islamist terrorism equals crucial and disastrous First or Second World War situations. Perhaps the jocularity noted in the innovative examples above is important to make them work *as hyperbole* and is thus acceptable. If such comparisons look too literal or too serious, they could be attacked in a way that playful hyperbole cannot.

Comparisons are found in the present data set in the *BNC* and in the newspapers, but not in the *SBC* – this is probably due to the overall small size of the *SBC*. There are more comparisons in the spoken data (thirteen instances) than in the newspapers (nine), but the latter are more likely to contain elaborate or innovative cases.

3.2.7   Repetition

Repetition for hyperbolic purposes is a spoken language phenomenon. In a way it is the very simplest form of saying 'more of X' (cf. the definition,

Section 2.7) by just repeating the same X several times. What is meant by repetition here is the re-occurrence of the same item or phrase in strict sequence without interruption by other material. Spaced-out repetition, such as employed for the sake of cohesion, is a totally different matter. Only the straightforward 'piling-up' can possibly cause a hyperbolic effect. However, not all, perhaps even rather few, repetitions are necessarily hyperbolic; many are just generally emphatic and emotive, which is certainly the prototypical function of repetition (e.g., Leech 1969: 78f.). Repetitions are generally an index of intensity (Janney 1996: 232). One problem is that the contrast (cf. definition) produced might not be sufficient for real overstatement: how many repetitions of one form are needed in order to go over the top? On the one hand, there can be no hard-and-fast answer to this, but it's probably quite a few, and, on the other hand, there is likely to be a 'tolerable' limit to the number of repetitions in natural conversation. Another problem is that pure quantitative contrast might not be optimal for hyperbole; in all other instances, even of basic hyperbole, there is an added qualitative contrast that might make hyperbolic speaker intention more easily recognisable. A third problem, certainly connected to the lack of qualitative contrast, is the difficulty of establishing if and when repetition makes the statement 'exceed the limits of fact' – which is a crucial part of the definition of hyperbole. In all cases where this latter point presents a stumbling block, the repetition in question might serve rather generally emphasising and maximising than hyperbolic functions. Appropriateness of expression in cotext is an additional point to consider here, however. Uninterrupted repetition as a marked linguistic feature may by its very markedness produce an impression of exaggeration; but there is probably a fine line between that and its backfiring to appear just overcontrived or even silly. Repetition will probably often be found at the fuzzy borderlines between maximisation and hyperbole.

There is a certain amount of repetition in the data, but the hyperbolic type has been identified only nine times in the present data set (cf. Table 3.1, p. 48). The threefold repetition of the adverbial intensifier *really* in (46) cannot be seen as hyperbolic, for instance, but rather, highly emphatic. An intensifier, especially a fairly weak(ened) one like this, does not have a referential meaning which could link it clearly to contextual facts; it only has an emotional connotation. The number of repetitions probably does not play a role here; more than three would probably just be ridiculous instead of more effectual. Of course, this type of usage can be called exaggerated in the general sense, but not, strictly speaking, hyperbolic.

(46)   But he's just **really really really** strange. (*SBC* 1)

In (47) we find another adverbial repetition, but the situation is somewhat different to (46).

(47)   Because they don't have any genuine effect. It happens **over and over and over again**. *Nobody ever learns anything.* (*BNC* KBK 7046)

Over has here a clear adverbial meaning, namely 'again', something which can be checked against context. Also, the repetition expands on the established idiom *over and over* (*again*) containing repetition from the start and meaning 'many times, repeatedly'. Nevertheless, it is difficult to match or contrast the number of failures of development aid (cf. the explanation for (25), p. 56) with the repetitions used here. Counting *again*, we have fourfold (semantic) repetition, which may or may not be enough, as well as the coordinator *and*, which serves the function of stressing the piling up. Repetitions containing an explicit coordinator can be argued to be more forceful; McCarthy and Carter (2004: 163) mention polysendeton, i.e., the repetition of conjunctions, as a supportive syntactic device for hyperbole. Furthermore, the repetition precedes a clausal hyperbole (in italics; Example (47) is the full speaker turn of (25)) and can be seen to prepare or lead up to it. Given the overall context, this example is marginally hyperbolic.

Hyperbolic repetition occurs in the data set with adverbs (three instances), as in the preceding example, verbs (four), and nouns (two). The following example involving the verb *chew* occurs together with another indicator, *like bullets*, which supports a hyperbolic interpretation. Also, it is not only the verb on its own, but the coordinator and the object *it*, which are being repeated six times in all. While the first two occurrences may have been partially obscured by overlap (marked with [ ] in the transcript), the overall amount still makes a very forceful impression, namely that of being basically unable to get the beef down.

(48)   **Peggy**   stewing beef, you don't like stewing beef
      Arthur   I do, but you've got to sacrifice it so, until it's tender
      Peggy   aye, ney
      June   not in pressure cooker you haven't
      Arthur   otherwise it ends up *like bullets*
      June   well you don't have to have any but I don't see why I should do without [because you don't want any]
      Arthur   **[and chewing it and chewing it]**
      Peggy   [normally tender]
      Arthur   **and chewing it and chewing it and chewing it and chewing it**
      June   I'm gonna get myself some
      Arthur   it's not going anywhere (*BNC* KSS 4082)

It is possible that the intonation used in this example supported the effect even further, e.g., an extra stress on each *and* to stress the amount of

time (and effort) needed. The following example, where we get two sets of repeated *jump*(*ing*) in close sequence, is one where the sound file is available. Each repeated instance forms an intonation group on its own, and whereas the first set is produced in a mock child's voice and with 'normal' speed, the second set is spoken rather fast and in a staccato-like manner. Both renderings have a touch of iconicity about them (as, also, the *chewing* example above), the second by imitating the abruptness of fast jumping and the first by alluding to the jumper, Cassandra, who is a child of about four or five years of age. It is clear from the context that the speaker does not like Cassandra at all, and one of the chief aspects she uses to characterise the child is her supposedly abnormal amount of jumping activity (versus 'act like a human' in the last line). The use of repetition in describing two different occasions makes it sound especially strong as though Cassandra was constantly jumping – which, however, is not likely.

(49) **Alina:** [(H) And] <VOX there's ~Cassandra, **jumping around, jumping around, jumping around**, inside the car. <SING nyah nyah nyah nyah nyah nyah SING>VOX>. H)[=

 Lenore: [(H)=]

 Alina: So it turns out], that, she wouldn't get out of the car with ~Arnold and ~Lisabeth, so ~Liza and ~Antonio follow=ed them over there, to pick up ~Cassandra, and take her for a day in the park. … (H) But then ~Liza wanted ~Antonio to see Mom's house. .. So they go barging in on ~Mar. .. So Mom felt obligated, to ask those two idiots to lunch. .. (H)= Also, thereby, having to= invi=te, dear ~Cassandra, who we did not want there in the first place, cause she's such a little piss ass. .. (H) So the first thing, I get inside the house, and there's ~Cassandra, **jumping up and down. Jump, jump, jump, jump, jump, jump, jump**. <VOX And I grabbed her, and I held her [down,

 Lenore: [@@@]

 Alina: and I go],

 Lenore: @@@@

 Alina: listen you little p=iss ass, .. this is my house, and today you are not going to jump. Today you're gonna act like a h=uman. You got that VOX>? (*SBC* 6)

While the examples presented so far use words that are not in themselves hyperbolic, but may only become so in repetition, there are also instances where items of an already hyperbolic nature are repeated. This is the case with *ages* and *loads*, for example, which is interesting because these are fairly

established items, thus items with bleached force. Repetition may be used to reinforce the hyperbolic nature again.

(50)   Talking of which there's a house down lower Camden which has the Chislehurst station sign. Great big thing. Stuck in their driveway. It's been there for **ages and ages and ages**. (*BNC* KBK 832)

(51)   **Emma**   You want some toast?
       Joanne Yeah.
       Scott   **Loads and loads and loads of** it.
       Emma   Loads and loads of toast? (*BNC* KCE 3852)

In (51), the hyperbole used is explicitly responded to, in this case being questioned, as a single occurrence of *loads* probably would not have been. The repetition has made this instance more noteworthy, more communicatively interesting. This is an aspect of the interactive negotiation of hyperbole which will be treated in more detail in Chapter 5.

This chapter has highlighted the great variety of hyperbolic forms used in two rather different registers, namely conversation and press language. Single words are clearly in the majority in both registers, pointing to several relevant aspects: (i) they are easy to use in all contexts, (ii) they are potentially rather unobtrusive, with only low hyperbolic impact, and (iii) they are an ideal group for conventionalisation and ultimate loss of hyperbolic meaning (cf. Chapter 6). Longer structures, sentences, clauses and, to a lesser extent, phrases also exhibit a certain genre preference. They are more common in newspaper texts, from which one might generalise towards a greater frequency of these more interesting hyperboles in planned and/or written discourse, especially types with a persuasive and aesthetic appeal (cf. Chapter 7). The chapter has shown, however, that it is problematic to try to give a formal classification that lists very specific hyperbolic constructions or to label individual items as clearly or overwhelmingly hyperbolic.

4   Using hyperbole: the speaker perspective

The occurrence of hyperbolic expressions and the form they take is the result of a speaker's choice.[1] The present chapter will thus look more closely at speakers' usage of hyperbole, in particular dealing with the following questions:

- How frequently do speakers opt for a hyperbolic expression? Corpus data can give information on the overall frequency as well as, to a certain extent, on the degree of use by certain social groups. (Sections 4.1 and 4.2)
- Why do speakers choose to use hyperbolic formulations? This leads us to an analysis of subjectivity in language use. The particular reasons or motivations on which to focus here are the expression of affective meaning, self-presentation and the interest value of speakers and their communications. (Section 4.2)
- What types of hyperbolic expression are used, going beyond the semantic and syntactic classification used in Chapter 3? Here the degree of conventionality or creativity of hyperbolic expressions will play a role. (Section 4.2)
- How do speakers frame or 'package' their overstated usages in context? Speakers can choose to downtone or emphasise their overstatements, they can reassert them, modify them or retract them. They can, furthermore, use explicit hyperbole in order to comment on their own or other speakers' use of language. (Sections 4.3 and 4.4)

4.1   Frequency of hyperbolic expressions

The discussion of frequency presented here makes use of the *BNC* sub-corpus, and partly also the *SBC*, as introduced in Chapter 3. Table 4.1 shows the composition of this corpus,[2] the raw and regularised frequencies

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[1] 'Speaker' is a shorthand description for the producer of hyperbole, which, of course, also includes writers.

[2] Cf. the *BNC* manual (Burnard 2000) for a description of these files and a detailed explanation for the categories used. Social class categorisation, which refers primarily to the

Table 4.1 *Frequency of hyperbole in the BNC subcorpus*

	Region	Class	Word count	Instances	Per 1,000	Time: one hyp. expression every
KB1	North	DE	39,285	45	1.14	4 min.
KB6	Southwest	DE	12,953	8	0.62	10 min.
KB9	North	C1	31,726	31	0.98	
KBK	London	AB	53,920	34	0.63	10 min.
KBY	Midlands	C1	6,316	10	1.58	
KC7	Home C.	DE	15,279	24	1.57	
KCA	Wales	DE	21,431	40	1.87	
KCE	Southwest	C2	50,776	90	1.77	4 min.
KD4	Midlands	AB	7,068	6	0.85	
KD9	N. Ireland	C2	12,902	28	2.17	
KP8	Scotland	AB	20,442	32	1.56	4 min.
KPP	London	AB	7,616	9	1.18	
KSS	North	DE	34,975	19	0.54	10 min.
Total			*314,689*	*376*	*1.19*	

per file, as well as the temporal distribution of hyperbolic occurrences for those files where the *BNC* manual specifies the time length of recording. While the corpus is fairly small, it does represent the speech of ninety-five speakers (forty-four men and fifty women; one unknown) from diverse backgrounds and thus a rather wide range of interactions.[3] There is on average one overstated utterance per 1,000 words, or one hyperbole every four to ten minutes – given the temporal extension of spoken language, the latter may be a more relevant measurement of 'experienced' hyperbole. Some groups of speakers use much less than the average (cf. KSS), while other groups use twice as much (cf. KD9), indicating that there may be idiolectal, group- or situation-specific factors (dis)favouring hyperbole. KD9 together with KCA might be taken as an indication for a Celtic propensity for hyperbole; however, this would need investigation on a larger scale. More important for the present study is that KD9 patterns with KCE in its high use of hyperbole: in both files, most of the speakers are teenagers. This speaker group is important, as we will see below (Section 4.2).

The overall figure for the much smaller American *SBC* (Part 1) is fairly similar with 0.97 instances per 1,000 words, but interestingly 4 of the 14

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recording respondent of each file: AB = top or middle management (administrative or professional), C1 = junior management (supervisory or clerical), C2 = skilled manual, DE = semi-skilled or unskilled. Cf. also Appendix 1 for information.

[3] The small size of the corpus is due to the decision to read through the files in search of potential hyperboles instead of automatically searching for a list of predefined hyperboles.

SBC files do not contain any overstated instances. Three of those files are highly task-related interactions with a concentration on factual communication (*SBC*8, 9, 14) and two furthermore represent 'public', business-like events, in a lawyer's office (*SBC*8) and in a bank (*SBC*14), respectively. Such contexts might inhibit the use of overstatement. The highest amount of hyperbole is found in the *SBC* in informal conversations between friends (*SBC*6, *SBC*13).

While there is hardly other frequency data for hyperbole in particular, one can compare the above figures with those obtained for the use of metaphor in real discourse. Gibbs (1994: 123f.) quotes three relevant studies, namely those by Pollio, Barlow, Fine and Pollio (1977), by Graesser, Mio and Millis (1989) and by Voss, Kennet, Wiley and Engstler-Schooler (1992). Pollio *et al.* found 1.80 novel and 4.08 frozen metaphors per minute of discourse in a corpus of therapeutic interviews, essays and presidential debates, whereas Voss *et al.* identified the use of novel metaphors only every two to three minutes within one US senate debate in January 1991; Graesser *et al.* detected one instance every twenty-five words in television debates and news commentary.[4] Link and Kreuz (2005) provide experimental data on the use of non-literal language, including hyperbole, in emotion talk. Metaphor is the type most frequently used (at about 1.7 instances per 100 words), which is followed by hyperbole and simile in second place, at just about under 0.5 instances per 100 words[5] – i.e., equivalent to almost 5 hyperboles per 1,000 words. This very high amount is certainly due to the topic of emotion. Compared with these findings, the present incidence of hyperbole as shown in Table 4.1 may nevertheless seem rather low. However, hyperbole is not to the same extent as cognitively basic and pervasive as metaphor is; this also means that the use of hyperbole is potentially more prominent than that of metaphor and it is as a rule characterised by greater intensity, an aspect which might forestall overuse. The use of metaphor can often simply not be avoided (cf. Ortony's (1975: 49) 'inexpressibility thesis'), whereas hyperbole is usually optional. A further point concerns the database. None of the above studies looked at everyday conversation such as makes up the present corpus; instead, they examined highly context-governed, specifically goal-oriented and even persuasive types of discourse. My feeling is therefore that hyperbole is shown here to be fairly frequent. In fact, any much higher frequency would probably be counter-productive: either by producing an 'overdone' or high-strung impression, for a stretch of conversation

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[4] The diverging results may be due to both the different corpora used and the definition of metaphor. Frozen metaphor in Pollio *et al.* includes such instances as *leg of a table*, *face of a clock*.

[5] The approximate figures are based on Link and Kreuz's Figure 7.3 (p. 169), which does not allow more precision. Their definition of hyperbole is 'deliberate overemphasis', illustrated by 'It takes *all of his strength* to write his letter' (Table 7.1, p. 162), which possibly is a wider concept of hyperbole than the one used here.

or for a particular speaker, or by speeding up the weakening of hyperbolic expressions.[6]

4.2   Hyperbole and subjectivity

Each speaker has a unique identity, a 'self', and is characterised by specific views of the world or actual context, attitudes and wishes, which enter into the communicative interaction (cf. Fiehler 1990: 29). This fact is captured in the linguistic notion of subjectivity, which 'involves the expression of self and the representation of a speaker's … perspective or point of view in discourse – what has been called a speaker's imprint' (Finegan 1995: 1). Expression of self is basically unavoidable, as completely neutral or objective language use is not possible (cf. Langacker 2000: 206, Burridge 1998). It can thus only be minimised or maximised (i.e., be relatively more objective or more subjective in nature) depending on the degree of the speaker's engagement or involvement in the discourse in question (cf. Daneš 1994: 253), it can be done more or less consciously/intentionally (Legitt and Gibbs 2000: 5, Arndt and Janney 1991: 538) and it can take various linguistic forms, potentially drawing on all levels and resources of the language. Subjectivity thus comprises the expression of various aspects, such as the colouring of the message by/through the speaker's perspective or viewpoint, affect and attitude, epistemic modality and metalinguistic comments on the style of speaking (Finegan 1995: 4, Biber *et al.* 1999: 972ff.). With respect to hyperbole it is the choice of particular lexical items and composite expressions that serve to demote the objective content (the usual conceptual meaning of an expression) in favour of a subjective, more attitudinal content (cf. also Edwards 2005: 268f.). One of Traugott and Dasher's (2005: 23) characteristics of subjective expressions, which applies to hyperbole, is the predominance of the R[evelance]–heuristic, i.e., the fact that what is said implies that more is meant. As hyperbole has a highlighting and emphasising effect, it also indicates to the hearer 'a speaker investment' in that point (Edwards 2000: 270).

   One starting point for the investigation of hyperbole and subjectivity is the examination of the semantic areas in which exaggerated expressions are found. Some domains contain inherently objective – or at least

[6] One of the reviewers of this book was surprised at the relatively low frequencies and argued that (stereotypes of) youth language and current 'extreme' lifestyles are aspects that make them expect higher frequencies. That same reviewer directed me to Zwicky (2005a and b), who identifies the Frequency Illusion and the Out-group Illusion, which may be applicable in this case. According to the Frequency Illusion, an observer will think a phenomenon happens very frequently, once (s)he has noticed it. This might have happened to the reviewer; it certainly happened to me: I kept noticing hyperbole all around me while working on this project, but that does not change the corpus figures. The Out-group Illusion makes one notice a feature (at all or more prominently) in the speech of outsiders/other groups, but not in speakers of one's own group – young speakers are definitely an outgroup for both the reviewer and myself.

Table 4.2 *Semantic domains* of hyperbolic expressions (BNC and SBC data)*

	Value	Activity/ event	Time	Quantity	Degree	Human state	Physical property	Dimension
Instances	107	80	66	50	45	39	32	25
Per cent	24	18	15	11	10	9	7	6

* The semantic domains were partly inspired by Dixon's (1982) semantic adjective classes. The domain 'human state', for example, is similar to his 'human propensity'.

objectivisable – facts, in which case hyperbolic use clearly subjectivises a factual content. Such semantic domains as DIMENSION (referring to the size or extent of something), QUANTITY and TIME provide information of a potentially measurable and countable kind. If what is said 'contradicts' such measurements, objective characterisation has been turned into a subjective one. In (1) and (2) actual past events are discussed; the statements thus reflect real experience and a more objective estimate of the amount or length referred to is available to the speakers.

(1)   And so we have our instructor right there, and we asked **a million** questions, .. all the time (*SBC*1)

(2)   Then I had to wait **a week** for my suitcase. (CC)

Example (1) is set in the context of the speaker and her fellow students shoeing other people's horses, which is presented as being potentially dangerous (e.g., it could make the horse lame if done wrongly), and the exaggerated number of questions points to the subjective feeling and message to be conveyed, namely that great care was taken by the students so as not to hurt the horses. Example (2) is the culminating statement of a fairly long story told by a friend of mine about a trip from London to Hamburg, during which several things went wrong. While it was clear from the tale that the luggage delay was in fact the least of all the inconveniences, the phrasing neatly highlights the great amount of problems encountered, the resulting frustration felt by the speaker and the fact that this last, though minor, incident was, so to speak, the straw that broke the camel's back. Both examples are thus cases of subjective meaning, but the difference is that grossly overstated and fairly conventional *million* signals this more overtly than nonconventional *a week* does. As Table 4.2 shows, the domains TIME, QUANTITY and DIMENSION make up 32 per cent of all hyperbolic expressions from the conversational corpus evidence.[7]

[7] McCarthy and Carter (2004: 152, 162) also mention number, quantity (= these two merged in quantity here), size, spatial extent (= merged in dimension), time and degree of intensity as common hyperbolic fields.

In almost a third of instances, the impact of subjectivity on originally objective semantic domains is thus clearly evident. The fact that TIME is more prominent than QUANTITY and DIMENSION in the present data may be due to the fact that the actual individual *experience* of the passing of time is clearly more subjective than the experience of size or quantity. The following dialogue from the comedy series *Coupling*, which contains several hyperboles, explicitly comments on the subjectively and contextually determined impression of time spans.

(3)   **Jane:**   You know, I went out with Steve **for six years**--

      Susan: --No, you didn't. You went out with him for four years. I checked.

      Jane: … Well, it seemed longer.

      Susan: Ya, ya – of course it seemed longer. I myself have been going out with him **since the twelfth century**. Or possibly since last week – it's hard to keep track. Because how are you supposed to measure time with the man you want to spend the rest of your life with? What would make sense? **Centuries**? Nanoseconds?

      Sally: Eggs. (*Coupling*, Episode 'Split')

The domains ACTIVITY and PHYSICAL PROPERTY also refer to observable and/or verifiable facts, but they are, like TIME, linked to experiential influence inasmuch as their perception can be more in the eye of the beholder than QUANTITY and DIMENSION are. Both (4) and (5) below are objectively wrong, but nevertheless make a point about subjective ability or feeling. (4), said by a TV cook while touching very hot meat with bare hands, makes the point that this is not (very) painful for him, while the term *latex* can also be taken to highlight the danger for others.

(4)   Sie sollten das jetzt nicht so machen – aber ich habe ja **Latex-Hände**. (*Kochduell*, CC)
(You shouldn't do it like that – but I've got **hands made of latex**.)

Example (5) is concerned with the topic of caterpillar boots, where the reference to an activity presented as impossible aids the negative evaluation of this kind of shoe. This example also illustrates how linguistic expression is often based on bodily experience, more or less individualised, or how the latter is used to make things more accessible.

(5)   **Ryan**   I think they're horrible. Er.

      Matthew   They go good with baggy jeans.

      Josh   Yeah but **you can't lift your foot up**. (*BNC* KPP 75)

Repetition for coding activity hyperbolically (e.g., chewing something hard, a child jumping around, cf. examples in Section 3.2.7) iconically

captures the length of the experienced or perceived action. It is, further, noteworthy that many of the activity types (and to some extent also, property types) refer in fact to clearly overstated, i.e., impossible or openly absurd, actions or events – thus clearly advertising the subjective content. ACTIVITY and PROPERTY together make up one quarter of all instances. The remaining domains, i.e., VALUE, DEGREE and HUMAN STATE, have a subjective component from the start and can only be made even more emphatically subjective. HUMAN STATE includes descriptions of mental and psychological states as well as of resultant human inclinations for actions; these instances most commonly refer to the speaker, as in the examples in (6).

(6) a. I am **sick to death** of yous. (*BNC* KD9 846)
     b. I mean one Friday I come, I left here about ten to one I went in the house and I went to bed and I was **starving** and Gordon says oh I'*m hungry* I, so I went out straight down the stairs, come back up with a bloody big tray cups of teas. (*BNC* KCA 1262)

The VALUE group contains items expressing clear evaluation on a good/bad, positive/negative scale (mostly adjectives, but also the verbs *love* and *hate*), while the DEGREE class consists of expressions with an intensifying function (e.g., *incredibly X*). These three classes thus deal with affect and intensity. The fact that together they make up 43 per cent of all instances shows that statements which are already subjective in nature are fairly prone to exaggeration. Speaker investment, which is generally high in such cases anyway, is further emphasised by the use of hyperbole.

What is further noticeable in the context of subjectivity is that a substantial amount of realisations (forty-eight items in the *BNC* data) are taken from or involve the existential fields of dying and killing (in the domains activity, degree, human state, as in (6a) above), i.e., items that denote the very limits of individual existence and thus the ultimate that can happen in one's subjective experience. These are also fields marked by extreme emotional involvement, which is carried over to the point referred to by the hyperbolic expression. The following section will proceed now to dealing with the expression of emotive or affective content by means of hyperbole in more detail.

4.2.1   *Expression of self I: encoding and transporting emotional attitude*

Emotion has already been highlighted in Chapter 2 as an important element of the definition of hyperbole. The expression of emotion is both a subjective, personal and an intersubjective, interactional phenomenon (Janney 1996: 92). Emotion is taken here as a cover term to include those aspects which are found in the literature also under the following terms: affect,

attitude, evaluation, intensity and involvement.[8] Apart from the fact that it is the linguistic expression, not the actual psychological presence, of emotion, etc. that is in focus (cf. Caffi and Janney's (1994) use of affect and Selting (1994) on involvement), the following aspects captured by the terms above are important. The relevant emotion is usually transitory, has a clear object or target (Arndt and Janney 1987: 71, 76), is non-neutral in nature (Bowers *et al.* 1985) and reflects an increased degree of personal commitment (Labov 1984).

The speaker as the origin of the emotion will be the focus of this chapter's treatment. I will thus concentrate on the contributive intention in emotional communication, where the frame of reference is the speaker's self, as opposed to the elicitive intention with the 'other' as the frame of reference[9] (Arndt and Janney 1987: 86). Caffi and Janney (1994: 361) speak of 'emotive self-disclosures' in this context, where the speaker's real or projected feelings are at the centre of interest. This type of speaker-centred emotive choice is characterised by the use of different kinds of emphasis (1994: 361), of which hyperbole is one instantiation.

It has been noted in several studies[10] that a rather high amount of figurative language is used when speakers talk (explicitly) about their emotions; Pollio and Barlow (1975) found three to six figures of speech per one hundred words in a psychotherapeutic session, for example.[11] Similarly figurative, non-literal language will play a prominent role in everyday communicative contexts when speakers are emotionally involved. First, figurative language as a marked choice deviates from 'normal', i.e., neutral language and contextual behaviour, and can thus express/convey 'abnormal', i.e., non-neutral emotional involvement (cf. Arndt and Janney 1987: 322). As hyperbole magnifies the aspect talked about, people who are emotionally involved often choose to express themselves in a more exaggerated manner in order to convey their affect (Arndt and Janney 1987: 352, Legitt and Gibbs 2000: 2, 4; cf. also Fiehler 1990: 215). This link between hyperbole and emotion is also borne out by findings for Wolof (a west African language spoken in the Gambia, Sierra Leone and neighbouring countries), where one of its

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[8] Cf. for example Caffi and Janney's (1994: Section 1.1.2) discussion of terminology in this area. The terms listed are used, e.g., by Arndt and Janney (1987), Bowers *et al.* (1985), Marty (1908), Biber and Finegan (1989), Selting (1994), Daneš (1994), Labov (1984), Fiehler (1990). There is no agreement on the meaning and use of these terms in the linguistic literature, which furthermore deviates from usage in the psychological literature.

[9] The latter point will be taken up in Chapter 5. Cf. also the hearer-centred dimension in emotive choices, where the partners' well-being is in focus (Caffi and Janney 1994: 361).

[10] Cf. Davitz (1969), Davitz and Maltis (1964), Fansilbur and Ortony (1987), Fussell and Moss (1998) (quoted in Legitt and Gibbs 2000: 3), all quoted in Gibbs (1994). Cf. also Link and Kreuz (2005).

[11] They looked at 15 types of figure of speech, but explicitly mention only the types metaphor, metonymy, oxymoron and litotes. It also needs to be noted that the therapy in question used gestalt theory, which in itself is highly metaphorical, and that the one person investigated was a verbally highly skilled speaker.

two styles is characterised by Irvine (1990: 131) as 'hyperbolic and high in affectivity'.[12] Secondly, figurative language can be useful for capturing fine nuances of emotion more adequately than literal language (Gibbs, *et al.* 2002: 125), partly because it packages the emotional content in a conceptually and experientially more accessible form (cf. the BIG IS IMPORTANT metaphor encapsulated by hyperbole). Thirdly, figurative expressions like hyperbole, which can be as small as one word, allow the conveyance of emotion besides and on top of an 'objective-content' message, thus economically telescoping several messages (cf. *it was dead easy* versus *it was very easy – and I was surprised, relieved* etc. *about it*). After all, the communication of emotion is usually not the main goal, but a secondary aspect in the fulfilment of other interactional tasks (Fiehler 1990: 37).

Fiehler (1990) presented a model for the description of linguistically expressed emotion which is well-suited for an empirical analysis. I will therefore adapt his scheme in order to analyse the hyperbolic expressions occurring in the *BNC* and *SBC* corpora. Fiehler starts out from the descriptive formula 'emotion A is an evaluative statement about X on the basis of Y as Z', in which the slot X represents the trigger and/or target of the emotion, Y stands for the quasi-normative criterion used in the evaluation and Z denotes the nature or value of the evaluation. The statement *but now we are like prisoners in our own homes*, for instance, evaluates X = [the situation of not being able to move freely beyond one's home], on the basis of Y = [the normal wish and/or expectation of any person for unimpeded movement] as Z = [negative] (here because Z and Y conflict with each other). The slots X, Y and Z can be filled more precisely as provided in Table 4.3. The items in *italics* are my additions to Fiehler's original table (1990: 47), his original category '(7) mental productions' has been added as 'inner state' to category (4).

The object or target of the emotion expressed (X) falls into six groups comprising people, objects and situations. A distinction partly underlying these groups is that of presence (1, 2, 4) or absence (3, 5) of the target. Absence in the case of people is taken to mean primarily that they are not participants in the ongoing conversation. This distinction seems important to me as it can have an influence on the actual expression of emotion: while, on the one hand, the closeness of the target may increase emotional intensity and thus likelihood of expression,[13] the association of the present interactants with the target, on the other hand, may dampen or hinder the expression for

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[12] Wolof possesses hyperbolic expressions such as *ba dee* 'to death' and *ba reey* 'till killing' (Irvine 1990: 144), which are reminiscent of English expressions, stemming from the same semantic areas. It may be possible to find cross-linguistically common or even universal hyperbolic source domains.

[13] Absent targets, in the sense defined here, can in certain cases be nevertheless present in the physical environment, e.g., in the case of different conversational groups at a large party. Thus, the statement above needs to be adjusted in some cases; cf. also example (12) presented on p. 84 below.

Table 4.3 *Fiehler's (1990) aspects of emotional expression (adapted)*

About X	On the basis of Y	As Z

(1) situation (*present*)
  • *speech/communication*
  • *other*
(2) other person (*present*)
  • activity
  • characteristic
(3) *other person* (*absent*)
  • *activity*
  • *characteristic*
(4) self
  • activity
  • characteristic
  • *inner state* (*mental/psych.*)
(5) event/situation (*absent*)
(6) objects
	(1) expectations
	(2) interests, wishes
	(3) (accepted) social
	    norms / moral
	    norms/notions
	(4) self-image
	(5) image of other
		(1) conforming (well)/*positive*
		(2) not conforming/*negative*
		(3) *indeterminate*

reasons of politeness and general expediency, at least in those cases where Z is negative. The latter aspect is the reason why the presence–absence distinction has been dispensed with in the case of objects (6), as these as a rule cannot be 'hurt'.[14] Table 4.4 provides the distribution of targets of hyperbolic expression in the corpus data. People are somewhat more often the target than things and happenings (53 per cent to 47 per cent), indicating a greater emotional involvement of people in social relationships. The absent–present distribution extractable from this table is 68 per cent to 32 per cent, thus showing a clear dominance of absent targets. Speakers' hyperbolic expression is apparently not so much triggered by acute emotional states, but by remembered, long-term, delayed and reported emotions, even emotions attributed to others. Politeness reasons may also play a role, given the pronounced difference between reference to other interactants and to absent persons.

Here it is important to take Z into consideration, as the nature of the appraisal will be important for face considerations. Z in Fiehler's scheme simply means fulfilling (well) or not fulfilling the norm as posited by the speaker's criteria, which thus means either a positive or a negative evaluation. I have added a third possibility (indeterminate between positive and negative) for those cases where the major point of the hyperbole lies in increased intensity; cf. also Caffi and Janney's (1994: 338) affective dimension of arousal/intensity besides the dimension of positive or negative evaluation.[15] The distribution of the Z values is shown in Table 4.5.

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[14] In those cases where an object were to be closely and personally linked with one of the interactants, this statement needs to be modified.

[15] Their third dimension is that of power, control and potency, which is of less relevance in the context of hyperbole.

Table 4.4 *Targets of hyperbolic expression (BNC, SBC)*

Target of hyperbole	Occurrences	Per cent
(1) situation (present)		
• speech/communication	3	1
• other	21	5
(2) other person (present)		
• activity	29	7
• characteristic	15	3
(3) other person (absent)		
• activity	62	14
• characteristic	59	13
(4) self		
• activity	32	7
• characteristic	12	3
• inner state (mental/psych.)	25	6
(5) event/situation (absent)	113	25
(6) objects	70	16

Table 4.5 *Types of evaluation carried by hyperbolic expressions (BNC, SBC)*

	Conforming well/ positive	Not conforming/ negative	Indeterminate (intensity)
Occurrences	75	287	80
Per cent	17	65	17

Clearly, most hyperbolic expressions are used to transport negative evaluations, making it likely that politeness considerations have led, at least in part, to the presence–absence distribution above. However, politeness will be taken up in Section 5.3. The interesting question at present, is rather, why negative evaluations dominate to such an extent. The propensity for hyperbole to express negative feelings, in particular a speaker's irritation with something, has also been noted in the context of German data (Hartung 1996: 157). Psychological research (e.g., Anderson and Leaper 1998: 426) exhibits a greater richness of categories for negative than for positive emotions, indicating that our negative emotional range is comparatively larger and more varied. While this need not necessarily mean that negative emotions occur more frequently, it does increase the relevant contexts and opportunities for their expression. In fact, Anderson and Leaper (1998: 439f.) have also found in their experimental study that negative emotions were expressed more frequently than positive ones and that these were expressed mostly not through explicit emotion terms such as *angry, happy*, but in an indirect manner as in *she went through the roof*. This is in line with the conversational data used

Table 4.6 *Basis of evaluations used in hyperbolic expressions (BNC, SBC)*

	Expectations	Interests/ wishes	Accepted social and moral norms	Self-image	Image of other
Occurrences	184	154	80	6	17
Per cent	42	35	18	1	4

here. A positive state of affairs is apparently seen as the default case, whereas (events triggering) negative emotions are seen as more divergent from the norm, more marked, and thus more worthy of comment – in the same way as the press is heavily tilted in favour of reporting bad rather than good news.[16] Nevertheless, this need not mean that figurative language as such specialises for negative evaluations, as Gibbs *et al.* (2002: 139) have found that metaphors are particularly likely to be used to describe intense *positive* emotions. Hyperbole in this respect seems to pattern rather with irony, whose negative orientation has been commented on repeatedly and sometimes this aspect is integrated into the definition of irony (e.g., Utsumi 2000).

The last part of Fiehler's scheme concerns the criteria on which speakers base their evaluations (Y). This aspect requires more far-reaching interpretation of the data than the other two aspects, even a certain amount of guesswork. The picture as presented in Table 4.6 should therefore be treated with some caution.

The subjective nature of hyperbolic expressions is clearly shown in the relative infrequency with which general norms can be seen to influence the assessments made. In contrast, over three quarters of all cases are most probably based on the way in which hyperbolically predicated objects correlate with the speakers' individual expectations, interests and desires. What hyperbole does is to 'inflate' the contrast between the norm provided by whatever criteria are applied and what actually is the case (cf. Colston and Keller 1998: 500).

Let us now proceed to some illustrative examples. As Table 4.5 has shown, most hyperbolic utterances are evaluative in character. Such evaluations can be self-directed (cf. Table 4.4), especially when (thinking or) talking to oneself; this is unfortunately something as a rule not recorded in corpora. I once overheard my husband walking through the flat and muttering to himself:

(7)   Aah. … brain **the size of a grape seed** (CC)

Apparently he had forgotten to do something; thus, this is a negative comment on his lack of memory capability at that moment (self: characteristic),

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[16] The Pollyanna Hypothesis or Principle (Boucher and Osgood 1969), mentioned by Leech (1983: 147, 151), also comments on the human propensity to equate good with the normal state of affairs, and bad with an 'abnormal' state. This automatically makes the bad newsworthy.

which stands in conflict to people's usual desire to remember things. The function in cases like (7) seems to be to let off some steam related to the frustration about oneself that one feels at the moment, i.e., it is more or less cathartic in nature. Those cases are better subsumed under what has been called 'emotional' utterances without primary communicative intention (Janney 1996: 26, based on Marty 1908: 275, 363) rather than under 'emotive' speech, which always has strategic, interactional communicative intent. Why such cathartic use is executed in a quasi-creative way is an additional question – perhaps it produces a feeling of satisfaction, however slight, to counteract the present negative feeling. However, people also produce evaluative hyperboles about themselves in public talk (cf. (8)), in which case they represent emotive talk and are linked to aims regarding self-presentation.

(8) I'm just **the ultimate wimp**. I'm **the world's worst patient**.
     (BBC 1, '*Vets in Practice*', broadcast 6 September 2002)

This statement by a female vet recounting the incident of fainting at a blood test before a wisdom teeth operation reflected her fear of 'human' medicine. Again, the evaluation is negative, as fainting does not form part of one's self-image and others' expectations. While some people may have a propensity for being overly modest or even of denigrating themselves, another point in these uses may be that sometimes it may be more important to sound interesting than to present oneself in a good, but more boring light. Here, the almost absurd contrast between being a vet and being afraid of medical treatment makes for an increased interest factor. The overdone presentation may thus partly smother the bad impression left by the fact itself of fainting. Self-directed negative evaluations are proportionally somewhat more frequent than positive ones in the present data set (15.7 per cent versus 10.6 per cent of the relative groups).

Example (9) comments on the reactions and feelings of the speaker to somebody else's behaviour and thus indirectly also on that person, who is a topic of conversation, not an interactant.

(9) I **couldn't get over** Des asking me if I wanted a bottle of beer! I **nearly passed out on floor**! (*BNC* KB1 3962)

The speaker is apparently describing behaviour not in line with Des' character, thus non-conformant behaviour which deviates in a positive manner from the expectations of the speaker. As this positive occurrence is portrayed in such an outstanding way it reflects negatively on Des' normal behaviour, however. As indicated above, hyperbolic statements with non-interacting third-party targets are more common than those with other personal targets. Example (10) illustrates the more common critical, negative comments, on a person's characteristics (10a) or on somebody's behaviour and activities (10b, c). Example (10b) is a case where the underlying criterion for the evaluation lies in social norms regarding the behaviour that is expected of people.

(10) a. Dennis has got more [feeling, CC] in his little finger than George
          (…) had in his body! (*BNC* KB9 1333)
      b. No she, she doesn't do a thing I mean to cook a Sunday dinner
          she doesn't know what it is. (*BNC* KCA 313)
      c. Dance of the baby rhinoceroses … (CC; comment on noise pro-
          duced by upstairs neighbours)

Example (11) represents the rarer positive or neutral appraisals, with (11a)
hyperbolically reporting on another person's psychological disposition, and
(11b, c) transporting either surprise at an extraordinary achievement or
something like admiration for the person talked about.

(11) a. **Matthew:**   Is he okay?
          Elizabeth: Oh yeah! **He's on top of the world!** (*BNC* KBY
                        363)
      b. I was chatting to his nan, his nan's amazing you know, she's a right
          traveller. (…) **She's been to every country you can imagine**,
          Far East, Middle East (*BNC* KC7 931)
      c. he's a good, you know, cleaner I mean the bath, whenever he, bli-
          mey if ever he cleans the bath **it looks ten times better** than
          when I I do it. (*BNC* KD4 427)

Instance (11c) may also contain touches of a boast, as husbands (= he) clean-
ing the bathroom – and cleaning it really well – are not necessarily regarded
as the norm. In the data, absent persons are the most frequent targets of
negative evaluations (30.6 per cent), while positive evaluations are most fre-
quently made about objects (34.6 per cent). This can be linked to Anderson
and Leaper's results (1998: 436), who also found that the targets of negative
emotions (regardless of way of expression) were most often specific persons,
whereas targets of positive emotions tended to be, rather, objects or events.

The emotional expression by way of hyperbole can produce whole clus-
ters, witness the following case of four instances being produced in a fairly
short space of time (3–4 minutes):

(12) Context: Person waiting to make a specific photographic shot in the
      Alcazar palace in Seville, while visiting individuals and groups keep
      moving around and thus 'getting in the way'

      • [about a tour guide:] Oh no, he's now giving them a **lecture on
         the making of** *azulejos.*
      • Push off **before sunset**. [said at 11 a.m.]
      • Will this [taking the picture, CC] ever work **before the Second
         Coming?**
      • [On people using digital cameras:] It takes them **five hours** to
         look through the camera, and then **six hours** to decide on whether
         they want the picture. (CC)

In this case, the triggers and targets of the emotion are actually present (though not being talked to and not within hearing range); this and the fact that the person *really* wants this shot may explain the clustering produced by the immediacy of the emotion, in this case apparently increasing irritation. Similarly to (7) above, the function here is partly cathartic, as the main recipient is the speaker himself (apart from his accompanying partner). In contrast to (12) and the previous examples, the statement in (13) is directed at the target of the hyperbolic expression.

(13) **Norrine** and I walked on a couple, two or three and picked up this bloody carton out of the road and I was right next to Linda's car

   (…)

   Norrine No, there's these girls with a fellow with several cars that way though and I just put it in the bin that was there.

   Chris Yeah

   Norrine But, I did think he was cheeky, I mean it was so blatant.

   Chris Yes.

   Norrine And people walking on the pavement <unclear> all it totally and I thought what a cheek.

   Chris Ha Well done dear, **you've done your bit for humanity** today. (*BNC* KBK 4119)

Referring to picking up litter in the street hyperbolically as *done your bit for humanity* produces an ironic statement. Here, the impact is rather mild and playfully mocking, but nevertheless the evaluation is a negative one: Norrine is overreacting in Chris' opinion and he is belittling her action. The fact that overstatement can lead to irony has been commented on before (e.g., Seto 1998: 244–8), and this is also found in the present data, but actually to a rather small extent with three or four instances. Negatively evaluating hyperboles are directed at communication partners in 11.8 per cent of cases, more commonly than is the case with positive ones (6.6 per cent). It is perhaps noteworthy that the majority of cases with present personal targets are found in conversations of family members, where the greater degree of intimacy and fairly clear roles put negative evaluations in a larger relationship perspective. Chris and Norrine in (13) are husband and wife, while the rather more emotional and offensive (14) is spoken by a mother to her teenage sons.

(14) See that fucking knife Mark, I ought to stab you or him with it, I am **sick to death** of yous. **All yous do** is fight and ruck and fight. (*BNC* KD9 846–7)

Absent situations are the second most common objects of negative evaluations. These can be rather general situations of potentially common

knowledge, as in (15a, b). Example (15a), although primarily about the experience of the sister of the speaker, is also a statement about the British National Health Service as such and its policy regarding hip operations, which is part of the common complaint tradition regarding NHS procedures. Example (15b) gives an assessment of the 1980s as a political and social era (metonymically using two leading politicians of that time), where the subjectively felt length of the decade marks it as a tedious and unpleasant experience for the speaker.

(15)   a.   You **have to crawl before** they give you an operation. (CC)
       b.   **100 Jahre** Reagan und **100 Jahre** Thatcher – **200 years** between the two of them (CC) ('100 years of Reagan and 100 years of Thatcher'; German speaker, language mix original)
       c.   But, (H) the fact of the matter is, … (H) that the marriage itself=, I mean as **h=ellish** as it was, … % .. it's like **it pulled me under, like a giant octopus, or a giant**, % … **giant shark**. (*SBC*5)

While (15a, b) are generally evaluative, (15c) is more about the personal emotions of the speaker, who talks about her failed marriage. The graphically descriptive metaphor–cum–hyperbole used turns the 'abstract' emotion into a bodily experience, thus making it more 'graspable' for both speaker and hearer. Positive evaluations of situations as in (16) are also found, though to a lesser extent.

(16)   Our heating's working again so it's **bliss**, **absolute bliss** and lovely (*BNC* KC7 1203)

For positive situations to be noteworthy an 'abnormal' background such as the previously broken heating in (16) is often necessary. Objects as hyperbolic targets are often linked with a further aspect that is targeted through them. The negative evaluation of shoes, as in (17a), will normally carry over to the wearer of such shoes, so that indirectly a person is also the target – as the person in question is named in the immediate context, this is most likely. In (17b) the objects of criticism are the high steps leading up to St Michael's Mount in Cornwall, which make a certain amount of effort necessary on the part of the climber, thus also involving an emotional attitude towards the present activity of the speaker.

(17)   a.   That was the **ugliest set of shoes I ever saw in my life** (*SBC*6)
       b.   You need **six foot legs** here. (CC)
       c.   I'd got a **gigantic** love bite around my neck! (*BNC* KCE 679)

Example (17c) primarily refers to an object, but indirectly necessarily to a past situation involving the speaker. The nature of evaluation is here somewhat ambivalent, as female teenagers (like the speaker in 17c) may view love bites, on the one hand, as a sign of success, something to be proud of, and on the other hand, as something embarrassing to be hidden, at least from some

people. As the interlocutors involved in (17c) were both teenagers, a positive evaluation, perhaps a slight boast, is a likely interpretation of this instance.

Linking hyperbole to specific emotional or attitudinal categories beyond evaluation is tricky and will be dispensed with here. However, two examples can be used to illustrate this point. Overstatement has been linked to the expression of surprise by Colston (1997) and Colston and Keller (1998). Thus, a hyperbolic term referring to size such as *huge, giant, mammoth, colossal* (perhaps together with suitable intonation) etc. versus *big, large* will express the amount of surprise, of being impressed or the like on the part of the speaker. In the following example it is the contrast between *tiny* (girl) and *huge* (arms), both in themselves mildly hyperbolical but here re-enforcing each other, that brings across Lynne's astonishment at what the girl talked about can do (note that Lynne might have wanted to produce a more imaginative hyperbole with *arms the size of*, but broke it off):

(18) **Lynne:** (…) … (TSK) (H) there's this girl, that's working with him, for the summer?

  Doris: Unhunh.

  Lynne: And she's gonna be a ferrier.

  Doris: … Yeah.

  Lynne: … I couldn't believe it. <HI And she's just little HI>. … She's a **tiny** girl, but, boy I tell you, **she's got ar=ms the size of** – … **(H) they're hu=ge**. but she must only – … <HI What is m- … blowing out of there HI>. (*SBC1*)

The amount of hyperbole expressed apparently plays hardly a role in the degree of surprise expressed, according to Colston and Keller's (1998: 508) experimental results, so that *tiny* will as a rule have the same effect as, e.g., *minuscule* or *diminutive*. In comparison to other figures of speech, Colston (1997: 52f.) has found hyperbole to express more surprise if the situation commented upon is a negative one; this goes along with the primarily negative evaluative orientation of hyperbole described above. In (19) it is the feeling of personal satisfaction and pride that is expressed by the speaker.

(19) I've read up on me fish. So I know **all** about fish, at the minute. (*BNC KB6 502*)

Whereas surprise is more or less neutral as a value judgement, pride is clearly something positive for the individual speaker.

Hyperbole is not only an evaluation device, it is first and foremost a quantity and thus an intensity device, which follows naturally from its magnifying power. The degree of language intensity chosen correlates to the degree of the speaker's attitude differing from a neutral one (Bowers *et al.* 1985: 526) and increases the force of an utterance (Labov 1984). Intensity, unlike the expression of evaluation, does not necessarily need an object or target; it can

simply reflect the emotional disposition of a speaker, at the moment or in general. Thus, of the two speakers in example (20) talking about the very same fact, one chooses the form *loads of*, the other *a lot of*, of which the former is the more intensive one (partly due to being more colloquial).

(20)   **Gordon**   they sent us a parcel before Christmas three weeks before Christmas, and they were ringing se–, because he knew with overseas or anything. So, she said that er (…)

      Gordon   can we enquire about it. But if you remember the last time they sent us a parcel er (…)

      Gordon   they took out **loads of** things. They take

      Debbie   **a lot of** things out see. (*BNC* KCA 2304, shortened)

Similarly, *dead* in (21) is more emphatic than *very, so* and the like.

(21)   Emma: Well we had oh I'm trying to think what we had today oh got out of assembly because I had to go and speak to this maths teacher who's **dead** boring! (*BNC* KCE 4)

Interestingly, the maths teacher characterised in this manner is not the topic/focus of the conversation, but only a minor point. Both Gordon and Emma's attitudinal expression is stronger than the neutral norm, and this may reflect their greater propensity towards emotionality. Alternatively or additionally, the above examples also reflect a stylistic, sociolinguistic choice: the more informal, blunter forms are used by a male and a teenage speaker, respectively. Both *loads of* and the intensifier *dead* are conventional forms with weakened impact (compared to other hyperboles) and it may be that in the case of an equally conventional neutral and hyperbolic item, more emotional speakers, rather, use the latter. The degree of speaker intention-ality regarding transmitting the emotional information is probably reduced in comparison to less conventional hyperboles. Here, it is a more automatic manifestation of emotion (cf. Daneš 1994: 261), something akin to Goffman's (1963: 13f.) concept of information given off, which is uncalculated, and more spontaneous than the intentional information given.

4.2.1.1   *Speaker characteristics*

In the context of expressive language, speaker characteristics naturally play a role. Thus, this is the place to investigate which speakers or speaker groups, in particular distinguished by gender and age, use more or less hyperbole. A common stereotype is that women are more emotional and therefore use more emotionally charged language. This also applies to the topic at hand, as '[h]yperbole is often popularly assumed to distinguish female from male speech. But there is no firm evidence that women exaggerate more than men do. It's an absolutely preposterous claim' (Wales 1989: 222). Neither is there uncontroversial evidence that women generally use more emotional language

Table 4.7 *Instances of hyperbole employed by male and female speakers*

		Men	Women	Unknown
BNC	Instances	90	277	9
	Per cent	23.9	73.7	2.4
	per 1,000*	0.8	1.3	—
SBC	Instances	18	46	—
	Per cent	28.1	71.9	—

* of the respective words spoken by male and female speakers

than men do. The evidence for hyperbole in the *BNC* subcorpus and the *SBC* is presented in Table 4.7.

In both corpora we find a clear majority of hyperbolic expressions being used by female speakers, thus at first sight corroborating the stereotype. However, the picture might not be as striking as it seems at first sight. In both corpora, we find somewhat more female than male speakers represented, fifty to forty-four (*BNC*) and twenty-two to seventeen (*SBC*). Furthermore, more than half of the speech in the *BNC* is produced by female speakers: 221,236 words in the subcorpus are spoken by women, whereas men contribute only 106,238 words. If one sets the hyperbole figures in relation to the word counts, we get the normalised figures per 1,000 words indicated in Table 4.7. Calculated in this way, the difference looks less remarkable, but it is nevertheless statistically significant ($\chi =$ 10.49, $p \leq$ 0.001, $df =$ 1).[17] It is furthermore necessary to take highly personal preferences into consideration: there is one female speaker in the *SBC* who is responsible for twelve hyperbolic occurrences (*SBC*6), which comes to a quarter of all female uses and may have skewed the data somewhat. However, other women also contribute eight (*SBC*1) or six (*SBC*13) instances, while the highest number for men is five (*SBC*3). A study of fourteen individual items as used by male and female speakers in the *BNC*[18] found a more balanced distribution of hyperbolic uses, with women using the items hyperbolically in 48.2 per cent of all instances and men using them thus in 46.4 per cent of all cases. This study found gendered preference for some of the items investigated, however. While women used the hyperbolic senses of *starve, die for, ages* and *to death* relatively more frequently, men showed a comparative preference for *incredible, tons of, hundreds* and *gigantic*.

[17] The word count's split according to sex was produced with the help of the *BNC* web software.
[18] Carried out by Janina Raschke (2006), a student of mine, in the context of a seminar on figurative language. The items selected were *incredible, unbelievable, brilliant, starve, die for, live on, ages, years, tons of, hundreds of, like hell, to death, under the sun* and *gigantic*.

Why would women exaggerate – even if only slightly – more than men do? Psychological research (e.g., Bowers *et al.* 1985: 501, 535f.) points towards the greater importance for women of sharing emotions, of talking in friendships and of emotional release through speech. Men, in contrast, attach greater significance to common activities and to content-centred exchanges not greatly coloured by emotionality. A fair number of the hyperbolic expressions used by female speakers are clearly emotive terms as such, e.g., *love, hate, horrible*, etc. Male speakers might prefer other forms of hyperbole, those more connected to achievements, to objects (cf. the items above preferred by men), to the interest function (cf. also boasting) and to (perhaps competitive) humour. Such contexts were not that much in evidence in the data, except to some extent with young speakers (cf. pp. 93, 96, 99).

Another factor that may play a role is the presence of male only, female only or male and female participants in conversations, not so much for female but for the lesser male use. The gender of the addressee(s) may increase or decrease the likelihood of hyperbolic expressions, i.e., an all-male conversation might produce more male hyperbole than a mixed-gender talk. Hyperbole might be more likely in contexts where speakers feel completely at ease, and this may be more commonly the case with same-sex conversation partners. Norrick (1993), for instance, quotes a heavily hyperbolic conversation which seems to be a lively male-only conversation. Purely male conversations are somewhat rarer than female or mixed ones in the *BNC* subcorpus, however. A look at where hyperbolic expressions are found reveals the following picture: mixed-gender conversations, 243 instances; all-female conversations, 114 instances; all-male conversations, only 18 instances. This figure is even lower than expected given the amount of male–male talk. Some of the topics found there simply do not lend themselves to exaggeration, however; for example, the case where one man explains to another at great length how cricket works – which brings us back to the fact that men use more content-centred talk. In contrast, Raschke's study mentioned above found a somewhat greater tendency of men to address their hyperboles to a male audience, rather than to a female or a mixed one.

Looking at the distribution of hyperbole among different age groups (cf. Table 4.8) one notices that the 20–60-year-olds in the *BNC* contribute roughly comparable levels of exaggeration to the overall findings. There is relatively little overstatement used by speakers over sixty years of age, but this group is also represented by relatively fewer speech productions in the subcorpus (6 per cent of utterances). Children contribute very little speech to the conversations used here and thus, the fact that there is only one instance for this group is not too surprising. The most striking group, i.e., with a very high use of hyperbole, is certainly represented by the teenagers (11–20-year-olds). This group has the largest amount of speakers and accounts for a fairly high percentage of the utterances (29 per cent), but this alone cannot explain the pronounced use of exaggeration.

Table 4.8 *Hyperbolic expressions used by different age groups*

		1–10	11–20	21–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61+	Unknown
BNC	Number of speakers	9	29	17	13	10	7	9	1
	Instances	1	131	59	61	46	59	9	10
	Per cent	0.3	34.8	15.7	16.2	12.2	15.7	2.4	2.6
SBC	Number of speakers	—	5	16	9	4	2	—	2
	Instances	—	9	18	25	4	1	—	7
	Per cent	—	14.1	28.1	39.1	6.3	1.6	—	10.9

The picture presented by the *SBC* is different, as here it is the age group of the thirty-somethings that contributes the most hyperbolic expressions, followed by people in their twenties. Again, this partly correlates with a greater number of speakers in these groups. While the result for age is thus not really conclusive, there are in fact several aspects that make plausible a higher exaggeration level for youth language, as shown by the *BNC*. First, the comparatively greater emotional turmoil characteristic of this time in life needs expressing and hyperbole may be a suitable and accepted means. Secondly, peer influence and pressure is fairly strong, which may lead to the more frequent use of 'accepted' hyperbolic forms. Thirdly, hyperbole may have a role to play in the expression of positive politeness strategies, creating solidarity by exaggerating shared values, interests and features. Fourthly, there is the need to construct a positive self-image within one's peer group, which may induce greater linguistic innovativeness, reached with the help of figurative language. The last of these points provides the transition to the next section.

4.2.2   *Expression of self II: self-presentation*

Another facet of subjectivity is the self-presentation of individual speakers through language, i.e., the kind of image they aim to project of themselves and the kind of role they want to play in interaction. The positive face wants of a person include 'the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). Classical rhetoric, for instance, linked mastery of language and good character of a person, in so far as *ethos* is at least partly established through the way content is presented and through the speaker's stylistic capabilities (Charteris-Black 2005: Chapter 8).

In both (22) and (23) the speakers use the hyperbole to portray themselves as competent practitioners of the field that is under discussion and thus, to increase the credibility of either the point they are making or of their persons as such.

(22)   I've been teaching English phonetics **ever since the Flood** and I don't
recall ever having heard any of my students pronounce words like *keen*
and *king* with the same vowel. (LinguistList 13.2053, Sum: Tense and
Lax I)

(23)   [= (4) above] Sie sollten das jetzt nicht so machen – aber ich habe ja
Latex-Hände. (CC)

In (22) the overstated time of teaching phonetics serves to strengthen the
point made about the vowels of *keen* and *king*. In (23) it is, implicitly, again
the long experience that is stressed, and especially the physical suitable-
ness of the cook in dealing with very hot things. In both cases, the speak-
ers use the hyperbole to present themselves as experts. Additionally, there
is a certain humorous touch to these examples. In fact, being not only more
expressive of the speaker('s aims) but also more interesting, more vivid,
cleverer, funnier and more likely to catch or focus the hearers' attention is
an effect of hyperbole's standing out from the norm. Positive evaluations
of and reactions to such interesting language use will also reflect positively
on the user of that language. This can be linked to some of the communi-
cative maxims introduced by Keller (1994: 98), namely 'talk in such a way
that you are noticed', and 'talk in an amusing, funny, etc. way'.[19] Colston
(1997: 55), referring to research by Roberts and Kreuz (1994), remarked
that speakers are more likely to be thought of as humorous or witty when
they use overstatement. This can also be combined with self-referential
mocking, as in the examples in (24). In the first example a university dean,
writing in a scholarly journal, is joking about his 'great age' and thus
establishing himself as a humorous person. Witty self-depreciation of this
kind, if not overdone, is a sympathy factor as the speaker comes across as
unpretentious, confident but nevertheless capable of self-criticism and as
entertaining.

(24)   a.   When I was a college freshman, **back when dinosaurs ruled
the earth** … (quoted from B. W. Brown, 1974: 288)
b.   Gestern war ich mal joggen, und **als mich eine Nacktschnecke
überholte**, wußte ich, ich muß noch ein bißchen üben.
[I went jogging yesterday, and **when I was overtaken by a slug**
I knew I had to do some more training.] (CC)

Example (24b) spoken by the host of *Kochduell* (Germany's version of
Ready Steady Cook) neatly suits the character of the host and the show
in general: the speaker does in fact make the impression that eating and

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[19]   Together with 'talk in such a way that you are not recognisable as a member of the group',
'talk in an especially polite, flattering, charming, etc. way' and 'talk in such a way that you
do not expend superfluous energy', they make up the group of dynamic maxims, which
produce dynamism and thus change in language. Cf., further, Chapter 6.

drinking well (and enjoying it) is much more important to her than doing sports and conforming to a slimness ideal – and in a way this embodies the spirit of the whole show.

Hyperbole can have a function in story-telling and guiding attendance, inasmuch as it allows speakers to present things in a more interesting way for the hearer. Leech's (1983: 146) Interest Principle 'Say what is unpredictable, and hence interesting' claims that this increases the news value of what is said. Interest can be aroused by overstating on the content level, on the one hand. For example, saying about a day that

(25)   it was **the most weird day I've ever seen in my entire adult l=ife**. (*SBC*1)

is certainly a better attention–grabber than *it/he was a (rather/very) weird day*, due to its extravagant claim and unforeseeability in the context in which it occurs. If a speaker begins a story in such a way, s/he can count on greater initial interest on the part of the listeners. In the *SBC*1 file, the speaker uses it to give, in a fairly long turn, her subjective experience of an event that has already been the topic in general. The attention of the listeners is thus focused on the individual experience of the speaker, which is introduced as if it is more striking than the general event. On the other hand, the interest-factor can also be increased by the form that is chosen. Leech illustrated his Interest Principle by absurdly overstated idioms, but completely unpredictable, because highly creative expressions like the following (26) increase the memorability of a statement and make for a potentially greater impact.

(26)   **Helena**   But like, like, I mean Andy, Andy goes yeah, like, cos we were talking about that, and he goes, yeah you've got *child–bearing hips*!

      Emma   Yeah.

      Helena   He goes, unlike my sister who's got **house-bearing hips**! (*BNC* KCE 900)

House-bearing hips is a hyperbolic play on an established term and so successful as to be repeated here by Helena, who is quoting the original user of the expression. While the original speaker might have intended an evaluation of his sister's figure, the creative aspect and presenting himself as a witty and linguistically skilful person was certainly as or even more important for him than giving a plain assessment. In the repetition in (26) it is definitely not the transported evaluation but the witticism as such that is at issue, i.e., the hyperbole has gained a life of its own by virtue of its noteworthy form. As to interest through form, it is surely, rather, the creative, non-conventional expressions that have an impact, while (highly) conventional forms can be mostly neglected in this respect, as they are often below

consciousness level and taken for granted by speakers. Unlike (26), creative hyperbolic uses tend to be phrasal or clausal more often than conventional types. This makes them textually and interactionally more prominent, and potentially more effectual. An example is the following, where the hyperbole lies in the relative clause:

(27)   **Gill**   Oh she won't mind you using it anyway. She's got **so much tuna she could bloody start an aquarium up**.

      Jemma   tuna

      Gill   Mind you, *they're all dead so it wouldn't be a very active aquarium really would it*? Think the pasta's done. (*BNC* KC7 1240)

Besides being hyperbolic, the expression is also transferred in another way: as the utterance was spoken in the context of a cooking activity, the tuna in question is dead and could not in fact populate any aquarium. This absurdity or incongruity is commented on by the speaker herself, who thus plays around with her own hyperbole. This shows that the speaker has a certain ironic distance to her language usage and is in full control of her productions, which enhances the image of the speaker. The extended playfulness of (27) makes the hyperbole used more prominent.

The incongruity mentioned above is of course a classic ingredient of humour in various theories (e.g., Attardo 1994: 47–9), and many of the more creative examples are in fact humorous to a greater or lesser extent. An equally incongruous and thus funny example is *she misses more words out than she gets in!* (*BNC* KB1), quoted in Chapter 3. People using humorous language present themselves as imaginative, creative speakers, which enhances their image in their own and other people's perception. Humorous or playful modes in conversation also provide resources for displaying involvement, for negotiating attitudes and interpersonal relationships in a fairly light-hearted way and for the establishment of group identity (cf. Eggins and Slade 1997: 155). Norrick (1993) gives examples of humorous storytelling and interactive wordplay involving hyperbole. In one example (1993: 68), three men cooperate in telling the story about the encounter of an insect which takes on epic proportions in the course of the narration. The insect, roughly the size of a hummingbird, is described in terms of a plane, i.e. as being able to carry a load 'of about twenty tons', of having a big fuselage and a large wingspan, and finally as a 'primordial' beast. The hyperbole is mostly provided by one of the men, but the others are contributing encouragement to go on (also by laughter) and support. On the whole the narration is reminiscent of Tall Tale contexts (cf. Chapter 7).

The following elaborately constructed joke also involves hyperbole. Robert carefully builds up a semantic scale leading to a clear hyperbole (*a million years*) in a pre-joke routine as input to a 'knock knock' joke, which

Robert intends to creatively subvert. When Susan responds in the manner standard for this type of joke, he links back to the preceding build-up, 'reproaching' her for having forgotten him and playing on the implied contrast between 'a million years' and the few seconds that have passed in reality.

(28) **Robert:** Will you remember me *in a second*?
      Susan   Why?
      Robert No just say yes.
      Susan   Oh yes <unclear> here, when you were laughing.
      Robert Will you remember *in an hour*?
      PSooo   […]
      Susan   Yes. How could I
      Robert Will you remember me *in an hour*?
      Susan   Yes, how could I forget?
      Robert Will you remember me *in a week*?
      Susan   Yes.
      Robert Will you remember me *in a year*?
      Susan   Yes.
      Robert Will you remember me **in a million years**?
      Susan   Yes.
      Robert Knock knock.
      Susan   Who's there?
      Robert *You've see you've forgotten me already*!
      Susan   [laughing] you've forgot who I am already []. [laugh]
      Robert You should say …
      Susan   Hello Robert, shouldn't I?
      Robert Yes you should say hello Robert.
      Susan   [laugh] (*BNC* KBG 3202)

Susan responds with laughter and helps in supplying the 'correct' answer, so that presumably the light mode of a joking relationship is preserved. But this example also shows that humour can be a problematic and potentially aggressive strategy. Not getting a joke or not reacting to it in the intended manner can be a threat to the addressee's face, here Susan's. It is hard to say how common such elaborate stagings as (28) are in everyday conversation, as one comes across such instances in corpora basically only by chance.

As in Norrick's and some other examples above, humorous and/or creative uses have a tendency to work with the impossible or highly implausible. The same is true of (29), where 18-year-old Andy has hurt himself by falling

onto the hard edge of a camp bed and comments on his subsequent painful problem as such:

(29)   **Andy:**   I've got a split sac. (…) **I've got one testicle down here somewhere and the other one's still embedded in bedroom**. (*BNC* KCE 2529)

Perhaps this grossly overstated creative use communicates more emotional intensity than more conventional phrasing would do, thus being at once more expressive and more suitable to present Andy as a person deserving of some commiseration from the others at that moment. Also, the hyperbole indicates that while in (whatever amount of) pain, the speaker can still manage to be linguistically creative and funny. What is being played with here is a taboo area in society at large (sexual organs), which may further add to the interest value of this utterance.

Another way speakers can show off their resourcefulness at language is by taking established idioms and transforming them in an attention-catching way. In (30), Helena plays with the idioms *not have two pennies to rub together* (*OED* s.v. *rub*[1]) / *not have one penny to rub against another* (*ODCIE*2) and *as thick as two short planks*, which are already overstated and absurd as such.

(30)   **Helena**   and I went who's applying to go on to university or education after eighteen, so I put up my hand, turned round and flipping Stuart and Danny had put their hands up and I just went oh god, they're gonna do really well and Terry, and Terry, we're talking Terry, Terry **who hasn't got a brain cell to rub together**

Sheila   What, er, mm, he's in your class ain't he?

Helena   so ah that boy, this is the one who said I think we should be allowed to hit girls

Sheila   <laugh>

Helena   he supposedly, he, **two short planks does not describe this boy**, even Miss hates him that was it, she, we were having this discussion right in education, she goes, are you cynical about education Terry, he goes, no, he goes, oh she goes why? He goes I don't know what cynical means

Sheila   <laugh>

Helena   I said, ah no and everyone in the class just cracked up sometimes you wonder, you wonder whether he does it on purpose he must do it on purpose, no one can be that thick (*BNC* KCE 7316)[20]

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[20] The same dialogue is also found in the *BNC*'s KPN file, while otherwise KCE and KPN differ.

Through contextualised creative substitution (*penny* > *brain cell*, potentially also *two* > *a*), omissions (*as thick as*), and through topping the overstatement (*does not describe*), the idioms are reanimated and made forceful again. A further, somewhat less elaborate approach to playing with language is presented by the quasi-rhyme found in (31).

(31)   **Annette**   now what you've done say er little *vandal*'s here again
       Teresa   Yeah **Becky the wrecker** been at it again
       Annette   *Rebecca the wrecker*, give me a kiss (*BNC* KB9 1069)

In contrast to the previous examples, (31)'s creative element is not about content or meaning, but purely about form. The meaning is actually 'copied' from *vandal* in the previous utterance, but the phonetic shape of *wrecker* [rɛkə] echoes *Becky/Rebecca* [bɛkɪ / rɪbɛkə], the name of the person thus described. The success of this little language play is highlighted by the fact that Annette, who used *vandal* before, proceeds to imitate Teresa's pun.

The above uses of hyperbole thus partly illustrate the social and discourse functions of wit listed by Long and Graesser (1988: 52ff.), in particular the functions of self-disclosure and social probing (29), social control (30), conveying social norms (30), ingratiation tactic (24a), discourse management[21] (e.g., (25)), cleverness and multiple goal fulfilment (28), establishing common ground (28?) and social play (31). They further mention decommitment, which seems to be of lesser importance in the present context.

All the above examples from spoken language hold a certain degree of interest for their audience. This is seen most clearly in (27) and (26), where the hyperbolic instance is so successful as to get quoted, and in (24b) from a TV show, where all that is spoken is of course produced with a view to its effect on the audience. Thus, one can also regard written instances of hyperbole, for instance in the press, as enhancing the reputation of the author as a good and/or entertaining writer. Hyperbole in newspapers, while often serving the purpose of evaluation (as in (32a, b)), also makes the texts more vivid (cf. Ortony (1975) on vividness and metaphors), potentially more convincing and certainly more memorable.

(32)   a.   When particularly outraged, or pretending to be, Mr Cook affects a stammer and his voice enters **a strange falsetto range audible only to bats**, before swooping down. (*Times* 27 June 2002: 2)

       b.   [Ethan] Hawke has created a lengthy conversation between two averagely neurotic people who have original thoughts **with the same frequency that Halley's comet arcs across our sky**. (*Tim* TV guide: 15)

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[21] Drew (2003: 927f.) also illustrates how particular interactional tasks, such as those connected to the speakers' struggle over right to knowledge and discourse dominance, can be served by hyperbolic uses.

    c.   Was der Vermieter nicht weiß: **Ein rechter Allergiker niest noch, wenn der vorletzte Mieter gern in Katzenbüchern geblättert hat**.
[What the landlord doesn't know: it is enough for the second to last tenant to have leafed through books on cats to still make a really allergic person sneeze.] (*Die Zeit* 31, 24 July 2003: 64)

Evaluation both of politicians (32a) and of films in the context of reviews (32b) is common and often unsurprising in form. The overstated comparisons make the evaluation stand out from the usual and thus leave a greater impression of the author's opinion. The instance in (32c) helps to lighten an otherwise serious topic and helps, together with other such light-hearted touches, to keep even the reader unaffected by allergy problems reading on. In sum, speakers, whether in everyday interaction or in public discourse, use hyperbolic expressions, besides other forms of creative, playful and humorous language of course, to be appreciated by their hearers – as witty persons, as interesting speakers, as good writers. Being thus liked and being successful will also add to the speaker's own positive self-image.

4.2.2.1   *Creative hyperbole*

As I have talked about creative uses above, it is now time to be more specific about this aspect. It is first of all necessary to define what I take to be creative items. Creative hyperbolic instances, in contrast to conventional ones, are nonce usages and formal and semantic neologisms. The following three aspects seem to me important for the recognition and the description of creative hyperboles:

(1)   Creative items are created to fill a specific speaker's expressive need at a given point in time and in a given context that cannot be as adequately catered for by a conventional item. Thus, they will usually only occur once (in a given corpus),[22] unless they are repeated by the very same speaker or unless they are so successful as to catch on with other speakers immediately. Both of the latter points are found in the present data.

(2)   Creative instances are semantically, and potentially also formally, deviant or striking in such a way as to impress the audience. Their meaning conflicts both with the extralinguistic context and with all established meanings of the item(s) used, because novel connections or associations have been made (cf. Carter 2004: 47). Because of their deviance and unfamiliarity they can become the focus of metalinguistic comment or discussion, cf. the following example:

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[22] It cannot be excluded, however, that two speakers independently produce an (almost) identical nonce formation (cf. Bauer 1983: 45).

(33)   **Joanne**   I goes open the bathroom. I just walked down and I walked in and there was Scott with his top off, Emma nearly ha Emma half naked. I thought oh shit. Oh dear.

Emma   God it all happens in your bathroom doesn't it?

Helena   I know.

Joanne   It was **like** flipping **the channel tunnel** on the landing when me and Andy were there. *Every three minutes people were going* to ch I goes I don't believe this, I just don't fuck–ing believe this. And he just kept …

Scott   *It was like the channel tunnel?*

Joanne   Well

Scott   *Where the hell did you get that from?*

Joanne   *Don't know, I just felt like saying it.*

Helena   <unclear>

Joanne   **Like Clapham Junction** then.

Emma   <unclear>

Helena   There usually is one. There usually is one.

Joanne   It was like **Clapham Junction** in (sic) was. *Every flipping two minutes they were coming to the toilet.* … (*BNC* KCE 4109)

Here the novel use of a hyperbolic phrase by Joanne is questioned, and thus implicitly criticised, by Scott and perhaps also by Helena (the unclear bit). Joanne reacts defensively (*well*; *don't know* …), finally even retracting her novelty and replacing it by a much more conventional form, *Clapham Junction*, first with a resigned *then* and more emphatically in the last line. She also gives explanatory evidence for her descriptions, namely *every three minutes… every flipping two minutes*, interestingly upping the numerical hyperbole after the retraction. The initial use of a creative hyperbole makes the speaker potentially 'not recognisable as a member of the group' (referring to one of Keller's dynamic maxims mentioned in footnote 20, p. 196), which can apparently be either good or bad (as in the present case) for one's self-presentation.

(3)   The understanding of creative uses needs comparatively more pro-cessing effort on the part of the hearer(s), who need to make use of contextual knowledge and inferential thinking (cf. Clark and Gerrig 1983: 606). As a result, such uses can have a greater effect, but they can also lead to misunderstanding.

Creative hyperbole is by no means absent from everyday conversation, as the preceding examples and others quoted throughout the book show. This is consistent with Carter's (2004) claim that linguistic creativity is a fairly frequent characteristic of everyday spoken language. But how frequent is a

creative hyperbole compared to more conventional forms? In order to answer this question, I first of all want to propose a threefold classification into (i) conventional, (ii) semi-creative (or semi-conventional, depending on one's perspective) and (iii) creative hyperbolic expressions.[23] Conventional types are well-established, repeatedly used expressions, which are polysemous with both a literal and a hyperbolic meaning, for example *thousand* 'exactly 1,000' and 'extremely numerous' (cf. the discussion in Chapter 2, and in Chapter 6 for more treatment). Creative types are nonce-usages as defined above. Semi-creative hyperboles combine conventional and creative components and are mostly produced in three different ways. (i) A conventional expression (potentially but not necessarily already hyperbolic) is remodelled in order to create or to increase exaggeration. This is nicely illustrated by (30) on p. 96, where established idioms are rephrased. In such cases, the hearer needs to know the meaning and use of the original conventional form in order to understand the remodelling. (ii) A conventional hyperbolic expression is reinforced by additional linguistic material, as in (34).

(34)   No, my, they came round to my house (unclear contribution by other) honestly I **swear** it **on my mother's grave** (unclear contribution by other) it's not it's my Walkman, they gave me a Walkman, they gave me twenty tapes, I'm not joking (*BNC* KCE 6796)

Swear alone is already a hyperbolic speech act in this context and does occur on its own; *on my mother's grave* adds further force to the exaggeration.[24] Expressions that make use of the piling-up technique (Section 3.2.2) will often belong to this category. (iii) New and less familiar lexical items are used in an established hyperbolic pattern. This is most likely with numerical hyperbole and with superlatives including modification, as in the examples in (35).

(35)   a.   About the only thing the old communist regimes got right was handing out awards for Achievement in Motherhood, although in Soviet Russia you did have to bear about **72 kids** before getting a tin medal with a picture of Lenin on it. (*Tim*, 27 June 2002)
        b.   (about a salad spinner:) the most spurious device ever invented. (*SBC* 3)

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[23] Goatly (1997: 31–5) suggested a five-stage conventionality cline for metaphors, consisting of (i) dead (e.g., *pupil*), (ii) dead and buried (*clew/clue*), (iii) sleeping (*crane*), (iv) tired (*fox*) (iii and iv: inactive) and (v) active instances (*icicles* meaning 'fingers of a dead person'). The criterion for the ranking is the likelihood of an expression being processed as a metaphor, i.e., recognized as a vehicle and the grounds (re)constructed. The concept 'dead' is more problematic with hyperboles than with metaphors; this point will be treated in Chapter 6. Goatly's 'active' type, where there is no established lexical relationship and a context-dependent meaning will be created based on the vehicle, corresponds to creative hyperboles, while his inactive type corresponds to conventional hyperboles.

[24] Alternatively, this could be seen as another instance of substitution, with *on my mother's grave* replacing *to God*. However, as *swear* occurs alone as well, the interpretation in the text is the preferred one.
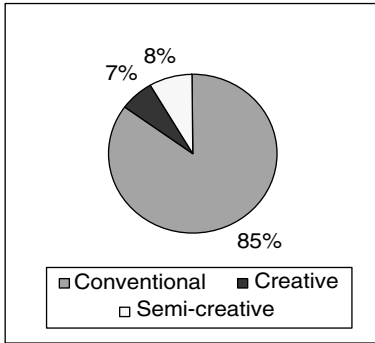
BNC subcorpus: *n* = 376   *SBC*: *n* = 65
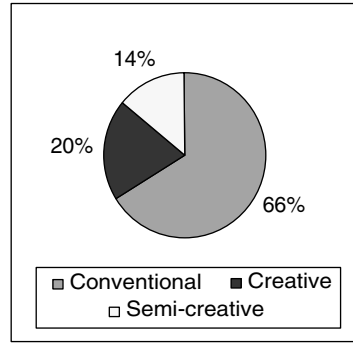
Figure 4.1: Distribution of hyperbolic types

It can be argued that high and/or round numbers provide the prototype and thus the highly likely linguistic forms. Whenever a number of different kind, i.e., fairly low or non-round, like the *72* in (35a), is used, the resulting hyperbolic expression seems somewhat more inventive than other numerical exaggerations. In the case of (35b), we have an established pattern, 'the X-est Y + postmodifier', which can be filled with suitable lexical items in more or less imaginative ways.

The corpus evidence from the *BNC* subcorpus and the *SBC* as to the distribution of the three major types of hyperbolic expression is presented in Figure 4.1.

In both corpora, the conventional items are clearly in the majority, but more strikingly so in the *BNC*. Both creative and semi-creative make up a fairly small portion of the whole in the *BNC*, while they come to a third of all occurrences in the *SBC*. It would probably be rash to read a real British–American difference with regard to creativity into the result in Figure 4.1, as the American database used here is simply too small. If one assumed about a quarter of (semi-)creative instances (the average between the two corpora), this would in fact be quite impressive. Creative uses certainly need greater effort, they are more (self-)conscious forms and they are based on a greater degree of intentionality. Thus, the more striking forms of creative hyperbole are more common in writing. This reflects the simple fact that there is more time to think of and to refine new instances of hyperbole or build constructionally more complex forms of exaggeration.

Coming back to speech, a further question to be asked is that about the users of creative hyperbole. Table 4.9 shows the distribution as found in the *BNC* subcorpus.

It is teenagers and female users that clearly use more creative forms than other user groups. This corresponds with the user distribution for

Table 4.9 *Users of (semi-)creative hyperbole: age and gender (BNC)*

	0–10	11–20	21–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61+	Female	Male
Creative	—	10	2	3	6	4	—	17	8
Semi-creative	—	11	1	7	6	6	—	23	8

hyperbole as a whole, as presented in Tables 4.7 and 4.8 above. If certain speakers use generally more hyperbole, this probably increases the likelihood of the occurrence of creative types. It is also possible, however, that the greater degree of involvement or emotionality carried by such forms and their face-enhancing potential is more important for those two groups than for others. A further point is the interpersonal aspect, as novel expressions, if they work, can establish a greater degree of intimacy between interlocutors, because they are based on highly specific common ground (Gibbs *et al.* 2002: 137f.).

4.3   Modulating hyperbole

Hyperbole is not always straightforward, in the sense that it is just there. Speakers can vary the strength or the effect of the hyperbole by adding qualifying elements such as *about* in (35a) or by providing a further comment on it as in (27). They can thus downtone their overstatement or emphasise it by drawing more attention to it, in each case revealing a speaker attitude to the hyperbole. They can also reformulate or retract their overstatement, either on their own account as in (27) or on the prompting of other speakers as in (33). The following section will deal with such cases in more detail.

4.3.1   Downtoning and emphasising

A well-known brand of beer uses the slogan ***Probably** the best beer in the world*, and similarly a pizza delivery service in my neighbourhood advertises *die **wahrscheinlich** leckerste Pizza der Stadt* ('probably the tastiest pizza in town'), both advertisements thus producing a compromise formulation between overstating and downtoning. The reason in these cases is obvious: the main message is 'it is the best/tastiest', but such a blunt statement might be legally challenged by competitors and would then have to be retracted. Additionally, the hint of insecurity present in the above phrases can also represent a sympathy factor with respect to consumers. By using a downtoning device, speakers signal that they are not absolutely prepared to stand behind their hyperbolic formulation, either because they are in two minds themselves or because they want to forestall contradiction on the part of other speakers. Downtoning is commonly done as in the

examples above, namely by prefacing a modal adverbial to the hyperbolic expression.

(36)   a.   And *possibly* **the most spurious .. device ever invented**. (*SBC3*)
    b.   He said such suggestions failed to do justice to the tests' critical role in "*perhaps* **the biggest peacetime economic decision**" **Britain has ever had to make**. (*Times* 27 June 2002: 1)
    c.   The flag now flies proudly from *just about* **every car aerial in the land**. (*DM* 17 June 2002: 14)
    d.   Elvis was *arguably* **the most loved human being the world had ever known**. (*DM* 17 June 2002: 30)

Commonly this occurs with superlatives (36a, b, d) and universal quantifiers (36c), that is, instances which are also called extreme case formulations. This form of exaggeration has a greater inherent likelihood of being true – and thus to be taken as such – than other, in particular absurd, forms of hyperbole. It may therefore be more important in those cases for the speakers to signal that they are not absolutely certain. The fact that this type is more frequent in newspapers, and includes quotes by politicians as in (36b), is in agreement with this interpretation. If the hyperbole is of another kind, the effect of a modal particle can also be different. The hyperbole in (37), where the reference is actually the fifty-first Biennale, clearly advertises its fictionality by gross overstatement and equally by the literary reminiscences of '1001 nights' which it evokes; a literal reading is thus excluded.

(37)   Am Horizont erscheint die *ungefähr* **1001**. Biennale, aus der Taufe gehoben von Stadtmarketing und Tourismusindustrie. (*Die Zeit* 38, 12 September 2002) – *About* the **1001st** Biennale appears on the horizon, helped along by city marketing and the tourism industry.

Furthermore, it is a seemingly precise number that is being hedged. The effect here is thus less purely downtoning than playful and mildly funny; it could actually be argued that the hedge adds to the criticism expressed, roughly indicating the sentiment 'do we have to endure another Biennale'. A similar light-hearted (mis)use is found in one of the *SBC* conversations. Talk about a measuring cup centres around its feature of virtual unbreakability, probably its maker's self-advertisement, as the *SBC* coding VOX indicates that the speaker is not using her own usual voice or her own formulation.

(38)   **Wendy:**   (…) .. Eightounce measuring cup.
                … Is *virtually* <VOX **unbreakable** VOX>.
      Kevin: … *Virtu[ally.*
      Wendy: [That's for @you].
      Kevin: Let's find] [2out2].

> **Kendra:** [2@@2]@@ [3<@ Let's check it out3].
> **Marci:** [3@@@@ (H)3] (*SBC*13)

The original formulation is probably due to a similar reasoning as that of the beer company mentioned above. Here, Kevin's repetition of the hedge *virtually* focuses on this aspect and takes it at face value, proceeding to the suggestion of actually testing the claim. The laughter that accompanies the exchange highlights the playful treatment of a hyperbole that the speakers do not take completely seriously.

Being *unbreakable* is of course a real possibility, but modification also occurs with contextually impossible hyperboles such as the following:

(39) **Mary:**   … And they say that if there's six years between children, there's not that much rivalry.
      Alice: … After four there's almost none.
      Mary: … Really?
      Alice: … Mhm.
      Mary: … [Cause they're],
      Alice: [Four is i]deal.
      Mary: … **they're** *kind of* **in different worlds,** (*SBC*7)

(40) 'Suddenly there was a big emptiness', he said. 'It was **like life** *sort of* **ended**.' (*DM* 17 June 2002: 69)

Both cases represent a metaphorical type of hyperbole (including a simile), so that *kind/sort of* can be read as metaphor signals. As metaphor and hyperbole are irrevocably intertwined here, their approximative effect corresponds to a slight downtoning of the hyperbole as well. Besides the adverbial or quasi-adverbial hedges above, verbs with a modal meaning are also used to temper a hyperbolic statement.

(41) That's why it is expensive compared to eh, other cars, but, they, they *seemed* to **go on for ever** those cars, I mean they're *quite* **incredible** aren't they? (*BNC* KBK 4574)

(42) It *may* be **the noisiest house in Britain** but we're not moving. (*ES* 20 August 2002: 14)

The question in all such modified cases is, of course, how much of the hyperbolic force remains intact. I would argue that most or even all of it is retained. In (41), for example, *seemed to go on for ever* is surrounded by other hyperbolic expressions about the cars talked about, including *incredible*, whose accompanying *quite* may even be intensifying. A speaker producing several exaggerations in a row probably does not intend seriously to downgrade their force. The modification may often be seen as a pro-forma escape hatch for the speaker, one that *in the normal course of events* need not be taken too seriously and can be played around with, even by the speaker

him-/herself (cf. (37, 38)). In some instances, the modifier could even be regarded as a focusing device, as in (36c), making the whole phrase longer and the following hyperbole more prominent.

A device that is of interest beyond downtoning is the outright negation of a hyperbolic expression. What we find in (43) is the rhetorical figure of *apophasis*:

(43) a. I *don't say* **the deletion of my emails alone eclipses the burning of the ancient library of Alexandria**. *But* once again it shows the arrogance and contempt of Microsoft. (*GU* Extra Online 1 August 2002: 2)

  b. I, I *don't say* that **it was like being grilled by the KGB** he was most polite and courteous. *But* he was going to find out where Paul was. He was going to find out. (*BNC* KBF 6390–6392)

Apophasis is defined as asserting, even stressing a point precisely by denying it. The apparent contradiction between introductory negation and the following fairly blatant hyperbole makes the exaggerated content cognitively more prominent. In both examples the hyperbolic point is further strengthened by the ensuing *but*, which justifies the exaggeration, and, in (43b), by the repetition of *he was going to find out*, which produces an implicature that is not incommensurate with the preceding overstatement. Another type of negation is found with superlative hyperboles in the data, as in (44).

(44) a. I see, yes, it's *not* **the most stimulating job in the world** is it? (*BNC* KBK 4868)

  b. American veteran Mark Calcavecchia, a close friend of Woods and Mickelson, recently admitted that the pair "are*n't* **the best of friends**". (*ES* 20 August 2002: 76)

This is the type of understatement or litotes exemplified by 'not bad' for 'very good', i.e., the intended meanings are 'a very uninteresting job' and 'not friends at all' or even 'rivals'. This form of understatement is usually seen to be emphatic, which is even more clearly the case in hyperbolic cases. The contrast of the above to alternatives such as 'not a stimulating job', 'not (exactly) friends' shows that the intensity of the hyperbolic formulation carries over into the understatement, making it on the whole more forceful.

Instances in which the hyperbole as such is made more emphatic by the speakers are also found in the data. One method is repetition of the hyperbolic expression by the same speaker, either within the same or the speaker's next turn, as in the following examples.

(45) **Norrine** I wouldn't trust her **an inch**.
  Chris No quite right.
  Norrine **Not an inch**.
  Chris Quite right, except soon as your back's turned dear (*BNC* KBK 4204)

(46)   **Arthur**   You *nearly* **ripped me head off** earlier. penknife.
       Angela   Ow.
       Richard   sorry. I thought it was a loose one.
       Arthur   I forgot to leave me penknife so **she ripped me head off**.
       Angela   Will you stop it. (*BNC* KSS 1549)

This is distinct from hyperbole created by repetition as treated in Chapter 3. In (45), Norrine's statement has already received agreement from Chris, so that a repetition is not necessary from an interactional perspective. Norrine's second utterance, which also makes the negation more prominent, can thus be taken simply to mirror her very strong feeling on the point in question, that is to be used for emphatic expression. In contrast, Arthur in (46) receives no immediate ratification of his statement; if he wants a reaction he has to repeat it, so that the emphasis is due here to interactional considerations. It is not an exact repetition, but leaves out the downtoner present in the original formulation, thus is more assertive, and changes the subject from second to third person, perhaps in an effort to get a response from the other interactants. Arthur's repetition is partly successful, as he receives an answer, though one that is more a retort. Such emphatic repetition is not always successful, as (47) shows, where Jamie tries to get her formulation through, but neither Harold, Pete nor Miles pay much attention and proceed with their own ways of describing the characteristics of children's bones.

(47)   **Pete:**   But it was his leg?
       Harold: … Yeah[=].
       Pete: [That's like], .. <X I guess X> that he was being hauled around in a little wagon [2and stuff2].
       Harold: [2Right2]. … [3He healed very quickly3].
       Jamie: [3<X Guess X> kids' bo=nes, just like3] .. [4grow4] [5back5] really fast (Hx).
       Pete: [4M4][5hm=5].
       Harold: [5Yeah5]. I think they're really soft to start with.
       Jamie: **They're made of rubber**. … Th- that's it.
       Harold: That's why b-, .. little kids usually don't break their legs anyway.
       Pete: … Cause they're [so X][2XXX2].
       Jamie: [**Cause they're made**] [2**of rubber2**].
       Miles: [2But they have more2] cartilage than w-, … [3you know3].
       Harold: [3Yeah3], aren't they real s-, .. aren't their k- .. legs [pretty soft]?
       Miles: [Yeah, there's] less calcium % deposits <X in them X>. (*SBC*2)

Unlike the preceding examples, (48) contains the repetition within the same turn, indicating that the emphasis is due more to speaker-internal than to interactional motivations.

(48) yes, er, no, **yonks and yonks, yonks, yonks, yonks ago** we had one for a <unclear> it's from them, *absolutely* **ages ago** So that's that lot (*BNC* KBK 2491)

(49) Yeah. Shame Tom wasn't in. We were like ringing the bell and both of us were **desperate** for a crap, *absolutely* **desperate**, and **desperate** for a cup of tea cos we got up at ei er half seven. (*BNC* KC7 1168)

Whereas in (49) we find verbatim repetition of *desperate*, the reiteration in (48) is of a non-exact, semantic type substituting *ages* for *yonks*. As in the present examples, such repetition is usually accompanied by an intensifier. Intensifiers, most commonly *absolute(ly)* and *really*, are further found with single instances of hyperbole:

(50) I *really really* **hate** love bites (*BNC* KCE 688)

(51) "Is the Secretary of State's policy still to **do** *absolutely* **nothing**?" (*DT* 13 June 2002: 12)

On the whole, such intensifiers are mostly found with rather conventional forms of hyperbole, such as *hate* and *nothing* above, and also, for example, *absolutely/really* plus *miles away, incredible, brilliant, ghastly, massive, terrified*, etc. This means that speakers try in these cases to revitalise fairly tired or even dying hyperboles by adding an element that increases their forcefulness. As *absolutely* is a maximiser and shares the feature 'extreme' with many hyperboles, it is very suitable for the task, and in contrast to *really* in (50) it need not be repeated to reach full impact.

Speakers also have other means of emphasis besides repetition and intensification. Usually, this takes the form of a (meta)comment following the hyperbolic utterance, as with repetition either in the same (52) or a following turn (53).

(52) **Phil:** we all know ~Brad, … (H) I said, we all know !Teresa, I said, and I **don't know anybody on this board who does not tiptoe around !Teresa**. … [*Period*].
       Brad: [Yeah]. .. [2Unhunh2]. (*SBC*10)

(53) **Miles:** [I mean] I'm gonna start dancing with those Brazilian women. … So I can learn how to beat my hips, I @mean, (H) cause their .. their hips are <<SLAPPING beating up against you, … you know, like that fa=st SLAPPING>>. X – (H) **Hundred cycles per second**, or something?
       Jamie: [(H) @ @@][2@(H)2]

> **Pete:**   [@@@@@] [2@@2] [3@ @ @ @(H)3]
> **Miles:**   [2*I mean, I am2*] [3*not kidding.* .. It – It is3] a different [4sen-
>   sation4] entirely. (*SBC2*)

In (52), Phil uses the term *period* to mark the preceding clause as an emphatic affirmative, the content of which he stands behind completely. Similarly, Miles' *not kidding* refers to the fact that he wants his previous statement to be taken seriously, that is, as something he really means. Hence, both examples work like truth emphasisers or attesters, with the truth being subjective. What is ultimately being attested is not the literal surface meaning but the speaker-meaning. *Really*, treated above as a degree emphasiser, can also be used as a truth attester (Paradis 2003) in some of the cases where it modifies a hyperbole. In both cases, the truth-attesting element seems to be reactive. In (52), it follows a medium-length pause in which a response from Brad might have been expected but was not immediately forthcoming; it then overlaps with *period*. Miles in (53) produces his emphasiser following laughter from Jamie and Pete, which may have indicated to him their doubt. Hyperbolic speakers, or at least some of them, want their subjective view of reality to be ratified by their audience.

In the context of emphasising and truth attesting, there is one element that is of special interest in the context of figurative language and that is the item *literally*. According to the *OALD* and the *OED*, *literally* can have the following meaning or functions: (i) 'to be understood in a literal way/sense', 'meant word for word/verbatim', (ii) emphasising (subjective) truth, and (iii) with figurative language: intensifying or boosting. Goatly (1997: 173, 176) treats *literally* mainly as an intensifier in the case of metaphors, but also points to its simultaneous activation of both the literal and metaphorical levels of the thus modified expression. Powell (1992: 341–6), who investigated the use of *literally* in the context of extreme lexemes or expressions, remarked that it either expresses the speaker's surprise at a fact or is due to the speaker's anticipation of hearer surprise or doubtfulness. She identified four uses, which can be linked to those listed above, namely (a) forcing a non-hyperbolic literal reading, e.g., *the vice president's lead melted literally to nothing in Bob Teeter's polls*[25] (= i), (b) increasing rhetorical emphasis, e.g., *he literally and actually foamed* (= iii), (c) signalling that approximation relative to some norm is adequate (e.g., with 'vague' numbers), e.g., *North Americans are investing literally billions of dollars in fitness clubs*, etc. (= ii), and (d) justification of hyperbole through a link to the speaker's judgement, e.g., *the walls are literally panelled with nineteenth-century reproductions* (= ii). The latter two capture the subjective element typical of all hyperbole, which is simply emphasised by the presence of *literally*. Finally, McCarthy

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[25] The examples given here are Powell's own, but somewhat abbreviated.

and Carter (2004: 156) call *literally* a 'characteristic conversational marker of hyperbole'.

The *BNC*-spoken contains 256 instances of *literally*, of which only twenty-one occur in potentially hyperbolic contexts. In some cases, as in (54a, b), the context makes clear that an extreme statement is not to be understood as hyperbole, but to be taken literally. Example (54a) deals with a medical problem, referring to a so-called muscle depolariser, which is used in some surgery to ensure actual and complete immobility of the patient.

(54)   a.   You **cannot**, *literally*, **move a muscle**. (*BNC* FLY 454)
       b.   Whilst at the time, it it seemed an eternity, it was *literally* **seconds**, er very, very quickly because we were aware of the noise that at that time in the morning seemed to be er echoing everywhere. (*BNC* JJW 524)

The context of (54b) is a witness statement in a court case, where truthful precision is important. The witness contrasts a subjective hyperbole (*eternity*, downtoned by *seemed*) with an objective ('real') truth (*seconds*), and marks the latter as used in its proper literal sense.[26] As *seconds*, like *eternity*, is a common conventional hyperbole, *literally* is used to preclude a hyperbolic misunderstanding, here the possible assumption that the speaker was simply contrasting extremes in order to make a subjective point.

In the case of vague expressions, *literally* can have different functions. Example (55) is taken from an oral history interview, where the speaker talks about blues parties creating disturbance. A literalising meaning can be excluded here, as repeated *days* cannot be assigned a precise enough meaning. *Literally* is either intensifying or, more likely, functioning as a truth emphasiser licensing the expression following it.

(55)   Er I mean they there were one or two that just went on *literally* **for days and days and days and days**. (*BNC* FY7 340)

Thousands in (56) could be being literalised, if the reference is in fact to a figure between 2,000 and 9,000. Depending on the frame of reference (e.g., time period) for the two statements, this is not completely unlikely.

(56)   a.   So that erm, nobody really kn was the most monotonous job when you had to erm assess *literally* **thousands of students** in the end. (*BNC* HDM 554)
       b.   You mentioned the explosion of information, particularly in the science area where there are **thousands**, *literally* **thousands, of publications** and scientists producing more information, more data, every day and pumping into these things. (*BNC* KRF 45)

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[26] A similar instance is found in Drew (2003: 918), where the witness starts with a hyperbole (*seemed like three days to me*), and is then coerced into a more realistic statement by the defence counsel.

Example (56b), in particular, could be taken as objectively correct; in this case *literally* would again work as a misunderstanding-avoidance device. Example (56a), which refers to the assessment of grant applications, is less likely to be factually true; *literally* here emphasises the subjective truth of the speaker. In this function it seems to combine primarily with conventional hyperboles, similar to the literalising function. Powell (1992: 346) noted the use of *literally* in general with conventional hyperbolic instances only. However, this is not completely true; *literally* also occurs with metaphorical and thus often more creative (57a–c) hyperboles.

(57)   a.   I will buy it because I have an **addiction** to the printed word. If I am caught without something to read **I will** *literally* **break out in a cold sweat**. (*Times*, TV guide, 31 August 2002)
       b.   If I could get away from him, not talk to him I was happy but if he spoke to me I was ju *literally* **shake in me shoes**, he gave you that, he was that erm type of man, although he was kind enough really, but he was really gruff. (*BNC* HDL 331)
       c.   the, the way we, the way I look it see, the way we've been cut and slashed, and I'm not just talking about high schools and first schools or anything right we've been destroyed, we've been *literally* **thumped into the deck**. (*BNC* F7J 744)
       d.   **June:**   She is *absolutely* **petrified** of that cat.
            Geoffrey: Yeah?
            June: *Literally* **petrified**. (*BNC* KCT 1634–36)

None of the examples in (57) can be factually the case, as the formulations are impossible or absurd. It is almost as if the hearer was invited by the use of *literally* to imagine the scene visually, creating a graphic and/or humorous, slapstick-like effect. *Literally* further highlights exactly the implausible metaphorical statement, making it more prominent and more forceful. It is in these cases that it has most clearly an intensifying or rhetorically emphatic function. This is clearly evident in (57d), where *literally* is used to top the intensification expressed by *absolutely* in the previous turn. The (re)animation or highlighting of the metaphor as in the above examples can also be made use of for playful or witty reactivation of the literal meaning alongside the hyperbolic sense. This is seen in the following two examples, one English, one German, but both commenting on hyperbolic uses of *dead/death*. Unfortunately, the context of (58) is not entirely clear, but Andy's remark about knocking one's head against something, that precedes the phrase *literally dead funny*, would point to his taking up the intensifier use of *dead* by Mark and turning it again into an intentionally ambiguous use.

(58)   **Mark:**   Yeah that would have been **dead** funny wouldn't it?
       Andy: head whack into that. Yeah *literally* **dead** funny.
       Mark: **Dead** funny. (*BNC* KCE 5782–4)

Example (59), which is taken from a report about the annual Wagner festival at Bayreuth written by a person distinctly critical of the whole event, does not use the German equivalent of *literally* ((*wort*)*wörtlich*) but works with a longer paraphrase. The revitalisation of *death* in the context of talking about bodily pain and collapse creates an apt overall picture and is thus suitably motivated for the reader.

(59)   Die Langeweile macht jeden Muskel kribbeln, Schmerzen im Rücken, Gliedmaßen, links und rechts Reihen voller verzückter Stoibers. Wie kommt man hier raus? **Zu Tode langweilen**, *endlich weiß ich, was das heißt*: **lieber sterben wollen, als das weiter erleben zu müssen**. Eine Dame hat einen Kollaps und wird unter lautem Gerumpel entsorgt. Oh ja, man reiche mir einen Kollaps.

[The boredom makes every muscle of one's body itch, causes pain in back and limbs. To the right and left of me the rows are filled with blissfully ecstatic *Stoibers* [name of the then prime minister of Bavaria used generically, CC]. How does one get out of here? **To be bored to death** – *finally I know what that means*: **I would rather die than have to live through any more of this**. A lady suffers a breakdown and is being disposed of with much noise. Oh yes, somebody please hand me a breakdown.]

<div align="right">(Die Zeit 33, 10 August 2006: 36)</div>

The playful literalisation in both cases works as an emphatic reaffirmation of what is said and meant.

4.3.2   *Reformulations and self-contradictions*

If speakers use means to emphasise their hyperbolic statements as illustrated in the preceding section, they are confident about the message they want to transport. In contrast to this, downtoning can (but need not necessarily) signal a certain degree of speaker uncertainty about the full applicability of their statement. When speakers reformulate or even contradict their hyperbolic expressions, they also display a lack of confidence in their very content or their applicability in context. In (60) the speaker starts to say presumably *flu* (*fl*), breaks it off to upgrade to *pneumonia*, then realises that this might be exaggerated and modifies its repetition with the approximator *near*.

(60)   And then erm and then er when we went out, mum was in bed with *fl* **pneumonia**, *well near pneumonia*. (*BNC* KCP 3866)

The immediate self-repair is introduced by *well*, which indicates several things at once. It generally marks deliberation and thus hesitation on the part of the speaker, it implies a certain amount of contrast to what has gone before and it has a concessive touch. *Well* is found in several instances as an explicit signal of upcoming repair. Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (2005: 264) also

note the common *well*-preface in the context of a preceding negatively for-
mulated overstatement; in contrast, it is here found exclusively with positive
hyperboles. As in (60) and (61) the repair formulation is usually explicitly
downgrading, substituting a somehow weaker version of the original state-
ment; cf. also Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (2005: 269ff.), who point to an
implicit linear scale as the basis of this. This is only to be expected given the
definition of hyperbole provided in Chapter 2 and the role that gradability
plays in it (cf. the entailment scale examples in Chapter 2, pp. 17f.). In effect,
the repair moves some way in the direction of a more factually appropriate
literal statement, without necessarily reaching this point. In (61a) the con-
cessive element of *well* is further strengthened by clause-final *anyway*. As
(61b) shows, the repair attempt can be quite extensive, thus actually drawing
more attention to the point and making it fairly prominent by these means.

(61) a. They [police, CC] have been sitting around looking at that car **all
          day** .. *well, all afternoon*, anyway (CC)
      b. Erm you know that Georgian house on my road on th my side of
          the road, up the road? **Looks way out of place**. *Well not as way
          out of place as a British Telecom building would look but*, *it looks
          quite erm looks quite out of place*, but erm this **massive great
          obnoxious** Georgian building erm was broken into on Christmas
          morning right? (*BNC* KC7 97)

It further shows that scales can be of an ad-hoc nature (Couper-Kuhlen
and Thompson 2005: 271) and rather subjective in nature: *way out of place*
is not part of any pre-existing scale and the speaker resorts to the exemplary
approach, constructing a British Telecom building as a prototype for 'out-of-
placeness' in the given area. The downgrading here is also somewhat half-
hearted, which is also indicated by the fact that it is immediately followed by
another exaggerated negative evaluation.

The repair attempt is not always explicit, but can remain vague as in the
following example:

(62) **Lynne:**   […](H)= … they go over=, .. the who=le, … the who=le
                    part … of the horse. … I mean, (H) … all the skeleton=
                    .. part of it you know=, and– – and they go through ..
                    %every kinda ligament. and I mean, there's, … (H) **mil-
                    lions** of ligaments, and **millions** of .. tendons, you know,
                    well not millions, but, .. I mean,
      Lenore: yeah, [I bet]. (*SBC1*)

Lynne negates her previous formulation, implies an upcoming refor-
mulation with *but*, which is not forthcoming, however. As Lenore's reac-
tion shows, the simple signalling and intent of reformulation is sufficient
to make the speaker's point; it need not actually be carried out fully. The
hearer can easily surmise that a smaller figure on the numerical scale is

intended, as, in the words of Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (2005: 271; 274ff.), the repair formulation is 'so strongly projected that it need not be produced in full'.

Both (61b) and (62) contain the item *not* immediately after *well*, which is also used as an introductory signal on its own. Example (63) is by a lecturer talking in class, who downgrades the 'literal' part of his exaggeration.

(63)   I want you to think of %the agents of socialisation. (…) Two, … the educational institutions. … I mean, from the time that you start .. kindergarten, to the time that you .. graduate from the university, **(H) it's constant**, .. *not constant*, .. *but somewhat of a consistent* .. **bombardment** .. of values, .. attitudes, et cetera, … reinforcing the nature of the political system, (*SBC*12; shortened, CC)

A more common alternative to *not* is *no*, which provides a more striking interruption of the speaker's flow (64). It is as if the speaker was entering into a dialogue with him- or herself. Again, one finds explicit reformulation (64) and simple, unexplained denial (65).

(64)   I was the only kid **who only had to walk past the bakery to gain weight**. .. *No, that's not true. I actually only started getting fat much later.* (CC)

(65)   **Kendra:**   <READ Wishing you a day of little treasure=s, simple pleasures. Happy birthday READ>. They're always dorky, but at least they have cats on it. Right?
      Wendy: … @
      Kendra: <READ !Kendra READ>.
      Marci: [@]
      Kevin: [@@@][2@@@2]
      Kendra: [2@@@ @Sorry2].
      Wendy: I'll let you know, **I spent hours picking that c- –** [*No.*
      Kendra: [@ I'll bet] [2you did2].
      Wendy: *Not really*].
      Marci: [2@@2][3@@@@@3]
      Kendra: [3(H) <Q Oh there's a cat Q>3] ch. (*SBC* 13)

The hyperboles in these two examples can be regarded as somewhat more blatant in their context, less 'credible' than those in the preceding examples. Perhaps this leads the speakers to a more obvious self-contradiction. In such cases, the *but* often introducing the reformulation (61b, 62, 63) is missing (64, 65). Both, like those above, are initiated by the speaker herself and occur, after a brief pause, within the same turn as the hyperbole; there is no verbal prompting by other interactants. In corpus examples like (65),

Figure 4.2: Pattern for hyperbole repair

it is of course impossible to tell whether there was a non-verbal contribution that might have triggered the speaker's repair (cf. also Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson 2005: 281). In (64), however, this was certainly not the case. Similarly, the speaker in (66), who is complaining about people's behaviour in public libraries when answering a phone call, and in (67) provided their addition completely unprovoked.

(66)   … they go rushing out **like a herd of buffalo** .. *except it's only one person.* (CC)

(67)   I was reading an article **ages ago** *a few months ago actually* and saying you know if you think about it the sort of revolution was over a year ago … (*BNC* KBH 6594)

Here we find further signals besides *well, no(t)*, which also contains the semantic features of negation and concession, namely *except* and postposed *actually*. The pattern for repair/reformulation so far is thus as represented in Figure 4.2.

This is more or less the pattern that Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (2005) have identified as 'concessive repair', consisting of overstatement – concession – revised description. One difference here is that the concession part can be less explicit than in their data, e.g., consisting of only *well* (61a) or *except* (66). The concession can thus stay as implicit as the repair can; only one of the two needs to be fully realised. In Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson's study many concessive repairs are turn-internal, but even more are found in next position (2005: 281–2). Drew (2003: 933) and Drew (2005) also noticed reformulations stretching over longer passages of discourse. In the data available here, in contrast, same-turn repair is almost the norm. Also, the occurrence of repair here is much less frequent (twelve/ eighteen instances) than in Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson's study. This may be partly due to the different definitions of overstatement in their and the present study.[27] Two conclusions can be drawn from the infrequency of repair in my data: (i) speakers are as a rule not uncertain about their

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[27] Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson's definition (2005: 258) runs as follows: 'The notion of "overstatement" as we use it here encompasses both these categories: objective exaggerations, i.e., semantically extreme statements, as well as those statements which are treated

hyperbolic formulations, but confidently stand by them, and (ii) many conventional hyperbolic expressions may be so unobtrusive to hearers that they pass by unchallenged.

Two other infrequent patterns distinct from that presented above are found in the data, however. These are more likely to occur in next position, i.e., in a subsequent turn from the original statement. What we find in (68) is, taken at surface value, straightforward contradiction by one and the same speaker.

(68) **Jamie:** @ (H) And they were banging their .. their soccer ball up against our – .. below the bedroom .. th- the study window?

   Harold: So ~Jamie the old lady went and yelled at em.

   Jamie: [I opened %] --

   Pete: [Mhm],

   Jamie: (H) <VOX Ah=, you mind moving, getting away from there, thank you= VOX>. @(Hx) @I [felt like] such an old lady.

   Pete: [@@]

   Harold: It's so [2bad,

   Jamie: [2With those ki=ds2], they make us feel2] [3so ol=d3].

   Pete: [3How many of them3] are there.

   Harold: … **Eight hundred**.

   Pete: n_[yow=].

   Jamie: [@@]

   Harold: *There's two.* (*SBC2*)

Harold's statement of *two* is completely unmarked as a repair, not even intonationally, and it clearly does not follow the concessive pattern identified above. Also, it is not a somehow weaker version that is substituted here, but a full-scale correction to the factual, objectively appropriate level that is carried out. Marking may have been dispensed with here because the repair has most likely been prompted by Pete's contribution and Jamie's laughter, which follow the hyperbole. The extreme contrast evident between hyperbole and reformulation, unlike those in previous examples, can actually add to the force of the hyperbole, as it makes clear the degree of emotional reaction at the children. A somewhat similar

as in need of qualification by recipients and speakers.' The first part of this definition refers to extreme-case statements, which would exclude most examples above except for *all day* in (2a). The second part is not, strictly speaking, a definition of overstatement at all, but of the class of all 'qualifiables'.

example, inasmuch as it is a reaction to another speaker's turn, is found in (69):

(69)   **Anon.**   George had no affection in him, I found that out.
     Annette   Really?
     Anon.   No affection.
     Annette   Now you surprise me cos I would have thought cos you always went round holding hands and looked so happy.
     Anon.   Not with George wouldn't have hold your hand. **Wouldn't have touched you**!
     Annette   Oh?
     Anon.   No! No way! The most affection *you got from George was a pat on head*! (*BNC* KB9 1290)

The fact that the additional formulation is a reaction is clearer in this example, as Annette's *Oh* has questioning force and thus expects an answer. The contrast between the hyperbole and the ensuing formulation, on the other hand, is less obvious than in the previous example. It is definitely a downgrade of the original hyperbole (a pat *is* a touch), but a slight one, and given the emphatic rest of the speaker's turn (cf. *no! no way!*) it may be doubted whether it was really intended as a downgrading repair.

The second diverging pattern from that in Figure 4.2 is found in the following two instances:

(70)   "One moment he was by the right-hand post and I headed down, *the next moment, no*, **the same moment**, he was by the left-hand post and he'd scooped the ball up and over the bar." (*DE* 17 June 2002: 65)

(71)   **Alina:**   @@@@@(H) *But there was hardly [anybody there]*.
     Lenore: [<WH @@@ WH>]
     Alina: It was the matinee=, the place was **completely empty**. (*SBC* 6)

In these cases, something that can be read as a contradiction or counter-evidence precedes the actual hyperbole. The first example, which contains the *no* as an explicit signal of repair, presents a rhetorical build-up from weaker to stronger, in this case hyperbolic, expression, i.e., the speaker corrects *towards* the hyperbole. In contrast to the preceding examples, there is no question of speaker insecurity about the hyperbole; the greater emphasis is fully intentional. The second example with its intervening material between weaker and stronger formulation may be less intentional and has less rhetorical impact, but nevertheless the step-up in emphasis is clear. From these last examples there is only a small step to genuinely rhetorical uses of hyperbole repair, as found in the following excerpt from

a pre-written speech delivered by Stanley Wells to the ICAME conference (May 2007):

(72)   I won't give you a survey of my Shakespeare research over the **centuries** – *sorry decades*. (Stanley Wells)

This little ploy was clearly aimed at getting a laugh from the audience, which it duly did.

4.4   Explicit hyperbole: signalling and metalinguistic comment

Speakers can use the terms *hyperbole*, *overstatement* and *exaggeration* (including their derivatives) to comment explicitly on their own use or non-use of hyperbole.[28] Such explicit use of a rhetorical device term has been investigated for irony by Barbe (1995: 131–44), for example. While *hyperbole*, like *irony*, cannot be used as a performative, in spite of the single verbal use in (73) listed by the *OED* (**I hereby hyperbole …*), there are sufficient other ways for speakers to make their point.

(73)   Your poor solitary verger who suffers here under the deep winter of frost and snow: I **do not hyperbole** in the case. (*OED*, 1698 Locke Let. to E. Masham 29 April in Fox Bourne Life (1876) II. xv. 461)

Searching the complete *BNC* for the forms *hyperbole*, *hyperbolic-al-ly* turns up 112 instances, of which 23 refer to discussions about literary or linguistic matters and 5 to the mathematical sense; this leaves 84 references to other types of authentic language usage. Of these, only a small fraction of 9 instances are used by the speakers to refer to their own statements, while 75 refer to other people's use or to situations characterised by hyperbole. Almost all instances, in particular all of the self-referential ones, occur in written contexts (books and periodical publications); spoken contexts include, for example, a university lecture and a parliamentary debate. This distribution may be due partly to the term *hyperbole*, which is more technical and formal than the alternatives *overstate(ment)* and *exaggerate/exaggeration*, both of which are more frequent, with 231 and 1,705 instances, respectively. The latter are not used as technical terms and are found more often in self-referential contexts. However, both items also occur in speech in only negligible quantities (*overstate*: eight instances, *exaggerate*: fifty-nine) and are, in normalised terms, about three-and-a-half times as frequent in writing. Explicit hyperbole in its various guises thus appears to be a purposeful rhetorical means that is used especially

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[28] Speakers' own usage will be the focus in this section, whereas explicit comment on other people's hyperbolic expressions will be treated under the topic hearer/reader reactions in Section 5.2.

Table 4.10 *Functions of explicit hyperbole*

Function	Hyperbole	Overstatement	Exaggeration
F1 downtoning of present hyp. expression	✓	✓	✓
F2 downtoning of present hyp. expression, with added justification (reassertion)	✓	✓	✓
F3 denial/contradiction of present hyp. expression (+/- justification)	✓	✓	✓
F4 licensing of present hyp. expression as correct (by denying it to be hyp.)	✓	✓	✓
F5 discussion of (present) hyp. expression, with reader reaction in mind	✓	✓	✓
F6 denial of applicability of hyp. expression (not present), warning against its use		✓	✓
F7 present hyp. expression labelled and affirmed		✓	✓
F8 present hyp. expression labelled and reformulation/ repair			✓
F9 licensing of an extreme statement that is not explicitly present		✓	

Note: The nominal forms in the column headings stand for all possible word classes in which the items are found.

when users have both time and motivation to plan their linguistic output more carefully.

I shall first of all concentrate on the overwhelming majority of written uses. The analysis of these instances yields nine more or less distinct uses or functions, which are listed in Table 4.10.

Five of those are found with all three of the terms (1–5), two with overstatement and exaggeration (6–7), and two with only one of overstatement and exaggeration respectively (8–9). Some of these non-occurrences may be an accident of the data, but others could be systematic. I cannot think of a possible formulation with *hyperbole* for F6, for example, and *overstate* in F9 is comparatively so frequent with thirty instances that it really seems to be a specialisation of this form. As will become obvious in the discussion of examples below, the hyperbolic expression commented on by the explicit term is sometimes present, in the same sentence or in the immediate context, and sometimes absent. It is usually present in the case of the functions 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 8; it can be present or absent in F5, it is

usually absent in F6 and always so in F9. Explicit uses in the presence of a purported hyperbolic expression can thus tell us something about the average language user's conception of what constitutes hyperbole; in the examples presented below I will italicise the hyperbolic expression if it is present.

Several of the functions listed here are reminiscent of the uses discussed in Section 4.3 above, namely functions 1, 2, 3 and 8, perhaps also 7, inasmuch as they downtone, reformulate or emphasise, but often with different effects from the non-explicit uses. Eliot in (74) uses a formulation (cf. *one*, *might*) that distances himself from his own statement and reduces his personal commitment to it – is he really stating it or just playing around with the idea? The formulation, which is an example of F1, certainly leaves this open.

(74)   Typically, for Eliot, this hope for the future, following the French anthropologists' piece, looks towards the distant past. 'Poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential of percussion and rhythm; **hyperbolically one might say** that *the poet is older than other human beings …*' (*BNC* A6B 1635)

Overstatement in (75) is another F1 example, but one that is more concessive in nature than (74).

(75)   That *I only half-believed in this self-image* – and even **that is probably an overstatement** – was a circumstance I tried desperately hard to conceal, both from myself and others. (*BNC* CEE 1153)

One aspect that plays a role for the different effects of (74) and (75) is the sequencing, that is, whether the hyperbole precedes or follows the explicit phrase. Once the hyperbole has been produced, it can only be weakened but not left in limbo as in (74). Example (76) illustrates F2 with the *but*-clause introducing a justification of the preceding hyperbole that downgrades it somewhat but reaffirms its basic validity.

(76)   It is **perhaps overstating** the case to say that *motorists can speed with impunity in residential areas*, **but it is certainly true that the limit is widely disregarded and rarely enforced**. (*BNC* C8F 94)

While (75) really downgrades the original hyperbole, (76)'s softening is only minimal, being counteracted by the explanatory addition, and the force of the original hyperbole is left almost fully intact. Example (77), a further instance of F1, lies somewhere in the middle between (75) and (76) as regards downtoning force, due to the interpolated remark, which in turn reduces the effect of the downtoning.

(77)   It would recognise, too, that industrial democracy cannot be conjured into being overnight, no more than was political democracy, no

more than was the joint stock company as the common expression of industrial capitalism. **It may be an exaggeration – though not by much** – to observe that *industrial democracy stands now where political democracy did before the Great Reform Bill of 1832.* (*BNC* EF4 986)

On the surface, (78) is an instance of F2, *slight* having a softening force. What follows, however, is not so much a justification, but rather, a reformulation or repair, as found in F8, where, however, there is usually no modalisation present.

(78)   After a couple of false starts I managed *to stand erect. Erect* is **a slight exaggeration. What I did was to teeter from side to side like a tall mast on a small ship in a heavy sea**. (*BNC* FAP 974)

Example (79) starts off unmodalised (F8) and then offers justification (F2).

(79)   *The way we vote is being influenced by editorial interpretations of what John Major said to Norma over breakfast; by magazine articles telling us what the Kinnocks enjoy for breakfast; and by TV coverage (live, no doubt) of Paddy Ashdown telling us why he chooses toast and Marmite every time.* All right – **I know I'm exaggerating**, **but frankly it seems so trivial that it's almost become a political version of the World Cup**. (*BNC* C88 1413)

This shows that not all instances found are clear specimens of one type only and that the list presented in Table 4.10 is of course a – probably incomplete – idealisation on the basis of the present data.

Moving on to F3, this involves the explicit denial of a hyperbole used in the context. A justification for the procedure need not be given, but can be provided as in (80). The writer here uses a strong explanatory comparison, then contradicts it and finally provides a clarifying justification for his hyperbolic use.

(80)   Children have to learn competence in this mode [written language, CC] in terms of its syntax, its organisational patterns and its contextual constraints – *much as if it were a second language.* **Clearly it is not, but the hyperbole is a useful corrective** to some of the simplistic notions presently informing the teaching of writing … (*BNC* EV4 1037)

In (81) there is not explicit negation, but nevertheless the speaker contradicts what has gone before. Again, a reason is provided why the use of the particular overstatement can be seen as apt.

(81)   Meanwhile, despite US murders hitting a record 23,700 last year, Disney World continues to do its best to distance itself from the disaster unfolding down the road. No crimes are ever reported in the

> Magic Kingdom – and it's even rumoured that *fatal heart attack victims are smuggled out so their deaths can be recorded off the park.* '**Of course that's an exaggeration, but it illustrates the point**,' said a local police source yesterday. (*BNC* CH1 9946)

The repair pattern illustrated in Section 4.3 above is thus varied to produce another version, namely: hyperbole – pause (here: new sentence) – (implicit) negation – justification. The justifications not only license the hyperbole in the given context, but they can also shed light on the varied reasons for hyperbolic language use: exaggerations can make things graphically clear, perhaps clearer than possible with a factual expression, and be used as arguments that are more likely to be convincing.

F4, which asserts the factuality and appropriateness of the speaker's statement by denying that it is hyperbolic, is one of the most common uses of explicit hyperbole, in particular with *exaggeration* (cf. (85, 86, 87)). It always occurs in the same sentence as the hyperbolic expression and is usually accompanied by a performative verb. Typically, the hyperbolic statement follows the denial of hyperbolic intent, as in all instances below except for (85). Prefacing the statement in such a way focuses it and singles it out as deserving more attention, which has been given by the writer and is now required of the reader. It is also an explicit attempt to preclude 'hyperbolic' misunderstanding, that is, the immediate downward correction of what the writer states or even its complete dismissal. This is especially relevant when the writer has an important or unpleasant message to convey, which might be challenged. This is the case in (86), for example, where the writer not only uses the no-hyperbole preface, but also calls to witness '*every* residential social worker', a hyperbole in itself.

(82)   He argues that there is no single causal explanation for Britain's decline; rather, it has to be seen as resulting from a convergence of pluralist stagnation, a decline of class, and a revolt against authority. The result has been fragmentation in political life. 'The outcome has been incoherence and immobilism; drift, not mastery. **It is not hyperbole to call it** a *paralysis of public choice.*' (*BNC* J57 991)

(83)   Despite her [= M. Thatcher] occasional lapses into the royal 'we' and her desire to give comfort to victims of disaster, she is not monarch, head of state, nor dictator. Why then must the street in which she lives, in a row of handsome but not very grand Georgian houses, be protected by gates and railings which **can without hyperbole be described** as *neo-palatial*? (*BNC* A27 255)

(84)   **It is not an overstatement to maintain**, therefore, that throughout 1936 the struggle in Spain came to symbolise in Nizan's eyes, as in the eyes of countless intellectuals of the period, *the ultimate stand against fascism.* (*BNC* FTW 687)

(85)   So I'd say Peter; he had *more talent in a little finger than I've got in my whole body* – **no exaggeration**. (*BNC* C9H 229)

(86)   And every residential social worker knows that **I am not exaggerating when I say** that after a death has occurred – often alone or with one of us holding the dying resident's hand – *the family will descend like vultures, demanding a complete inventory of all their belongings, ransacking their personal clothes for valuables, and insisting on receiving all that is left of the petty cash.* (*BNC* CCE 1709)

(87)   Indeed, as early as 1954, James Kinsley notes that '**it is no exaggeration to say** that *most of our students – Scots, English and Welsh alike – come to us hardly able to construe the English language*, and unschooled in the patient, critical reading we require of them.' (*BNC* EWR 1117)

The exception to the rule just treated, (85), in contrast, rather creates the impression of an afterthought: a potential hyperbole has already been produced, might be misunderstood and now has to be framed. This sequence would seem to be more appropriate in spoken contexts, and indeed (85) represents an approximation to these in so far as it is apparently from the context of an interview printed in a magazine. Most of the above examples, with the exception of (86) are not couched in first-persons terms, but use impersonal formulations with dummy *it* and the passive. In the case of *hyperbole*, the impersonal strategy is certainly partly due to the fact that, in spite of (73) above, there is no verbal form available; but this does not apply to *exaggerate* and *overstate*. A perhaps intended effect of this strategy is a generalisation of the assertion into a quasi-shared opinion.

In the case of F5 we find the exact opposite of the impersonalisation strategy, as it can be seen as an attempt to draw the reader into the text by making it seem more interactive. The suspicion of hyperbole is raised, as a reader might do, and then immediately dealt with by the authors. Examples (88) and (89) contain the revealing term 'accuse', indicating the fact or the fear that people exaggerating too much or without sufficient justification may not be taken seriously or may be liable to attack. Partly formulations such as those in (88, 89), but also the following ones, can be seen as a kind of forward defence. But their approach is nevertheless slightly different: while (88) gives proof and reaffirms the extreme statement as non-hyperbolic and factually correct, the writer of (89) backs down and provides carefully conservative figures about his topic, the victims of drunken driving.

(88)   The Maya 1966 Show is barely believable with hindsight; The Beatles, the Stones, The Who, The Walker Brothers and, by way of backup, a whole host of minor attractions such as The Yardbirds, The Small Faces, Roy Orbison, Cliff Richard, The Spencer Davis Group, Dusty Springfield and Herman's Hermits. For once, **you can't accuse us**

of self-promoting hyperbole when we described the show as '*the mightiest concert ever!*' (*BNC* CHA 1581)

(89)   It is claimed that a fifth of road fatalities say 1,150 deaths a year can be attributed to 'drunk' driving: a driver has more than the permitted level of alcohol in his blood. (…) But **rather than be accused of overstating my case**, I will leave the figure at somewhere between 550 and 1,000. (*BNC* HSM 205/210)

Apart from (89), all forms are clearly marked as interactive, either because they contain the pronoun *you* or because they have the form of a question, thus in both cases addressing an implied reader. The answer is immediately provided, to the effect, of course, that the preceding was not hyperbole. In (90) and (92), this is also combined with instructions for the reader (*listen; if you think*) geared towards reaching the same conclusion.

(90)   it was this soundtrack (…) which finally and unimpeachably established the fact that skinhead ska really had metamorphosed into rude boy reggae and that the island of Jamaica was about to embark on *a decade of musical creativity unmatched anywhere before or since.* **Hyperbole?** Listen to this stuff – boss, beautifully primitive sounds from The Maytals, Desmond Dekker, Scotty, Cliff himself and the Slickers' ultimate wild youth anthem 'Johnny Too Bad' – and believe … (*BNC* CHA 2559)

(91)   Chances are, *a Boeing jetliner is touching down at New York right now. The same could be said about Tokyo. Chicago. London. Frankfurt. Los Angeles. Atlanta.* And if a Boeing plane isn't landing right this second at any of those cities, wait a minute. Because more than likely, it'll happen by then. **An exaggeration?** Hardly. Boeing jetliners touch down every four and a half seconds of every day. (*BNC* CFV 1034)

(92)   … *Then you spend another 30 minutes sitting in a car, bus or train on the way to work. When you arrive at work you may then spend another six hours sitting in a chair working. Then 30 minutes back home again and about another four hours sitting around the house before retiring to bed.* **Is this an exaggeration?** Not for many people it isn't. And if you think about it, that's more than 11 hours each and every weekday. (*BNC* BPG 77)

Similarly to the examples for F4, these cases also put the spotlight on the potential hyperbole and make it more prominent. Of course, it is not always a real hyperbole that is strengthened; while (88) and (90) may be debatable, (91) and (92) are, or were, probably more or less true – in these cases it is simply that the stating might seem outlandish and has to be covered.

The sixth function uses the explicit term to state that something should better not be exaggerated. Although it is impossible to be sure on the available evidence, it is very likely that such statements are a reaction to pronouncements in the indicated fields that have been interpreted as hyperbolic and disapproved of by the authors themselves.

(93)   However, the link between planning and state ownership **should not be overstated**: all companies of any size plan. (*BNC* EX2 1093)

(94)   **It would be erroneous to overstate** this apprehension [China's of Japan, CC], for there was another aspect to the argument. (*BNC* EDP 1586)

(95)   **It would be an exaggeration to imply** that Vogel's views have been *slavishly* followed by Japanese or Western writers. (*BNC* EAX 108)

The rejection of hyperbole applies to the authors' own usage in the text, but also has a general application as a kind of instruction, cf. again the impersonal constructions employed and the use of *should* in (93). An interesting variant of this type was found at the very beginning of a magazine article about the EU reaction to the Iraq policy of the USA in 2002:

(96)   **It would be an exaggeration** to say that *official Brussels is eagerly awaiting the outbreak of hostilities with Iraq.* **In fact, it would be a downright lie**. ... (*Prospect* October 2002: 79)

The passage plays with the thin dividing line between exaggerations and lies and treats them as lying on one scale. The sequence exaggeration – lie can be read as an upscaling and as a deflating at the same time. As such it is an interest-arousing start to an article and makes the reader read on.

F7 seems to be a rare occurrence, so rare that a spoken instance is here included with (98). It consists of the simple labelling of the hyperbole, as a rule once it has occurred, as in the following two examples.

(97)   I have had the most trouble-free year's pondkeeping since my Koi pool was built in the spring of 1988. Yet, because of other commitments, I have arguably spent less time than ever with my fish. The only '*disasters*' (**and that's overstatement**) involved close encounters of the animal kind. (*BNC* C96 2314–17)

(98)   Just one twice a day. Best taken on an empty stomach so half an hour before food. Don't interfere with paracetamol, they don't interfere with aspirin, they don't interfere with alcohol. That's alright then. Okay. **Just to exaggerate those three points**, I know, I can remember being a student myself. (*BNC* G5U 163)

One point is to give more emphasis to what has preceded and which, as in (98), is not necessarily hyperbolic at all. Example (97) is more

interesting: *disasters* is apparently not meant fully literally, but this is already indicated by the scare quotes and further explicit signalling seems superfluous. Perhaps it is intended for extra emphasis or it is seen as some playful light relief, also as something that makes the magazine discourse more chatty in nature.

In the eighth type identified here, a hyperbolic expression is followed first by the explicit label of 'exaggeration' and secondly by a corrective reformulation or repair. Such examples are found in fictional writing in the present data, as the following examples illustrate. Example (99) is from the novel *The Big Glass* by Gabriel Josipovici, while (100) comes from a short story by Judith Kazantzis; both have in common that they record private thoughts/meditations (interior monologue) of a protagonist (even if in the first case jotted down as written notes), thus do not necessarily represent primarily interactive pieces in the internal fictional world.

(99)   No more notes, he wrote, no more queries, no more space in the work of X and time in the work of Y, no more symbolism, no more allegory, no more influence of X and legacy of Y, no more background and no more foreground, no more social this and political that, no more Heidegger and no more Heisenberg, no more still life and no more portraiture, no more collage and no more frottage, no more lines and no more surfaces, no more genius and no more talent, no more creation and no more mechanical reproduction, no more African masks and no more Cycladic figures, no more clowns and no more nudes, no more museums, no more galleries, no more group shows, no more one-man shows, no more public commissions, no more prizes, no more shit and no more vomit. It is not, wrote Harsnet (typed Goldberg), that I am under any illusion on this score. *There will of course always be critics and there will always be oohs and ahs, there will always be shit and there will always be vomit.* **I exaggerate**, he wrote. **There will not always be critics and the rest, just as there will not always be man and the rest**. But they will be there for long enough, long enough. (*BNC* A08 238–43)

The labelling and correction in (99) follows a long list of things that will be 'no more', which in its apodictic and piled-up quality can be seen as overdone and hyperbolic, but only the last bit of this is contradicted by a counter-hyperbole, which in turn suffers the same fate. Some things are thus singled out for statement – counter-statement – counter-counter-statement thereby giving them prominence. It is presumably those aspects that are of especial importance for the producer of the list. Even the last sentence, which provides a justification for the preceding, is still emphatic with its repetition at the end. The structure in (100) is less elaborate, but it is also less clearly expressed what exactly is being repaired.

(100)   Jennifer, she scolds herself, be warm too, more affectionate. Harriet has laid on a midsummer's night farewell, just the two of us, sisters. Didn't we share a bath when we were little, ride ponies together when we were bigger? Just us, *fair and dark, peas in a pod, little and large* (well, **I exaggerate here, she's smaller, more slender**; but then Jeff, he's given me new trust in my ass). (*BNC* AoU 197)

As in (99) we witness the fictional characters weighing up (further indicated by the following *but*-clause) more emotional (hyperbolic) and more objective reactions.

Finally, the last function identified here occurs only with the term *overstate*(*ment*), of which it is highly typical, being the single most frequently found realisation. Its prototypical form is 'X cannot be overstated', as illustrated in (101), but other forms marginally occur as well, as in (102, 103).

(101)   Here, the value of well-documented museum collections or excavated finds **cannot be overstated**. (*BNC* AC9 1042)

(102)   There must be doubt as to whether the Government fully intended the severity of the monetary squeeze and the massive rise in the real exchange rate that impinged on the economy in those years, but **it is not possible to overstate** the economic shock that hit industry in 1979–1981. (*BNC* G08 1009)

(103)   **No-one can argue against or overstate** what Sgt Wilko has done in this area, that's why I believe no-one around could have done a better job, and why he is the best man for the future too. (*BNC* J1C 3437)

In these cases, a hyperbolic or extreme statement as such is never present, but the explicit formulation employed here would license the use of very strong statements in the areas under discussion by saying essentially that they would still be factually correct. In that way the great importance of an event (102, 103), objects (101) or a person (103) is emphasised.

As I have indicated above, the preceding discussion was based on written instances as these overwhelmingly dominate the evidence. What I found in speech in the present data are variants of the functions 4 and 5. In (104), Lisa's apparently unsolicited/unprovoked denial of exaggeration is inserted into the middle of a statement that can easily be seen as hyperbolic. She is at great pains, however, to make it appear 'correct' and trustworthy, not only by her explicit meta-comment, but also by the various repetitions and rephrasings, which give the whole statement a very emphatic character. Her answer to Melvin's perhaps doubtful question is highly affirmative.

(104)   **Melvin:**   What does he do at home?
        Lisa: Oh he, well he potters around and <pause> goes slowly! <pause> *Like a bloody tortoise*! <pause> I told you

I sat round there once and *it took him an hour* <pause> *a whole hour*, and I'm, **I'm not exaggerating** <pause> *to fit* <pause> *or to put up* <pause> *half a sheet of wallpaper*! <pause> *And it wasn't the full length of the wall* because they got a dado rail <pause> *it was* <pause> *half.* <pause> *It took an hour*!

Melvin: One sheet?

Lisa: One sheet! <pause> I was getting so frustrated! (*BNC* KD3 4387–95)

If (104) is an instance of F4, because the explicit use occurring in midturn is apparently primarily the choice of the speaker, (105) is similar to F5, inasmuch as it is an immediate reaction to a challenge by another speaker, Richard, who interprets the statement *she vomited* as an overstatement and probably wants it retracted. His interlocutor, however, explicitly reaffirms and restates it, especially if one can take being *ill* in the last line as a synonym of *vomit*.

(105)   **Anon:**   Yes. Breathing fumes over patients when they're not feeling well and nauseated and then they get this <unclear> of garlic. It's very unfair on them, I was ever so annoyed with you this morning.

   Richard: Oh sorry.

   Anon: This poor patient was really ill and there I was breathing garlic over her.

   Richard: Ah. Did she mention it?

   Anon: She did.

   Richard: Did she really. <pause>

   Anon: She said what, what were you eating last night she said

   Richard: <laugh>

   Anon: *as she vomited.*

   Richard: <laugh> **Don't, who's exaggerating**.

   Anon: **I'm not exaggerating. She was really ill this morning** <unclear> (*BNC* KDP 2762–75)

Only one other similar use to (105) was found in the *BNC*. One should not conclude from this that suspected hyperboles are not challenged, however, but simply that people will use a variety of means other than using the explicit terms searched for. The next and last spoken example is another clearly interactional one.

(106)   **jm:**   You're listening to the Fox Report. *Oxford's Radcliffe Infirmary has developed new technology that could save lives*: it's called image link and it allows images from hospital scanners to be

>   transmitted down the telephone line to a consultant at the
>   Infirmary. Richard Kerr is consultant neurosurgeon there,
>   Richard tell me a bit about this, what, what sort of things does
>   it allow you to do now that you couldn't do in, in the past?
>
>   (…)
>
> **jm:**   I know I said at the beginning that *it could help save lives*, **am
>   I er overstating the mark there?**
>
> **rk:**   No I think it could save lives, because it means that we have
>   immediate access er to what's going on and so on rare occa-
>   sions, life and death decisions can be made down the tele-
>   phone. (*BNC* KRT 1988–90, 2001–2)

In (106), a radio interview, the interviewer jm is not challenged by the interviewee, but questions an earlier statement of his and seeks confirmation from the interviewee. As the confirmation is forthcoming, the statement in question is established as objectively correct and thus not hyperbolic. Topicalising this point in such a manner gives it more prominence, on the one hand, and prevents it from being taken – and discounted – by hearers as the usual kind of press hype, on the other hand.

To close this chapter, let us have a somewhat closer look at the hyperbolic expressions occurring or presented as such in the context of these explicit comments. From the above examples, it seems that all kinds of hyperbole can become the focus of metalinguistic comment or denial. There are those examples characterised by rather conventional phrasing or elements, such as extreme case statements (*the **ultimate** stand against fascism*; *there will of course **always** be critics and there will **always** be oohs and ahs, there will **always** be shit and there will **always** be vomit*; *a decade of musical creativity unmatched **anywhere before or since***), superlatives (*the mightiest concert ever*) or frozen and tired hyperboles (*paralysis of public choice; disasters; like vultures; save lives; took him **an hour***). Because of their familiarity, it is possible that recipients receive them in ways unwanted by the producer: pass them over hardly or not at all noticed, discard them as inapplicable, automatically downgrade their force to a more 'objective' level or find them overdone and stylistically a bad choice. Commenting explicitly on these forms can bring them back to life, and steer their interpretation in the direction desired by the author. Hyperbolic comparisons also occur in these contexts, which in their often improbable or absurd characteristics (*the poet is older than other human beings*) are likely to draw attention to themselves. Many statements, however, seen in themselves, are at least formally, fairly innocent; it is the clash of their content with what we expect, regard as the norm and want to believe that makes them comment-worthy. Most people will find it absurd or worse if *fatal heart attack victims are smuggled out* of Disney World, that present *industrial democracy* is only up to the standards of *before the Great Reform Bill of 1832*, that *the way we vote is being influenced by (…)*

what the Kinnocks enjoy for breakfast and that students are *hardly able to construe the English language.* These, if true, are unwelcome truths and to sink in they may need avowals of 'no' or only 'slight exaggeration', or the other like comments. The last of the preceding examples could also have been listed under conventional cases: the complaint tradition about falling standards of pupils goes back at least as far as Socrates and is thus an easily discardable instance. The variety of these and other examples shows that the realisation of the hyperbole does not play a role as a trigger for meta-comment, with one exception: metaphorical types are very rare and are only found among the conventional items here. The degree of hyperbole does not matter either; both very strong and barely noticeable exaggerations (e.g., *I only half-believed in this self-image*) are commented on – in fact, the latter can sometimes be classified as hyperboles only because of the comment. The decisive aspect for the use of explicit hyperbole is the reaction of the readers and hearers, presupposed and/or intended by the speaker or writer. This is also true for those cases where the author needs to make clear that something is not hyperbolic, e.g., when something evidently true simply sounds surprising when put into words.

5   Hyperbole in interaction

While the preceding chapter focused on the speaker, the present chapter will stress the interactive nature of hyperbole more than was done previously and thus will also pay greater attention to the role of the hearer. I will first deal with the question of how addressees understand hyperbolic utterances, discussing various approaches to the processing of figurative language. Then I will proceed to present the addressee's explicit reactions to hyperbole that can be seen as a correlate to the speakers' self-references treated in Chapter 4, and the staging of hyperbolic exchanges. This point will also include a brief look at the role of hyperbole in ritual insulting and boasting behaviour. Finally, I will discuss how hyperbole can function within the context of face-work and politeness.

5.1   Understanding hyperbole

Let me start by some brief remarks about 'understanding'. I assume that there is no complete understanding, that is, no absolute identity of what is meant and what is understood. Instead, there is far-reaching but nevertheless still approximative understanding, due to the fact that the knowledge systems of speakers overlap partly but not entirely. Communication works as it does because there is a mutual presumption of understanding, which is upheld as long as there is no clear evidence to the contrary in a given communication situation. In such cases understanding and misunderstanding will then become the focus of negotiation. In the absence of such meta-communication the analyst can only assume that the interactants in a given situation have understood each other to a reasonable degree and that the analyst's own interpretation roughly correlates with that of the addressee(s). With this caveat I will now proceed to discuss the comprehension of hyperbole.

How do hearers and readers recognise utterances such as (1a, b) as hyperbolic and how do they arrive at an appropriate interpretation?

(1)   a.   **James Whale:**   You see I I think er er probably one of the best erm Ministers of er of er Education that er has been for quite some considerable time and I bet

you throw your hands up in horror when I say this you will totally disagree and I'm talking here cos his name's just slipped <voice quality: laughing> out of my mind <end of voice quality>. Who was tha-- who was that oh for goodness sake tall thin gaunt looking man, always had to have about **fifteen spoonfuls of sugar in his coffee** whenever I met him?

Noel: S-- Sir Keith Joseph?

James Whale: Er you knew you see Sir Keith (*BNC* HV0 328–31)

   b. It was so fantastic, we played it [Elvis' first album, CC] **endlessly** and tried to learn it all. **The messiah had arrived**. (Paul McCartney, quoted in *DM* 17 June 2002: 28)

According to the definition provided in Chapter 2, an appropriate interpretation would mean correcting what is said downward to a value which is nevertheless still fairly high, and, usually, including an inferred speaker attitude to the topic in the meaning. In (1a) the speaker thus characterises somebody as taking more than average amounts of sugar in his coffee (perhaps four to five spoonfuls), which is represented as a noteworthy, salient trait distinguishing this particular person from others. While the attitude expressed here is neither clearly positive nor clearly negative, (1b) on the evidence of its second hyperbole expresses a clearly positive evaluation and means roughly that the album was listened to very, very often and that Elvis had a similar effect on music/musicians as Jesus had on religion/believers. This latter paraphrase is not unproblematic, as metaphorical instances such as this one enable a greater range of individual interpretations than non-metaphorical instances do. This leads us to the fact that the processing of hyperbolic utterances will depend on which type of hyperbole is present. The important distinctions in this respect are: (i) basic versus metaphorical hyperbole (cf. Chapter 3): *fifteen spoonfuls/endlessly* versus *messiah*, and (ii) conventional versus creative hyperbole (cf. Section 4.2.2.1): *endlessly* versus *messiah*, with *fifteen spoonfuls* in an intermediate position.[1] The more conventional, familiar and frequent a given hyperbole is, the less inferencing will presumably have to be done (opting for the salient meaning as indicated in Figure 2.3, p. 38), while the simultaneous presence of both hyperbole and metaphor may complicate processing.

Let me start by highlighting a few approaches to non-literal language use before proceeding to my proposal for using and comprehending hyperbole.

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[1] The hyperbolical sense of *endless* is meaning 1b in the *OED* entry (*hyperbolically*: 'interminable; perpetual, incessant, constant'). Capitalised *Messiah* is also listed in a transferred sense by the *OED* ('an expected liberator or saviour of an oppressed people or country'), but the application to the world of music can still be seen as a (minor) creative act.

First, there is psycholinguistic evidence, which concerns the role of 'literal' meaning in processing (cf. Gibbs 2002 for an overview), on the one hand, and the varying effect of different kinds of figurative language,[2] on the other hand. As to the first point, various experiments involving reading-time, phrase classification and online word recognition have been used to assess the merits of a direct access model (where the figurative/indirect meaning is processed directly without intervening steps) versus a two-step process model (called the standard pragmatic model by Gibbs 2002), in which the literal meaning of a given stretch of language is computed first, and then rejected to be followed by the derivation of the non-literal meaning via implicature. Unfortunately, the results are not conclusive. Some studies have shown figurative expressions to be processed as quickly as, and sometimes even more quickly than literal expressions, which speaks for the direct access view and for no extra cognitive effort. Such results were found both for conventional and novel instances of figurative language. In other studies processing times for figurative instances were longer (speaking against direct access) and literal meanings have been proven to be completely or partially present in the minds of speakers in some cases. According to some research, speakers can and do distinguish between what is said and what is implicated, which is not identical to the literal–figurative distinction. On the definition of hyperbole used in this study (cf. Figure 2.3), some activation of the literal level or of what is said, however residual, is necessary. It seems likely to me that the literal meanings of *fifteen* (1a) and *messiah* (1b) will be present in the speaker's mind on encountering the examples above. Different types of pragmatic meaning, namely enriched meaning (explicatures) and implicatures, can also exhibit varying speeds of access, with the latter being processed somewhat more slowly. Gibbs (2002), on whose detailed treatment the above summary is based, points to some methodological problems involved in such studies; above all, the problem of a clear definition of literal meaning and the neglect of the fact that there may be many different kinds of meaning in general, and of figurative meaning in particular. It may thus not be irrelevant whether the experimental material consists of idioms, indirect speech acts, metaphors or ironic utterances. In this context, it is especially relevant that, to my knowledge, there has been no psycholinguistic study on comprehension which uses hyperbole. Studies dealing with the processing of polysemous words may be relevant for hyperbole, however, as many conventional hyperboles can be considered to belong to that group. Highly frequent or dominant meanings of a form will be activated regardless of context (which in our case can be either hyperbolic or literal meaning, or both), and this may result in the simultaneous activation of the inappropriate and the appropriate senses in a given case (Gibbs 2002: 461), e.g., in a hyperbole such as *dying to do* something.

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[2] This point is relevant, rather, to the next Section (5.2), when I will come back to it.

Secondly, we can look at pragmatic models, in particular, Gricean approaches and at Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. The first of these is oriented towards speaker meaning, while the second is concerned with the hearer's interpretation. However, with the introduction of heuristics based on Grice (cf. Levinson 2000), the neo-Gricean approach has also moved more towards a hearer perspective.

Grice introduced the concept of non-natural meaning (meaning$_{nn}$) and the implicature-creating system of the cooperative principle together with the maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner. In this scheme, assuming the speakers of (1a, b) are obeying the cooperative principle, all three instances flout the first maxim of quality, i.e., 'Do not say what you believe to be false' (Grice 1989 [1975]: 27, 34), because the speaker must actually know that they are not true to the facts. Other hyperboles of a vaguer kind, e.g., absolute superlatives, may fall under the second maxim of quality, which is concerned with the speakers' lack of evidence for what they say; those may not be flouts so much as infringements in Grice's view, however. The effect of a flout is a conversational implicature, which 'must be capable of being worked out' (1989: 31) – and this is partly where the problem lies. Grice himself does not explain his single hyperbolic example (*Every nice girl loves a sailor*). Noticing a quality flout does not indicate at all to the addressee the direction the intended interpretation should take,[3] i.e., the 'downgrading' of *every* to *some* and of *endlessly* to *often* is by no means a necessary next step, nor is the interpretation of the attitudinal force. Furthermore, the maxim of relation may play a role in hyperbolic uses[4] as well (in combination with others), as one might wonder about the relevance of mentioning the *messiah* in talking about music and as the use of *fifteen spoonfuls* serving as a unique identifier,[5] so to speak, for the person sought is highly relevant to the purpose at hand – and apparently succeeds in its interactional goal. A more general problem concerns the fact that in this system irony, metaphor and hyperbole all work alike, although they intuitively are rather different phenomena. The Gricean approach thus does not work optimally for the interpretation of hyperbole, in my opinion.[6]

Various attempts at remodelling or building on the Gricean system have produced (reductionist) neo-Gricean theories, notably those of Horn (1984, 1989, 2006) and of Levinson (1995, 2000). Both schemes actually retain Grice's Quality maxim, either as a primary, irreducible factor and necessary to communication as such (Horn 1984: 12), and/or as relevant for

[3] Grice himself commented on such problems with irony in 'Further Notes on Logic and Conversation' (1989 [1995]: 53f.).

[4] Grice (1989 [1995]: 371) mentions the interdependence of maxims, in particular, those of quantity and relation.

[5] I am aware of the fact that the addressee may in fact have been prompted more by 'tall thin gaunt looking man' than by the overstatement.

[6] Cf. Wilson and Sperber (1981: 159–64), Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) for a discussion of figurative language and the Gricean approach.

particularised conversational implicatures (PCIs), but not for generalised ones (GCIs) (Levinson 2000: 74, 386 fn. 1). Thus, (most) hyperbole will presumably still fall under Quality flouts in the neo-Gricean view.

Relevance Theory (RT) as outlined by Sperber and Wilson (e.g., 1986/1995, Wilson and Sperber 2006) claims to give a better account of figurative language understanding than the Gricean approach. As there are no maxims guiding implicature derivation in this theory, occurrences of figurative speech, and hyperbole in particular, do not constitute a flout of any maxim or principle; instead, hyperbole is simply one of the 'alternative routes to achieving optimal relevance' (2006: 619). A hyperbolic utterance is an ostensive stimulus, which, like any other such stimulus, carries a presumption of its optimal relevance for the audience, i.e., the hyperbole is the most adequately chosen form, and thus the most relevant one, given the speaker's predispositions and aims. The expectation of relevance guides the addressee in the inferential comprehension process, which is aimed towards a maximum of relevance, in terms of contextual cognitive effects, with the least possible processing effort. Figurative language is thus processed no differently from literal language, with the exception that the former, and also loose language, tends to produce a set of weak implicatures rather than a strong implicature. It is, for example, not possible to say that *the messiah has arrived* in (1b) has one strong implicature which is *essential* for an interpretation satisfying the demands of relevance. Rather, it weakly implicates that music had entered a completely new age, that this was a longed-for positive development, that Elvis was the pivotal figure in this change, that the new musical developments divided followers from opponents, that the speaker belonged to the followers, and so on. In (1a), however, one strong implicature is much more likely: Sir Keith drinks his coffee very sweet, definitely sweeter than the average person – and this makes using this hyperbolic description relevant in the context of searching for his name. This may highlight a difference between basic and metaphorical hyperbole, i.e., certain types of figurative language may have a range of weak implicatures while others tend not to.

Relevance Theory is appealing inasmuch as it treats non-literal language as something that by and large works and is processed like everything else in language, i.e., no special apparatus is needed. But are instances of figurative language actually explained in a more convincing way in this theory? In spite of Sperber and Wilson's claim that RT is superior in this respect, they do not go out of their way to prove it. The only figure that is given comprehensive treatment is irony, in which case the echoic-mention theory (1981, 1986) can and does work without the support of RT.[7] Although hyperbole

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[7] In fact, this irony theory predates (1981) the full formulation, or at least publication, of RT (1986). Echoic-mention theory has also been criticised, as it apparently cannot explain all instances of irony either.

is always mentioned as one of the cases which RT explains more adequately than, e.g., the Gricean model, there are only two brief explanations of hyperbolic instances provided by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995; 1990). Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 235f.) discuss the hyperbole (106a) *Bill is the very nicest person there is*, which implicates (106b) 'Bill is a very nice person'. Seen from the speaker's perspective, (106a) is used because everything she wants to convey is among the implications of this utterance, while (106b) does 'not exhaust her thoughts about Bill' and there is no other alternative formulation that would exactly express her thoughts. '[T]he speaker thus encourages the hearer to look for a range of further contextual implications not shared, or not equally strengthened, by (106b), and assumes that within this range there are some she intends to implicate.' The addressee must thus first have computed the implicature in (106b) as a basis for further implicatures, but it is not specified how this particular assumption is arrived at. Thus, a crucial step in the interpretation process is left unaccounted for. The discussion of the second instance, *Clarissa's face was a perfect oval* (1990, n.p.), is vaguer simply by talking about the addressee's resulting mental representation, but adds the point that a more explicit formulation would have required more processing effort on the part of the hearer, thus reducing the relevance of the message. The focus on *minimal* effort is probably misguided, as inferencing can be regarded as fairly 'cheap' (cf. Horn 1984, Levinson 2000).

I will argue that the Gricean approach can be made use of in the elucidation of hyperbole, but in a different way than envisaged by Grice.[8] As to the maxim of Quality, I do not think that it should receive too strict an interpretation, but rather, one of truthfulness within certain limits of tolerance varying according to the conversational purpose (i.e., it is partially linked to the maxim of relation). Furthermore, if we look at the Quality maxim from an addressee perspective, we may be dealing not with a clear true–false opposition, but with the degree of credibility of an utterance. Allan (2000: 180f.) presents a credibility metric with eleven values ranging from 'undoubtedly false' to 'undoubtedly true' with intervening values such as 'possibly false', 'indeterminable' and 'most probably true', which a hearer can attach to a given message. The credibility metric can be taken to refer to the contrast between the hyperbolic and a literal expression (with its values reconcilable and sufficient), which is part of the definition of hyperbole (Figure 2.3). A departure from strict truthfulness may thus pass unnoticed or be judged as

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[8] Norrick (2004: 1732f., 1737) makes the point that extreme case formulations involve violation of the quality maxim, whereas non-extreme hyperboles do not, e.g., *the line's a mile long* does not flout quality whereas *the line has no end at all* does, with the line being less than a mile in either case. He bases this view on Gibbs' (1994) argument that listeners expect utterances only to resemble but not perfectly match the speaker's beliefs. I find this distinction not very convincing and it begs the question where is the dividing line for the application of the quality maxim is: what about *the line's five/ten/fifty/a thousand*, etc. *miles long*?

of minor importance in the course of communication. Only if the credibility judgement moves beyond indeterminable into the 'false' range (i.e., if the contrast is sufficient) will the addressee register the potential presence of something noteworthy, e.g., of hyperbole.[9] The hyperboles in (1) above, *fifteen spoonfuls*, *endlessly* and *messiah*, certainly fall in the false-range. However, I think that the Quality maxim is not sufficient for processing hyperbole, but that the maxim of Quantity is necessary as well, given the scalar nature of the phenomenon in question (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987: 219). Only if the addressee recognises that there is discrepancy along the axis of magnitude can s/he perform the suitable adjustment. The two Quantity maxims are the following (Grice 1989: 26):

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

   It is Quantity 2 that is useful here. While Grice had doubts about the necessity of this submaxim, his own discussion actually highlights the usefulness of this maxim. He says that 'the hearers may be misled as a result of thinking that there is some particular *point* in the provision of the excess of information' (1989: 27, emphasis original). The *point* of a flout of Quantity 2 in the case of hyperbole is of course a particular attitude conveyed by the speaker and to be inferred by the hearer, who is thus by no means 'misled'. From Grice's discussion of a possible Quantity 2 flout (1989: 33f.) it seems as if he was thinking of greater informativeness, mainly in terms of additional linguistic material, i.e., in terms of brevity or length of expression. In the case of hyperbole there is often no such extra material, but the surplus information is encapsulated within one word, chosen in contrast to another one,[10] e.g., *fifteen* (spoonfuls) instead of, e.g., *four*. A linguistic item (A) can be taken to be more informative than another one (B) if A entails B (Levinson 2000: 115). As we have seen in Chapter 2 (pp. 7f.), terms used hyperbolically are often part of scales which are based on semantic or pragmatic entailment relations (e.g., <always, often, sometimes>), or which at least allow some inclusion relations on the basis of world knowledge (partially ordered sets, e.g., <mountain, hill>). In each case, the terms to the left in such lists can be taken to contain more information than those on the right. In our example (1a) *fifteen* entails everything from *one* to *fourteen*, while *endlessly* (1b) entails other terms of temporal extension such as *long* (time), *often*. Additionally, more marked terms, which many hyperboles are in their contexts (cf. Figure 2.3 on contextual appropriateness),

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[9] This is linked with the contrast between literal and hyperbolic utterance commented on in Chapter 2, but is not identical to it.
[10] Cf. Chapter 3 for the realisations of hyperbole and the fact that single-word hyperboles are the most common type (p. 48).

will usually carry more information than unmarked terms; this may apply especially to metaphorical realisations (e.g., *messiah* in (1b), *dead* versus *very*). Markedness can, of course, also refer to form, which we find, for example, in the case of hyperbolic repetitions or in cumulative examples identified in Chapter 3; in such cases the Manner maxim, here the sub-category 'be brief', may play a role. Another Manner subcategory, 'avoid obscurity of expression', may be evoked in some metaphorical and creative cases. Manner flouts, by their signal function, have a supportive role in the identification process of hyperbolic instances. It can only be a supportive one as Manner does not apply in *all* hyperbolic instances and as it does not unambiguously lead to hyperbole.[11]

While the Quantity 2 maxim is an essential trigger and guideline for the inferential processing of hyperbole, the link between quantity and attitude/affect has deeper roots. It is to be found in the concept of primary meta-phor (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 49–59, quoting Grady 1997), which are basic metaphors that universally form part of the cognitive unconscious. Primary metaphors are acquired in early childhood and 'pair subjective experience and judgment with sensorimotor experience' (1999: 49). The relevant primary metaphor for hyperbole is IMPORTANT IS BIG, for which the early experience of big things and people, such as parents, being able to dominate the (perceptual) environment and to exert great influence pro-vides the linkage between the sensorimotor domain *Size* and the subject-ive judgement *Important* (1999: 50). A further primary metaphor, MORE IS UP, linking quantity with vertical orientation, may feed further into the understanding of BIG. As both speakers and addressees share these basic interpretative links, the intention and the inference of attitude expression through hyperbole is a natural tendency. The particular co- and context as well as mutual knowledge will then guide the way to the more precise nature of this attitude. I am not claiming that intention and inference will be identical, only that they will usually be fairly similar (cf. the remarks on understanding on p. 130).

Figure 5.1 summarises the preceding discussion. Both the Quality and Quantity 2 maxims trigger the identification of hyperbole in a given con-text. As to quality, only the last four, possibly only the last three, values on the scale will have the potential to generate an implicature; the precise cut-off point here will depend on what is known about a speaker's dispos-ition towards exaggeration. People with a 'general' hyperbolic speaking style might trigger hyperbolic interpretation in many cases,[12] perhaps even those

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[11] An anonymous reviewer suggested that Manner might be given greater prominence and also proposed a greater role for the subcategory 'be orderly'. The data does not support this, however; nor does it speak for the relevance of the subcategory 'avoid ambiguity'.

[12] Cf. example (11) below on p. 147, where a hearer's comment points to the speaker's common use of hyperbole.

Quality*	
1	Undoubtedly true
0.9	Most probably true
0.8	Probably true
0.7	Possibly true
0.6	Just possibly true
0.5	Indeterminable
0.4	Just possibly false
0.3	*Possibly false*
0.2	*Probably false*
0.1	*Most probably false*
0	*Undoubtedly false*

HEARER

❶

'...always had to have about fifteen spoonfuls of sugar in his coffee'

Speaker

+

Quantity 2: more information than necessary

❷

primary metaphor: IMPORTANT IS BIG

= identification ❶
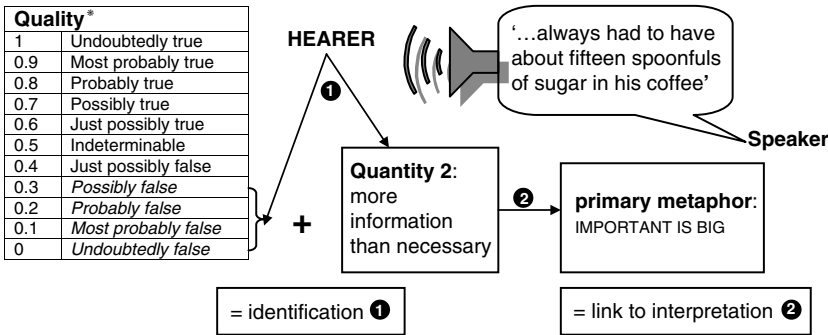
= link to interpretation ❷

Figure 5.1: The comprehension process of hyperbole
*The quality matrix included here is taken from Allan (2000: 181).

where it is not applicable. Quantity 2 ensures that the implicature is identi-fied as hyperbole. As a further step, the primary metaphor leads the way to a possible interpretation – here, the fact that a 'sweet tooth' is a noteworthy fact about a person.

What has been outlined so far certainly applies to hyperbole in general. I will now consider what is necessary for the processing of metaphorical hyperbole, and, in particular, for the recognition of such types as hyperbolic in nature. Bach and Harnish (1979: 68f.) present three relations which guide the hearer from what is said to the speaker's nonliteral intention: (R1) the opposite of what is said (sarcasm, irony), (R2) a figurative or metaphorical connection (figures of speech) and (R3) the next evaluation toward the mid-point of the relevant scale (exaggeration). The important point about these interpretative strategies is that they are ordered, i.e., they are applied (tested, rejected, used) by the addressee in the order R1, R2, R3. Bach and Harnish argue that it is possible to make an exaggeration out of a metaphor, but not the other way round,[13] which accounts for their ordering. Two strategies can be used in sequence, for example R1 and R3 in *That was the worst dinner in my life* said of a gourmet dinner (R1: best dinner > R3: very good dinner). However, it is of course possible that sometimes hearers stop processing after one strategy has been used and has yielded a sensible interpretation in context. This would explain why some informants do not recognise some instances as hyperbolic, but only as metaphorical (cf. Chapter 2, p. 13) by stopping after a successful R2 interpretation. Metaphorical thinking is cog-nitively more basic than hyperbole, after all, and metaphors can have a wide range of (rivalling) functions apart from expressing hyperbolic attitude. In instances where an affective attitude is not very prominent, while the imagery

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[13] But cf. Plett (2000), who classifies hyperbole as a type of metaphor, a view which is not adopted here.

is vivid and striking, the latter may in fact dominate the interpretation process. The metaphor *inundated*, for example, in 'every member of staff had been "inundated" with calls to this effect from Blair's officials' (*DM* 17 June 2002: 10) may not receive a hyperbolic interpretation by every reader. The ordering R1/R3 seems less convincing to me, however. Exaggeration of some kind has been seen as a trigger or at least as a cue for irony and sarcasm by Kreuz and Roberts (1995), Seto (1998)[14] and Haiman (1990), for example. In this case, recognition of the hyperbolic form or content should precede the interpretation of an utterance as ironic. As irony and, especially, sarcasm convey stronger attitudes than hyperbole, the final interpretation can nevertheless suppress the hyperbolic interpretation to a certain extent in the addressee's consciousness.

Similarity and/or analogy will play a role in the production and interpretation of metaphors – this is the case in traditional approaches such as the comparison and the interaction view as well as in the conceptual theory of metaphor. The recognition of such a relationship is thus primary in the processing of metaphorical hyperboles, while the recognition of the hyperbolic force is a further step. I mean this in the sense that a two-part interpretation is necessary, but not that it must happen in sequence (1: metaphor, 2: hyperbole); in fact, both parts can take place simultaneously. 'The messiah had arrived' from (1b) above needs an analogical interpretation, which is based on world knowledge about Judaism/Christianity and modern popular culture: it takes roughly the form of messiah : religion : : Elvis : music. The hyperbolic interpretation in this case is eased by the fact that the Messiah is somebody unique and hierarchically ranks immediately beneath God, i.e., higher than any (other) human; that is, in cases where the metaphor employs a vehicle that is intrinsically huge, high or extreme, the metaphor will not preclude further hyperbolic interpretation. The *inundation* example mentioned above constitutes a simpler similarity case which maps the domain of water and floods onto the domain of (telephone) communication. The problem for hyperbole in this case is the fact that there are degrees of inundation; there is nothing inherently extreme about the concept. It is therefore up to the addressee to settle on a degree of flooding, however vague, depending on the individual's predispositions, knowledge of inundation and potentially also on clues in the cotext (or context). In such cases hyperbolic attribution will naturally vary between recipients.

Conventional hyperboles, both of the basic and of the metaphoric kind, may require a somewhat different treatment. As shown in Section 4.2.2.1, conventional instances are the most frequent hyperbolic occurrences, comprising such cases as, e.g., *ages*, intensifier *dead, incredible, freezing* and *never*. There are various approaches to problems such as this one. The concept of

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[14] Seto regards non-echoic irony as being produced by semantic reversal, which can only apply if what is said is semantically overcharged by hyperbole and great emphasis.

short-circuited implicature (SCI), introduced by Morgan (1978, quoted in Horn 1989: 343f.), deals with cases where the implicature, while theoretically calculable, is not really calculated on-line by speakers familiar with the usage conventions of the language. SCIs are the outcome of routinisation, and have been applied to very specific phenomena, e.g., indirect speech acts and negative raising. Bach and Harnish (1979: 192ff.) advanced the standardisation thesis for indirect speech acts, where it is mutually believed by interactants that an expression has a certain standard illocutionary force when uttered in contexts where it would otherwise violate the Cooperative Principle. SCIs as used in the literature apply to whole utterances, whereas conventional hyperboles are often single words occurring in various utterances. If the concept were to be used here, it needs extension.

Levinson's (2000) GCI, i.e., a default inference or preferred, idiomatic interpretation, is a similar concept. GCIs are generated by the application of the heuristics and, in contrast to SCIs, are not due to simple routinisation (2000: 24). They are inferences which are both defeasible and default, thus constituting an utterance-type meaning, midway between sentence-meaning and speaker-meaning (2000: 73). In this system, the M-Principle ('Indicate an abnormal, non-stereotypical situation by using marked expressions that contrast with those you would use to describe the corresponding normal, stereotypical situation'[15]) could be useful for conventional hyperbole. The M-Principle produces a kind of negative inference, as it refers to what was not said but could have been said (i.e., in terms of the present work: to the factually appropriate expression). There is a division of labour between the M-Principle and the I-Principle ('produce the minimal linguistic information sufficient to achieve your communicational ends, given Q[uantity]') in the case of lexical doublets, which are words from different registers. The pairing of the 'literal' and the hyperbolic item can be regarded as such a doublet, with the hyperbolic term often being the more colloquial, informal choice. In such cases the more frequent and usual item carries an I-implicature and the more unusual, marked one an M-implicature. One of Levinson's (2000: 138) examples, contrasting the use of *house* and *residence* in context, is relevant for hyperbole: he argues that *Her residence is on the corner* implicates 'her immodest, pretentious house is on the corner', while *house* would simply implicate 'house, of the normal variety'. This model can thus work for conventional hyperbole via the quasi-synonymous relationship between a hyperbolic item and a 'literal' item. The following example can illustrate this:

(2)   when you know you go home and lying on the doormat on the Friday night is a great **tome** of paper that came second post which made me

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[15] Shortened to the first sentence of Levinson's formulation and thus only to the speaker maxim, neglecting the recipient corollary.

out to be *the biggest idiot philanderer, thief, cheat and liar in the world* (*BNC* KGK 471)

Tome, which according to the *OED* 'now usually suggest[s] a large, heavy, old-fashioned book', is applied here incongruously to legal papers and is furthermore combined with a more conventional superlative hyperbole concerning the papers' contents. *Philanderer*, however, takes up the register introduced by *tome* and thus reinforces the effect. The choice of register here transports that whoever was the sender of the papers was overdoing things.

Using Levinson's GCI concept for hyperbole implies admitting some role for routinisation, however. For cases which have progressed very far along the road of conventionalisation, such as *ages* (cf. Section 2.5), the synonymy approach may not be the only or the best one. In those instances where conventionalisation has constituted polysemy, Giora's graded salience hypothesis can be employed. If an item has several senses, among them a hyperbolic one, the more salient of them in the given context will be accessed (1997: 185).

Thus, three solutions for understanding hyperbole have been offered here, namely PCIs, GCIs and polysemy resolution via salience. This may seem inelegant, but it is necessary to account for the different stages of conventionalisation in which hyperbolic forms are found. The *continued* use and existence of conventionalised hyperbole, if not their comprehension, can also be explained by Keller's (1994: 90f., 99) communicative maxims which are 'responsible' for producing homogeneity and stasis, namely M1 'Talk in such a way that you are not misunderstood', M2 'Talk in such a way that you are understood' and his so-called Humboldt's maxim 'Talk in a way in which you believe the other would talk if he or she were in your place'.

As posited in the definition (Figure 2.3) and shown in Section 4.2, hyperbole is crucially concerned with the expression of an attitude or emotion. Thus, it is not only of interest how hyperbole is understood in general, but also how the emotional state of the speaker is assessed and what emotional effect is prompted in the addressee. This type of information is not accessible in authentic data, so that we have to turn to psycholinguistic evidence for that. Legitt and Gibbs (2000) compared the effects of several ironic strategies, i.e., ironic remarks realised as (pure) irony, sarcasm, overstatement, understatement, satire and rhetorical questions[16] and of non-ironic remarks by confronting experiment participants with specific instances and asking them the following questions: (i) 'How would you feel?' as the addressee of a given remark, (ii) 'how did the speaker feel when making the statement?', and (iii) 'How does the speaker want you to feel?'. The examples were phrased in such a way that the participants in the experiment were both the addressee and the target of the statement. Eight emotional response

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[16] It is possible that not all overstated instances used in this experimental research are actually ironic, cf. e.g., examples 3 and 4 in the samples provided by Legitt and Gibbs at the end of their paper, which I would regard as plain, i.e., non-ironic hyperbole.

sets from the Discrete Emotional Scale of McHugo *et al.* (1982) were used. As to (i), overstatements elicit addressees' negative feelings more strongly than other forms. Specifically, the emotional groups angry/irritated/mad, disgusted/turned off/repulsed and scornful/disdainful/contemptuous received high ratings (Legitt and Gibbs 2000: 7f.). Interestingly, the negative feelings aroused by overstatement were even somewhat stronger than those for sarcasm, and similar to those for rhetorical questions. Legitt and Gibbs (2000: 9) put this down to the fact that these three types magnify problems, which is certainly true for hyperbole, and that they are a direct challenge to the addressee's (inter)personal behaviour. Such instances can be very memorable and have a long-ranging effect, which highlights their emotional impact. A very long time ago (1997), a fairly irate neighbour accused me of *sounding like a herd of elephants trampling around in the attic* while I was stowing away books in the attic above her flat. The emotion she was expressing was very clearly anger. For the next few years I only walked on my toes in the attic. I might not have done this nor still remember the incident if my neighbour had used a straightforward non-hyperbolic complaint.

While hyperbole directed to a present target thus comes out as a very intensive and effectual strategy, it also has to be remembered that this use of hyperbole is relatively rare in the present data (cf. Table 4.4, Chapter 4). Regarding the questions (ii) and (iii), the assumed feelings and intentions of the speaker when using a particular form, these are not rated as negatively as for sarcasm and rhetorical questions, i.e., seen from this angle hyperbole turns out to be a, relatively speaking, milder and somewhat less intentionally hurtful form. Nevertheless, it is again the same negative emotion groups as for (i), and especially the angry group, that receive fairly high ratings in both experiments (2000: 11, 13, 14f.). Legitt and Gibbs' research thus shows that hyperbole triggers fairly intensive emotions, and while their experiments specialised in 'negative' situations, it can be assumed that a similar intensity may be attributed to hyperbole also in positive contexts, e.g., praise.

5.2   Hyperbole: reactions and interactions

The way addressees react to hyperbolic utterances may not tell us much about how they comprehend hyperbole in the sense of the preceding section, but it will show us how they evaluate specific hyperbolic instances and what effect they have on them. Responses to hyperbole can be non-existent, minimal, positive or negative. The first possibility means that there is no verbal or otherwise audible response[17] referring *specifically* to the hyperbole;

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[17] This does not exclude the possibility of a non-verbal response, e.g., a smile, a nod or a certain facial expression. Information of this kind is missing in corpora.

the conversation simply goes on as it presumably would have without the exaggerated utterance. This is so because hearers rate the utterance containing the hyperbole as appropriate and relevant to the context (cf. Drew 2003: 922). The following dialogue is such an example, which could also be called a 'neutral' (if overtly positive) response:

(3) **Annette** Yeah. Well solicitor said she, it sounded to her as if there's something more to it. Maybe they don't have the money.

    David Yeah. Yeah.

    Annette And they're stalling all the time.

    David Yeah. Yeah.

    Annette But erm you see, they suggested going down for a meeting he's **up to his eyes in it!**

    David *Yeah.*

    Annette And

    David Yeah.

    Annette he can't honestly spare time to go down there (*BNC* KB9 3381)

David responds with *yeah* to everything Annette says, regardless of whether it is factual or exaggerated, and this seems to be quite sufficient. Such exchanges are the most common cases in my data, a result which probably agrees with most speakers' everyday experience as well. One may conclude from this that the great majority of hyperboles used are seen as appropriate forms and thus as largely unremarkable ones in their respective contexts. The forms may also be unremarkable in a more general sense, i.e., in the sense that they are conventionalised, as the one in (3), and thus no longer perceived as *highly* or *particularly* hyperbolic. The weakened effect thus correlates to (the licensing of) a weakened or at least largely non-overt response.

Edwards (2005: 269f.) pointed out that minimal responses, like the above, may be simply acknowledging or may even imply censorship of the hyperbole. I do not think that the latter is the case in (3) or in the majority of similar instances, but responses which are still more minimal, as the *mm* in (4), are problematic. This is the type that I mean by 'minimal response'.

(4) **Lyn** Yeah well i it's a brand new spanking house right.

    Gordon He's got a big well it's a brand new farm

    Lyn (unclear)

    Hayley What's it like?

    Gordon Do what?

Lyn	Oh it's **fab** the house is **fabulous**
Hayley	*Mm*
Lyn	**really it is**. (*BNC* KCA 238)

Hayley's *mm* responds to a highly conventional, but repeated, and thus emphatic hyperbole. Lyn in turn replies to this unenthusiastic reaction by a reaffirmation of what she has said, using the truth emphasiser *really* – in contrast to Drew's (2003) data, where minimal response often leads to retraction of the hyperbole. Hayley's response cannot really reflect a difference in assessment (Hayley does not know the house) or disinterest (she has asked about it), but must be a comment on the credibility of the statement: either Hayley does not quite believe Lyn in this particular instance or she thinks that she generally exaggerates too much and therefore is not to be credited. In either case, the muted response is a kind of attack on Lyn and she takes it as such, as shown by her own response. Minimalist responses of this kind are indeed very rare. The true problem they represent is not their minimal form, however, but the fact that they do not contain an overt positive semantics (in contrast to the *yeah* above).

By negative reactions I understand those which challenge a previous hyperbole, either for its content and applicability to the situation in question or for the (unusual) form chosen. It is the content challenges that are of interest here (cf. Section 4.2.2.1 for the form challenge). It needs to be pointed out here that it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between challenges and requests for clarification. Hearers may simply not have understood properly acoustically or, in particular in small-scale hyperboles, just want to make certain that something which might also be factually correct was in fact meant hyperbolically. The latter case thus concerns a search for precision and constitutes a state of insecurity about hyperbolic or non-hyperbolic speaker intention. In (5), during a discussion about crime, one of the participants uses *abominably*, a potentially hyperbolic expression, or one that is at least vague as to its exact semantic range, and is promptly asked to clarify it.

(5)	**PS000**	I think your (sic) treated completely differently if your assaulted in the street than you are if your assaulted in your home
	FL9PS000	mm, mm
	PS000	I was treated **abominably** by the police when I was assaulted in the home
	FL9PS000	er, *when you say you were treated abominably what do you mean?*
	PS000	over a number of years I was subjected to domestic violence, erm, the last time I left I didn't report it right away,

morally it was my son, I didn't want to drag him through the court, but when I did I was told no, your (sic) too late, you will just be seen as a woman scorned, your trying to get revenge, and that's it, no, I'm not taking a statement. (*BNC* FL9 117)

A similar negotiation about understanding is taking place in (6), where Marjorie suspects Dorothy of entertaining an inappropriate meaning and proceeds to correct the perceived misunderstanding.

(6) **Marjorie**   Don't, don't touch that cos she hasn't had it yet.
     Dorothy   Does she eat **anything**?
     Marjorie   *What do you mean?*
     Dorothy   Well I mean
     Marjorie   *There's no, she's not on a diet if that's what you mean.* (*BNC* KBW 19190)

Some 'hyperboles' responded to might not in fact be exaggerations. One can imagine the reactions of the policeman in (7) who thought he was being made fun of.

(7)   … Now, you've seen the picture of the van haven't you? And how small it is, a th hund er thirty-hundredweight van. Ben gave the right answer … literally speaking because it said it on the sheet of paper. But when he was asked What are you carrying anyway? he said … **Thirteen thousand fir trees**. (…) Now you can imagine with a little van that size *the policeman thought he was taking the mickey. And it was quite true cos there were thirteen thousand of these little t Er he didn't explain the size, he just said Thirteen thousand fir trees.* (*BNC* KNC 177)

Real challenges highlight the fact that the hearer realises the inappropriateness of the hyperbole, i.e., takes the role of an 'objective observer', as stated in the definition (cf. Figure 2.3). The first type of challenge is questioning the hyperbole, in its simplest form by repeating the hyperbolic expression with a question intonation, as in (8).

(8) **William**   You two
     PS0oo   <unclear >
     William   **hours ago**
     Clare   <laugh> <pause> *Hours?*
     William   **Well an hour**
     PS0oo   <unclear >
     Kim   *it wasn't hours* (*BNC* KBN 1368)

Clare's challenge here may have been softened by the preceding laugh, depending on the nature of the latter. The presence of the laugh also makes it clear that this is not a negotiation about understanding. William responds by correcting his hyperbole downwards towards the factual state of affairs, marking this by a concessive *well*. Immediate and fairly unresisting retreat is one strategy of speakers caught out exaggerating, which may indicate that their emotional involvement in the hyperbolic utterance was not very high or that nothing much depends on the precise formulation in the context. Another response strategy when challenged is silence, thereby abandoning the hyperbole completely. This is what happened in (9) where Sue's question does not receive a reply, thus violating conversational sequencing expectations. However, easily giving in, as in (8, 9), is not the standard approach to challenges, as we will see in the examples below.

(9) **PS000:** My brother is **the most brilliant artist in the world**.
     Sue: *How d'ya know that?* (*BNC* KD5 671)

As to the type of challenge, here it takes the overt form of a question about the justification for using such an extreme formulation. Such challenges (pretend to) treat the hyperbole as a factual statement which can be proved or disproved on factual grounds. A clear challenge asking for grounds is also found in (10), asked by the host of a radio phone-in show. The extremely phrased complaint of the caller is of course damaging to the show and thus needs to be clarified on air. In fact, the caller, while trying to defend his formulation, is not able factually to validate the statement, as he does not mention more than one call-in attempt as proof. Looking at the further context, one might also say that James Whale does not give him much opportunity for further justification, something that can be taken to suit his conversational aim in this excerpt.

(10) **James Whale**   What can I do for you?
      Douglas   Well I wan-- I tried **for two days** to talk about Lady Thatcher.
      James Whale   *What do you mean you tried for two days?*
      Douglas   **Well I tried at quarter to nine the day that there there is talking about it** and er I wasn't allowed on the phone. (*BNC* HUV 71)

In (11), we find another challenging strategy, namely that of correcting the hyperbole to its presumed factual basis. Stephen adjusts David's *eight thousand* pairs of Bridge players to *eighty* and adds a meta-comment on what he is doing, thus effectively changing the present topic of conversation. Like all challenges, this is an attack on the speaker, which is here exacerbated by the

implicature contained in *this time*, indicating that the speaker is in the habit of overstating things.

(11) **David** Martins, Johnson and I once did a New South Wales pairs round and as I was handing out the boards … I put them on the wrong tables, right? Out of order, right? And it was across the room scoring. There was **about eight thousand pairs playing**.

    Stephen *Maybe eighty, right? You only deduct two noughts this time.*

    David No, no. **There was about two hundred – a hundred and fifty two hundred pairs playing**.

    Stephen *Well, from eight thousand to two hundred!*

    David **Yea well whatever**. So, this board that had been – For some reason, I don't know whatever had happened, right. But we had to actually average this board across the field, and we finished at half past five in the morning.
    (Eggins and Slade 1997: 149)[18]

David first tries to defend himself by denying Stephen's corrected figure and providing a number that, in his opinion perhaps, justifies the exaggeration. When Stephen attacks the justification as well, he backs in and then goes on with his narration. The nature of the attack here is twofold: first, as stated above, it is a criticism on somebody's general speaking style, and secondly, it concerns the appropriateness, or extent, of a particular instance of hyperbole. While David is necessarily guessing at the correct figure, in those cases where the hyperbole concerns the addressee there is no need for that, because the addressee knows the facts. In (12) David applies exaggerated *for ages* to some action of Florence's, which she denies and downscales to *for years*. Her corrected version, while closer to the truth, is possibly still hyperbolic.

(12) **David**   up there **for ages**, have you?
    Florence *No for years* (BNC KC2 4005)

Instead of correcting downwards, an addressee can also mention the hyperbole and make it the target of a meta-comment as in (13). In that way one can highlight the exaggerated item precisely and indicate the amount of divergence from the factual level. Such a metalinguistic approach is then as a rule accompanied by some justification for the assessment put forward, as seen here in the explanation about pricing policy.

(13)   > … (LDC corpora are **prohibitively** expensive) …

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[18] This is the beginning of their longer Text 4.2 'Averages', which they use to illustrate the use of technical terms and 'expert' status in conversation. They do not comment on the hyperbolic aspect in this passage at all.

With apologies for my nit-picking, **I would consider 'prohibitively' to be a bit too strong**. Certainly, US$2000 for a one-year academic membership in the LDC is a lot of money – especially so back in 1992 when that amount was first established – and even now, regretfully, we know that many non-profit institutions have trouble coming up with this kind of money. (*The LDC does provide reduced rates for those with special needs and insufficient funds, considered on a case-by-case basis.*) (Corpora mailing list, June 2005; shortened, CC)

In (14) Eriksson rejects the term *hero* applied to him during the soccer World Cup.

(14)   He [Eriksson, CC] said: 'I don't feel like a hero. **Hero is a big word to apply to anybody. For me a hero is somebody who wins a war for his country**. I am not a hero.' (*DM* 17 June 2002: 79)

He corroborates his view by metalinguistic comments on the use and the meaning of *hero*, thereby essentially advocating a 'literal' and repudiating a loose or hyperbolic use of this word. It is of course hard to say whether this example reflects a general averseness to hyperbolic language (beyond the term in question) or whether the response should, rather, be seen in the context of politeness, as an application of the modesty maxim (Leech 1983).

Another type of challenge consists in presenting the exaggerating speaker with counter-evidence to the hyperbolic claim, as is found in the fictional example (15).

(15)   Context: Minister Hacker visited a so-called city farm, promised his support, and received great positive publicity for that, while he actually, unbeknown to himself, had signed an order for the re-use of the land the farm is situated on. He is now afraid of the damage to his image:

   Hacker: (…) This is **the greatest disaster this century**, Bernard.
   Bernard: *There were two world wars, minister.*
   Hacker: **Ah, fighting on the beaches is one thing. Evicting cuddly animals and children to make room for tax inspectors' cars is quite another league.**
   (*Yes Minister: The Quality of Life*, BBC, 1981)

Bernard is pointing out that there are at least two other events which can more rightfully be called the greatest disaster. Hacker is not bothered by the objection, but reaffirms and in fact even upgrades his hyperbole by essentially belittling Second World War fighting with a reference to a Churchill quotation when compared to the damage that closing the farm will do to his reputation. Needless to say, this type of reply is part of the humour of the *Yes*

Minister series and adds to the characterisation of Hacker as a self-centred and superficial politician. In the normal course of events, in contrast, such a challenging strategy should lead to the speaker backing down. One finds re-affirming instances similar to (15) in everyday speech as well, witness (16) where Christopher, a 4-year-old, repeats and upgrades his hyperbole after his parents have corrected him.

(16)	**Carl**	Latest fashion this <-|-> year. <-|->
	Susan	<-|-> Ye-- <-|-> yeah I'm I'm just <unclear>.
	Carl	Wearing a <-|-> doughnut! <-|->
	Christopher	<-|-> Andrew <-|->, cos he's got **millions of teeth** now!
	Susan	<laugh>
	Carl	God!
	Susan	*He's got ten.*
	Carl	*Not millions of teeth, no.*
	Christopher	**Millions of teeth, cos they're round his ears and nose!**
	Susan	<laugh> (*BNC* KBG 810)

A last type of 'negative' response is one that is somewhat indeterminate between a form and a content challenge. This type highlights comprehension problems on the part of the hearer, and its being regarded as negative results from the fact that it actually blames the speaker for being obscure. *Totally non-existent kissing* used by Catherine in (17) answering a question about an intimate encounter exaggerates the brief, cursory and boring nature of the kissing that occurred, as becomes clear from her explanation.

(17)	**Cassie**	You did get off with him?
	Catherine	Twice, but it was **totally non-existent kissing** so
	Cassie	*What do you mean?*
	Catherine	**I was sort of falling asleep. Lasted yeah lasted about two seconds** and it was twice and basically… (*BNC* KP4 522)

It could, however, also have been intended in a more literal understanding, namely that the two people involved had not even kissed at all. This is what causes Cassie to make her request for clarification.

The instances discussed so far were all from dialogic contexts, even the somewhat marginal (13). People also comment on other speakers' hyperbole in other than face-to-face contexts. The following instance from a Law School tutorial contains a very general assessment about people being prone

to hyperbole, or at least positive hyperbole about themselves, by inventing a plausible example.

(18)   Erm, the rule of evidence is that it is inherently unlikely that anybody would make a statement against their own interest unless it was true. Right? You might very well say that you were **the greatest law lecturer in the world**, *because people tend to say these things about themselves. It would be unlikely that you would say that you were the worst law lecturer in the world unless you were.* (*BNC* HYH 83)

   Occurrences like these show that people are to a certain extent consciously aware about possible forms and contexts of hyperbolic usage. The next two instances are again more specific, as they target and critically assess the kind of hyperbole commonly employed in marketing products, whether they are books (19) or medicine (20). The review of *Vernon God Little* by DBC Pierre in (19) proceeds to demolish the exaggerated claims printed on the book cover and implies that they even exceed the exaggeration norm of this genre. It is the latter point that leads to the topicalisation of this aspect here (and perhaps the degree of contrast to the 'reality' of the book), as the 'normal' hyperbolic level will be within the tolerance limit of the reader, based on his or her genre convention knowledge.

(19)   Whatever else the merits of DBC Pierre's debut, *he has raised the art of book-jacket hyperbole to new heights.* Critics **queue up** to testify to **endless belly-laughs**, to **pages that practically turn themselves**, and John Carey, chairman of the panel that awarded it the Booker prize, **likens Pierre's linguistic freedom to the malleable English of Shakespeare's day**. *Can any text live up to this level of exaggeration? Not really.* Though the dysfunctional argot is well sustained and Pierre clamps together some striking metaphors, *this rollicking Tex-Mex fantasy is essentially Jerry Springer*: … (Alfred Hickling, in: *The Guardian Weekly* 28 May–3 June 2004; 24)

   In (20) it is, rather, the moral outrage of the speaker about the marketing procedures of medical companies that prompts the comments. In contrast to (19), and like (18) above, what is in focus is not a specific case of hyperbole, but a generalised one, abstracted from wider experience.

(20)   … *you don't seem to understand the way the drug companies work.* They put a drug on the market and they say that it's wonderful and **that the side effects are** irrelevant and **very slight** and that **everybody's gonna be very happy** and **it's a new wonder drug** and **it'll change the world** and [intake of breath] *isn't that marvellous. Then a few years later when the problems develop they say, oh god we're terribly sorry, we'll take the drug off the market.* (*BNC* HV1 41)

The extreme marketing statements used as examples are contrasted with what often turns out to be the reality later. Here, it is also arguable that the speaker is not, or not only, targeting hyperbole (though the hallmarks of hyperbole are present), but is actually accusing the companies of misleading/lying.

Advertising is not alone in being suspected and accused of hyperbolic style. Another target is the media, sometimes in combination with politics. Addressees, or victims (?), of such common hyperbole may react to it with degrees of resignation and enervation. Ironically, the complaints in (21) and (22) appear in one of the media, namely the press. Example (21) deals with early media reactions to a case of amok running in a German school and highlights the pressures of having or wanting to report on something without having the necessary amount of information. Interestingly, it is an extreme case formulation which is topicalised here (*alles* 'all, everything'), i.e., an instance that should be completely defeasible, therefore freely contradictable (Norrick 2004: 1733) and thus largely unobtrusive. A number of the above examples, which are commented on or challenged, can also be taken to fall completely or partly into this category (e.g., 9, 17, 18, 19, 20), so that it seems doubtful, contra Norrick (2004) whether they are really treated differently from other instances of hyperbole.

(21) **ALLES über das Verbrechen**. Gleich in Radio FFH. *Als wisse irgendwer schon mehr, geschweige denn ALLES*. Aber nein, wir sollen ja dranbleiben, jedenfalls bis zur nächsten Werbung, *also darf, was uns versprochen wird, keinesfalls weniger als ALLES sein.*

   (**EVERYTHING about the crime**. Coming up on Radio FFH. *As if anybody knew any further details at this point in time, let alone EVERYTHING*. But no, we have to be kept listening, until the next commercial at least, and *therefore we need to be promised by no means anything less than EVERYTHING*.)

   (Matthias Altenburg, in *Die Zeit* 20, 8 May 2002; capitalisation original)

(22) The country [Germany, CC] has been in a particularly bad mood these past few months as another round in the economic reform debate has trundled on weighed down with *the usual hyperbolic stuff* about '**crisis**', '**collapse**' and '**outrageous**' attacks on the welfare state. (Tom Levine, *Prospect*, July 2003; 19)

In (22), the focus is on other people's exaggerated assessment of a given state of affairs. The quote captures and criticises the prevailing tendency in Germany at that time (and perhaps in general) to see everything in a highly negative light and generally to expect the worst of everything. What is noteworthy about examples (18) through to (22) is that speakers do not just state

and somehow paraphrase the hyperbole in question, but they explicitly quote the forms on which they are commenting. Given a large enough corpus of such instances, these would allow the researcher to construct a folk model of what constitutes hyperbole. It would be interesting to see whether similar cases also exist for the purpose of positive appraisal – in the present data there are no such cases.

In everyday interaction, however, there are instances which show a positive assessment of hyperbole on the part of the interlocutors. These can take a minimal form, e.g., in the sense of being non-verbal. Lisa acknowledges and appreciates Melvin's utterance in (23) with laughing, in which he joins in.

(23) **Melvin**   <-|-> he was going <-|-> both of them going, how's your missus, some people didn't even know that you were pregnant again

   Lisa   <laugh>

   Melvin   some people, no I said she's alright, she's out here like that, ah,

   PS000   <unclear >

   Lisa   <laugh>

   Melvin   yeah, that's it, no more, I said three

   PS000   <unclear >

   Melvin   **I haven't slept for two years**

   Lisa   *<laugh>*

   Melvin   *<laugh>* (*BNC* KD3 2212)

The laugh acknowledges and licenses the hyperbolic formulation, indicating that the hearer finds it amusing or funny.

It has been pointed out that it is the rule that agreement with utterances is expressed by providing second assessments, in particular those of an upgraded kind (Pomerantz 1984, quoted in Edwards 2005: 269). With hyperbole a further upgrade is of course not that easy; if the hyperbole in question is a 'mild' one, it is possible to top it with a bigger one, but extreme hyperboles could only be surpassed by an absurd one. Another option is to go along with the hyperbole roughly on the same level as that set by the speaker, but the notion of 'same level' is not always easy to apply. The simplest method here is for the addressee simply to repeat the preceding speaker's hyperbole, as Albert does in (24).

(24) **June**   I ended up paying for him. She's not bothered, she **never goes near him**.

   Albert   *Never goes near him.*

   June   She **never goes near him**. She's **frightened to death** of 'im (*BNC* KB1 475)

In contrast to *Hours?* in (8) above, an assertive, thus in some ways appreciative type of intonation (as opposed to a questioning one) is necessary in order for the repetition to go through as a positive assessment. As June then proceeds to add another, stronger hyperbole to her original one, the assessment provided might not have seemed sufficiently appreciative to her. A second same-level method is to produce another hyperbole with about the same force as the first one. This is especially tricky, as there is hardly a way to measure the exact force of an individual hyperbole. However, if two forms exhibit roughly the same degree of conventionality, they might also be regarded as having a similar(ly weakened) hyperbolic force. *Wolf down* and *starve* in (25) can both be regarded as conventional forms of about the same status.

(25) **Gill**   I think I might feel a bit sick now. Yeah.
      Anon.   I wish I hadn't stuffed it down so quick.
      Gill   Yeah you **wolfed** yours **down**, you fat pig.
      Anon.   I was *starving* though. (*BNC* KC7 892)

Gill's utterance represents a reproach, which the following excuse or justification thus has to at least match the strength of in order to be successful. In both parts of this type of adjacency pair exaggerating is a useful strategy in general (cf. Pomerantz 1986: 219). The present exchange, however, is not a completely serious one, but can rather be seen as playful in the spirit of Leech's (1983) Banter Principle. In (26), comparable strength is overtly reached by using the same hyperbolic formula with minimal lexical exchange. There is, however, some additional material in Francis' response which makes his assessment somewhat less forceful than Lemar's statement: there is most importantly the hedgy *one of* and the tagged on clause *you told me*, which may betray some impatience and dissatisfaction with Lemar's opinion.

(26) **Lemar**   Yeah, **the best footballer in the world**.
      Francis I know! It was *one of the best goals in the world* you told me!
                   (*BNC* KDH 2077)

The last strategy found which was used to match a speaker's hyperbole is to take its content at its surface face value and to comment playfully on it. The following three examples do this in different ways. The topic of talk in (27) is a former partner of Jane, who is being criticised by Jane and also by the other interlocutors. While other remarks in the co-text stay on a fairly factual ('literal') level, the evaluation about a very sensitive topic in (28) is couched in hyperbolic terms, standing out as a particularly noteworthy point. The amount of hyperbole remains vague to the outsider, as the number of girls is not specified – but the implication is that

there were quite a few. While Madge simply (and seriously?) acknowledges Jane's hyperbolic evaluation, Chris' reply is also supportive of it but additionally lightens the tone and tries to introduce a more jocular mood. He paints a mental picture of Jane having to care for all of the man's many children.

(27) **Madge**   how many kids has he had <-|-> by each one? <-|->
      Jane   <-|-> I say **he's had half a dozen kids** <-|-> **to each girl** <-|-> **he's been** <-|->
      Madge   <-|-> Yeah. <-|->
      Jane   **going out** ain't he?
      Chris   Mm and *just think Jane if you'd of stayed with him* <-|-> *you'd have your hands full.* <-|-> (*BNC* KCG 1169)

Allan's *two hundred percent funding cut* in (28) is an absurd, in the sense of factually impossible, hyperbole, as a cut of more than 100 per cent is not possible at once and this cut would leave him with a minus amount of money. Sue presents to take the statement and the figure in it seriously and goes on to calculate how funding and time may match. Both speakers mark the playfulness with laughter.

(28) **Allan**   I want this in for when me and Jayne do this management training at er at <name> Grammar School. This year it's it's gonna be a **two hundred per cent funding** <voice:laughing>**cut.**   <-|->   For   me.</laughing> <laugh> <-|->
      Sue   <-|-> <laugh> <-|-> *A hundred per cent funding for more than fifty per cent of the day* you know. (*BNC* G4X 892)

Similarly, the hyperbolic episode in (29) is delimited by (simulated) laughter by Roy introducing the exaggerated stretch of language and in both this and the follow-up remark by a distinct voice quality, with Marilyn's *no* being rather emphatically 'overdone', for example. In his first utterance in this excerpt, Roy is introducing a serious topic, one which can potentially spoil the atmosphere and, in the given setting of cooking together, people's appetite. This he tries to forestall by immediately introducing a specific example constructed in a light, humorous note (he will, however, revert to more gruesome detail later). Marilyn's reply spins out what potential use the chicken characterised thus might have.

(29) **Roy:**   … Have you heard about these horrific … uh new .. genetic … developments, in .. in .. um … food livestock?
      Pete: .. Y_no. .. [Like what].

Roy: [Like they're], .. they're @trying @to bree=d, .. <VOX ho ho= VOX>, (H) .. they're trying to breed like a **forty foot long** tube chicken?

Marilyn: .. <F<VOX No= VOX>F> @@. (H) *You mean so that they can [go right] from that [2to Chicken2] McNuggets?* (*SBC*3)

What the replies in the last three examples have in common is their counter-factuality. Jane in (27) is no longer together with the man and, moreover, he is apparently not acknowledging his children, as the following co-text indicates. Thus, the situation envisaged by Chris is purely hypo-thetical and known as such to all interlocutors. The calculation presented in (28) does not really make much sense mathematically or economic-ally and is thus unrealistic. Marilyn's remark in (29) envisages a livestock production chain that is utopian, or rather dystopian – but nevertheless the picture painted here might be uncomfortably close to realities in the food industry as feared by some speakers. What the replying speakers are doing in these instances can be explained in terms of Goffman's concepts of 'framing' and 'footing' (Goffman 1979, Clift 1999). They are not speaking seriously for themselves, i.e., they are not committed to and fully respon-sible for their statement, but are taking a make-believe perspective which builds on the foundation provided by the preceding hyperbolic remark. This is what Goffman terms 'footing'. The perspective in question can be a completely non-sensical one, or one that may contain a grain of truth and even be attributable to certain (types of) speakers (as perhaps in (29)). The stretch of language affected is put into a distancing frame by the use of certain strategies and cues, such as are found in the instances above: the laughter, the tone of voice and the preface *just think* in (27). In (28) and (27) such cues are of course also present in the hyperbolic utterance itself, which raises the question of whether framing and footing is relevant for hyperbole as such. In this context, Clark's (1996) model of non-literal language use is of interest, as it is similar to Goffman's concepts. Clark (1996: Chapter 12, esp. 368–78) proposes to explain the occurrences of communicative acts such as irony, sarcasm, teasing, overstatement and rhetorical questions with the help of the concepts of layering and of staged communicative acts. Layer 1 in any communication situation represents the actual situation while layer 2 is created by the *joint pretence* of the speakers involved.[19] Acts creating and taking place within layer 2 are *staged commu-nicative acts*, which are *sincerely* exchanged between the implied commu-nicative partners of layer 2, who *correspond* to the real partners on layer 1. According to the intention of the pretence-initiating partner, all partners

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[19] This theory is clearly based on the pretence theory of irony, originally presented by Clark and Gerrig (1984).

should be able to perceive a clear *contrast* between the situations in the various layers, i.e., there should be no danger of confusion. Finally, the acts performed by the implied partners on layer 2 are *deniable* in the sense that they would not be admitted to apply to the real persons on layer 1 (I have italicised the important properties of the theory). In his discussion of an example of irony, Clark (1996 369f.) highlights various para-linguistic or non-linguistic cues (tone, facial expression, laughter, etc.) as indicators of the opening up of a second layer, which are reminiscent of framing strategies. In some instances, like (28, 29), such cues are present, but in many others they are missing, e.g., in (27). In contrast to irony, to which Clift (1999) applies Goffman's concepts, hyperbole is hardly ever accompanied by signals and there is no such thing as a hyperbolic tone of voice.[20] The footing or layering approach is especially problematic in cases where the hyperbole has a role to play in a very real problem-solving task, such as in (1a, pp. 130f.) above, where the addressee is asked to help identify a *real* person whom the hyperbolic description might fit. Within layer 1, the speaker is simply asking the hearer to imagine whom he might describe in a similar way as an aid for the identification. Thus, these approaches are not applicable to hyperbole in general,[21] but they are of interest for such playful, quasi-fictionalised examples as those above. For Clark's model to work, cases where more than one speaker is explicitly, i.e., verbally, involved are necessary, as the implied addressee can only be proved by the actual presence of a reply or uptake that is anchored in layer 2. As I have pointed out on p. 143 above, many hyperboles do not receive a noteworthy reply.

Instances where the hyperbole is co-created or co-constructed are candidates for the layered category, however. In (30) Ann, a child-minder, and Bryony, a 2-year-old child, are playing a game about possible designations for Bryony, with Sally providing a sort of audience (cf. her laughs). At least for Ann, the interaction in (30) is certainly a game with semi-fictional utterances, whereas this cannot be stated with absolute certainty for Bryony – unless this is a repeated game already known to her. Labels like *horror* or *best girl in the world* have an echoic quality, in the sense that they re-occur in this or similar shape in many parent/adult–child relationships and it is clear from the context in (30) that neither are they new to either participant here.

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[20] Needless to say, neither so-called irony signals nor the ironic tone is unproblematic – but at least they exist to some extent.

[21] The aspects of contrast and deniability are clearly applicable to hyperbole, cf. the discussion in Chapter 2. Otherwise, I see various problems with this approach. What is missing in the account, for example, is how addressees actually know that a second layer has been opened, unless clear cues are present. As to implied interactants, the necessity for the addressee to be implied is present only if he/she is also in some sense the target of the staged act; this is not the case here, nor is it in most instances of hyperbole (cf. Table 4.4 in Chapter 4). Furthermore, whereas in (most) irony, teases, etc., the *surface form* of what is said clearly clashes with what the speaker really intends, this is not the case in hyperbole, where what is said, strictly speaking, only magnifies what is meant. There is, thus, no need to resort to 'fictionality' in order to protect the speaker.

(30) **Ann**   Are you our horror?
     Bryony Not a horror!
     Sally   \<laugh>
     Ann   You're not a horror? What are you?
     Bryony I'm not erm
     Ann   What are you? **You are the best**
     Bryony **girl in the world!**
     Ann   <-|-> *That's right! The best* <-|->
     Sally   <-|-> \<laugh> <-|->
     Ann   *girl in the world* Sally!
     Sally   \<laugh> (*BNC* KB8 2752)

Near co-creation is found also in (31), with Norma's question *is it a tip?* intervening in Wendy's phrasing already in progress. The hyperbolic expression used is again a conventional and thus predictable one, which makes the joining in easily possible. Wendy's *absolute tip* is a negative evaluation, which actually reflects negatively on her as the housekeeper. It can be argued that this is only partly herself speaking, while she is partly taking the perspective of an outsider (perhaps Norma) who might describe her flat thus.

(31) **Norma**   Go and have an early night.
     Wendy   \<voice: laughing>Oh well \</laughing> if I could! I got **loads** to do. **Loads**!
     Norma   *Have you?*
     Wendy   Mhm.
     Norma   What \<unclear>?
     Wendy   Ah \<pause> tidy up this house, it's an **absolute**
     Norma   *Is it a tip?*
     Wendy   **tip, absolute tip**.
     Norma   *Really?*
     Wendy   Yeah. **A bomb hit us in the night**, d'ya not know that? \<laugh> \<pause> **That's what it looks like!**
     Norma   *Oh can't you*
     Wendy   So
     Norma   *can't you leave some of it until tomorrow morning?* Or is it better when you having a quiet (*BNC* KP8 2679)

The equally conventional follow-up statement (*bomb hit us*) sounds like a statement that can possibly be made by anybody. The laughter provided by Wendy at two points in this excerpt and the unrealistic question *d'ya not know that?* can in this interpretation be seen as framing cues. What this

playful interaction is about on layer 1 is the expression of sympathy and pity for Wendy, achieved on the one hand by the fact that somebody shares her (staged) opinion, i.e., understands her emotional state, and on the other hand by Norma's suggestions for Wendy to take a rest, thus showing that she cares for her well-being. Strategies like Wendy's here are thus an invitation for exchanges functioning within the context of positive politeness strategies (cf. also Section 5.3 below). Norma's co-creation is surrounded by other supportive devices, namely her questions *have you?, what (…)?* and *really?,* which in contrast to, e.g., (8) above, do not have a challenging function, but indicate interest and appreciation by encouraging more talk of the same kind; in other words, they are a positive politeness strategy in the sense of Brown and Levinson (1987: 128) or of Leech's (1983) Sympathy Maxim. The intonation used, paralinguistic signals and/or mutual knowledge will as a rule make perfectly clear whether a given move is to be understood as a challenge or as an appreciation. Annette's question in (32) equally shows interest and has an elicitative function. David's following factual elaboration is then in turn greeted by an interjection and understatement, which both express Annette's appreciation.

(32) **David**   <-|-> Yeah right. <-|-> Yeah. <pause> I haven't got much territory now. **I'm all over the place!**

 Annette   *Have you?*

 David   Mm. Yeah. Do half of Preston's you see.

 Annette   <-|-> Yeah. <-|->

 David   <-|-> You know <-|->, Blackburn and Burnley, <unclear> and all that round there. Accrington, Wetheral, Longridge.

 Annette   *Jeepers!* <-|-> *You get about* <-|->

 David   <-|-> All over the place! <-|->

 Annette   *a bit then?* (*BNC* KB9 3155)

Explicitly showing interest in the point conveyed by a hyperbolic expression, as in (31) and especially (32), is thus a further option that addressees can pursue in providing an assessment of an appropriate kind.

5.2.1   *Competitive exaggeration: insulting and boasting*

Matched or upgraded hyperbole, as mentioned in the context of examples (25) to (27) (pp. 153–4), can be taken to regular extremes in some speech events, to which Clark's concept of layering (pp. 155f.) may partly be applicable as well. Boasting and insult exchanges in some cultural contexts make liberal use of extreme, exaggerated statements.

While personal insulting with a serious intention does not necessarily use exaggeration, as the Middle English examples in Jucker (2000) show, so-called ritual insults are often exaggerated or absurd. Furthermore, while personal insults have a number of possible reactions, from silence via denials, excuses to counter-abuses, ritual insults always demand a response of the same kind (Jucker 2000: 375; Arnovick 1999: 21f.). Ritual insulting, also known as 'sounding', 'signifying' and 'playing the dozens', is found most commonly (though not exclusively) in the African-American community. Sounding in African-American culture is a competitive verbal game, in which two or more players exchange insults each of which has to top the previous one(s) in order for the speaker to win the game (1999: 20; Labov 1972: 308).[22] Labov (1972: 338f., 342) gives the following rules for ritual insults:

1   If A makes an utterance S in the presence of B and an audience C, which includes reference to a target related to B, T(B), in a proposition P, and
    a.   B believes that A believes that P is not true and
    b.   B believes that A believes that B knows that P is not true …
         then S is a sound, heard as *T(B) is so X that P* where X is a pejorative attribute, and A is said to have sounded on B.
2   If A has sounded on B, B sounds on A by asserting a new proposition P' which includes reference to a target related to A, T(A), and such that it is an AB-event that P' is untrue. P' may be embedded in a sentence as a quantification of a pejorative attribute of X' of T(A).
3   the response to a sound is a sound.

It is of vital importance that the untruth of P is obvious to everybody present, as in the example *Your mother is so low she c'play Chinese handball on a curve*, where a hyperbolic comparison is employed – i.e., 'nobody is that low' (Labov 1972: 340; Smitherman 2000: 228). Among the patterns Labov lists, the comparative kind[23] seems especially suited to hyperbolic use, e.g., *your mother is so old she got spider webs under her arms / so old, she took her driving test on a dinosaur / so skinny she could split through a needle's eye / so small, you play hide-and-go-seek, y'all c'slip under a penny / so stupid, she thought a lawsuit was something you wear to court* (2000 311f., 345). Some sounds work with straightforward size hyperbole, e.g., *she got a ten-ton pussy, she got knobs on her titties that open the door* or *a pussy like a Greyhound Bus* (Abrahams 1962: 210; Labov 1972: 308). Other sounds provide descriptions that imply the extreme presence of a feature such as dirt, poverty, etc., as in *I went to David house, I saw the roaches walkin' round in combat boots* or *I went to your*

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[22] Similar customs or instances can also be found in other English-speaking contexts, e.g., in late medieval Scotland, where flyting was practised, cf., for example, 'The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie'.
[23] Cf. the formal realisations described in Chapter 3.

house, stepped on a cigarette, and your mother screamed, 'Who turned off the heat?' (Labov 1972: 316). These are in line with the calculated absurdities mentioned in Section 2.2. Each sound has to be topped, i.e., it should ideally be followed by an original transformation, which is better than the sound to which it reacts. This can apparently be done by increasingly extreme statements, by introducing topics of recognised higher value (e.g., reference to sex is rated higher than poverty), by absurdities or by clever puns (cf. Labov 1972: 327). Smitherman (2000: 227) mentions hyperbole first among her criteria for being good at the game, i.e., for good insults (or so-called snaps): 'they must be exaggerated, the wilder, the better, like "Your mother's mouth is so big, when she inhales, her sneakers get untied".' The other two criteria involve the use of creative figures of speech (where one may think of metaphorical hyperbole) and of getting the timing exactly right. According to Labov (1972: 308), the winner in a sounding context is the man with the largest store of couplets on hand, the best memory and perhaps the best delivery.

Semi-serious, or humorous exaggeration also characterises much of the conventional boasting heard in the African-American community (Arnovick 1999: 24, cf. Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990: 100–11). Insulting and boasting, as well as perhaps threatening, often go hand in hand (Arnovick 1999: 25), cf. the exchange provided by Smitherman (2000: 204): *If you don't quit messin wif me, uhma jump down your throat, tap dance on your liver, and make you wish you never been born. – Yeah, you and how many armies? Nigger, don't you know uhm so bad I can step on a wad of gum and tell you what it is.* Edwards and Sienkewicz (1990) mention boasting of similar kinds and functions in African and ancient Greek cultures. Both they and Smitherman (2000: 203f.) mention the African Sunjata (or Sundiata) in which extravagant pre-battle boasting between two speakers is found:

(33) **S1:**   I am the poisonous mushroom that makes the fearless vomit.

     S2:   As for me, I am the ravenous cock, the poison does not matter to me.

     S1:   Behave yourself, little boy, or you will burn your foot, for I am the red-hot cinder.

     S2:   But me, I am the rain that extinguishes the cinder; I am the boisterous torrent that will carry you off.

     S1:   I am the mighty silk-cotton tree that looks from on high on the tops of other trees.

     S2:   And I, I am the strangling creeper that climbs to the top of the forest giant.

Each extreme metaphor S1 uses is countered and thus devalued by an even stronger boast of S2. According to Edwards and Sienkewicz, the boasts of Muhammad Ali before his fights have to be seen in this very tradition.

The examples of ritual insulting and of boasting further illustrate that there are genres in which hyperbole has an important and institutionalised role to play (cf. further, Chapter 7 for some more roles of hyperbole in larger textual contexts).

5.3   Face and politeness

While ritual insulting is a kind of staged impoliteness, the examples (31) and (32) above (pp. 157–8) have already touched on politeness with respect to reactions to hyperbole. Hyperbolic expressions themselves need to be considered in the light of face-work and politeness strategies as well. The hyperboles in (31) and (32) might be seen as dealing in different ways with Leech's Modesty Maxim, for example. While Wendy's description of her house as a 'tip' (31) conforms to it by maximising dispraise of the speaker, David in (32) infringes it by producing a mild boast. Keller's maxim 'talk in an especially polite, flattering, charming, etc. way' (cf. Section 4.2.2 above) points to a role for exaggerating in polite speech acts. These are indications of the varied role which hyperbole can play in interactional work: it can serve as a politeness strategy for avoiding or softening a face-threatening act (FTA) with respect to both positive and negative politeness, it can enhance a politeness strategy, but it can also function in the context of producing or strengthening an FTA. Thus, hyperbole has a role in impoliteness, and in (mock) impoliteness.

The psychological dimension of politeness is about dispositions and attitudes and in that sense politeness is linked to emotive communication. There is thus a connection to the expression of emotion through hyperbole as treated in Section 4.2.1, and to the understanding of emotive causes and effects as expressed by hyperbole mentioned in Section 5.1 above. According to Caffi and Janney (1994: 326), there are the following relations between emotions and language, all of which are important for the discussion of politeness:

> (1) we can all express feelings that we have, (2) we can all have feelings that we do not express, (3) we can all express feelings that we do not have, or feelings that we think our partners might expect or wish us to have, or feelings that it might be felicitous to have in a given situation for particular reasons.

Relation (2) is important but not researchable in naturally occurring language because of its zero-realisation. In the case of (1), a given instance of hyperbole can thus be simply a more or less inadvertent emotional expression or a goal–directed politeness strategy – cf. also Culpeper *et al.* (2003: 1557) on the difficulty of distinguishing clearly between such cases. Relation (3) clearly constitutes strategic language use, at least in theory: in this case hyperbolic expressions with affective potential are used in the absence of an appropriate

emotional state of the speaker, but, as with (1), it is almost impossible to decide on the absence or the presence of either aspect in authentic contexts. The important question here is about the attribution of intentions to speakers and on the perception of intentionality on the part of the addressees. There can be no absolute certainty about these; only plausible assumptions on the basis of a careful analysis of the data.

In Chapter 4, I have shown that the majority of hyperbolic expressions are used for the purpose of negative evaluations (Table 4.5, p. 81). Legitt and Gibbs' study quoted above also investigated the use of hyperbole in 'negative' contexts and gave evidence for the fact that addressees rank its adverse emotional impact rather highly. Hyperbole thus clearly has FTA-potential. The following example of a dialogue between husband and wife can clearly be looked at in this light: it is conflict talk.

(34)   **Albert**   I've shut the door now I've finished running about
       June   With door instead of handle
       Albert   You know no matter what I do it's **always** bloody wrong.
       June   I'm glad, he reminds me of me dad, you put door handles on doors to open em you don't use 'em for shutting
       Albert   Says er last night who went and got a bath and left **every door in the house** open
       June   It's alright.
       Albert   Yeah, it's alright for you, you were in a nice warm bath, I was downstairs. (*BNC* KB1 105)

June's first utterance represents an indirect complaint about a specific act of Albert, accusing him of shutting the door noisily and improperly. Albert clearly feels attacked by his wife, and chooses the strategy of counter-attack (cf. Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1562, quoting Harris *et al.* 1986), a common approach in such context. The overall effect here is to escalate the conflict. He uses the generalising *no matter what*, and hyperbolic *always*, indicating that June does not approve of his overall behaviour and thus, implicitly, of him as a person, thereby introducing a more general level into the controversy. Jumping from a specific point to such a general one and using extreme statements which may be hard to counter can be seen as an explicit way of forestalling agreement and of producing disharmony. In his second utterance, Albert proceeds to an attack on June's behaviour as being detrimental to him and, perhaps, as conflicting with her expectations of him. Again, he uses a hyperbolic form, this time not to generalise but to heighten the nature of June's offence. Both hyperboles used are typical extreme case statements, thus representing the strongest possible statement that the speaker can make. While these hyperbolic forms certainly do express emotionality, such as Albert's irritation at being criticised (cf. also the use of *bloody*), they clearly

have a goal-oriented interactional value as well. Albert did not have to produce these (specific) FTAs; he could simply have ignored June's reproach, backed silently down, apologised for banging the door or used a milder linguistic form for his reproaches. Therefore, I see them as impoliteness strategies (in the sense of Culpeper 1996) in the context of Albert's counterattack, defending his face by attacking June's. As a successful counterattack needs to be stronger than the original FTA, the use of hyperbolic expressions is a promising tactic.

Negatively evaluative hyperbole in general involves the maximisation of impolite beliefs and thus represents a contradiction to Leech's definition of politeness. Leech (1983: 146) assumed that polite beliefs will tend to be overstated, whereas impolite beliefs will more probably be understated. All negative hyperbolic evaluations directed at present interlocutors are therefore either outright impolite or an unavoidable FTA in need of redress. As shown in Chapter 4, present people are the target of a hyperbolic expression in only 10 per cent of all cases (and by no means all of them are negative, of course), of which the majority (7 per cent versus 3 per cent) refer to an activity, not a personal characteristic, of the addressee. It is slightly less damaging to attack aspects which are transient/can be changed than which are an inalienable part of a person. The *every-door* hyperbole in (34) refers to a specific activity, while the one involving *always* talks about repeated action and thus implies a character predisposition; the latter is thus the stronger FTA and more impolite. Not all hyperbolic FTAs are counterattacks; some are, strictly speaking, unprovoked, at least at the moment they occur. Kerry in (35) has not been attacked by Mark; Michael, who is not present at this point in the conversation, however, has been. Nevertheless, Kerry produces a strong generalised criticism of Mark, perhaps triggered by exasperation about Mark not admitting that he may be at least partly responsible.

(35) **Kerry**   Look there's wee pieces of cheese everywhere in this fridge. <pause> Open a block and then open another block.

 Mark   That's Michael again. <pause>

 Kerry   You're the one that eats cheese too, you blame **everything** on Michael.

 Mark   It's him that eats most of the cheese. (*BNC* KD9 440)

What is also interesting is to look at the reactions to the hyperbolic attacks in (34, 35). Extreme-case formulations of the type present here have been called a risky strategy as one counter-example would be sufficient to discredit the hyperbolic argument. Neither June nor Mark try this approach (pointing out which door was closed, for example), or even attend to the extreme formulation in any way. June tries to back down and defuse the tension, and Mark produces a fact that backs up his earlier statement and partly refutes

the non-hyperbolic part of Kerry's utterance. I would argue that while it is easy in everyday speech to resort to very extreme formulations, it is more difficult and rather unusual for an addressee to think of a specific refutation. This is more likely to happen in formal argumentation contexts (e.g., trials), where extreme case formulations are really risky. In colloquial contexts, however, extreme hyperboles can function successfully as FTAs. In (36) below, Mark's verbally unprovoked hyperbolic attack works as a forceful threat. A threat is inherently impolite or an intrinsic FTA (cf. Leech 1983: 83, Brown and Levinson 1987: 66). Moreover, Mark did not need to resort to this type of speech act in the context, but could have used a normal request instead. He also had the choice of formulating a 'milder' threat, whereas the one he used is expressed in the most extreme form possible and thus further intensifies the FTA.

(36)   **Michael**   Down there.
     Mark   Are they?
     Michael   Yes, in a bag.
     Mark   How do you know?
     Michael   \<unclear\> in a bag.
     Mark   How do you know? How do you know? \<pause\> You stop poking into my stuff or **I'll kill you**. Get out. Catch you in my stuff again **I'll \<-|-\> kill you**. \<-|-\>
     Michael   \<-|-\> I wasn't \<-|-\> in there anyway.
     Mark   Yes you were (*BNC* KD9 821)

In (34) certainly and very likely in (35, 36) the interaction takes place between family members[24] and this seems typical of impolite hyperbole in the present data, which can be linked to research quoted by Culpeper (1996: 354, quoting Birchler *et al.* 1975) that greater intimacy can foster the occurrence of impoliteness. Culpeper argues that while partners in intimate relationships have the necessary knowledge as to which aspects are particularly sensitive for the other's face and thus useful in FTAs, the degree of affect and common (face) wants nevertheless makes the greater occurrence of impoliteness in such contexts unlikely. This may very well be so with respect to friendships, but families are not completely voluntary relationships for all members concerned. In particular, there is an intrinsic problem with privacy in family contexts (partly focused in (36)), which can lead to tensions and impoliteness. A further aspect that the three impolite examples have in common is their use of conventional hyperbolic forms. Brown and Levinson (1987: 220) quote the similar *You néver do the washing up* as an indirect, i.e., off-record strategy, but, as they themselves point out (212), conventionality can cause a shift in the direction of an on-record strategy – and thus, in my

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[24] Husband and wife in (34), probably mother and son in (35) and teenage brothers in (36).

view, towards impoliteness. Conventional forms are blunter, as a rule shorter than creative ones and therefore in some respect more forceful. They do not detract from the attack by an interesting, playful form and do not lighten the tone by, however slight, humorous touches.

In contrast to offensive impoliteness, there is also mock impoliteness, i.e., impolite surface forms which are not meant to be hurtful but friendly (cf. Culpeper 1996, Culpeper *et al.* 2003, Leech 1983: Banter Principle). Again, hyperbole can play a role. It is their particular contextual fit, and in some instances also prosodic and extralinguistic cues (e.g., smiling), that distinguish these hyperbolic uses from those in real FTAs. In (37), for example, Mike's response, if taken at face value, is absolutely disproportionate to the cause, which consisted in me spilling a few drops while pouring a cup of espresso. Instead of being insulting, the mock hyperbole makes the point that my apology was unnecessary because of the smallness of the offence in question.

(37) **Claudia** Sorry, spilt some.
      Mike   Terrible. **I shall never speak to you again**. (CC)

Example (38) is about the question of who was doing the washing up, which, due to its perceived unpleasantness for most people, is an occasion that can lead to conflict. Thus, the context alone does not disambiguate here between mock and serious impoliteness. There are other indicators, however: There is repeated laughter by several interlocutors (also in the omitted section), there is the response to the hyperbolic complaint with its almost cartoon-like character and there is the particular realisation of the hyperbole, i.e., the repetition of a negative evaluation directed at a present person. It is exactly this overdone characteristic that turns the utterance into something close to ironic praise.

(38) **Nancy** <unclear> washing up <unclear> <pause>
      Jemma Yeah but <unclear>
      Gill   That, that kind of er <pause> that kind alienates us from <unclear> <laugh>
      Nancy J-- J-- er whatsit <unclear> as well
      Anon. We did fight for it though.
      Gill   <voice: laughing>Yeah</laughing>
      Anon. I was fighting very, <unclear> wanted to do it.
      [… lines omitted, CC]
      Jemma You made life **horrible** for me cos I was doing the washing up, you **horrible horrible horrible** person.
      Anon. Urgh!
      Nancy <laugh> (*BNC* KC7 887)

It is necessary that non-seriously intended impoliteness is clearly untrue, which means that hyperbole used for that purpose must be clearly overdone or absurd in the given context or generally (cf. also Section 5.2.1 above). Zajdman (1995: 333) charts four possible configurations of the speaker's and hearer's take on a situation involving a humorous FTA, only one of which (his (d)) ensures the full success of mock impoliteness as understood here: speaker's intention = not meaning offence, hearer's interpretation = not taking offence => speaker's expectation = amusement, hearer's reaction = amusement. If either the form chosen is not blatant enough or the match form–situation is somehow unclear, the hearer's reaction can instead be an insult, which is the case in two of Zajdman's constellations.

Hyperbole can also play a role in FTAs with accompanying redressive action, i.e., within politeness as such. The FTA itself can be exaggerated as long as there is enough evidence of good intentions towards the face of the addressee in the surrounding discourse. In (39), daughter-in-law (Wendy) and mother-in-law (Norma) talk about meeting up so that Norma could see her grandchildren again.

(39) **Wendy**   pop in after lunch er th with the
     Norma   Alright.
     Wendy   boys because they haven't se they haven't seen you **for ages**.
     Norma   Yes.
     Wendy   And erm
     Norma   Oh I would **love**
     Wendy   they're as they're asking
     Norma   Yes I know, I would
     Wendy   So
     Norma   **love** that! And I'm I'm when I wrote to Marion I said, er I'm ge I am getting the **most terrible withdrawal symptoms**! I haven't seen two sweeties for er, well I haven't seen Jonathan since the the third of Ja erm January is it, or the second of January or whatever and er
     Wendy   Is it? As long as that? (*BNC* KP8 2861)

Norma hyperbolically expresses her dissatisfaction (*withdrawal symptoms*) at not having seen the boys for quite some time, but the complaint is tempered by the additional presence of conventionalised positive maximisation (*love*), the term *sweeties* and by the fact that Wendy herself has paved the way with exaggerated *for ages*, which can be read as a mild self-criticism, and by the offer to come by and visit. On the whole the complaint here is thus embedded in a cooperative environment and does not lead to conflict. The form of the complaint is relevant for the overall positive effect, as well. It

refers to Norma's state, not to a doing of Wendy's, which makes it less direct. The phrasing implies highly positive feelings on Norma's part towards the boys and thus the family as such. Furthermore, it is metaphorical and not quite as conventional as most of the examples above. Metaphorical hyperbolic instances are in general not as likely to have a negative impact: their precise implicature(s) may be relatively more indeterminate, i.e., they are less direct, and they make a more 'playful' impression because of their reduced conventionality. Also, they tend very often not to be extreme, but if they are it is in an absurd manner, which again is more amusing than offensive.

House and Kasper (1981), working on English and German data, and Held (1989), on French and Italian data, found that maximisation strategies are surprisingly common in FTAs such as requests, complaints and criticism. What is being maximised is material surrounding the FTA that is capable of softening or in some way justifying the FTA, or of showing the positive feelings of the speaker towards the addressee. Exaggerations can function as an indirect excuse in the context of a refusal, for example, by providing the reason for why something is not done. In (40), Wendy is explaining to her children why she can't spend time playing with them by graphically pointing to the amount of work she has to do.

(40)   I'll help you get started, mummy's gotta get on darling I've got **tons** to do! (*BNC* KP8 568)

Formulating reasons for doing the FTA in a hyperbolic manner makes them seem more important and potentially more valid; in other words: if you have to deny something to somebody or to impose on somebody, at least make clear it is for a good reason. Another strategy is to exaggerate the reluctance and regret with which an FTA is carried out. A conventional form for this is *hate* + (usually) speech act/mental verb, which highlights the speaker's care or involvement, and at the same time downtones the following negative utterance, as in (41).

(41)   Erm the policy panel that erm looked at this erm a week before Christmas was erm **I hate to** *disagree with you* with Peter <name> we are not exactly unanimous in this views on terminal five … (*BNC* JS8 404)

As Brown and Levinson (1987: 101) point out, all positive-politeness redressive action is characterised by an element of exaggeration, which strongly indicates 'I want your face to be satisfied'. Their positive politeness strategies 2 'exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)' and 3 'intensify interest to H' are especially geared towards that aim, but exaggeration can also be used in (the context of) other strategies. A classic case of strategy 2 are compliments, of course. The following statement was addressed to me by a female friend on my appearance from the bathroom in the

morning – involving hardly more than showering, brushing my teeth and doing my hair: certainly no transformation.

(42) Oh, my goodness. What a **transformation**! (CC)

Interestingly, such classic compliment cases are hard to find in the spoken corpus data used for this study. This may have to do with the fact that simply accepting compliments on the part of the addressee is always in some conflict with the Modesty Maxim (Leech 1983). My husband remembers the following dialogue exchanged between him and his host when he was invited to the latter's new house. It shows that some speakers may have a problem even with fairly 'normal' compliments, which I think is what most people would consider *a lovely house* to be.

(43) **Mike**   This is really a lovely house.
     Host   Well, we don't need to exaggerate. (CC)

Hyperbolic compliments pose an even greater problem for an appropriate response, as the addressee cannot simply let them stand without giving the impression of having an inflated opinion of himself/herself. Thus, the addressee in (44) repudiates the complimentary *you're an angel*, which I used to thank him for bringing my orange juice to the table.

(44) **Claudia**   Du bist ein Engel. (You're an angel.)
     Lars   So weit würde ich nicht gehen. (I wouldn't go as far as that.) (CC)

Angel is both absurd, thus not realistically applicable, and weakened through conventionalisation, but nevertheless it is seen as too strong here. As (45) shows, saying 'thank you' is also often accompanied by maximisation strategies. While some languages have conventionalised hyperbolic formulations of thanks, such as Italian *grazie mille*, French *merci mille fois*, or the colloquial English form *thanks a million*, English speakers may further include hyperbolic appreciations in statements about the object or action thanked for and about the addressee, as in (45):

(45) A Very Special Thanks to **the most amazing guitar player on the planet**, Michael Landau. (Vonda Shepard, *the radical light*, CD booklet)

Negative-politeness redress strategies can also be hyperbolically maximised, in particular, Brown and Levinson's strategy 5 'give deference', 6 'apologise' and 10 'go on record as incurring a debt'. Hyperbole in the context of apologies can be an indication of how grave the speaker thinks the 'wrongdoing' is, or it can serve as a more effective self-defence than a non-hyperbolic excuse might be. In the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, best man Charles (played by Hugh Grant) rushes into church at the very

last moment before the wedding starts and says the following to the other groomsmen:

(46) I'm so so sorry. It's **inexcusable. I'll be killing myself after the service** if it's any consolation. (Film, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*)

The noteworthy thing here is that nobody had reproached him or had had any chance to do so. By his unsolicited and overstated excuse, Charles shows that he is fully aware of his misbehaviour and is thus forestalling any further censure on the part of others. Using hyperbole in such contexts can also be thorny, however, as it might come across as grossly overdone, ridiculous and, which is worse, as insincere. Overstating the giving of deference, for example, can easily be used and perceived as irony. Nevertheless, one finds instances like Roy asking to move past Marilyn on the way to some cupboard, which occurred while a group of friends was cooking a meal together.

(47) **Roy**   … <FOOD **Could I** FOOD> … **beg your indulgence,** … my dear? … That I might slip in past you here?

 Marilyn   … <X You can X>.… <VOX Sure VOX>. (*SBC3*)

The intimate, informal setting and the overall context, e.g., the smallness of the favour asked, make for a humorous interpretation of this remark.

6   Conventionalisation

6.1   Conventional hyperbole

The spoken corpora used in this study (cf. Chapters 3, 4, 5) exhibit many highly familiar forms of overstatement. As many as two thirds or over three quarters of instances attested in speech are conventional as shown in Figure 4.1 on p. 101.[1] These are forms which one has heard quite often, uses oneself or which are even listed in dictionaries. Some of such conventional single-word and phrasal examples are provided in (1):

(1)   *ages, all over the place, all the time, always, brilliant, constantly, dead, desperate, die, disaster, dreadful, end of the world, every(body/thing/ where), eyes popping out, fabulous, freezing, ghastly, give sb. a heart attack, hate, hopeless, horrible, incredible, kill, like a beanpole, loads of, love, massive, miles away, million, never, nothing, starve, vandal* etc.

The question of conventionality has already been touched on in Section 2.5, when the question of literal *versus* non-literal language was dealt with, and briefly in Section 4.2. For Ariel (2002), conventionality is one determinant of her linguistic type of minimal meaning, while for Giora (1997) it plays a role in establishing the degree of salience of a word or utterance. As in these cases conventionality as such is not being defined, it is necessary to go back one step further. A convention according to Lewis (1969: 78) is 'an arbitrary regularity in the behaviour of members of a population in a recurrent situation'. For linguistic purposes, this means that speakers who want to express meaning X or perform speech act Y would use form A (and perhaps B, C), but not forms D, E, F, etc. and would expect other speakers to behave within the same linguistic range in the normal run of things. This covers most aspects of Lewis' definition, apart from 'arbitrary'. This aspect needs relaxing with regard to conventional hyperbole. If an instance of hyperbole is still to function as an exaggeration, it cannot in fact be completely arbitrary. Some motivation for the hyperbolic use, even if only residual, must still be present in the form.

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[1]   McCarthy and Carter (2004) have in fact only looked for fairly conventional items in their corpus study.

Which other factors are important to determine the conventionality of an expression?

1. A form that is rated by speakers as fully acceptable or grammatical without the need to specify special/extraordinary contextual requirements is conventional. This is linked to the normative force of conventions. Detailed knowledge of the context is as a rule no longer required for understanding conventional hyperboles. This makes hyperbolic *eyes popping out* and *million* more conventional than *freezing* and *miles away*, for example.

2. In the case of a conventional form the amount of processing necessary on the part of the hearer is minimal, as the conventional sense is shared and recognised by most speakers (cf. Clark and Gerrig 1983: 606), i.e., it is a sense that is close to being coded. Fully conventional senses as a rule do *not* give rise to misunderstandings or negotiations about their use. Thus, speakers will not normally remark on *dead funny*, though it is literally odd, or be in doubt about the intended meaning when a teenager says *my mother will kill me* – in contrast to the discussion about the nonce-use *like the Channel tunnel* presented in Section 4.2.2.1.

3. Use of a conventional form is automatic and without special effort (cf. Gibbs *et al.* 2002: 137), not connected with any specific intent connected to its formal appearance. For Lakoff and Turner this point is connected to the grounding of a given metaphorical usage in everyday experience, but this is probably not of equal relevance for hyperboles, as these are not to the same extent a conceptual instrument as metaphors are. However, some hyperbolic forms are anchored in another way, namely in the language structure: they are part of graded entailment scales, such as *<freezing, cold, cool, lukewarm>*, *<excellent, good, all right>*, *<loathe, hate, dislike>*, *<all, most, many, some>*, *<always, often, sometimes>*, etc. Instances where the membership in a semantic or pragmatic scale is clear and fixed are highly conventional. The more ad hoc the construction of the scale is (e.g., *house-bearing hips* quoted in Section 4.2.2 used for the scale of size), the less conventional the item will be.

4. Special syntactic constructions for hyperbolic use (e.g., *dying to*) contribute to some forms being idiomatised or lexicalised (cf. Bauer 1983: 48), as the construction does not have its origin in a (still) productive rule.

5. As a consequence of (some of) the former points, conventional forms and senses are frequent, i.e., they are habitually used by many speakers within a given speech community. As many as thirty-eight types occur more than once even in the small *BNC* subcorpus used for this study. For hyperbolic senses, this need not necessarily mean that they are *more* frequent than the coexisting non-hyperbolic senses, but a certain degree of familiarity can be assumed for the speakers (cf. Giora 1997 on salient

senses). *Dead* in the function as an intensifier meaning 'extremely, totally, absolutely', for example, occurs 156 times in the *BNC*-spoken, which comes to about 15 instances per one million words and to 18 per cent of all occurrences (849) of *dead*.

It is noticeable that most conventional hyperboles are single words or, in smaller numbers, fairly short phrases. It is probably more likely that one sense of a single item conventionalises than that a longer form together with its transferred sense does so. However, there are of course hyperbolic idioms (cf. below), but their text frequency, like that of idioms in general (cf. Moon 1998), is not very high. Conventional hyperbolic items will certainly be part of the mental lexicon, but they need not necessarily be found in dictionaries. *Never*, for example, is not listed in a hyperbolic sense in the *OALD* or the *OED*; nor is *constant(ly)*. In both cases, the hyperbolic sense is equivalent to the loose use identified by Labov for *all* (cf. Chapter 2), a sense that is common but not prominent or standing out sufficiently in order to be consciously noticed. Both the *OED* and the *OALD* list *die* and *kill* in hyperbolic sense(s), although only the *OED* explicitly marks them as such. Dictionaries do not necessarily list the whole hyperbolic range, either; the *OALD*, e.g., lists for *kill* the 'cause pain' and 'heavy laughter' senses, but not the 'punishment, retribution' sense. The two dictionaries also differ with regard to some words, thus the *OALD* lists hyperbolic uses of *freezing*, *always* and *disaster* (again without label), whereas the *OED* does not. Therefore, dictionaries only provide additional, but not decisive evidence for the conventionality of an item.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how the conventionalisation of hyperbolic expressions shows up in dictionaries. Taking the *OED* as example, one finds hyperbolic usage commented upon in 168 main entries, in some of these cases for several sub-entries.[2] One finds notes such as 'in idiomatic hyperbolic use' (s.v. *all*, 2c), 'often used hyperbolically' (s.v. *deluge* n.), 'esp. in trivial or hyperbolical use' (s.v. *devastating*), 'applied with jocular hyperbole …' (s.v. *fiend*) and '… are said by hyperbole to …' (s.v. *heaven*). In each of these cases, one needs to assume that a fairly high number of examples in the *OED* database warrants such a usage note. These 168 instances can partly be sorted into the semantic domains used in Section 4.2 above (p. 75), albeit leaving a group of diverse remaining examples.

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[2] This is based on a full-text search of the *OED* CD-ROM (second edn), using the search string *hyperbol**. This yields an initial 365 results. A considerable number of these refer to the mathematical-geometrical use of *hyperbola* and were thus discarded. The remainder comprise the above-mentioned 168 usage-note instances, instances contained in the ten main entries of the *hyperbole* word family, thirteen instances of the word used in (etymological or other) explanations, and fifty-five uses of the words themselves in context. For comparison: there are 464 (unweeded) hits for *ironic** and 17,721 for the marker *fig.* (figurative).

1. dimension: *deluge* (v + n), *giant, immensely, inch, mass, microscopically, millstone* (phr[3]), *mountain, ocean, sea, stream* (n), *walnut–shell, well* (n), *yard*

2. quantity: *all, dozen, less* (phr), *mine* (n), *once* (phr), *sackful, wagon–load, wife* (phr), *world* (phr), *worldful*

3. number: *four* (phr), *hundred, million, squillion, ten, thousand, three* (phr), *thrice, tithe, twenty* (phr)

4. time: *endless, eternal, eternalise, eternally, eternity, ever* (+ phr), *ever-lasting, everlastingly, infinite, infinitely, infiniteness, infinitesimal, infini-tude, infinity, year, year–long*

5. human state / experience: *dead, death, die* (+ phr), *fatal, kill, killing, life* (+ phr), *lifeless, mortal, murder* (v + n) / *freeze, pee* (v) (phr), *sleep* (n) (phr), *starve / madman, martyr*

6. the supernatural: *fiend, heaven, hell* (phr), *immortal, incarnate, miracle, miraculous, omniscience, omniscient, superhuman, wonder* (n) (phr)

7. value (and degree): *amazingly, Belsen, devastating, devastatingly, excru-ciating, excruciatingly, execrable, fearfully, frightful, frightfully, furious, gaiety, ghastly, glorious, happy* (phr), *prodigious, prodigiously, shocking, stupid, terrible, tremendous, tremendously*

8. activity / event: *boiling, burst, fidget, flay* (v), *fleet* (v), *float* (v), *foam* (v), *fry* (v), *melt, mix* (v), *parboil, pepper* (v), *rive* (v), *save* (phr), *scour, scratch* (v), *scream* (v), *smother, split, start* (v), *stifle, stink, strike* (v), *stun, subsist, sunk, swear, tear* (v) (phr), *toothpick* (phr), *trouble* (v), *water* (v) (phr), *weep* (phr), *welter* (v), *wither*

9. physical property: *blue* (phr), *feather* (phr), *hot* (phr), *lurid, stiff, sun-bright, white* (phr)

10. remaining examples: *body* (phr), *excruciate, eye* (phr), *fit* (n), *flint* (n) (phr), *for* (phr), *fortune, give* (phr), *grave* (n) (phr), *grope, gut* (n) (phr), *literally, lug* (v), *marrow, milk, only, overhang, paralysingly, point* (phr), *shade, shadow, steam–engine, steep* (v), *stroke* (n) (phr), *supersault, weight* (phr)

The fact that a similar grouping is possible for modern corpus data and diachronically oriented dictionary data highlights the temporal continuity of hyperbolic usages, reflecting the need to exaggerate the same aspects again and again, or different aspects in a very similar way. It is interesting to see that terms which mark the (existential) borderlines of human experience or even go beyond it are prominent in groups 3, 4 and 5, pointing again to the fact that clear extremes lend themselves to hyperbolic usage. In all cases in the above list, except the obsolete *fleet*, the hyperbole is still alive. Even figurative and potentially hyperbolic references to *Belsen* still occur today, according to *BNC* evidence.

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[3] 'Phr' marks the fact that the hyperbolic sense only occurs in a specific phrasal use, accord-ing to the *OED*.

In many cases, the *OED* also explicitly links the hyperbolic use to a specific phrasal frame, such as **less than no time**, *all the world and his **wife***, *could do something in one's **sleep***, *smashed into **toothpicks***, etc. This links hyperbole to the area of idiomaticity. It has been noted before, e.g., by Moon (1998: 194; 197ff.) and Gréciano (1988: 55), that exaggeration is an important feature of metaphorical fixed expressions. Moon (1998) lists both literally impossible (e.g., *sweat blood*) and exaggerated, implausible instances (e.g., *everything but the kitchen sink*) from her corpus evidence. Working through the *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*, vol. 2: *Phrase, clause and sentence idioms* (1983) one finds indeed a substantial number of idioms (230 items) which are inherently hyperbolic (e.g., *as light as air, not know one is born, swallow the dictionary, would awaken the dead*) or lend themselves easily to hyperbolic use in certain contexts (e.g., *as hard as rock/steel, break the sound barrier, in ten seconds flat, second to none*).[4] Similar to the *OED* entries above, the idiomatic uses will be alive despite their fixedness, either because they are so striking and/or because they always occur in new, motivating contexts. The use of such established hyperbolic terms turns the expression of affect into an intersubjective, social phenomenon (Gréciano 1988: 58).

6.2   Hyperbole and semantic change

The presence of so many conventionalised hyperbolic items in the language raises the question of their origin and development. The connection of hyperbole with lexical and semantic change has of course been noted in the literature. Samuels (1972: 53) remarked that 'the selection of a stronger (…) form than the hearer believes the context to warrant will in time produce a devaluation' and thus a new sense of the item in question. He mentions as instances which have undergone such a development *very, terribly, frightfully, marvellous, glorious, stupendous, astonish, amaze, surprise, starve* as well as *awfully*. Stern (1931: 311) recognised sense change especially clearly in cases of metaphorical hyperbole (e.g., *delightful, wonderful, heavenly, glorious*) and less unambiguously in cases of literal/basic hyperbole (e.g., *endless, thousand*), unless adequation (one of his types of semantic change) set in, i.e., here the subjectively based weakening of the force induced by repetition. But how exactly does hyperbole-induced sense change work? Levinson (1983: 166) posed the question of the roles of implicature and of syntax in this process, namely: (i) does an implicature suddenly turn into a sense or are there distinct stages along the way, such as particularised > generalised > conventional implicature? (ii) do syntactic constructions (such as the *to-*complement of *die*) follow or rather cause the new sense? In Section 6.3 I will present some case studies in order to shed some light on the history of various hyperboles and, in the process, also to elucidate important aspects of

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[4]   The list of these idioms is included in Appendix 3.

hyperbole and change. Before I proceed to these, some more general remarks about change and hyperbole are in order.

Given the nature of hyperbole, a pragmatically oriented approach to language change is necessary. Various such treatments have been presented, notably Keller's Invisible-Hand-Theory (1994/2003), Fritz's application of a usage-based (G. *handlungstheoretisch*) semantics to the historical study of meaning (1998) and Traugott and Dasher's Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change (2005). The following treatment will borrow freely from these and related approaches. According to Fritz (1998: 33, based on Keller 2003: 99f.), there are three components necessary for explaining historical semantic change:

(a) identification of the relevant conditions for the speakers' communicative behaviour, from which innovations originate (cf. Section 6.2.1);
(b) identification of the mechanisms which cumulatively produce non-intentional, institutional results based on the intentional actions of individual speakers (the invisible-hand process, according to Keller (1994)) (cf. Section 6.2.2);
(c) identification of the results of the application of these mechanisms (cf. Section 6.4).

6.2.1   Conditions of communicative behaviour

Language users have certain communicative goals which they pursue, pertaining to the (content of the) message as such, the interactants' social positions and relationships, and the fulfilment of aesthetic values (Keller and Kirschbaum 2003: 139). With respect to the message, Keller and Kirschbaum (2003) distinguish representation and persuasion, each of which can either be factive (referring to factual content) or emotive (referring to emotions and attitudes). Speakers have a choice regarding to which of these goals to give prominence as well as regarding the linguistic features with which to realise them. In doing so, speakers will generally stick to the rules of the language and the principles and norms pertaining to successful language use, but they will also innovate, within the limits of their cognitive make-up, based on mutual knowledge within a speech community and on established patterns and templates for possible uses. If we apply this to the feature in question, we get the following picture:

– Goals (1): Hyperbole as a maximising phenomenon emphasises the importance or relevance of something and makes it more prominent/salient for the hearer (factive and emotive representation); it also highlights speaker attitudes and emotions with the intention of having these shared by the hearer (emotive persuasion). Hyperbole is thus one means of reaching greater expressivity, an important functional cause for language change (Geeraerts 1997: 92–3). A more blatant way of expression

may also help the speaker to be understood more clearly. According to Stern (1931: 183), emotive changes are in fact especially numerous among nominations (which include the classical figures of speech, especially metaphor and irony, but also euphemisms) and among adequations (specialisations, or adjustment of the meaning to the actual characteristics of the referent as perceived by the speaker), which in his system always involve speaker subjectivity. Hyperbole is different from other figures of speech, however. In contrast to metaphor and metonymy, which can in certain cases be necessary in order to fill an expressive 'gap' (e.g., computer *mouse*) or to pursue the most efficient, i.e., economical, approach (e.g., metonymic *drink the whole bottle*), hyperbole is never a 'necessity' in that sense but always an option.[5] It is thus not a primary means to create new lexical material or new senses. In contrast to irony, it is more often based in single words than in longer segments (cf. Chapter 3, p. 40) and thus a more likely input for semantic change. Interestingly, and in contrast to the preceding hypothesis, Keller and Kirschbaum's (2003) large-scale study of semantic change in German adjectives has identified a small ironically motivated group, but not a hyperbolically motivated one, besides the major groups of metaphorically and metonymically induced changes.

– Goals (2): Hyperbole can be important for enhancing a speaker's social standing, in particular if it is of the innovative kind, as well as for consolidating interpersonal relationships and group identity (cf. Section 4.2.2).

– Norms of communication: Norms of polite behaviour potentially play a role in hyperbolic change. Leech (1983: 146) remarks on a tendency to overstate polite beliefs and Brown and Levinson's (1987: 104ff.) second strategy under positive politeness reads 'exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)' (cf. Section 5.3).

– Cognition: Hyperbole may be seen as a very basic mental process, linked to the primary metaphor IMPORTANT IS BIG (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 49–50) and thus to basic experiential facts of life. The existence of hyperbolic uses in different languages within the same semantic fields and partly with the same items is evidence for a cross-linguistic universal.[6] The importance of the experiential basis is also noticeable in the choice of items for hyperbolical usage, such as *dead/die/death*, *ages* and *load* if seen from the individual human perspective (link to age of individuals; what could be carried by an individual), and the subjective sense of items like *awful* and *dreadful*.

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[5] This also applies to metaphorical hyperbole.
[6] German and French examples will be commented on (where relevant) in the case studies below.

– Cognition and Goals: Because of their experiential importance, certain thematic areas are more likely than others to be the focus of emotively coloured communication and these fields will produce input and output material for hyperbole in greater amounts than other fields. Such fields have been identified above on the basis of the *OED* material and in Chapter 4 on the basis of corpus data. Koch and Österreicher (1996: 73–4) mention a very similar set of thematic foci in their discussion of expressive orality and change: (i) basic facts of life; (ii) emotions and evaluations; (iii) great intensity and quantity; (iv) plans and hopes; (v) speakers' relationship to space and time. The more often that items from such fields have been chosen for expressive use, the more likely it is that others will follow – partly because the previous uses serve as models and partly because the weakening of older uses (cf. p. 197 below) make new ones necessary.

– Rules of language use (1): Like other rhetorical figures and means, hyperbole, including metaphorical hyperbole, is available as a pattern and common hyperbolic uses serve as models for repeated or for completely new uses.

– Facts/rules of language use (2): Words/expressions have a whole range of usages, with different kinds of (potentially interconnected) sense, with different collocations and in different syntactic constructions. Some constructions may make hyperbolic use or interpretation more likely than others. Some uses or senses can be characterised by a greater degree of vagueness, which may support hyperbole more easily than 'precise' uses. Hyperbolic uses can be based on one or several of such usages.

– Facts/rules of language use (3): Each word is anchored within semantically or formally (morphologically) related words, i.e., within word families in the widest sense. Hyperbolic usage can be a 'family affair', with one exaggerated use of one item leading to further ones of other items and with several hyperbolic usages 'supporting' each other in the minds of language users. For speakers, it is not a huge innovative step to coin a new hyperbole within such a family and for hearers it will be easy to understand against the background of existing uses. A morphological family with pronounced metaphorical and hyperbolical tendencies is the *death*-family; noun, verb, adjective and adverb have all developed non-literal usages.

These conditions are relevant both for innovators and for adopters of hyperbole.

6.2.2 *Mechanisms and evidence*

Mechanisms are crucially about how innovative uses become part of the language, i.e., how they become conventionalised. The first successful use of
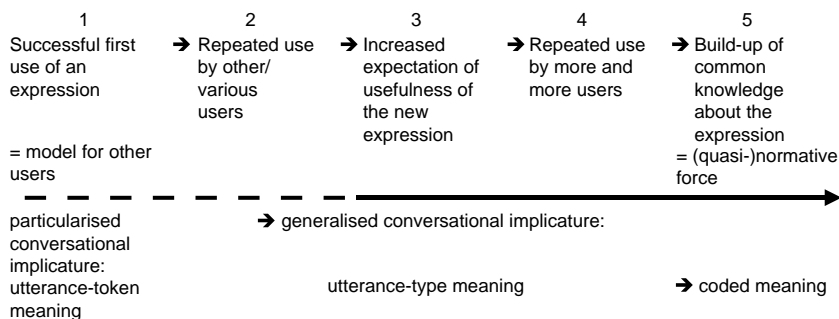
1	2	3	4	5
Successful first use of an expression	→ Repeated use by other/ various users	→ Increased expectation of usefulness of the new expression	→ Repeated use by more and more users	→ Build-up of common knowledge about the expression
= model for other users				= (quasi-)normative force

particularised conversational implicature: utterance-token meaning → generalised conversational implicature: utterance-type meaning → coded meaning

Figure 6.1: Conventionalisation

an item or a sense serves as a model for further uses by the same and in particular by other speakers; repeated use creates and increases the expectation of the usefulness and the understandability of the new expression. This expectation becomes communalised and thus turns into common/mutual knowledge about the expression (Fritz 1998: 21). In terms of Traugott and Dasher's (2005: 35, 38) 'Invited inferencing theory of semantic change', a use with a specific conversational implicature (invited inference) may acquire social value and become salient in a community, thus spreading to other linguistic contexts and speakers and turning in time into a generalised invited inference. Such generalised inferences can turn into semantic meaning with the recession of the original meaning (cf. Section 6.4.). If one combines the approaches of Fritz and of Traugott and Dasher, the result is Figure 6.1.

Many speakers are necessary to contribute to the gradual spread of a use in a given community. Conventionalisation is thus to a certain extent a matter of frequency and distribution across texts and users (cf. Brinton 2007: 40). That is where the corpus studies to be presented in Section 6.4. come in, as they provide the means for a quantitative study. However, historical corpora, and historical data in general, are not unproblematic for the issue at hand, in particular if one focuses on the locus of change. Innovation and change can of course take place both in the spoken and the written, the formal and informal, the private and the public forms of the language. Hyperbole is both an everyday and a 'literary' rhetorical means. Registers, genres, styles and text types (and the linguistic conventions holding in them), as well as movement of linguistic forms between them, may thus play a certain role in the history of hyperbole,[7] but it is probably fair to assume that a large amount of hyperbolic innovations and early usages 'suitable' for imitation and thus conventionalisation will be found in spoken, in more informal and in familiar contexts (cf. Taavitsainen and Fitzmaurice 2007: 18). As regards

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[7] Cf. also Taavitsainen and Jucker (2007: 114–16) for generic constraints in the use of speech acts. In order to determine the role of genres in the history of hyperbole, a more comprehensive approach than the one followed below would be necessary.

closeness to authentic speech, Culpeper and Kytö (2000) have looked at witness depositions, trial proceedings, prose fiction and drama (comedies) in order to investigate which of these records of speech is closest to everyday spoken interaction. According to the diagnostic features they used (lexical repetitions, interruptions, question marks, first- and second-person pronouns, private verbs, demonstrative pronouns), a case can be made for dramatic comedy and, to a lesser extent, trial proceedings as useful sources for studying conversational and pragmatic phenomena in the past. They tentatively identified a diachronic development towards more speech-like characteristics (cf. also the comparable drift towards orality documented by Biber and Finegan (1992)), so that 'younger' texts will present increasingly more faithful portrayals of spoken interactions than older ones. The *Corpus of English Dialogues* (*CED*) and the *Corpus of Nineteenth-century English* (*CONCE*), which will be used below, contain the above-mentioned types and some other speech-related texts. As degree of involvement will clearly also play a role for the occurrence of hyperbole, one may add private letters as a potentially promising source. These are provided by the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (*CEEC*) and partly by *CONCE*; fiction may, however, also contribute involved language use. Needless to say, much of the historical written evidence (as found in the *Helsinki Corpus*, for instance) is nevertheless far removed from being ideal sources for investigating pragmatic features such as hyperbole. Furthermore, the more prominent users of hyperbole, and particularly of creative (i.e., innovative) types, are female speakers and young speakers, as Section 4.2.1.1 has demonstrated. It is precisely such contexts and such users that are largely lacking or under-represented in the available historical data. Given the limitations, it will as a rule only be the second, third or even fourth step of Figure 6.1 that is documented in historical corpora, leaving us to speculate about the beginnings. This also means that only ultimately successful uses are really researchable; those that were not taken up by other than the original users and those that were not repeated often enough will not usually make it into the written record.

6.3   Routinisation: diachronic case studies

It is impossible to write a complete history of hyperbole, but it is realistic and feasible to research and illustrate various paths of 'hyperbolic development' on the basis of some few selected items. The focus here will be on the semantic areas that have been proved relevant for exaggeration, and which include items that have been highlighted in the literature, such as *awfully, starve* and *dying to* (cf. Section 6.2). Table 6.1 lists all the search items used in the present section. Each of these forms has its intrinsic interest, while together they highlight important aspects of hyperbole to be looked at in the diachronic perspective. Some of them represent fairly established modern polysemies, such as *age* or *dead*. It will be interesting to see how far back in

Table 6.1 *Search items for diachronic hyperbole*

TIME	QUANTITY	EVALUATION	DEGREE	HUMAN EXPERIENCE	
age	load	awful	awfully	starve	
	thousand				die
			dead to death		

time such polysemy extends. Some tend to occur in certain collocations or fixed frames, such as *dying to, for ages, a load of.* The question is whether the genesis and potential hyperbolic specialisation of these frames is traceable. From the PDE perspective, the above forms are live hyperboles to different degrees; in fact, some of them are 'dead' inasmuch as they are not recognised as exaggerations any longer, e.g., *awful(ly)*. The question thus arises why some forms, but not others, become defunct as hyperboles over time.

In order to trace the development of the sample words, a variety of sources reaching back as far as Middle English will be used, some of which make a conscious effort to represent or at least include somewhat more private and/or speech-like forms of English, such as letters and trial transcripts. The sources include the following: *OED* quotations,[8] Chaucer (*Canterbury Tales*), Shakespeare (plays), the *Helsinki Corpus* (*HC*, ME and EModE parts), the *CEEC*, the *CED*, the *Lampeter Corpus of English Tracts* (*LC*), the *Zurich English Newspaper Corpus* (*ZEN*), the *CONCE*, the ARCHER Corpus,[9] as well as corpora of modern English, as far as necessary. The Old English period has been excluded intentionally, as the nature of the data makes a comparison to later stages of the language problematic.

6.3.1   Age

As presented in Chapter 2 (p. 28) on the basis of the *BNC*-spoken, singular *age* is only very rarely hyperbolic (one instance only, close to 0 per cent), while plural *ages* is used hyperbolically in 80 per cent of all occurrences. Thus, it is today a clearly established, conventional hyperbolic item.

According to *OED* evidence, the word as such has been used in English since the late thirteenth century. Table 6.2 provides the total occurrences of

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[8] The second edition of the *OED* on CD-ROM was used in order to base the findings on finite, unchangeable and thus verifiable corpus data.
[9] A complete listing together with basic corpus statistics is provided in Appendix 4. I would like to thank the compilers for giving me access to *CED* (prior to its publication) and to *CONCE*, and the Department of English, Uppsala University, in particular for the opportunity to use *ARCHER* there.

Table 6.2 *Historical instances of* ages

	Chaucer 14th c.	HC-ME 1150–1500	HC-EModE 1500–1710	CEEC 1418–1680	CED* 1560–1760	Shak. ~1600	LC 1640–1740	ZEN 1661–1791	CONCE 19th c.
Age	49	100	85	153	147	190	215	402	141
Hyp	—	—	—	5	4	1	—	1?	5
Ages	1	5	10	13	14	13	86	59	34
Hyp	—	—	1?	1	2-?3	—	—	1?	3

('?' refers to borderline examples)
*The *CED* also contains one Shakespeare play, namely *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Care has been taken not to list any hyperbolic instance twice in the tables in Section 6.3.

singular and plural forms in several texts and corpora, and the potentially hyperbolic (hyp) uses among these.

It becomes clear immediately that hyperbolic uses of *age(s)* before the twentieth century are very rare. Furthermore, hyperbolic uses of *age* seem not to have existed in Middle English. There are no occurrences in Chaucer, the relevant section of the Helsinki Corpus, and in the *ME* texts of the *CEEC*. Partly, this may be an artefact of the predominantly written nature of the texts. In written PDE, hyperbolic *age(s)* is also not common: out of 307 *FLOB* occurrences, only one singular and nine plural instances are hyperbolic, with half of them used in direct speech quotes.[10] If one looks at the historical texts in which hyperbolic occurrences are found, one finds that the majority are letters (*CEEC, CONCE*) and fictional works representing speech (*CED*, Shakespeare). The remaining texts are a handbook written in dialogue fashion (*CED*), a travelogue (*HC*) and newspaper texts (*ZEN*), the first of which also uses quoted speech and the second is styled as a letter. Hyperbolic *age* is thus clearly located in, relatively speaking, more colloquial and more intimate contexts, with other contexts yielding less clear or proto-typical examples (cf. the '?' in Table 6.2). The first three examples below provide clearly emotional contexts, dealing with love (2), family bonds (3) and sadness (4). The last example (5) is part of an evaluation, juxtaposing *ages* with a short *day*, thus sharpening the exaggeration by contrast.

(2)   [$ (^Ma.^) $] O good maister (^Arthur^), where haue you bene this weeke, this moneth, this yeare? This yeare said I? where haue you bene this **age**? Vnto a Louer euery minute seemes time out of minde. How should (^I^) thinke you loue me, That can indure to stay so long from me? (*CED* d2cheywo, 1602)

(3)   My Dearest Brother, It is so many **ages** since I have had the honor to write to you, that I finde my selfe under a load and weight, first to acknowledge the great obligations I owe you … (*CEEC*, conway, 1665)

(4)   I cannot tell you how my heart sank within me when I found none today, the tears were nearer flowing than they have been for an **age**; still I did not give way, but I felt so wretched! (*CONCE*, t2letwil, 1857)

(5)   His papers will be admired for **ages**, but the attacks of his adversaries die with the close of that day which gave them birth. (*ZEN*, levo6858, 1771)

The texts also locate the origin of hyperbolic *age(s)* around 1600: the earliest use is Shakespeare's in 1590 (*Midsummer Night's Dream*),[11] followed by the comedy occurrence of (2) above in 1602 (*CED*). The temporal distribution of

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[10]   *FLOB*: *age* 265, of which 1 hyperbolic (1 quote); *ages* 42, of which 9 hyperbolic (4 quotes).
[11]   This is also the *OED*'s first quote for the exaggerated use (s.v. *age*).

Table 6.3 *The chronology of hyperbolic* age(s)

	16th century	17th century	18th century	19th century
Instances	1	9	6	8

hyperbolic instances across over more than four centuries is as represented in Table 6.3.

One may assume that it had already been in use in the sixteenth century before Shakespeare took it up. The last thing of note in Table 6.2 is that plural hyperbolic uses are rarer than singular ones, in contrast to the modern situation. Perhaps the hyperbole was somewhat more restrained, less blatant in the past, or, more likely, with the weakening of the hyperbolic force of the singular used in the past the plural has taken over in PDE. The last assumption is borne out by the fact that nowadays, repeated uses of *ages* are not uncommon, pointing to a weakening in turn of the plural form.

Neither the established polysemy nor the clear specialisation of the plural is provable from older data, as the above analysis has shown. Also, the collocational patterns are not as clearly visible as they are in PDE. In modern English, hyperbolic *age(s)* occurs prominently with *for*, *ago* and *take*, but the only collocation found in the historical data is the one with *for* (six times, cf. (4, 5) above). This is, however, also the most frequent one nowadays.

The path of meaning extension towards hyperbolic usages must have worked in the following way for *age(s)*. The anchor meaning is that of a particular period of history, i.e., an era or epoch (as found in (6)), which is always a long period. This also lends itself to vaguer usages, often in the plural, seen in the scientific use referring most probably to geological ages in (6b).

(6)   a.   The three **ages** of France: her child-hood, till Pepin: her man-hood, till Capet; her old age, till now. (1630 R. Johnson's *Kingd. & Commw.* 138, *OED*)

    b.   If we suppose the filling up of fissures with metallic and other ingredients to be a process requiring **ages** for its completion, it is obvious that the opposite walls of rents, where strata consist of yielding materials, must collapse or approach very near to each other before sufficient time is allowed for the accretion of a large quantity of veinstone. (CONCE, t1scilye, 1830)

Incidentally, this meaning is also the one with the first attested quote in the *OED* entry (1297), which speaks of the age from Adam to Noah. As (6a) makes clear metaphorically, the link to human age (in particular, old age) may have played a role, thus partly grounding this hyperbole in human experience. The importance of this sense may also be visible in the prevalence of

singular uses, whereas the collocations point rather to the influence of the period meaning. The vague uses may have induced the application of *age(s)* to states/events that cannot possibly take ages in a literal sense (as in (2–4) above and (7)); the meaning 'a very long time' thus became strengthened and even prominent over time.

(7)   The Romans will repose at citrean tables **for ages**. (1833 Landor *Wks.* (1853) II. 246, *OED*)

Age, especially its plural, was in this way turned into a general time term. This is a particular English development. While time hyperboles are common, the terms used are to a certain extent of course language-specific. *Age*, originally a French loan, has not undergone the same hyperbolic development in its donor language, even though it has a similar range of meanings there, including the crucial 'history period'. Also, the German equivalent, *Alter*, has not developed any hyperbolic uses (*Ewigkeit* 'eternity' is instead used hyperbolically in German). This may be due to the fact that the age of a person is the prominent German meaning, while the period-meaning occurs only in compounds, such as *Mittelalter* ('Middle Ages') or *Zeitalter* ('epoch').

6.3.2   Load

A load of / loads of in PDE function like quantifiers, similar to *a lot of / lots of.* Ninety per cent of all occurrences of *load(s)* in the *BNC*-spoken are characteristic for this determiner use, which is fairly vague with regard to the quantity in question, but seems to be somewhat stronger than *lot*.[12] Arguably, *load*, but not *lot*, has its origins in hyperbolic uses.[13] Interestingly, the phrasing with *load* is the older one, according to *OED* evidence, which provides the earliest quotes from 1606 (s.v. *load*) and 1577 (s.v. *cart-load*), whereas the first evidence for the quantifier *lot* is dated 1812 (s.v. *lot*).[14] The contrast between the two, including the quasi-iconic phonetic difference, is thus not important for the early development of *load*.

The semantic path travelled by *load* proceeds from the meanings 2a and b of the *OED* entry, namely the (largest possible) burden usually carried by somebody or something and the specific measurable quantity of such a load (i.e., a unit of weight). Such standard loads tend to be fairly

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[12]   The precise figures are: *loads* – 661 instances, of which 629 are quantifiers; *load* – 475 instances, of which 393 are quantifiers. This usually means that it occurs in the (*a*)_*of*-frame, which is true in 442 and 336 cases, respectively. *Load* seems to have a certain predilection for collocations with 'nonsense' words, e.g., *a load of rubbish, crap, bullshit*, etc.

[13]   Brems (2003: 307) remarked on *load* and on *pile* as 'hyperbolic means of quantification', but did not elaborate on this point.

[14]   Traugott's (2008) example (20b), *lots of Fans*, among her instances for expanded partitive use, is a potential pre-dating to 1708, however. She outlines the development of *lot of* from its partitive use to degree modifier and free adjunct use.

large, e.g., 50 cubic feet of timber correspond to one load (*OED*). This meaning accounts for the compounds of *cart-load*, *wagon-load*, etc., which denote large amounts. Literal uses often co-occur with numbers, as in (8), indicating that precise amounts, which may also receive a price tag, are intended.

(8) a. Item, *3* **load of** falwood and bavings, 3s. 4d. (1528 Papers Earls of Cumberland in Whitaker's Hist. Craven (1812) 308, *OED*)

   b. This rick contains what they call in Hampshire *ten* **loads of** wheat, that is to say, *fifty quarters, or four hundred bushels*. (1825 Cobbett *Rur. Rides* 194, *OED*)

   c. Though the engine was 17 years old and had been used to pulling *40-tonne* **loads** at 60 mph, Mr Tomlinson didn't need to touch it. (*BNC* ACR 2575)

Vague uses are characterised by the avoidance or impossibility of such precision, and further by the application to items that have no standard measurements (cf. 9). In these cases *loads* can only mean 'a great amount', with the precise extent to be interpreted by speaker and hearer.

(9) **Loads of** ill Pictures, and worse Books, lye unpacked and unthought of when they come into the Country. (1721 Prior *Ess. Opinion* 13, *OED*)

While it is easy to imagine large amounts of pictures and books in (9), the application of the phrase to items and contexts which do not involve huge amounts marks the step into hyperbolic usage. The examples in (10) are exactly such cases:

(10) a. Stockin'd with **loads of** fat *Town-Dirt* he goes. (1693 Dryden Juvenal iii. 397, *OED*)

   b. I made myself as French as I could, but they wear such **loads of** *red*, and *powder*, that it is impossible for me to come up to that. (1720 Duchess of Montagu in Buccleuch MSS. (Hist. MSS. Comm.) I. 367, *OED*)

   c. Nature herself, if we'd let her alone, would gradually throw off the Load she labours with. 'Tis our own Impatience spoils all; for when we have but just Strength enough to struggle with our Distemper, we must take **Loads of** *Drugs* to burden us the more. (*CED*, d5cmille, 1734)

   d. A Thé is among the stupid new follies of the winter. You are to invite fifty or a hundred people to come at eight o'clock, tea and coffee are made by the company, and what constitutes the very essence of a Thé, an immense **load of** *hot buttered rolls and muffins*. (1788 H. More *Let.* 22 May 1925: 123, *OED*)

   e. **Loads of** *bride-cake* were distributed. (1822 W. Irving Braceb. Hall (1849) 474, *OED*)

f.   **Loads of** popgunning *blackguards*. (1846 P. Hawker *Diary* (1893) II.273, *OED*)

Neither dirt, make-up, drugs for individuals, pasties nor cake will be present in these contexts in such amounts as literally to justify the use of *load*. In (10f), the word is even applied to groups of humans, who are of course normally counted, not weighed (as suitable for loads), and who are probably not present in such masses as to make *load* a fitting lexical choice – although the context here is too small to be absolutely certain. Only one of the above examples (10d) uses the singular, which is apparently typical for the early hyperbolic extension of *load*: it is the plural that leads the way. Similarly, Brems (2003: 303f.) found that the plural form *heaps* is more biased towards the quantifier use than the singular form.

An accompanying and supporting trend for the hyperbolic and generally transferred use of *load* is the extension from concrete objects, which are always, in principle, measurable, to abstract items, which are actually not so quantifiable. The Shakespearean example (11a) illustrates a logical path of extension where the burden (*load*) of a person is in focus, with a negative emotion being depicted as oppressive, i.e., as a heavy weight pushing the person down. This is a common metaphorical mapping. Perhaps this served as a model for abstract extensions. Clearly abstract and non-quantifiable are *favour/courtesy* (11b) and *notions* (11f). With respect to *news* (11c), *messages* (11d), *circumstances* (11e) and *talk* (11g), one could, of course, say that these are either countable or measurable (e.g., time of talk), but this aspect is not necessarily in focus in the examples.

(11)   a.   'Tis all mens office, to speake patience To those that wring vnder the **load of** *sorrow*. (Shak., *Much Ado*, 1599)

b.   My ever best and dearest Lady and Cosin, I reseaved yours by my man, Knight, accompanied with that **horse load of** *favor and friendly curtesy*, which you pleased to mention in your former letters; (*CEEC*, Cornwall, 1626)

c.   There is **a loade of** *newes*. (1655 Nicholas Papers (Camden) II. 205, *OED*)

d.   For that Reason I wou'd not serve in that Post again; for my Memory is too weak for the **load of** *Messages* that the Ladies lay upon their Servants in London (*CED*, d4cfarqu, 1707)

e.   The undistinguishing compiler has buried these interesting anecdotes under a **load of** trivial and unmeaning *circumstances*. (1776 Gibbon Decl. & F. vi. I. 160, *OED*)

f.   The tallow, corn, cotton, hams, hides, and so forths, which we had got, in exchange for a **load of** *Yankee notions*. (1825 J. Neal Bro. Jonathan xxii. II. 298, *OED*)

g.   Sunday.–**Loads of** *talk* with Emerson all morning. (1852 Clough Poems, etc. (1869) I. 183, *OED*)

Table 6.4 *The chronology of hyperbolic* load(s)

	16*th century*	17*th century*	18*th century*	19*th century*
Instances (*OED*)	1?	5	11	10

Each instance in (11) is clearly emphatic, i.e., the great amount is being stressed. I would also argue that, except for (11a), all the examples have a hyperbolic touch. In (11a) the experiential conceptual metaphor does speak for a certain psychological reality; witness, for example, the body posture of depressed people which gives the impression that they are weighed down. In the other cases, literal *load* raises expectations which are hard to fulfil: how many pieces of news, messages or circumstances make a load? In (11b), the purpose is, of course, politeness, which is not uncommonly marked by exaggeration. In these abstract cases, it is the singular use that is prominent in contrast to the concrete ones above. What *load* is seen as doing in both (10) and (11) is increasing the collocational range of nouns following *of*.

Most of the examples so far have been taken from the *OED*. This is due to the fact that *load*(*s*) is not well represented in the corpora/texts that were used in the preceding section. There are only 111 examples to be found in them, of which in turn only 5 or 6 are hyperbolic. All of these are found in the *CEEC*, the *CED* and in Shakespeare; thus, as with *age*(*s*), the more speech-related sources are prominent. However, the *OED* sources are more diverse, proving that it is possible to find early hyperboles also in more formal and factual texts, such as Dryden's (cf. 10a) or Gibbon's (11e) writings. As to the time frame, (10a) and (11b) are indeed the earliest clear examples found in all the data examined. Hyperbolic *load*(*s*) is thus traceable to the seventeenth century, but the amount of data from that century does not suggest that it was very common then. Table 6.4 provides an overview of the chronology of *load*.

As regards the collocational frame of *load*, the following *of* is necessary for specifying the item(s) in question; it is also there in the literal use and can only be contextually ellipted. In the plural, hyperbolic use is most likely when there is no premodifier, or rather, none that is a precise quantifier of the type found in (8) above. Such use makes it sound vague and large at the same time. This is what we find in (9), (10) and (11g). In the singular, unmodified *a load of* is again a good candidate because of the inherent vagueness, but additionally vaguely modified or intensified uses serve to potentially strengthen the hyperbolic intention, such as *immense load* in (10d) and *horse-load* in (11b), and other compounds like *wagon-load* (cf. *OED* list above), *cart-load*, *ship load*, etc. – the latter especially when strictly speaking inapplicable as in (11b). Uses such as *the load of* in (11d) or with preceding

possessive, on the other hand, are in general less geared toward hyperbole, as the definite article tends to stress the psychological weight felt (as in 11a) rather than the amount. *Loads of* and *a load of* in this hyperbolic and vague use have developed into a quantifier parallel to (*a*) *lot(s) of*, cf. their analogous use in (12). The quantifier *load(s)* can thus be seen as an instance of ongoing grammaticalisation, a process accompanied by phonetic contraction and attrition as reproduced in writing by the form *loadsa* found in the *BNC* in (13).

(12)   *Lots of* eggs and **loads of** what cook used to call dip. (1931 'N. Bell' Life & Andrew Otway viii. 345, *OED*)

(13)   The game is played to normal poker rules: five cards are dealt and each player bets **loadsa** cash. (*BNC* EB6 2108)

The more the collocational range is expanding and the more *load* is solidifying as a quantifier, the less hyperbolic will it be felt to be. This will partly depend on its frequency. The *OED* quotations evidence does not yet show a preponderance of the quantifier use in the twentieth century. Table 6.5 shows the situation as it presents itself in comparison with *lot of* in three 1990s corpora. In the written *FLOB load* is negligible and that is also the case, though slightly less so, in the *BNC* written. It is somewhat more common in speech as shown by the *BNC*, but it is still only somewhat more frequent there than in writing. It is in spoken teenage language (*COLT*) that it is noticeably more common and in particular gains on *lot(s) of*, coming up to 60 per cent of the former's occurrences. Whether youth language leads the way in progressive grammaticalisation or whether the phenomenon is an instance of age-grading (where young speakers appreciate the form because of its comparatively still stronger impact) is hard to say at this point in time.

6.3.3   Thousand

Numerical hyperbole in general and exaggerated *thousand* in particular has been shown in Section 3.2.4 to be not overly frequent. However, in spite of that, numerical hyperbole seems to possess a certain (psycho-)linguistic salience inasmuch as people are familiar with it and apparently use and understand it with ease. It seems to be culturally entrenched. As many as ten number terms appeared in the *OED* list of conventional hyperbole presented on p. 173 above. Numerical hyperbole indeed goes back a long way. It is found plentifully in the Bible, for instance, which two of many examples can illustrate:

(14)   a.   And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. And five of you shall chase an **hundred**, and an

Table 6.5 *The distribution of* lot of / load of *in modern corpora*

	FLOB	BNC written	BNC spoken	COLT
lot(s) of	114	12,568	7,411	173
per 10,000 words	1.1	1.4	7.0	3.5
load(s) of	9	1,475	825	103
per 10,000 words	0.09	0.2	0.8	2.1

Note: The *BNC* figures may contain literal, i.e., non-quantifier, uses of *load*. *BNC*-written includes ten instances of the form *loadsa*.

       hundred of you shall put **ten thousand** to flight: and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. (*AV* [1611], Leviticus 26, 7–8)

b.   And the Philistines gathered themselves together to fight with Israel, **thirty thousand** chariots, and **six thousand** horsemen, and people **as the sand which is on the sea shore in multitude**: (*AV* [1611], 1 Sam 13, 5)

Thousand occurs here in multiples, as we will see it often does in hyperbolic use, and in conjunction with *hundred* and a non-numerical amount-exaggeration. The Bible was for most of western history, of course, the book, in written and spoken form, to which people were most exposed. It is thus not unlikely that it also had an influence on the familiarity of numerical hyperbole or at least increased a natural tendency. In the Bible, numerical hyperbole is often used to stress the fact that Israel was the chosen people, winning out, through the grace of God, against forces vastly outnumbering them. Incredibly high figures are often found in historical documents from the past, e.g., for the sizes of armies or the victims of epidemics, be it for purposes of propaganda (in the widest sense) or for the simple fact that precise counting might have been impossible with the means available then. An example is provided by the following extract from a history of Greece included in the *BNC*:

(15)   How large Xerxes' army was, we cannot say; the earliest Greek estimates are the most outrageous, beginning with the almost contemporary war-memorial at Thermopylai, which spoke of **three million**. To the Greeks, for whom '**myriad**', the word for **ten thousand**, was popularly used to mean 'countless numbers', such figures were clearly meaningless. (*BNC* G3C 693–694 = *The Penguin History of Greece*. Burn, A R, Penguin Group, London (1990))

The author's second sentence in (15) comments explicitly on hyperbolic and consequently almost vacuous uses of number words in Greek.

Table 6.6 *Historical instances of* thousand(s)*

	Chaucer 14th c.	HC-ME 1150–1500	HC-EModE 1500–1710	CEEC 1418–1680	CED 1560–1760	Shak. ~1600	LC 1640–1740	ZEN 1661–1791	CONCE 19th c.
thousand	43	48	121	231	248	334	272	349	190
hyp	11	3	31	41	93	137	16	29	28
thousands	—	3	1	18	20	17	61	102	35
hyp	—	—	—	2	2	4	—	58	—

* There are a certain amount of 'double' occurrences in ZEN, which are due to recurring advertisements in the newspapers.

Looking through historical corpora, one finds, as one might expect, that hyperbolic *thousand* is not as uncommon as the *BNC* findings (Section 3.2.4) might have led one to believe. As Table 6.6 shows, the singular form is more common overall and also in hyperbolic use.

In contrast to the previous items, hyperbolic use of *thousand* is spread across all corpora and texts. It occurs in letters as a more private form of language, as witnessed by the *CEEC* and the *CONCE* (sixteen of the twenty-eight cases) – cf. examples (16) and (17) – and in drama as representative of the spoken language, as in the *CED* and Shakespeare.

(16)   there are a **thousand** objections to the Parsonage which will make us regret it the less & I am sure if these reptiles harbour here we shall lament the change in Grasmere so much that it will be well to be removed from the sight of it. (*CONCE*, t1letw01, 1810)

(17)   I *thanke* you **ten thousand** times for my bacon, and all other your kindnesses shewed me, wch I will ever remember wth desire to requite. (*CEEC*, stockwe, 1607)

In such contexts, the use in politeness formulae is noteworthy, i.e., the speech act of thanking is hyperbolically heightened as in (17). This is particularly common with thanking (22 instances), but also occurs with *pardons* (5), *loves* (1), *blessings* (2), *commendations* (1), *welcomes* (2), *good morrow / good night* (4) and *obliged* (1) in the *CEEC*, *HC*, *CED*, *CONCE* and Shakespeare. These uses are evidence of social norms of communication being applied. Such formulae can of course fall out of favour over time, which seems to have happened in the case of *thousand*. Today, this use would seem rather overdone, which may have to do with a shift from a positive to a negative politeness culture in English. The commonness of such formulae in the past makes them useful for language play, as happens in the following Shakespeare example (18), where one hyperbolic greeting is reciprocated by a 'double' hyperbole, so to speak – which in turn is commented on by Speed with an even greater hyperbole (*millions*) and with a literalising monetary pun (*interest*).

(18) **VAL.**   Madam and mistress, a **thousand** good morrows.
SPEED   [Aside.] O, give ye good ev'n! here's a *million* of manners.
SIL.   Sir Valentine and servant, to you **two thousand**.
SPEED   [Aside.] He should give her *interest*, and she gives it
              him. (Shak., *Two Gentleman of Verona*, II,1; 1589–93)

As the last example shows and the following ones further illustrate, hyperbolic *thousand* also occurs as a more conscious stylistic device. It is very versatile: it can be scaled further upwards by means of various combinations, as in (19) to (22), or it can be used actually to hyperbolically increase smallness,

as in (23). Furthermore, it can combine with many different terms with which to scale upwards, including other hyperbolic terms, such as *ages* (21) and *loads* (22). In the latter two cases, it is used in the domains of time and quantity, but it can also be used to express the notion of degree (20, 23).

(19)   I lov'd Ophelia. **Forty thousand** brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum. (Shak., *Hamlet*, V,1; 1600–1)

(20)   a.   And if that excellent was hire beautee, / A **thousand foold** moore vertuous was she. (Chaucer, *CT*, Physician's Tale, 39–40; 1387–1400)

         b.   **Ten hondred thousand** (tales) tellen I kan / Notable of youre untrouthe and brotilnesse. (Chaucer, *CT*, Clerk's Tale, 2240–41; 1387–1400)

(21)   [$ (^Mar.^) $] In the Garden I'le expect you. [$ (^Wil.^) $] **Ten thousand** *ages*, till then, O Marina, do not fail me, my Heart will suffer unspeakably if you shou'd. (*CED*, d4cmanle, 1696)

(22)   Here hath been swallowed up, at least **Twenty thousand** *Cart Loads*; Yea *Millions* of wholesom Instructions, that have at all seasons been brought from all places of the Kings Dominions; (*CED*, d3fbunya, 1678)

(23)   I confesse I much marvelled at the change that was wrought in my own Spirit, from a trembling fearfulnesse to a rejoycing assurance (…), and *had not so much fear as the* **thousand** *part of the weight of a haire*: the poor ship workt for her life, … (*LC* RelB1650)

Examples (18) to (22) may suggest that numerical hyperbole is a specifically literary device, at least for older literature and/or perhaps for literature dealing with topics of love, religion, etc., i.e., literature with fairly emotionalised subject matters. This would need further investigation. Numerical hyperbole also plays a role in argumentation and persuasion, as the following two examples show. Within the trial context of (24), *ten thousand deaths* is used in a counterfactual profession in order to aver emphatically the fact that the person is speaking the truth. The hyperbole is used in lieu of proof. In such contexts, it is in principle similar to the formulae mentioned above, as such 'oaths' are fairly conventional.

(24)   But for that Practice with Arabella, or Letters to Aremberg framed, or any Discourse with him, or in what Language he spake unto him; if I knew any of these things, I would absolutely confess the Indictment, and acknowledge my self worthy **ten thousand** Deaths. (*HC*, cetri2b, 1603 [printed 1730])

Example (25) is from one of the many advertisements in the ZEN whose purpose is to sell something, in this case a certain medication.

(25)   WHICH, without the least Trouble, Confinement, or any Disorder
        whatever, do at once strike at the true Cause of the Scurvy, and entirely
        destroy it, and all Scorbutick Humors and Effects, Root and Branch,
        so as never to return again, as many **Thousands** of both Sexes have
        experienced, and as all who take them, in Three Days Time are con-
        vinced; (*ZEN*, ole00360, 1751)

The vague, unverifiable and thus mildly hyperbolic statement of *thousands*
of people being cured serves as a kind of proof in this case as well, here for
the efficacy of the drug. Many advertisements work with exactly the same
phrasing.

As I have tried to show, hyperbolic *thousand* is very common in a variety
of contexts, can be traced back to Middle English, and via the Bible, even
further back and to languages other than English.[15] It is thus a clearly estab-
lished form, even though it may have lost some contexts in PDE (notably
the formulae). This commonness, however, had no effect on the lexical item
thousand, as only the symbolic function is present in hyperbolic contexts. In
the hyperbolic usages, the various instantiations, such as *ten*, *twenty*, *forty*,
etc. *thousand*, are thus quasi-synonymous. *Thousand* is therefore not a poly-
semous item with two different meanings, like *age* treated above. In contrast
to *load*, *thousand* does not appear in a clearly preferred collocational frame
which could freeze and thus set it apart from its 'normal' usage. Despite the
formula usage, each occurrence of *thousand* is thus an individual instance,
one which, however, is given a certain predictability by the overall pattern of
numerical hyperbole.

6.3.4   Awful(ly)

Adjectives are especially prone to semantic change (Keller and Kirschbaum
2003: v), as is also visible in the development of *sad*, *silly*, *nice* and *stout*
shown by Menner (1945). The same can be said for adverbs derived from
adjectives, in particular if they come to be used in an intensifying func-
tion. Peters (1993) documented the great variety of intensifiers, specifically
boosters, used in the history of English and the extensive change that has
gone on in this area. His data includes *awful*(*ly*) (adv.) with a first booster
use in 1830[16] and still used in this function in PDE (Peters 1993: 193, 245,
253f.). He classifies it as an item with the primary meaning of 'terrible'
(1993). This primary meaning is, however, already a weakened meaning,
as I will point out, which can be seen as the result of hyperbolic overuse of
the items in question.

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[15]   Hyperbolic use of *tausend* and *mille* is also possible in German and French, including in
        formulaic contexts.
[16]   His research is based on the relevant *OED* entries.

Awful(ly) is not common in the corpora used here; the adjective occurs only fifteen times in *HC*, *CEEC*, *CED*, *LC* and *ZEN* taken together, while the adverb does not occur at all. Therefore, the *OED* quotations database was used as well, yielding 582 instances[17] of *awful*. *Awful* has the following senses (cf. *OED*): (i) causing (great) fear, (ii) commanding respect/reverence, (iii) very impressive, (iv) 'terrible, unpleasant' (= the present, fairly weak sense) and (v) pure intensification. Up to and including the seventeenth century, only the first three senses are used. The first two are closely related, especially in religious texts and contexts, such as the following early examples:

(26)   […ac aure ma wunien mid ða] **eifulle** dieulen, ðe bieð swa laðliche and swo grislich an to lokin. (c1200 *Vices & Virtues* (1888) 19, *OED*)

(27)   For mikel Laverd, swith loof-like to se; **Aghfulle** over alle goddes es he. (a1300 *E.E. Psalter* xcv [i]. 4, *OED*)

These senses and religious (or poetical) contexts are fairly typical of the early history of *awful*. The type of fear involved in the first meaning must have been of a certain magnitude, as the objects of fear are often supernatural beings (devils, gods, monsters), wild animals or warriors/events in battle. The respect-sense is in origin clearly linked to the supernatural (gods) and to rulers. These collocations make *awful* a word that denotes a high amount of respect. Furthermore, the awe-fulness lies essentially in the persons or objects themselves (the 'objective' sense of the *OED*). As Table 6.7 shows, the third sense ('impressive') is also present early, while 'terrible' and the use as a mere intensive originate in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, respectively.

In Figure 6.2, each of the horizontal arrows represents weakening or semantic bleaching (though this may not be the only process, cf. the objectivising switch to 'terrible'). For that to happen, *awful* must have been applied 'inappropriately', i.e., hyperbolically, to persons, things and events, which can neither as such cause great fear or command the respect deserved by immortals. It also involves a shift to the quality of 'awfulness' being attributed by the speaker, i.e., to outside evaluation (the *OED*'s 'subjective' sense). In the eighteenth century, we find collocates such as *God's presence, God's throne, Jove, majesty, king of kings*, which go with the respect meaning, furthermore *Justice's blade, monster, thunder, death, hell* to fit the fear meaning. However, one also finds the following: *fane, turret, oak, post, mountain front, sermonising, day, ray* or *theatre, twigs, length* as in (28).

(28)   a.   The **awful** *Theatre* of late's become A mere receptacle for ev'ry Strum. (1765 *Meretriciad* (ed. 6) 17, *OED*)

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[17]   Excluding the quotes in the entries *awful(ly)*.

Table 6.7 *A chronology of the semantic development of* awful*

	'fear'	'respect'	'impressive'	'terrible'	intensive
13th century	1	1			
14th century	1	3	2		
15th century	6	2	6		
16th century	9	11	5		
17th century	8	24	6		
18th century	21	48	24	10	
1800–49	39	34	10	38	4
1850–99	38	31	2	93	20
1900–49	6	2		81	23
1950 –	3			79	16

* In some cases two possible meanings may be present in the same context. These were both counted.

The connection between these senses and the pathways of change can be pictured as represented in Figure 6.2.
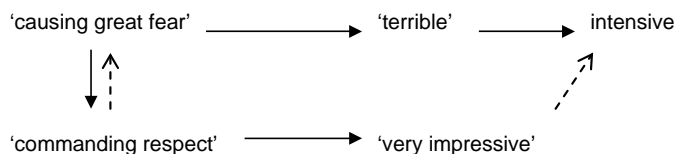
Figure 6.2: Semantic development of *awful*

    b.   Bound on a *voyage* of **awful** *length*, … A stranger to superior strength, Man vainly trusts his own. (1779 Cowper *Human Frailty* 17, *OED*)

    c.   Ye **awful** *twigs*! … Long may ye … far from my posteriors keep your sway! (1736 *Gentl. Mag.* Nov. 679/2, *OED*)

The more often such essentially hyperbolic uses occur and the more often *awful* occurs outside of religious and poetic (con)texts, as is the case in EModE, the less strong or elevated the meaning will be perceived to be. The writer of (28a) may have intended to characterise the theatre as an, in principle, respect-commanding institution, but whether all readers understood him in that sense, or rather as 'the (once) impressive theatre …', is another matter. The 'impressive' meaning will have provided one, though minor, input for the later intensive function. Ambiguous uses, of which (28b) is another example, and humorous uses as in (28c), help the newer, weaker meaning into the language. 'Declining life', as in (29), can of course be seen as fear-inspiring, as it is reminiscent of impending death. Therefore, the fear-sense of *awful* may be present, but it is equally possible to read it here as a strong evaluative item meaning 'terrible'.

(29)   Declining life is a very **awful** scene. (1780 Johnson *Lett. to Mrs. Thrale*
18 April, *OED*)

In (30), however, *awful* can only have the weakened evaluative meaning
'terrible'.

(30)   We saw an **awful** Hamlet the other night. (1833 E. FitzGerald *Lett.*
(1889) I. 20, *OED*)

As Table 6.7 shows, this meaning becomes prominent in the nineteenth
century, but still has considerable competition from the older meanings of
fear and respect. It is in the nineteenth century that the last semantic devel-
opment arises, namely that to a mere intensive or emphatic, largely devoid of
conceptual meaning. This is the meaning most likely in (31).

(31)   a.   The last Drawing Room of the season; so of course an **awful**
crowd. (1838 Hawker *Diary* (1893) II. 148, *OED*)
b.   A little too railroadish, perhaps, unless a man's in an **awful** hurry.
(1855 Smedley *H. Coverdale* i. 3, *OED*)

Possible paraphrases of (31) would be 'big/huge crowd', 'great hurry', in
each case just scaling the nominal content upwards. This is essentially a
degree meaning. In the twentieth century these last two uses are the pre-
dominant ones, with fear and respect at most residual uses, also as a rule
only as alternative readings in ambiguous contexts. Semantic change in the
case of *awful* can thus be seen as completed,[18] which means that in this case
original hyperbole has led to bleaching and full-scale semantic change, via a
polysemy stage, which lasted approximately 150 to 200 years.

There are far fewer instances of the adverb *awful(ly)*, namely 189 instances
found in the *OED* quotations and in ARCHER.[19] The latter was included
here to obtain a sufficient number of instances. Table 6.8 shows its semantic
development.

It is obvious that the adverb only becomes frequent once the newer
senses are available, but, given the small frequencies attested beforehand,
it is unlikely that it had developed them itself. Unlike Samuels (1972: 53),
who assumes *awfully* itself to be devalued by overstatement, I think it
rather likely that the adverb took over the weakened sense from hyper-
bolic uses of the adjective, but then expanded them greatly, in particular
the intensive use. It is probable that this in turn pulled the adjective more
strongly and faster towards the new senses. Alternatively or additionally,
other adverbs with a similar range of senses and corresponding adjective,
such as *dreadfully*, may have exerted an influence on *awfully* and indir-
ectly also on *awful*. The fact that the intensifying sense is found slightly
earlier with *awfully* than with *awful* could be relevant evidence in this

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[18]   Modern learners' dictionaries (e.g., *OALD*) do not list the older meanings any more.
[19]   There were no instances in the EModE corpora used for adjectival *awful* above.

Table 6.8 *A chronology of the semantic development of* awfully

	fear	respect	terrible	intensive
14th century	1	1		
15th century				
16th century		2		
17th century				
18th century	4	2	23	2
1800–49	2	2	2	7
1850–99	2	2	10	58
1900–49			3	67
1950 –			1	39

respect. At any rate, the adverb was probably never used hyperbolically in its own right.

Once *awful* had progressed far in its development towards 'terrible, unpleasant', new expressions for the original sense were necessary. This gap was filled by *awesome, awe-struck* or *–stricken, awe-inspiring* and *awe-filled. Awesome* is first attested by the *OED* in 1598; it in turn has developed weakened senses, but only in the late twentieth century and chiefly in American English. Apart from *awesome*, these formations keep the subjective and objective senses apart. Combining both subjective and objective senses seems to be inducive to change of the nature that *awful* has undergone (cf. Keller and Kirschbaum 2003: 124).

As was the case with *ages* and *loads*, this is another specifically English development.[20] While words with the 'fear' sense component have undergone similar developments in French and German (e.g., F. *horrible, terrible*; G. *schrecklich*), words with the 'respect' component provide no parallel (F. *digne*). In German we find a lexical split between objective (*ehrwürdig* 'venerable') and subjective (*ehrfürchtig* 'reverent, respectful') senses, which again might be part of the explanation.

6.3.5   Die, dead *and* death

The items in this section are marked by indicating the absolutely extreme point of the human experience, and as such are very forceful terms. As their literal meaning is always available for contrast, they lend themselves to hyperbolic use and are reasonably common in modern use. The resulting hyperboles are rather varied, but some uses stand out, namely the degree/intensifier uses of *dead* and *to death*, as well as the verbal *die/dying to* combination. These will be the focus of this section.

[20]   A development which is paralleled by *dread* (adj.), *dreadful(ly)*, which also combines fear and respect, cf. *the dreadfull mysteries of our faith* (*HC*, ceserm2a) and *our most dred and most souueraign erthy lord* (*HC* cmoffic3).

Table 6.9 *The chronology of hyperbolic intensifying* dead

	16th century	17th century	18th century	19th century	20th century
Instances	3	6	7	31	35

Example (32) illustrates the intensifier use of *dead*, i.e., the meaning 'extremely, totally, absolutely'.

(32)   a.   that you want to really help them and you feel **dead** sorry for them (*BNC* KCG 1064)

       b.   I was **dead** chuffed with that. (*BNC* KBC 3343)

This use can also be found in other corpora, e.g., three occurrences each in the London–Lund-Corpus and in *MICASE*, four in *LOB* and six in *FLOB*. Thus, it can be traced back at least to the 1960s. As *LOB* represents written language, it may even be supposed that it had a certain currency in speech before the sixties. How far back can this use be traced then? The *OED* gives the first instances for the late sixteenth century, equally for *deadly*, which needs to be looked at in this context as well. Evidence from the corpora does not really change the picture provided by the *OED*. Instances of intensifying *deadly* are found in Chaucer (two occurrences), Shakespeare (five) and *CONCE* (one), while *dead* is found in *CEEC* (one), *CED* (two), Shakespeare (one), *LC* (one) and *CONCE* (two), the earliest of which examples is found in 1511. Seventy-five occurrences of the intensifier *dead* in the *OED* quotations extend back to 1604. Taking the (older) corpora and the *OED* evidence together, one gets the chronological picture in Table 6.9 for *dead*.

It is, interestingly, the adverbially unmarked form that has become the dominant one,[21] which goes back to zero-derived adverbs common in EModE, most of which forms were regularised to *-ly* at the end of the period (Nevalainen 1999: 429–30). In the case of *dead*, it might have played a role that *deadly* as such was not an unambiguous adverb either. Nevertheless, this unmarkedness makes it similar to equally unregularised intensifiers like *very* and *pretty*.[22] As in *ages* above, we have a long-standing polysemy as shown by the chronology, one that is still kept alive by the strong lexical sense of *dead*, while the collocational patterns and the unusual morphological shape of hyperbolic *dead* emphasise the distinction to the literal use.

As to *dead*'s victory over *deadly*, one reason may lie in the fact that adjectival *dead* already had transferred uses, cf. Shakespeare's *the nights dead*

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[21]   There are only four intensifier uses of *deadly* in the *BNC*-spoken.
[22]   Cf. Nevalainen (2008) for zero and *-ly*-suffixed forms of intensifiers in EModE.

silence (*TGV*) or Dryden's *He that serves many Mistresses, surfeits on his diet, and grows dead to the whole sex* (*CED*, dʒcdryde). Such cases imply a comparison to the state of death, but one which is clearly hyperbolic: the night is not really completely silent as if all were dead, nor is the person literally dead or even emotionally dead. Likewise *in dead earnest*, the sense will originally have been 'as serious as if it was a matter of (life and) death', which in most cases will not have been the case. Some uses of the intensifier make use of or play with the literal meaning of *dead*:[23] in (33) *dead* takes up earlier *amort, no hope to live* and is combined with semantically similar *slain*, of which it could denote the result or it could join in the degree modification of *never in all my life*. The same ambiguity between result (of killing) and of intensification is found in (34).

(33) [$ (^Anticke.) $] How nowe fellowe Franticke, what all *amort*? Doth this sadnes become thy madnes? What though wee haue lost our way in the woodes, yet neuer hang the head, as though thou hadst *no hope to liue* till to morrow: for Fantasticke and I will warrant thy life to night for twenty in the hundred.
      [$ (^Frolicke.) $] Anticke and Fantasticke, as I am frollicke franion, *neuer in all my life* was I so **dead** *slaine*. (*CED*, dɪcpeele, 1595)

(34) Ah, cut my lace asunder, That my pent heart may have some scope to beat, Or else I swoon with this **dead-**killing news! (Shak., *Richard III*, 1592–1593)

(35) They continued drinking and roaring before, at, and after Supper, till most of them were *maddrunk*, and some of them **dead**-drunk[24] under the Table. (*LC*, LawB1649)

In (35), *dead-drunk* is clearly a step up from *maddrunk*, but it also uses one similarity between dead and drunk, namely that of being unconscious. *Dead sick* is another use that is easy to perceive; dead can be either a likely result of sickness or it can be a feared, subjectively felt outcome, i.e., commenting on the seriousness of the state of sickness – in other words an emotionally grounded hyperbole.

(36) When thou (as in a Sea-sicknesse) art **dead** sicke for the present, remember thou shalt be the better after. (1621 S. Ward *Life of Faith* (1627) 88, *OED*)

Most early examples are such uses where the semantic transfer is easily reconstructable as it involves either metonymy or implied similarity, e.g.,

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[23] Cf. also the playful, and partly literalising uses of *dead* and German *zu Tode* quoted as examples (58) and (59) in Section 4.3.1, p. 111.

[24] This combination occurs both hyphenated and as two separate words in the early sources.

dead asleep. But one also finds cases like (37) very early, where the transfer is greater and for which one would assume that cases like the above must have paved the way.

(37)   I knowe it is taken (as they say) to be **dead** sure that the party is a witch, if sundry such shewes of matters do concurre. (*CED*, dɪhogiff, 1593)

The increasing familiarisation of hyperbolic and consequently intensifying *dead* must have taken place in colloquial speech. The item was apparently too colloquial, on the one hand, to appear to a great extent in written sources, and, on the other hand, it was probably overall too infrequent (cf. the low *BNC* figures above) to surface significantly in the few speech-related historical corpora available. There is also no evidence that this use is expanding. Unlike with *load*, there is no pronounced preference of young speakers for the intensifier *dead*: only three instances of the sixty *dead* in *COLT* are intensifying.

Like *thousand* above, hyperbolic/intensifying *dead* is paralleled in German. There are expressions like *Totenstille, todstil* (dead silence/silent), *todernst* (dead serious), *todkrank* (dead sick), *todtraurig* (dead sad), *todunglücklich* (dead unhappy), *todelend* (dead miserable), *todlangweilig* (dead boring), *todmüde* (dead tired) as well as *todschick* (dead elegant[25]) and *todsicher* (dead sure/certain). Not all formations are paralleled, however. *Dead drunk* is, rather, *sturzbetrunken* (not **todbetrunken*), as the range in German seems more restricted, in particular with regard to collocations with positive words; the last two examples in the list above are the only non-negative items listed by the *Duden* (2001). There are no combinations with German equivalents of *easy, funny, good, happy, interesting, lucky, pretty, smart, sweet, true,* etc., all of which are found in the *BNC*. Loss of semantic restrictions and conventionalisation as an intensifier has thus progressed much further in English than in German. It is, of course, noteworthy that in German, as in the Shakespearean examples above, we find compounds, and the element *tod* has not (yet?) developed towards an intensifying affixal element (like *ur-*).

As one can be *dead bored* or find something *dead funny*, one can also be *bored to death* or *laugh oneself to death*. Phrasal *to death* thus serves equally intensifying functions as *dead*. Of the 139 occurrences in the *BNC*-spoken, almost half (67) can be interpreted as intensifying, while the others are literal. In the latter, *to death* denotes the actual result, as in *the girl chocked* (sic) *to death* (*BNC*), while originally in expressions such as *it frightened me to death*, it hyperbolically denoted such a high amount of fear as to *almost* lead to death. In this very common phrase and in others, the context never bears this out. The syntactic context of literal and hyperbolic uses is virtually identical; it modifies usually a verb or deverbal adjective.

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[25]   Compare perhaps English *dressed to kill*.

Table 6.10 *The chronology of hyperbolic* to death

	14th century	15th century	16th century	17th century	18th century	19th century	20th century
OED	1	—	3	13	19	38	28
corpora	—	—	5	1	3	7	67 (*BNC*)

Table 6.10 shows the occurrences of non-literal uses of *to death*, i.e., those where actual death does not happen, in the *OED* quotations and in the historical corpora used in this chapter (except *ARCHER*). Some of the earliest examples are the following:

(38)   Men laughe hem selve **to deaþ**. (1387 Trevisa Higden (Rolls) I. 305, *OED*)

(39)   a.   For *thirst* **to death** I dry. (a1541 Wyatt *Poet. Wks.* (1861) 117, *OED*)

b.   The people flocked together to see this sport, and although the Prior was *almost bruised* **to death** … yet he durst not cry for feare of further discredit, but lay still and suffered all with patience. (*CED*, d1fcoble, 1590)

c.   I pray you, one of you question yond man, If he for gold will give us any *food*; I *faint* almost **to death**. (Shak., *AYL*, 1599–1600)

d.   That the lover, sick **to death**, [Wish'd] himself the heavens' breath. (Shak., *LLL*, 1593–5)

In all of these cases there is a (potential) physical reaction and an actual or emotional danger or closeness of death. It is possible to be bruised to death (especially in the older, stronger sense of *bruise*), which in (39b) is negated by the insertion of *almost*. Whether a phrase like *almost to death* is factually applicable is, of course, a matter of context; if it is not, as it seems in the case of (39b), the use is intensifying in nature. In (39a, c), dying of thirst or hunger is, of course, possible, but the phrase can, equally, denote a subjectively unbearable sensation of thirst or hunger. Even today, *starve to death* can be ambiguous between actually dying and a pronounced feeling of hunger; here, the hyperbolic development of *starve* plays an additional role (cf. Section 6.3.6 below). *Laugh to death* is hardly ambiguous in the way of the other examples,[26] but works on the basis of the discomfort and belly ache that appears when one cannot stop laughing. Interestingly, its German equivalent (*sich tot lachen*) is equally old, being attested for at

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[26]   Laughing oneself to death is apparently possible, but is, of course, an extremely unlikely event.

least the last six hundred years (Fritz 2005: 105). *Sick to death* may refer both to the emotional despair felt in unrequited love and to the physical 'side effects' of the early stages of love. It is cases like these, where there is a residual likelihood of death or averse physical effects, from which the hyperbolic use of *to death* takes its start. Then, *to death* is transferred to other processes or activities, which cannot literally lead to death or for that matter cause any physical effects, such as *rhyme*, transferred *nauseate*, *talk* and *study* in (40). In each case, it vaguely means that something is being overdone or done to excess.

(40) a. I will not wish vnto you to be *rimed* **to death**. (a1586 Sidney *Apol. Poetrie* (Arb.) 72, *OED*)

  b. Which Book will *nauseate* a great many Readers **to death**. (1692 Washington tr. Milton's *Def. People M.'s Wks.* 1851 VIII. 194, *OED*)

  c. I was within an ace of *being talked* **to death**. (a1704 T. Brown *Lett. Wks.* 1730 I. 184, *OED*)

  d. I approve well enough of studying hard, but not to *study* myself **to Death**. (1725 N. Bailey *Fam. Colloq. Erasm.* (1733) 16, *OED*)

A next step is to use *to death* for the intensification of feelings and evaluations, as in (41). As a rule, it modifies rather negative emotions, which is in keeping with its literal sense.

(41) a. A Patriot, and so true, that it **to death** him *greeues* To heare his Wales disgrac't. (1612 Drayton Poly-olb. vi. Notes 93, *OED*)

  b. I'm *sad* **to death**, that I must be your foe. (1670 Dryden *Conq. Granada Pt.* ii. iii. iii, *OED*)

  c. A gentleman who would *resent* **to death** an imputation of falsehood. (1773 Mrs. Chapone *Improv. Mind* (1774) II. 80, *OED*)

  d. And let us take it for granted now, that the Time fix'd by the Laws is a reasonable and fitting Time for 99 People in a Hundred; yet if the Hundredth Person be *aggrieved* **to Death**, *or worse than Death*, by such a Law, what is the Impediment, what the Danger, what the Mischief, of declaring the Hundredth Person not to be bound by that Law? (*LC*, LawB1715)

Example (41d) is an interesting example inasmuch as it seems to imply by the addition *worse than Death* that *to death* is already weakening. Such weakening of the force (and thus fading of the literal meaning) would account for the jump to neutral or even positive evaluations as are found in (42).

(42) a. He must be a very fine man, as well as a very clever one, and I think it is a highly fortunate connection for her, and it is *reputable* **to death**! (*CONCE*, t2letjew, 1850)

    b. 'I'm *tickled* **to death** I'm talking to you,' Mr Perez said smiling into the telephone. (1977 E. Leonard Unknown Man No. 89 xvi. 141, *OED*)

    c. She *loves* it [= car, CC] **to death**. (*BNC* KM5 611)

These are the only such uses, however, which shows that in contrast to *dead*, the phrase has not quite made the transition to a pure intensifier. The most common collocation in the *BNC* is *frighten*, followed by *sick, worry, bore, scare, freeze, starve, work*, etc.

The final item in this group to be looked at is the verb *die*. It is not uncommonly used to express the length one would go to, the sacrifice one would be willing to make in order to achieve something, get something or not have to do something, as in (43). For the great majority of people, such statements would be clearly hyperbolic, as they would certainly not be prepared in fact to die.

(43)   I am so much in Love with this (^Bellfort^), that I shall **dye** if I lose him. (*CED*, d4cshadw, 1682)

Other uses denote the great intensity of a state or emotion, as in (44).

(44) a. He seith that 'sorweful and myshappy is the condicioun of a povre beggere; for if he axe nat his mete, he dyeth for hunger; and if he axe, he **dyeth** for shame'; (Chaucer, *CT*, Parson's Tale, 1387–1400)

    b. and parted in great Anger with the Usuall Ceremony of a Leg and a Courtesy, that you would have **dyed** wth Laughing to have seen us. (*CEEC*, Osborne, 1654)

Such hyperbolic and intensive uses, which are partly parallel in function to *dead* and *to death*, can be traced far back, as is shown in Table 6.11. *Dying* as the ultimate and most extreme experience lends itself naturally to such uses, and as such is also commonly in hyperbolic use in French and German.[27]

What I am especially interested in here, however, is the phrase *be dying to* 'long greatly', which the *OED* attests as early as 1709. The first *OED* quote and another one (of six altogether) are in the simple form, however; *dying to* first occurs in 1780. In this form, the literal meaning could never be used; thus, it can be seen as an extension and grammaticalisation of the common hyperbolic uses of *die*. Unfortunately, only two instances (cf. 45) were found in the corpora investigated, the first one again in the simple form and the second a non-prototypical one, as there is also the separate construction *die with* (cf. 44b).

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[27] French: e.g., *mourir d'amour / de tristesse / de peur / de honte / de chagrin / d'ennui / de faim / de rire*; German: e.g., *sterben vor Langeweile / Angst / Scham / Neugier; zum Sterben langweilig / müde / einsam*.

Table 6.11 *Historical instances of* die

	Chaucer 14th c.	HC-ME 1150–1500	HC-EModE 1500–1710	CEEC 1418–1680	CED 1560–1760	Shak. ~1600	LC 1640–1740	ZEN 1661–1791	CONCE 19th c.
die	147	259	238	450	388	678	256	632	261
hyp	7	1(–2?)	—	8	26	8	—	1	5
dying	—	12	11	50	43	29	31	32	20
hyp	—	—	—	—	3	—	—	—	5

(45)   a.   No ill Comparison; who is it? I **dye to** know. (*CED*, d4cmanle, 1696)
       b.   If we might not call on her, we would not even look at her, though we were **dying *with*** curiosity *to* know what she was like. (*CONCE*, t2ficgas, 1853)

Apparently, this is a very low-frequency feature: there are only twenty-seven instances in the *BNC*-spoken (2.5 per one million), one of which is (46).

(46)   I've been **dying to** make a good ginger pudding for years! (*BNC* KC0 1271)

An *OED* quotation search produced another eight pre-PDE instances besides the six in the entry discussed above.

(47)   a.   She **dies to** see what demure and serious Airs Wedlock has given you. (1711, Steele *Spect*. No. 254 3, *OED*)
       b.   I was **dying to** see a little of life. (1809, Malkin *Gil Blas* I.i 5, *OED*)
       c.   I was just **dying to** know whether you would appear in your pink tarletan. (1852 Mrs Stowe *Uncle Tom's Cabin* I. xviii. 309, *OED*)

Again, the earliest one of these (47a) uses the simple form, which makes it likely that this was the origin of this form. As it is likely that the form existed in spoken English before it made its way into writing, the time of origin coincides with the time when the use of simple and progressive was still fairly unregulated (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and when the progressive was not very frequent as such (up into the eighteenth century) (Rissanen 1999: 216f.). It is not unlikely that this form is an elliptical use arising out of usages similar to (43) above.

(48)   O get my graue in readinesse, *Faine would I* **die to** ende this stresse. (1568 T. Howell *Arb. Amitie* (1879) 39, *OED*)

An expression such as (48), 'somebody would be prepared to die if this led to y' or '... *in order to* y' can be reinterpreted if the surface markers of conditionality (*would, if*) were ellipted. It is perfectly possible to reformulate (47a) in the following manner: *I would die (in order) to (be able to) see* (...). Later, the progressive would be substituted for the simple form, so as to express greater immediacy and emotional involvement, and the expression stabilised/lexicalised in this shape. The infinitive marker *to* here also contains a clear 'purpose' reading. This is what it does in the majority of *die* + *to* sequences followed by a verb extracted from the *OED* and various corpora; in only three cases is the meaning rather a conditional one (with a total of twenty-eight instances). It is the purpose sense together with hyperbolic use of *die* that is important for the bringing about of the new 'desire' meaning.

There is a French parallel in the time frame relevant for the genesis of *die / dying to*, namely the use of *mourir de* with following infinitive, meaning 'désirer vivement', as found in Corneille's *Tite et Bérenice* (1670): *Un empereur sans foi qui* meurt de *me trahir* (Dubois *et al.* 1971: 371). In modern French, however, this usage seems not to exist. At a time when French culture and literature was serving as an admired model, it is possible that French influenced or reinforced the English phrase.[28]

Die to furthermore has a parallel in *die for* with a nominal complement. The two principal literal meanings are to 'die for the sake of sb, in order to do sth good for sb' (as in *Jesus died for mankind*) and 'die because or through sth' (as in *die for thirst*). These uses could be hyperbolically exploited as in (49), where b. means 'die because of love' (similar to *love-sick*), but it might also have allowed the interpretation 'to long for the love of Elizabetha', thus ushering in the new meaning. With the *would* construction, (49a) lends itself to similar processes as explained in the context of (48).

(49)   a.   and yf I woolde not do the lyke ye and willinglye **dye for** your Comffort I woolde I were in Hell (*CEEC*, Cromwel, 1540)

     b.   I will **dye for** love of Elizabetha, (*CED*, d3fcrisp, 1660)

In (50) the meaning 'desire, long for sth/sb.' is clearly present. The two constructions with *to* and *for*, developing the same meaning in parallel and thus producing symmetric complementation possibilities, may have reinforced each other.

(50)   a.   … but all would not doe, when she had nothing to say for her self she told her shee had rather begg wth Mr Howards then live in the greatest plenty that could bee with either my Lord Br:, Charles Rich or Mr Nevill, for all these were **dyeng for** her then (*CEEC*, Osborne, 1653)

     b.   I am the unhappy Wretch replied Montano that **dies for** the Possession of Bracilla; which I have in vain pursued this Twelve-Month, and must despair of, unless you can give me any hope. (*CED*, d4ftrage, 1693)

Despite its institutionalisation, *dying to* is still rather forceful and still has hyperbolic overtones, as the primary meaning of *die* is very prominent. As (51) shows, the construction can be literalised today, as the turtle is hurting itself, perhaps even to a fatal degree.

(51)   This pet turtle will continue walking into the glass until its snout is bloody. He exists, stressed and traumatised, in complete conflict with his biological program, **literally dying to** be free. (*BNC* CFM 327)

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[28]   *Dying/die to* is not listed in Prins' (1952) list of French-influenced English phraseology, however.

A last aspect is of interest here for all *death*-words. As a rule, the semantic area of death is one connected with taboo and euphemism, witness the various euphemistic expressions for *die*. In spite of this, hyperbolic and other figurative uses of *death*-words are common, i.e., the mechanisms of taboo have not prevented this. It seems as if the use of those words is only a problem when actual death is the referent, and not when something else is referred to.

6.3.6   Starve

Starve originally simply meant 'die' regardless of the cause of death. Later it became restricted to denoting 'slowly dying through hunger or cold' (the latter is northern), or modified to denote the process of 'dying together with extreme suffering'. This is first of all a process of differentiation or restriction, with the primary meaning ('die') remaining intact. It has never lost the primary meaning completely, even though the relatively weaker process/suffering meanings have become more prominent since 1600 (Stern 1931: 399, Samuels 1972: 53). In both hunger and cold senses, it developed a hyperbolic use, namely to be fairly hungry (*OED*, I.4.a.) or fairly cold (*OED*, I.5.a.), but with no danger involved. In the whole *BNC*, *starving* (pres. part.) and *starved* (past part.), the 2 most likely forms for hyperbolic usage (cf. e.g., *OALD* entry) occur 230 and 242 times, respectively, of which only 52 and 13 cases represent the hyperbolic use. The senses 'dying of hunger' or 'suffering extremely of impending death through hunger' are still the most dominant ones.

The development of the hyperbolic use will have taken its start from those literal uses which referred to the process of dying and the accompanying suffering. From there the sense components 'great physical sense of hunger or cold', '(very) little food/low temperature' and 'looking underfed' were able to become prominent at the expense of the component 'die'. Thus, we find uses such as *half-starved* (52), *almost starved/starving* or *starving* to denote a 'fairly low subsistence/income level' (53).

(52)   He is **half starv'd** in the lent of a long vacation. (1642 Fuller *Holy & Prof. St.* v. xiii. 408, *OED*)

(53)   Schiller was **starving** on a salary of 200 dollars per annum, which he received for his services as 'dramaturg' or literary manager. (1859 *Times* 17 November 8/2, *OED*)

Historical uses of the 'very hungry/cold' hyperbole are not very common. There are three instances in *CED*, one in the *Helsinki Corpus* (EModE), one in Shakespeare, two in *CONCE* and six in the *OED* quotations. The chronological and sense distribution is shown in Table 6.12.

Table 6.12 *The chronology of hyperbolic* starve

	Late 16th century	17th century	18th century	19th century	Early 20th century
'hunger'	1	2	2	2	1
'cold'	1	1	2	1	–

The following are 'cold'-examples, where it is noteworthy that the latest one is set in a northern English context, reflecting the regional restriction of this sense.

(54) a. O good Iohn it is I, quoth the widow, the night is so extreame colde, and my Chamber walles so thin, that I am like to be **starued in** my bed: wherefore rather then I would any way hazard my health, I thought it much better to come hither and trie your curtesie (*CED*, d2fdelon, 1596–7)

　　 b. The weather grows cold. I'll go rise, for my hands are **starving** while I write in bed. (Swift, *Jrnl to Stella* 30 December 1710, *OED*)

　　 c. Willie was rubbing his hands slowly before the roaring fire. 'I'm fearful **starved**', he said. (1893 J. K. Snowden, *Tales Yorksh. Wolds* 158, *OED*)

Hyperbolic examples with the 'hunger' sense are found in (55):

(55) a. Then let it be presently laid on the Spit. Make a good Sauce to it. And, pray, let it be done with all speed, for I am ready to **starve**. (*CED*, d4hemieg, 1685)

　　 b. I am hungry, I am very hungry. And I am dry. I am almost **starved**, methinks I have eat nothing these three days. (*CED*, d4hfboye, 1694)

　　 c. They came **starved**, and eat their little dinner voraciously. (1776 Mrs. Delany, *Life & Corr.* (1862) II. 208, *OED*)

　　 d. … for the strength of our dinner was a boiled leg of mutton, underdone even for James; and Captain Foote has a particular dislike of underdone mutton; but he was so good-humoured and pleasant that I did not much mind his being **starved**. (*CONCE*, t1letaus, 1807)

Here, the first two examples are especially noteworthy, as they are both found in language-teaching handbooks, (55a) for teaching English to French speakers and vice versa in the case of (55b). These handbooks present model dialogues side by side in both languages. It may be assumed that the authors were at least aiming at realistic formulations, so that the inclusion of

hyperbolic uses can be taken as evidence that these were not uncommon in the everyday speech of the time. Moreover, it may indicate that such usage was not felt to be extremely colloquial in nature.

The most typical use of hyperbolic *starve* is that found in (54) and (55a,b), i.e., with first-person subjects. As exaggeration usually depends on a subjectively felt intensity, this is the natural syntactic frame. The overall low frequency of this use as well as the clear contrast to real starvation on the one hand and to feeling hungry on the other hand ensures the still-persisting hyperbolic force of *starve*. The ambiguity of *starve to death* was already mentioned above; *to death* either can have a literalising force, countering a misunderstanding of *starve*, or it can be hyperbolic on top of overstated *starve*, thus making the exaggeration more emphatic.

6.4   Results and interpretations

Looking at the preceding results in the light of the general considerations presented in Section 6.2 above, it is possible to summarise a few important points.

Hyperbolic use may be favoured by polysemous items, where the various senses feed into the hyperbole, and by inherently vague expressions. In the case of *age*, both the sense 'person's age' and 'historical period' have played a role, providing the links to 'great length' and to an experiential basis. As the singular use of hyperbolic *age* is more prominent in the past, the former, more 'subjective' sense seems to have been an important input. *Load* similarly has various senses, such as (i) amount of goods that are being transported or are usual for a certain carrier, (ii) a very specific amount depending on the goods/material in question, i.e., a unit of measurement, and (iii) something conceived of as a weight, burden, pressure.[29] While (i) and (iii) stress the function of *load* as an 'extreme' measure, the unit will have involved greater amounts – thus, all three usages could form input for the hyperbolic use and reinforce each other. Both *age* and *load* are, furthermore, characterised by a certain vagueness, a feature which is also present in *starve* and *awful*. *Age* does not refer to a precise number of years, *load* can denote varying amounts, *starve* in its '(suffering in the) process of dying sense' is somewhat imprecise regarding the seriousness of the condition as well as the stage the person is at, and *awful* is vague as to the intensity of fear or degree of respect in the way that all evaluatives are vague.[30] Such vagueness may favour the use of a word for hyperbolic purposes, as the extension can be seen as gradual, not too blatant and also easily retractable.

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[29] Disregarding the late sense 'electrical power'.
[30] Vagueness may also play a role in the choice of round high numbers such as *thousand*: while it is mathematically precise, most people have only a hazy idea of which conglomerations of people or objects correspond to 1,000. This is not semantic/linguistic vagueness, however, but a cognitive aspect.

As *die*, *age* and *load* have illustrated, there are constructions or collocations which are more or less typical of hyperbolic use. The preferred modern collocates of *age* are not that noticeable in the past (with the exception of *for*), and these are also not relevant for the sense 'person's age', which seems to have been more important for the early hyperbolic extension. The collocations *for ages/ages ago* are borrowings from the 'historical period' sense, once this became more important for the hyperbole, or from the field of time expressions generally, when the hyperbolic use was becoming more prominent. The latter is certainly the likely origin of the collocation *take ages*. The answer to Levinson's questions (cf. Section 6.2, p. 174) of whether syntactic constructions follow or cause the new sense in the case of *age* is most likely: hyperbolic use > extension of collocation(s). The *die to*-construction, in contrast, was available, even if not frequent, in a literal sense, from which the hyperbolic use could take off. This was supported by the equally available literal *die for*-construction and its hyperbolic usage. It is only the later introduction and then fossilisation of the progressive *dying* that is a specific development of the hyperbolic usage. In this case the process is thus a two-stage one: (i) existing collocation (*die to*) > hyperbolic use, (ii) hyperbolic use > variant of collocation (*dying to*). In the case of *load(s) of*, the development is similar: (i) existing collocation > hyperbolic use (number slot always unfilled), (ii) hyperbolic use > phonetic reduction (*loadsa*), with the latter probably still a minor feature.

Word families and lexical fields play a role in the origin and establishment of hyperbolic uses as well (cf. Fritz 1998: 52). *Thousand* can rely on the whole field of numerical overstatement, while *age* exists against the background of other temporal hyperboles, e.g., *years, months*, etc. They are thus easy both to produce and to understand. Minor uses in terms of frequency, such as *dying to*, can be supported by their anchoring within the network of hyperbolic uses of the whole family, here all *death*-words. In the case of *awfully*, the evidence available makes it most likely that it was drawn into the hyperbolic spectrum of the adjective *awful*, at a time when this was already in the process of weakening, and made to behave in an analogical manner.

Another aspect of importance, on the evidence of the items investigated, seems to be the register distribution of the hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic uses. *Thousand*, for example, is notably common in literary contexts (Chaucer, Shakespeare, the majority of *CED* instances) and in the Bible, more so than in less formal contexts. It is therefore possible that the literary, 'rhetorical' uses of *thousand* have over time seeped into somewhat less literary, but still fairly formal contexts, such as the polite formulae mentioned above, and from there further into the colloquial contexts where they can be found today. A similar literary impulse or at least influence may be present for the form *die to*, in this case from classical French drama. Movement between text types and register has also been relevant for the development

of *awful*. The older, non-hyperbolical meanings of *awful* are typical, though not exclusive, for religious and poetical texts. Such texts containing the item in question are still fairly frequent in the eighteenth century, decreasing in the nineteenth century and virtually non-existent in the twentieth century (based on the *OED* quotations evidence); these texts as a rule use the 'literal' meanings. Hyperbolic meanings, in contrast, are found in other kinds of text and the early uses of the weakened meaning 'terrible' (the result of hyperbole) are found in the following text types: diaries, drama, magazines and letters. *Awful* has thus moved from restricted to less restricted contexts (cf. the collocational patterns mentioned above), and from more formal to less formal text types, in correspondence to its semantic development. It may also be of interest that the weakened meaning of *awful* makes its first appearance in the eighteenth century, a period at which religion and religious contexts started to become recessive (relatively speaking at least). With the increasing frequency of weakened uses, hyperbolic uses were on the wane and the original literal uses would be more and more avoided because of possible ambiguity and misunderstanding.

In (partial) contrast to *thousand* and *awful*, most hyperbolic usages, especially early ones, will have been found in spoken, more informal and familiar contexts. This is certainly likely for *age*, *load*, *dead* and *starve*, all of which refer to aspects of everyday relevance. It is of interest that early hyperbolic examples were often found in precisely those corpora (*CED*, *CEEC*, *CONCE*) which come closest to such contexts in the historical sphere. This was especially clear in the context of *age(s)*. But the early occurrence of an expression such as *dead sure* in *CED* (cf. (37) in Section 6.3.5), which already exhibits collocational extension, hints at even earlier spread and consolidation in spoken contexts. Unfortunately, the corpus evidence is too sparse and partly unsuitable (*OED*) for judgements about types of user and routes of propagation.

As the studies in Section 6.3 have shown, none of the features investigated, apart from *thousand*, can be called frequent in the historical sources. However, some uses are also not frequent in PDE, e.g., *dying to*, which may show that infrequent but nevertheless fairly constant use can be sufficient for the establishment of an item. What may be more important is the fact that these hyperbolic uses have been shown to be long-standing, traceable back to 1387 (*to death*), 1511 (*dead*, intens.), 1590 (*age*), 1596 (*starve*), 1626 (*load*), 1696 (*die to*) and to an even more distant past (*thousand*). In these cases we have established variants of usage; the question is what linguistic status these variants have at particular stages of their history and particularly in PDE. This refers to the second question posed by Levinson (cf. Section 6.2), namely whether an implicature simply turns into a sense or proceeds via various stages. Traugott and Dasher (2005: 35), partly based on Levinson (1995), proposed the historical path of semantic development illustrated in Figure 6.3, postulating at least one stage along the way.

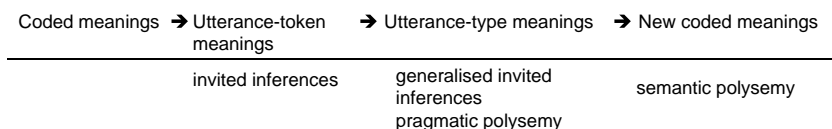| Coded meanings ➔	Utterance-token meanings	➔ Utterance-type meanings	➔ New coded meanings
	invited inferences	generalised invited inferences pragmatic polysemy	semantic polysemy

Figure 6.3: Stages of semantic development (according to Traugott and Dasher 2005)

What is at issue here is the increasing conventionalisation of implicatures or so-called invited inferences (1995: 5). Implicatures rely on heuristics in this and in Levinson's (2000) model of generalised conversational implicatures. For hyperbolic usage, it is the M(anner)-heuristic that is of importance, which Levinson (2000: 33, cf. also 38f., 135f.) formulates as follows: 'What's said in an abnormal way, isn't normal; or Marked message indicates marked situation.'[31] A use such as *die to* in (56a) is marked both in relation to (56a'), (56b) and (56c). First of all, it is abnormal to use first person, present tense *die* if one is patently not in the process of dying, in contrast to Jesus in (56b) and the unnamed person in (56c), where the narrative past tense marks it as a factual account. Secondly, it is abnormal in contrast to (56a'), which it scales upwards to almost absurd heights.

(56) a.   No ill Comparison; who is it? I **dye to** know. (*CED*, d4cmanle, 1696) (14a from Section 6.2. above)
a'. I **want to / would like to** know **very much**.
b.   by Gods blessing (…) will be sufficient to save our Souls, through him who first published it to the World, and **died to** make satisfaction for our sins. (*LC*, RelA1682)
c.   He both retracted his Apostacy and **dyed to** attone for it. (1703 Maundrell *Journ. Jerus.* (1732) 141, *OED*)

A striking use such as this will produce a strong and certainly memorable implicature/invited inference on first use. It will clearly transport the high emotive investment of the speaker and thus be a successful use, one that lends itself to imitation. This in turn will lead to the development of a generalised implicature or an utterance-type meaning. All of the items above have certainly reached this stage in their development, that is, their intended meanings need no longer be inferred strictly speaking or computed but have become default meanings. The question remains whether some of them have not progressed even further, in particular *dead* and *load*.

Awful has certainly done so. In this case, an earlier state of competing usages or polysemous senses has been partly resolved and has produced two new coded meanings, which are ultimately the result of hyperbole. Increased

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[31]   Levinson (2000: 38) relates this to Grice's M1 (avoid obscurity of expression) and M4 (avoid prolixity). The latter is also mentioned by Traugott and Dasher (2005: 19), who add that specially marked, complex expressions warn 'marked situation'.

frequency of transferred hyperbolic usage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has led to successive weakening, ultimately bringing about the new meanings of 'terrible' and pure intensification. This was the end of the usefulness of any hyperbolic usage, as it had lost its expressiveness. The older meanings ('respect'; 'great fear'), meanwhile, specialised in certain registers (cf. Traugott and Dasher 2005: 11), which furthered their increasing obsolescence. Some modern dictionaries still list them, partly marking them as archaic; learner's dictionaries dispense with them completely. As regards corpus evidence, the 37 instances in *FLOB* contain no example of the older meanings, and the 386 items checked in the *BNC* (non-fiction books only) yielded 3 uses with the older meanings, one of them a classical quotation. For modern speakers, understanding the older meanings is not impossible, if a connection with *awe* is constructed, but it certainly requires extra processing effort.

The demise or far-reaching relegation of the older meaning to linguistic niches and thus the loss of inferability is important for reaching the stage of new coded meaning/semantic polysemy.[32] As long as the original meaning is still clearly present and the path of extension thus potentially reconstructable by language users, the stage of generalised implicature and pragmatic polysemy is the more likely one (Traugott and Dasher 2005: 35, Busse 1991: 57). The original meanings are still very or rather salient in the cases of *age, thousand, death/die/dead* and *starve.* This is not very likely to change, as the alternatives, i.e., items that could substitute for the words in their original meaning, are lacking or are not very promising ones. There is no other word for 'thousand', and the same goes for *starve* in the sense of 'die of hunger' (*famish* seems no complete synonym). *Age* in the sense 'years of person's life' has no rival and *era*, *epoch* for the 'period' sense are stylistically different; the latter also goes for the *death*-words (cf. *deceased, demise, pass away, kick the bucket*, etc.). With regard to *load*, one could argue that the older meaning referring to fairly precise amounts (of, e.g., hay, timber) is recessive, either because it is relegated to certain technical/professional contexts or because it is superseded, even in these contexts, by other units of measurement. Furthermore, for most people in everyday modern life, there is hardly any close contact with large loads of anything (this is different in an agricultural society). More recent senses, such as the electrical one, also do not necessarily support a reading suggesting a 'great amount' any more. Thus, the inferable or retrievable connection of modern everyday uses of *load* to older, specialised senses may not be very obvious to many speakers.

An additional fact in this context is grammaticalisation. *A load of / loads of* can be said to have turned from a noun phrase into a complex quantifier, like *lot of.* As Table 6.5 showed, this process is obvious with younger speakers. In this case, *load* as such will largely have lost its lexical meaning, and

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[32]   This is thus an instance of Hopper's (1991) principle of layering.

Frequency of use →

Stage	0	I	II	III
Types of meaning	coded	utterance-token	utterance-type preferred/default	new coded
Processes	decoding	inferencing: particularised conversational implicatures	generalised conversational implicatures (M-heuristic)	decoding / disambiguation
Conventions	of language (system)	of general behaviour (conversational norms/principles)	of language use (Searle) norm (Coseriu)	of language (system)
Polysemy	(semantic)	-	pragmatic	semantic
Examples	*age*: e.g., *12 years of age, ages of history* *die to*: religious context	first use and early imitations: e.g., *age* (16th cent.) *die to* (17th cent.)	*age* *dying to* *to death* *thousand* *starve*	*awful(ly) load(s) of dead* (intens.)

weakening of impact →
semantic bleaching

Figure 6.4: The (potential) development of hyperbolic items

the complex form will have acquired a new coded lexico-grammatical meaning. The intensifier use of *dead* is another candidate for grammaticalisation and thus the acquisition of a new coded meaning. While the connection to the literal sense is in principle easy to make, the collocational extension to such adjectives as *nice*, *pleasant*, *honest*, *chuffed* shows that the connection is not salient for many speakers. Another contributing aspect to the grammaticalised nature is the abnormal (from the PDE perspective), non-adverbially marked form of *dead*. The adjective *dead* remains unaffected, however, i.e., there is still semantic polysemy. This goes with Peters' (1993: 282) observation that boosters as a rule do not lose their lexical uses.

A schematic rendering of the processes as affecting the example words is presented in Figure 6.4.

Hyperboles which have reached stage II are examples of Traugott and Dasher's (2005: 94f.) tendency I of semantic change, which says that meanings based in the external described situation turn into meanings based in the internal described situation, in this case by integrating the evaluative component into the meaning. They are thus an instance of the process of subjectification of linguistic items. With repeated use and potentially overuse, such hyperboles become 'weakened through a process of diminishing returns' (Leech 1983: 147), as hearers automatically adjust their interpretation

and the impact is thus reduced or even minimal (cf. Keller and Kirschbaum 2003: 2). The processes and types of conventions involved on the various stages vary, but with near-identity of stages 0 and III. On stage 0 and III systemic conventions dominate and, accordingly, decoding of linguistic meanings takes place; disambiguation is added in stage III as systematic polysemy may be present by then, which is not necessarily the case in stage 0.[33] To a large extent, what is said is what is meant in these two stages. Stages I and II are both characterised by implicatures and inferencing processes, albeit on a somewhat different basis. Conversational principles and maxims, of the Gricean or similar variety, are applied on stage I, which means that conventions of general and of linguistic behaviour play a role. These operate against the background of general and shared world knowledge. Conventions governing this stage are those of language usage. In Coseriu's (1988: 225, 267) sense, the norm is placed exactly there, on a level below the language system. The norm refers to what is commonly being realised, in a given way, in a speech community, but abstracted away from subjective variable realisations and approaching a kind of sociocultural obligatoriness.

All hyperbolic items can, in principle, pass through these stages, provided that they find a sufficient number of imitators after the first use. In stage III, the hyperbole is actually dead, either because the sense change is completed or because of the influences of grammaticalisation. However, it is still possible for some to be 'deader' than others, as is the case for *awfully*. Stage II can be long-lasting for individual items, as Section 6.3 has shown, and again, items can be on slightly diverging levels of conventionalisation, depending on the frequency of hyperbolic use and on the type of link to the non-hyperbolic meaning.

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[33]   Any polysemy existing there will not be due to hyperbole in the context of this model.

7 The rhetoric of hyperbole

The preceding chapters, in particular, Chapters 4 and 5, have dealt mostly with the everyday uses of hyperbole. But as occasional references to Quintilian in Chapters 2 and 3 have already indicated, hyperbole as a concept has its roots in the system of classical rhetoric. Hyperbole thus needs to be seen in the larger context of the art of persuasion. Figures of speech such as hyperbole are used in this context in a *consciously* strategic manner in order to reach fairly well-defined aims. Such highly deliberate uses are found in texts, types and contexts with various aims (and, of course, also in everyday speech). Furthermore, it is likely that hyperbole is distributed across registers and genres in a non-random manner, with some of these encouraging the use of hyperbole and others doing the opposite. A full-scale genre investigation is beyond the scope of this book, but it is possible to highlight some types with very different (functional) orientations and thus also, differential use of hyperbole. The analyses in this chapter will therefore further elucidate the functions of hyperbole beyond those singled out in Chapter 4. The present chapter will focus on registers and genres such as political discourse as a typical persuasive register, humorous texts as a primarily entertaining category, and literature as a type that combines persuasive, entertaining and instructive/ edifying features. So as to come as close to a 'representative' picture as possible, the sources chosen are extremely varied, comprising many types (from TV programmes to the literary canon) and originating from different historical epochs (from Old English to the twenty-first century).[1] Many of the hyperbolic types and strategies identified in Chapters 4 and 5 will reappear here in contexts in which they are put to specific uses in line with the requirements of the genre or register. Needless to say, the treatment here can only be superficial – a thorough text-linguistic analysis of hyperbole would need a book of its own – but I regard this aspect as necessary to round off the present study.

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[1] As the historical development of hyperbole is not in focus here, no attempt will be made to deal with sources in their proper chronological sequence.

7.1   Hyperbole as a persuasive device

7.1.1   *Rhetorical theory*

Dealing with this topic without recourse to classical rhetoric would, of course, leave it incomplete. Before I proceed to modern uses, I will therefore briefly highlight some relevant aspects of classical rhetoric and its understanding of hyperbole. Important sources are, for example, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian. Ancient rhetoric is basically about public, i.e., political and judicial oratory, and concerns not only the form of speech but also the contents and the search for truth. Aristotle (*Rhetoric* I, 2) identified three aspects involved in rhetorical persuasion; namely, credibility established by the good character of the speaker *as evidenced in his speaking* (*ethos*), the arousal of emotions in the hearers by means of the speech (*pathos*), and the construction of proofs through speech by means of logical arguments (*logos*) (cf. also Quintilian VI, 2). Hyperbole can play a role in all three of these aspects. With respect to *logos*, it can be useful to maximise or hyperbolically inflate some aspects or proofs while downplaying others (cf. the argumentative scales mentioned in Section 2.2). With respect to *pathos*, hyperbole can make things appear more important, more frightening or more desirable, thus arousing specific attitudes and feelings.[2] Modern studies back up this view of *pathos*. The psycholinguistic research quoted in Section 5.1 showed that hyperbole can trigger rather strong feelings, in particular when the addressee is the target, but also when the direct target is somebody or something else. Experiments have also shown that word choice can influence people's perceptions and memory, the latter being crucially linked to emotional reactions. The use of semantically stronger words, e.g., *smash* instead of *hit*, in describing a car accident leads to an increase of people's estimate of the car's speed (Loftus and Palmer 1974). Thus, hyperbolic expressions can be used to influence the audience's opinions, usually via the emotions aroused. Finally, with respect to *ethos*, a constantly exaggerating speaker may appear untrustworthy (cf. e.g., example (11) in Section 5.2, p. 147) while one who always minimises may not be convincing, or boring; the degree of hyperbole may need to be carefully calibrated. Aristotle (*Rhetoric* III, 11) was of the opinion that using hyperbole shows vehemence of character and is thus suitable for young speakers, but is also often a sign of people with an angry disposition.

Aristotle further distinguished three types of oratory (*Rhetoric* I, 3; cf. also Quintilian III, 3–4): (i) the political/deliberative kind, concerned with what kind of actions to take or not to take in the future, (ii) the forensic/judicial kind, aimed at attacking or defending deeds that were performed in

[2] Thinking of another theoretical maxim of antiquity, the Horatian *prodesse et delectare*, one might also say that some instances of hyperbole produce a positive mood/mental inclination in the audience through their entertaining function.

the past, and (iii) the ceremonial/panegyrical kind, focused on praising or censuring states or people in the present. While this classification as such may no longer be sufficiently detailed, the functions on which it is built are, of course, still relevant today; modern political discourse essentially includes all three of them. Again, it is obvious that each type offers scope for hyperbolic language use.

Quintilian (III, 3,1) produced an influential and long-lived subdivision of the rhetorical process into five parts: invention (*inventio*), arrangement (*dispositio*), style and expression (*elocutio*), memory (*memoria*) and delivery (*actio*), three of which are relevant for hyperbole. First, *inventio* involves the development of an argument, in the course of which a decision for or against the use of possible arguments of varying strengths and/or for exceeding the proper bounds of fact can be taken. Secondly, *dispositio* is concerned with the structural organisation of the argumentation, which provides the option to build up the argumentation in such a way as to lead to mutual reinforcement, maximisation or to a climax, thereby creating hyperbole through a cumulative effect. Finally, *elocutio* involves the choice of specific linguistic forms for the realisation of a speech, which includes the system of figures and tropes of which hyperbole is a part. Cicero ('On the Orator') sees the use of hyperbole as a sign of a brilliant oration, whereas Quintilian (VIII, 6, 73–4) warns of too extravagant hyperbole, as this can produce the impression of artificiality, affectation or foolishness on the part of the speaker. Quintilian treats hyperbole proper separately from amplification, but two of the four amplification types that he treats also potentially fall under hyperbole as understood in the present approach. These are amplification by augmentation, which involves an advance beyond a supposedly highest point, and amplification by accumulation, which is realised by a sequence of expression rising higher and higher in meaning (VIII, 4, 3ff./26f.). A whole chapter is devoted to amplification by Quintilian thus emphasising how important he considered it to be. Apart from the explicit mentioning of hyperbole or amplification, the ancient rhetorical texts contain various passages where the authors talk about the desirability of exaggerating certain facts or value judgements if they serve the purpose of the speaker in defending or attacking a given point. One illustrative example, taken from Cicero (Rhetorical Invention) will suffice here:

> Therefore the accuser, when he says that anything has been done in compliance with some impulse, *ought to exaggerate* that impulse, and any other agitation or affection of the mind, with all the power of language and variety of sentiments of which he is master.

Hyperbole does not figure only in western rhetoric. Kennedy (1998), who investigated and compared rhetorical traditions worldwide, found that it also plays an important role in other systems. Hyperbole is one of the seven important critical terms that he lists for Chinese literary theory, and in

Indian rhetorical theory it is the second most basic figure after the simile (1998: 165, 188). It does not appear among his listings of universal tropes, however, which include metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy (1998: 229). While the labelled concept thus seems not to be recognised everywhere in an explicit manner, the practice is common enough. Swartz (1976), for example, reports on hyperbolic language use in dispute settlement sessions among the Bena in Tanzania, a speech community that actually puts great emphasis on accuracy. Nevertheless, hyperbole is used when speakers who notice some resistance to their point of view (i.e., are in an insecure position) need to restructure reality so as to highlight some aspects and over-shadow others. According to Swartz, hyperbole among the Bena is more likely with respect to aspects which involve shared values of speaker and audience.

7.1.2   Political language

Classical rhetoric had a long afterlife; it was influential and in use up to at least the eighteenth century, and this applies in particular to the part of elo-cution. Therefore, I would like to start this section with a political speech from the early eighteenth century. It is the speech John Hamilton, second Lord Belhaven and Stenton, delivered in November 1706 to the Scottish parliament in the context of the debate about the proposed union between England and Scotland.[3] The issue was an extremely important one, with potentially very grave consequences, whichever way the decision would fall, and, significantly, the decision was by no means a foregone conclusion. Any contribution to the ongoing debate could influence the final vote. However, given the final outcome, Swartz's assumption that hyperbole is a resource of lost causes used by speakers in the view of formidable opposition (1976: 114) is also relevant here. Lord Belhaven was arguing strongly against the union, which meant that he had to emphasise the positive aspects of an independ-ent Scotland and the negative aspects of a Scotland within the union. In doing this, he applied various maximisation and hyperbolic strategies. One might think that it is hard to exaggerate, given an event that is of such supreme importance, but in fact, almost 10 per cent of the whole speech can be regarded as more or less clearly hyperbolic in nature. The beginning of the speech is already noteworthy in this respect. He started his speech with the following thirteen visionary statements, each beginning *I think I see*, which paint the future of Scotland in the union in very dark colours, partly in contrast to a glorious past, and which contain various very extreme statements.

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[3] The version to which I am referring was published in pamphlet format and is contained as text PolB1706 in the *Lampeter Corpus*.

(1)   1[4]   I think, I see a Free and Independent Kingdom delivering up **That, which all the World hath been fighting for, since the days of Nimrod**; yea, that for which most of all the Empires, Kingdoms, States, Principalities and Dukedoms of Europe, are at this very time engaged in **the most Bloody and Cruel Wars that ever were**; to wit, A Power to manage their own Affairs by themselves, without the Assistance and Counsel of any other.

2   I think, I see a National Church, founded upon a Rock, secured by a Claim of Right, **hedged and fenced about by the strictest and pointed'st Legal Sanction that Sovereignty could contrive**, voluntarily descending into a Plain, **upon an equal level with Jews, Papists, Socinians, Arminians, Anabaptists, and other Sectaries**, &c.

3   I think I see the Noble and Honourable Peerage of Scotland, whose valiant Predecessors led Armies against their Enemies upon their own proper Charges and Expences, now divested of their Followers and Vassalages, and put upon such an equal Foot with their Vassals, that I think I see **a petty English Exciseman receive more Homage and Respect, than what was paid formerly to their quondam Mackallamors**.

4   I think I see the present **Peers of Scotland, whose Noble Ancestors conquered Provinces, over-run Countries, reduc'd and subjected Towns and fortify'd Places, exacted Tribute through the greatest part of England**, now walking in the Court of Requests **like so many English Attornies, laying aside their walking Swords when in Company with the English Peers, lest their Self-defence should be found Murder**.

5   I think I see the Honourable Estate of Barons, the bold Asserters of the Nations Rights and Liberties **in the worst of Times, now setting a Watch upon their Lips, and a Guard upon their Tongues**, lest they be found guilty of Scandalum Magnatum.

6   I think I see **the Royal State of Burrows walking their desolate Streets, hanging down their Heads under Disappointments; wormed out of all the Branches of their old Trade**, uncertain what hand to turn to, **necessitate to become 'Prentices to their unkind Neighbours**; and yet after all, finding their Trade so fortified by Companies, and secured by Prescriptions, **that they despair of any Success therein**.

7   I think I see our Learned Judges laying aside their Practiques and Decisions, studying the Common Law of England, gravelled

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[4] Numbering added for ease of reference.

with Certioraries, Nisi prius's, Writs of Error, Verdicts indovar, Ejectione firmae, Injunctions, Demurrs, &c. and frighted with Appeals and Avocations, because of the new Regulations and Rectifications they may meet with.

8   I think I see the Valiant and Gallant Soldiery either sent to learn the Plantation-Trade abroad; or **at home petitioning for a small Subsistance**, as the Reward of their Honourable Exploits, **while their old Corps are broken, the common Soldiers left to beg**, and the youngest English Corps kept standing.

9   I think I see **the Honest Industrious Tradesman loaded with new Taxes, and Impositions, disappointed of the Equivalents, drinking Water in place of Ale, eating his saltless Pottage, petitioning for Encouragement to his Manufactures, and answered by counter Petitions**.

10   In short, I think I see the Laborious Ploughman, **with his Corn spoiling upon his Hands, for want of Sale, cursing the day of his Birth, dreading the Expence of his Burial, and uncertain whether to marry or do worse**.

11   I think I see **the incurable Difficulties of the Landed Men, fettered under the Golden Chain of Equivalents, their pretty Daughters petitioning for want of Husbands, and their Sons for want of Employments**.

12   I think I see **our Mariners delivering up their Ships to their Dutch Partners; and what through Presses and Necessity, earning their Bread as Underlings in the Royal English Navy**.

13   But above all, my Lord, I think I see our Ancient Mother CALEDONIA, like Caesar, sitting in the midst of our Senate, rufully looking round about her, covering her self with her Royal Garment, **attending the Fatal Blow, and breathing out her last** with a *Et tu quoque mi fili*. (*LC* PolB1706)

He frames this listing by first pointing out the high value attached to independence by humans in general (1: *which **all the world** hath been fighting for, since the days of Nimrod / for which … the **most bloody** and cruel wars that ever were*) and by ending with a strong evaluation statement equating agreeing to the union with murdering Mother Scotland (*fatal blow*, **13**), a more sophisticated version of common hyperbolic uses of the *death* group. The classical trappings add further force to this assertion. He is thus implying that Scotland would act unnaturally were it to agree to the union. On the side of the positive past (and present), he maximises the secure state of the Scottish Church (**2**) and the military successes on foreign soil of the Scottish ancestors. The latter's relationship to reality is rather tenuous (e.g., *the greatest part of England*), with exaggeration shading into untruth.

All remaining hyperboles in this passage relate to the negative effects of the union. Hamilton sees the Scottish Church ending up at the same low level as various religious groupings which share the characteristics of being illegal, unprotected and presumably disreputable (2). In this case he constructs an ad-hoc argumentative scale which is highly dependent on the sociopolitical context and on the society's value system. In the same manner, i.e., again working with culturally loaded scales, he envisages the Scottish peers being ranked below or at the same level with tax officers (3) and legal officers, attorneys (4), about the latter of which the *OED* even attests a common derogative meaning ('knave, swindler', s.v. *OED attorney* 1), making this an especially forceful choice. In the next point (5), we find the picture of an oppressive state, by implication even worse than *the worst of times*, in which Scots are afraid to speak their minds. He foresees a disastrous effect of the Union on the economic state of Scotland: Scots being forced out of their trades (6), being left poor, without employment or even to beg (8, 9, 10, 11), being suppressed with levies and administration (9, 11), being unable to sell their produce (10), and losing their navy (12). While it is, of course, possible that the situation of the weaker state of two within a union becomes some-what worse, Hamilton in each case chooses very strong terms, either using linguistically extreme forms (e.g., ***all the branches***, ***any success***, ***incurable difficulties***, cf. also the superlatives above) or those which are extreme in the context of world knowledge (e.g., *water, saltless pottage, dreading the expence of his burial*). Furthermore, he also employs emotionally loaded expressions (e.g., *desolate, hanging down their heads, unkind, despair of, cursing, fettered, underlings*). This is a very strong opening for a speech, but also a risky one. It is certainly attention-catching and may also make some hearers interested in more information, or rather, proofs for the wide-ranging claims, but it may not secure the good will[5] of all hearers, in particular not that of those who find the hyperboles too flagrant (in spite of the slight downtoning provided by the introductory formulae *I think I see*; cf. Section 4.3.1 on downtoning in general).

After this opening, exaggeration is never laid on as heavily again but hyperbolic instances occur intermittently, four of which merit a closer look. In both (2) and (3) the hyperbole is interconnected with classical allu-sions, thus imbuing it with greater authority and strength. The whip and bell, and the cock, viper and ape in (2) refer to facts the speaker has intro-duced before, namely the mementoes for the Roman triumphator and the cruel punishment meted out to a Roman condemned of parricide, which Hamilton exceeds by calling them too small in the present circumstances. This is a more sophisticated version of the idiom remodelling we have seen in Section 4.2.2 (p. 96). As in some cases in the introduction, he works again

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[5] I am referring to the three means listed by Quintilian (IV) as useful in the exordium of a speech for making the hearer inclined to a speaker's pleading.

with a clear positive/negative contrast (cf. *statue of gold*), which further heightens the effect.

(2)   If his Grace succeed in this Affair of an Union, and that it prove for the Happiness and Wellfare of the Nation, then he justly merits to have **a Statue of Gold erected for himself**; but **if it shall tend to the intire Destruction and Abolition of our Nation;** and that we the Nations Trustees shall go into it; then I must say, **That a Whip and a Bell, a Cock, a Viper, and an Ape, are but too small Punishments for any such bold unnatural Undertaking and Complaisance**. (*LC* PolB1706)

The hyperbole in (3) starts with a clear, fairly literal allusion to the phrase *Hannibal ad portas* used by Cicero (and subsequently by others), which has gained proverbial currency in the form *Hannibal ante portas* as a warning in the case of extreme danger.

(3)   What hinders us then, My Lord, to lay aside our Divisions, to unite cordially and heartily together in our present Circumstances, when our All is at Stake? **Hannibal, my Lord, is at our Gates, Hannibal is come within our Gates, Hannibal is come the Length of this Table, he is at the Foot of this Throne, he will demolish this Throne; if we take not Notice, he'll seize upon these Regalia, he'll take them as our spolia opima, and whip us out of this House, never to return again**. (*LC* PolB1706)

Hamilton then proceeds to bring Hannibal and thus the danger ever closer to himself and his audience, by successively piling up reports of Hannibal's (supposed) successes (cf. Section 3.2.2 for this technique in general). The paratactic combination adds great urgency to the listing. In both these examples, the speaker introduces a point which was already perceived as exceptional by the Romans and presumably also by his contemporaries with a classical education, surpasses it and thus implies that the present situation and plan is even more severe and important than those appalling events.

The following two hyperboles are of a different kind. They are rooted in the speaker's presence and largely in the military sphere. Similar to (3) above, (4) works with a piling-up technique, in this case adding point after point in favour of England's political and economic power. Some listed items have a hyperbolic flair themselves (e.g., *terror of Europe, through the universe, for the whole inhabitants of the earth*), while the overall hyperbolic impression is produced as much by the listing as by anything else.[6] Indirectly, it may even be linked to the classical allusions, as England's description here could double as one of the Roman Empire. Hamilton's aim was apparently

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[6]   This is similar in style to the Kafka-example in Section 3.2.3, p. 57.

to heighten the contrast between Scotland's and England's situation to such an extent that England's dominance in a Union would seem unavoidable and necessarily harmful to Scotland.

(4)   Our Neighbours in England, are not yet fitted for any such thing; they are not under the afflicting Hand of Providence, as we are; **their Circumstances are Great and Glorious, their Treaties are prudently manag'd, both at Home and Abroad, their Generals Brave and Valorous, their Armies Successful and Victorious, their Trophies and Laurels memorable and surprizing; their Enemies subdu'd and routed, their strong Holds besieg'd and taken, Sieges reliev'd, Marshals kill'd and taken Prisoners, Provinces and Kingdoms are the Results of their Victories; their Royal Navy is the Terror of Europe, their Trade and Commerce extended through the Universe, incircling the whole habitable World, and rendering their own capital City the Emporium for the whole Inhabitants of the Earth**; (…) Upon these Considerations, My Lord, how hard and difficult a Thing will it prove, to perswade our Neighbours to a self-denying Bill! (*LC* PolB1706)

(5)   Good God! What, is this **an intire Surrender**? (*LC* PolB1706)

Example (5), which comes later and near the end of the speech, seems like a logical conclusion to the preceding quotation. It builds upon the picture of English military might presented there, and accuses the speaker's audience (or, at least, parts thereof) of capitulation and submission, even without putting up a decent fight, metaphorically speaking, and therefore without real need. This is one of several instances in the speech where pathos is very clearly foregrounded, with the speaker using interjections, rhetorical questions and other emotionally biased devices. To sum up, Hamilton exaggerates aspects of the present situation and of the future as he feared it might come to pass, by employing extreme contrasts, an overabundance of extreme as well as graphic detail and awe-inspiring classical allusion. He uses exaggeration both in the construction of arguments (*logos*), e.g., the power imbalance between England and Scotland, and for the arousal of emotions (*pathos*), e.g., in painting a dark picture of the future. With regard to the formal realisations of hyperbole, he uses the range familiar from Chapter 3, even if stylistically polished. First, one can argue that he was using language that was adequate to the importance of the matter under consideration; but secondly, one could argue that he was overdoing the overstatement. Puttenham pointed out as early as the sixteenth century that if hyperbole is not used 'very discreetly', in prose in particular, it may 'seeme odious' (*Arte of Poesie*, Book III). During the seventeenth century, a shift in rhetorical theory was taking place in England, away from more ornamental styles, characterised

by tropes and figures, towards more ordinary, plainer styles, characterised by objective logical argument (cf. Howell 1956: 364–90; Adolph 1968: 191f.). Hamilton's speech might thus be taken as a kind of grand finale of an outgoing style.

Two twentieth-century speeches, Enoch Powell's so-called 'Rivers-of-Blood' speech and J. F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address, may bear out this assumption. Both speeches contain significantly fewer hyperboles than Hamilton's speech treated above: in terms of percentage of the word count, we find 7.2 per cent (Powell) and 5.5 per cent (Kennedy) hyperbolic content against Hamilton's 9.6 per cent. Powell delivered his speech to a meeting of Conservatives in Birmingham in 1968, in which he warned about the dangers of immigration for the future of Britain (the overall purpose is thus comparable to Hamilton's speech); in contrast, Kennedy's 1961 address is, in accordance with the genre, not about a single topic and is of a more positive outlook. The exaggerated content in Powell's speech can be subdivided into three fields, namely (i) the sentiments and situation of native Britons, (ii) the amount and character of immigration, and (iii) the effects of immigration. The first group serves a legitimising function, with Powell 'borrowing' the authority for his message from the views of many ordinary constituents, as the following quotes illustrate:

(6)   [a constituent:] 'In this country in fifteen or twenty years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.' (…) **What he is saying, thousands and hundreds of thousands are saying and thinking** …

(7)   **When the new Race Relations Bill is passed, this woman** [a white Briton, CC] **is convinced she will go to prison**. And is she so wrong? I begin to wonder.

(8)   … they found themselves made strangers in their own country. They found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places, their homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition, their plans and prospects for the future defeated; (…) they began to hear, as time went by, more and more voices which told them that they were now the unwanted.

Exaggerating the amount of popularity for and voter backing for a certain view as in (6) or quoting exaggerated voter sentiment and aligning with it (7, 8) can be seen as a natural use of hyperbole in a democracy. The politician can thus demonstrate a high level of agreement with the electorate. Powell's second group serves to underline the importance and urgency of the problem which needs to be dealt with. One method is to provide (projected) numerical evidence (9), which, in spite of the superficial sense of precision, is often vague, usually unprovable, and thus hard to refute. At the same time, providing numbers gives the impression of the politician as well-informed.

(9) a. even at the present admission rate of only 5,000 a year by voucher, there is sufficient for a **further 325,000 dependants per annum ad infinitum**,

b. In numerical terms, it will be **of American proportions long before the end of the century**.

(10) in the areas that are already **undergoing the total transformation to which there is no parallel in a thousand years of English history**.

Another method in this context is to portray the matter at hand as historic, i.e., as unique and of great import, as in (10). In each case, the points made both build on and are geared to increase existing fears, which can then be used to justify political demands and action. Again, exaggerating problems can be regarded as a probate means towards political action in general, if it is not done too blatantly. As to Powell's last group, the effects of immigration, this differs from the preceding group by talking about the future and as such is actually intimately linked with evaluation. While (11a) paints the picture of future immigrant domination over the native population, (11b, c) are more indirect warnings of national (self-)destruction and violent interracial conflict. The objective situation at the time of speaking certainly did not license such speculations.

(11) a. Now we are seeing the growth of positive forces acting against integration, of vested interests in the preservation and sharpening of racial and religious differences, with **a view to the exercise of action domination, first over fellow immigrants and then over the rest of the population**.

b. *It is like* watching **a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre**.

c. *Like the Roman*, I *seem* to see **'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'**.

Examples (11b, c) are probably the two most problematic hyperboles in the speech, and it is noteworthy that they are hedged, thus outwardly 'reducing' speaker liability. The hedging in (11c) is double-faced, also serving the 'positive' purpose of borrowing authority from classical antiquity (cf. Hamilton's instances above), in this case by quoting Virgil. Overstated warnings like these can, of course, set political things in motion, but, equally likely, they can give the impression of hysteria and of the speaker's unreliability. This last point certainly accounts for the fact that Powell does not actually use hyperbole to a great extent, but chooses to convey his point by more subtle means.[7] In the context of the last instance (11c), it is also

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[7] Cf. Chilton (2004: Chapter 7) for a detailed analysis of this speech with regard to other aspects.

of interest that the common shorthand-reference to the speech, 'Rivers-of-Blood' speech, is in itself a mild hyperbole, using the plural whereas Powell used the singular – showing perhaps, ironically, that he managed to make a point.

The hyperbole used by J. F. Kennedy is very different. Although he has to deal with the facts and the dangers presented by the Cold War, he nevertheless tries to highlight positive aspects. He emphasises what mankind can and will do, thus using hyperbole to instil confidence for the future in the listeners. Therefore, he names the positive before the negative possibility in (12a), making clear what is his and should be everybody's preference. Furthermore, he envisages both West and East working together in bringing about the feats listed in (12b).

(12)   a.   For man holds in his mortal hands **the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life**.

   b.   Together let us **explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease**, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce.

The listing in (12b) is impressive as such, but at least three of the items also represent extreme goals which could hardly be realistically reached at the time – the moon was explored in the 1960s, but not the stars, and deserts and diseases have not yet been overcome, to date. The method here is clearly to set one's goals high in order to infuse people with hope, enthusiasm and the motivation to be part of these efforts. Nevertheless, Kennedy also stresses the fact that some goals and values, such as the preservation of liberty, need a correspondingly high commitment, as is illustrated by the quote in (13).

(13)   Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that **we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe**, to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge – and more.

Again, this type of listing as such is a maximisation strategy, and furthermore, the first three items of the list in (13) in particular produce the impression of there being absolutely no limit to the efforts envisaged. In reality, there are always limits and also compromises to be made, however. In (14) the speaker maximises the degree of danger to liberty and singles out his generation as one of the 'chosen few' – both assessments are, of course, debatable.

(14)   In the long history of the world, **only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger**. I do not shrink from this responsibility – I welcome it.

In both of the latter quotations, Kennedy combines some things which are actually or potentially negative in themselves, expressed hyperbolically or maximally, with a positive goal and a positive evaluation. As in the examples above, the aim is to give his hearers a feeling of a special mission to be accomplished by the nation and its leaders – combined with corresponding sacrifice but also with glory. In a certain sense, Kennedy uses the function of self-presentation (Section 4.2.2) and applies it to the nation as a whole: he describes how the nation should be. Kennedy's hyperboles with their extreme, universalistic items, their listing technique and their encoding of moral values are in line with his general style, which has been called 'grandiloquent speech' and is reminiscent of religious oratory (cf. Geis 1987: Chapter 3).

The three speakers looked at so far share a concern for rhetorical refinement and detail, and to a certain extent also, rhetorical training. Furthermore, they were speaking at very special occasions and/or about a highly controversial topic. Such speakers and contexts may attract more hyperbole than is otherwise common in political speaking. Therefore, a random selection of modern speeches (from the year 2002) was downloaded from the websites of the Conservative and Labour Parties of Great Britain for comparison (cf. the list in Appendix 5), comprising 15 Conservative (43,185 words) and 23 Labour speeches (58,780 words). In these speeches, there is very little exaggeration to be found, making up only 0.2 per cent (Labour) and 0.7 per cent (Conservative) of the overall word count. The fact that the Conservatives in opposition use slightly more hyperbole than the government party may be due to a feeling that more emotional and persuasive effort must be expended in this political position. Some of the functions of hyperbole identified in the speeches above are also found in these sources, such as exaggerating the given state of affairs or a situation which is in need of change (cf. (15)), maximising the importance of an action or decision (16) and highlighting the urgency of political action (17).

(15)   Earlier this year in a speech to the Centre for Policy Studies I observed that growing up in Britain **sweeps up many children on a conveyor belt of crime without offering any exit routes**. (Cons.)

(16)   It (= adopting the euro currency, CC) is *perhaps* **the biggest peacetime economic decision** we as a nation have to make. (Labour)

(17)   No-one should be in any doubt about the significance of the next few years for the NHS. **It is make or break time**. (Labour)

The type exemplified in (15) is more common in Conservative speeches. It is logical that such negative hyperbole about the present is used rather by the opposition than by the government, as this serves as an implicit criticism of the ruling party. A governing party can only safely use such types at the

very beginning of its term of office, as it then reflects negatively on the predecessor government. Example (16) shows modulation by a modal adverb, apparently a common safeguard in modern political hyperbole. Instances like those above focus strongly on one particular aspect of reality, enlarge it and thereby make it more important, while ignoring other aspects – Swartz (1976: 111) used the expression 'to restructure reality' for similar cases.

This small corpus of speeches also turns up other uses of hyperbole not found above. First, there is criticising the political opponent and praising the achievements of one's own party. The first of these is only found with the opposition, as a government who feels secure presumably need (or should) not resort to overstating the failings of the opposition. The criticism can be about rather specific policies, as in (18a, b), and even throw a hyperbole used by the opponent back at them, contrasting it with reality. This example highlights a particular danger of political exaggeration: your own hyperbole can be used against you in the future. Example (18c) is a more sweeping condemnation of the government as such, receiving its force partly from its phrasing, which is vaguely reminiscent of a famous Churchill quote.[8]

(18) a. **Every new regulation and every increase in business taxation introduced by Labour since then** has undermined our long-term ability to compete in the global marketplace. (Cons.)

  b. **Tony Blair said Britain had '24 hours to save the NHS',** but five years later a quarter of a million people are having to pay for operations out of their own pockets because they cannot afford to wait any longer. (Cons.)

  c. **Never has a Government had so much, but achieved so little**. (Cons.)

The government party will also resort to this use in election times, however, as the following example from 2005 shows. As in (18b), the speaker of (19) takes the opponents' hyperbole (*sweeping the world*) and then proceeds to deflate it, thus mocking and belittling the producers of this particular statement.

(19) What is their new big idea? A flat tax. **An idea that *they say* is sweeping the world**, *well sweeping Estonia, well a wing of the neo conservatives in Estonia*. The Tories promising to do for national tax what they did for local tax with their last big idea, the poll tax. And let the flat tax go the way of the poll tax. (Gordon Brown, Labour Party Conference, 2005)

The corresponding positive use, i.e., positive self-evaluation or even self-praise, is somewhat problematic but occurs nevertheless. The extreme

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[8] 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.' – Churchill, House of Commons Speech, 20 August 1940.

characterisation in (20) is actually not very blatant or self-flattering, but rather, serves the purpose of a promise for a sound economic policy. Example (21a, b) is more dangerous in its directness and with its implied comparison to others. It conflicts with the Modesty Maxim (Leech 1983), which, however, may be taken as partly suspended in politics. Nevertheless, stating one's own high opinion of oneself in such clear terms may be damaging to one's political persona.

(20) **Our commitment**, Mr Lord Mayor, to economic stability is **immovable** and we will take no risks with it. **Our determination** that Britain be a world leader in the new global economy is **absolute**. (Labour)

(21) a. In the Assembly, Nick Bourne and his team are **the only Members standing up for the interests of all the people of Wales**. (Cons.)

  b. It is clear that we are **the only credible opposition in Wales**. (Cons.)

Two further uses have been found in these modern speeches, namely those of politeness and of humour (originally identified as important in Sections 5.3. and 4.2.2, respectively). The first is comprised of cases of positive politeness, with praise of the audience, either of an individual, a specific group or even the whole electorate as such, being maximised. In (22), NHS staff are being complimented on their work and declared free of guilt for any problems of the system; at the same time, this point, of course, highlights the criticism of the government. Such uses seek to establish a positive rapport with the audience and to secure its good will.

(22) Nor can criticism be laid at the door of medical, nursing and voluntary staff who have made a **Herculean effort in the face of the greatest difficulties**. (Cons.)

(23) I am here today because of state education. My primary school **wholly failed to convince me that there was anything more important than football**, but it did prove to me that there were other things to read about; (Labour)

Humour as realised by hyperbole is the last function found and is illustrated by (23). This function is linked to the preceding, as it also fulfils the role of lightening the atmosphere, and of making the audience positively inclined towards the speaker. A speaker who is humorous and succeeds in making others laugh usually comes across as a more likeable and potentially more trustworthy person (cf. the concept of *ethos*). Surveying all the examples above, it becomes clear that hyperbole can fulfil useful functions in political speeches. Nevertheless, it is also a risky strategy as it can make

a contrived, hysterical impression and, as any hyperbole, can, of course, be disproved by counter evidence. With regard to this last point, it is of interest that many hyperbolical expressions in political speeches refer to the future, thus removing them from the sphere of *immediate* verification or falsification.

The low instance of hyperbole in the modern speeches mentioned above would point to the fact that hyperbole is in fact rare in everyday, run-of-the-mill political speaking, that is, speeches which are not characterised by a special occasion or an extraordinary agenda. While classical rhetoricians and their successors generally had a positive attitude towards the use of hyperbole, these views were apparently undergoing a change from the seventeenth century onwards, and modern views are generally more critical, to which the following quotations testify:

(24) a. One might forgive the hyperbole in a politician but it is less easy to take from academic or journalistic critics (*BNC* AMK 669).

  b. One of the difficulties of debating with the hon. Member for Oldham, West is that if one is not careful one is sucked into the vortex of hyperbole in which he seems to live. I have had the dubious privilege over the years of debating with him on many occasions. The hon. Gentleman's grasp of detail is usually so light that the idea of actually debating with him at all is risible. (*BNC* HHW 8738)[9]

Example (24a) presents hyperbole as something that is apparently opposed to serious and factual information of the type one expects of, e.g., academics. It is accepted in the speech of politicians, but only grudgingly, as the talk about 'forgiving' shows. In (24b) we even find one politician accusing another of hyperbole, perhaps at least partly playing with assumed voter sentiments. A German weekly called all politicians 'artists of exaggeration' (*Übertreibungskünstler*) and suggested a reciprocal relationship between the use of hyperbole and a politician's success (*Die Zeit* 38, 2006). Politicians use overstatement for purposes which are often regarded as manipulative and deceiving by the public at large, such as denouncing the political opponent or praising their own achievements.[10] Also, they may use it for producing points in quotable catchphrases, which are very memorable but through their briefness often implausibly exaggerated. A German politician, for example, once used the argument of a possible *Steuererklärung auf dem Bierdeckel* 'inland revenue declaration short enough to fit on a beer mat' in favour of his proposed tax reform. In this negative interpretation, hyperbole moves close to *hype* 'deception, publicity stunt' (cf. *OED*), which,

9   a: William Cash, *Against a Federal Europe*, 1991; b: taken from the Hansard.
10 Note that everyday uses are not free of manipulation, cf. self-presentation (Section 4.2.2) and politeness (Section 5.3). Political uses simply make this aspect more prominent.

though etymologically apparently unrelated, is not uncommonly under-
stood to contain an element of exaggeration or to be related, as the following
two quotations illustrate.

(25) a.   In the days before *hyperbole was shortened to* **hype** and live boxing
           was a TV rarity, Cooper had a nationwide following. (*BNC* AKE
           1262)
      b.   Pinch *et al.* (1989) reported that the scale of development of flex-
           ible employment strategies had "been *exaggerated* in the past by
           media **hype** and to some extent by the enthusiasm of academics".
           (*BNC* G08 1325)

The two words may be mutually influencing each other, with the meaning
of 'deception' thus also becoming more prominent in *hyperbole*, especially
when applied to politicians and parts of the media.

7.2   Hyperbole and humour

As we have seen in Section 4.2.2 and in Section 7.1 above, hyperbole can
be used for the purpose of language play and humour. Long and Graesser
(1988: 39) list overstatement and understatement as number four in their
suggested taxonomy of wit.[11] Hyperbole's comic use ranges from individ-
ual funny remarks and use in jokes in conversation via witty comments and
small episodes in writing to whole texts or genres characterised by exagger-
ation and also to visual renderings of hyperbole. The focus in this section is
the latter types, i.e., those cases where hyperbole is either a large-scale or a
constitutive device in its given text and context.

I will mainly be looking at the productions of Monty Python, in
whose substantial output one also finds interesting hyperbolic items. Two
instances are characterised by a kind of metalinguistic approach to hyper-
bole. The bed-buying sketch, part of which is presented in (26), in which
a couple is trying to acquire a bed, is built on each of the sales staff exhib-
iting a particular peculiarity. In the excerpt presented here, we find Mr
Verity, who is given to overstatement, and Mr Lambert, who, in contrast,
always uses understatement. Both do this in a very 'precise' manner, in
the sense that the truth is calculable from what they say by a mathematical
rule. This can be taken as a play on the fact that all conversational impli-
catures are, of course, calculable, albeit not in a precise, strictly speak-
ing, logical way. The mathematical element introduced here thus adds an
absurd touch.

[11]   Their eleven-item list also contains other forms in which hyperbole can play a role, e.g.,
       (1) irony, (2) satire, (3) sarcasm and (10) transformations of frozen expressions (cf. Section
       4.2.2 for the latter).

(26) **Groom**   We want to buy a bed, please.

Lambert   Oh, certainly, I'll, I'll get someone to attend to you. (*calling off*) Mr Verity!

Verity   Can I help you sir?

Groom   Er yes. We'd like to buy a bed … a double bed … about fifty pounds, sir.

Verity   Oh no, I am afraid not sir. **Our cheapest bed is eight hundred pounds**, sir.

Groom   Eight hundred pounds!

Lambert   Oh, er, perhaps I should have explained. **Mr Verity does tend to exaggerate, so every figure he gives you will be ten times too high**. Otherwise he's perfectly all right, perfectly ha, ha, ha.

Groom   Oh I see, I see. (to Verity) So your cheapest bed is *eighty pounds*?

Verity   **Eight hundred pounds**, yes sir.

Groom   And how wide is it?

Verity   Er, the width is, er, **sixty feet wide**.

Groom   Oh … (laughing politely he mutters to wife) *six foot wide*, eh. And the length?

Verity   The length is … er … (calls off) Lambert! What is the length of the Comfydown Majorette?

Lambert   Er, *two foot long*.

Groom   Two foot long?

Verity   Ah yes, you have to, ah, remember of course, *to multiply everything Mr Lambert says by three*. Er, it's nothing he can help, you understand. Apart from that he's perfectly all right.

Groom   I see, I'm sorry.

Verity   But it does mean that when he says a bed is two foot wide it is, in fact, **sixty feet wide**.

Groom   Oh, yes I see …(…) (*MP-FC* 8; 100–102)[12]

The sketch comically highlights the fact that some people are in fact prone to common over- or understating by absurdly extending the practice to a context where precise numbers are important, i.e., a context where people normally would not exaggerate. The characters here are captives of their mindset, however. Both characters are aware of the other's 'fault' but completely unaware of

[12] The abbreviation refers to: Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. 1990. *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Words.* 2 vols. London: Mandarin Paperbacks, Chapter 8.

their own, as seen in Verity's straightforward confirmation of 'eighty pounds' with 'eight hundred pounds' and his calculation of two times three equalling sixty. The contrast of the name 'Verity' with the clearly false hyperbolic output produced by the character creates a further comic effect by the inherent ironic tension. The sketch plays on the hearer's expectations about a certain situation, here a typical sales situation, by partly fulfilling them (the staff are polite and to a certain extent cooperative) and partly violating those expectations as well as the Gricean maxims (by giving wrong information). In other words, the sales script is being humorously subverted.

The second, quasi-metalinguistic sketch plays on a common and conventional hyperbolic expression, namely *laugh oneself to death*. The comic potential of this sketch, the beginning of which is presented in (27), is located in the fact that this expression is taken absolutely literally.[13]

(27)   *Interior of a small room. A bent figure huddles over a table, writing. He is surrounded by bits of paper. The camera is situated facing the man as he writes with immense concentration lining his unshaven face.*

Voice Over   This man is Ernest Scribbler … writer of jokes. In a few moments, he will have written the funniest joke in the world … and, as a consequence, he will die … laughing.

The writer stops writing, pauses to look at what he has written … a smile slowly spreads across his face, turning very, very slowly to uncontrolled hysterical laughter … he staggers to his feet and reels across room helpless with mounting mirth and eventually collapses and dies on the floor.

Voice Over   It was obvious that this joke was lethal … no one could read it and live …

The scribbler's mother enters. She sees him dead, she gives a little cry of horror and bends over his body, weeping. Brokenly, she notices the piece of paper in his hand and (thinking it is a suicide note – for he has not been doing very well for the last thirteen years) picks it up and reads it between her sobs. Immediately she breaks out into hysterical laughter, leaps three feet into the air, and falls down dead without more ado. Cut to news type shot of commentator standing in front of the house.

Commentator   (*reverentially*) This morning, shortly after eleven o'clock, comedy struck this little house in Dibley Road. Sudden … violent … comedy. Police have sealed off the area, and Scotland Yard's crack inspector is with me now.

Inspector   I shall enter the house and attempt to remove the joke.

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[13]   The falling back to absolute literality was already mentioned in Section 2.5 (p. 29), as the wise-guy reaction (Ariel 2002) in everyday speech.

At this point an upstairs window in the house is flung open and a doctor, with stethoscope, rears his head out, hysterical with laughter, and dies hanging over the window sill. The commentator and the inspector look up briefly and sadly, and then continue as if they are used to such sights this morning.

Inspector   I shall be aided by the sound of sombre music, played on gramophone records, and also by the chanting of laments by the men of Q Division … (*he indicates a little knot of dour-looking policeman standing nearby*) The atmosphere thus created should protect me in the eventuality of me reading the joke.

He gives a signal. The group of policemen start groaning and chanting biblical laments. The Dead March is heard. The inspector squares his shoulders and bravely starts walking into the house.

Commentator   There goes a brave man. Whether he comes out alive or not, this will surely be remembered as one of the most courageous and gallant acts in police history.

The inspector suddenly appears at the door, helpless with laughter, holding the joke aloft. He collapses and dies. (*MP-FC* 1: 10–11)

Everybody who reads 'the funniest joke in the world' instantly dies of its hyperbolically humorous effect. In this small excerpt alone, four people fall victim to the joke, including the inventor of the joke himself. The murderously funny nature of the joke is underlined by the contrast with sad or tragic surroundings which are more likely to induce sorrow than mirth: the mother of the writer finding her son dead, the doctor examining two dead persons, the chanting of biblical laments and the playing of the Dead March. The language used by the commentator, which is characterised by maximisation strategies, is also appropriate to dangerous and tragic circumstances. The comic effect is heightened by the extreme seriousness with which the characters in the sketch deal with the situation. The sketch goes on to further extremes with the use of the joke in warfare and its still being lethal even in a completely nonsensical German translation. There is thus an incongruity produced by combining a funny joke with multiple death and intentional killing, but an incongruity which is in a sense 'licensed' by everyday language use (*kill*, like *die*, can also be used in combination with laughter).

Two other Monty Python sketches take speech acts which are fairly commonly maximised, namely a compère's announcements and the speech act apology, and take them to ridiculous extremes. Some of Leech's (1983) politeness maxims can be illuminating here: the APPROBATION MAXIM with

its submaxims (i) 'minimise dispraise of other' and (ii) 'maximise praise of other', and the MODESTY MAXIM with the submaxims (i) 'minimise praise of self' and (ii) 'maximise dispraise of self', of which the (i)-maxims are more important. In each case, there is also the sincerity condition of a speech act's felicity conditions to be considered: if the (ii)-maxims in particular are over-applied, the impression of insincerity can arise. The announcement of a performer by the compère in (28) has to fulfil two functions: it needs to be polite to the performer and it is supposed to arouse the audience's interest and good will towards the performer. For both of these 'maximise praise of other', here the performer, seems appropriate. This is what we find in (28), but in a grossly overstated way, by calling the performer, e.g., 'a great god', and 'totally and utterly wonderful'. In order to emphasise further the praise through contrast, we find a corresponding overuse of the MODESTY MAXIM, especially its (b)-submaxim. This is realised by successively more grotesque and absurd formulations, ranging from 'feeble words' to 'I would rather be sealed in a pit of my own filth'. The non-verbal behaviour ('on his knees') strongly supports the speaker's over-modest stance. Interestingly, Monty Python have chosen to highlight those maxims and submaxims more strongly which, according to Leech, are the less important ones in the hierarchy, i.e., modesty is here stronger than approbation and the (b)-submaxims are given prominence over the (a)-submaxims. In everyday terms, we thus get a clear picture of insincerity, which in the given context turns into humour because of the incongruity. The impression of insincerity is borne out by the compère's last line, a kind of punch line, in which he essentially contradicts his earlier eulogy.

(28)   *Cut to a swish nightclub. Compère enters.*

Compère
Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the refreshment room here at Bletchley. My name is Kenny Lust and I'm your compere for tonight. You know, once in a while it is my pleasure, and my privilege, to welcome here at the refreshment room, some of the truly great international artists of our time. And tonight we have one such artist. (*grovelling*) Ladies and Gentlemen, someone whom I've always personally admired, and perhaps more deeply, more strongly, more abjectly than ever before. A man, well more than a man, a god, a great god, whose personality is so totally and utterly wonderful my feeble words of welcome sound wretchedly and pathetically inadequate. (*by now on his knees*) Someone whose boots I would gladly lick clean until holes wore through my tongue, a man who is so totally and utterly wonderful, that I would rather be sealed in a pit of my own filth, than dare tread on the same stage with him. Ladies and gentlemen the incomparably superior human being, Harry Fink!
Voice Off   He can't come!

| Compère | Never mind, it's not all it's cracked up to be. Ladies and gentlemen, we give you Ken Buddha and his inflatable knees. (*MP-FC* 9: 116) |

In the 'Restaurant Sketch' (29 below), the focus of the hyperbole is the speech act of apologising. We can take an apology to consist of potentially the following parts: (i) the statement and assessment of the thing to be apologised for, (ii) acceptance/admission of blame/guilt, (iii) the explicit act of saying sorry, (iv) redressive action and (v) promise to refrain from offending action in the future (cf. Abadi 1990). All of these can be exaggerated, but the most logical ones for this option in everyday contexts are probably (iii) and (v). In contrast, what we find in (28) is that the most overdone elements concern (i) and (iv).

(29)   *A couple are seated at a table in a restaurant.*

Lady	It's nice here, isn't it?
Man	Oh, very good restaurant, three stars you know.
Lady	Really?
Man	Mmm …
Waiter	Good evening, sir! Good evening, madam! And may I say what a pleasure it is to see you here again, sir!
Man	Oh thank you. Well there you are dear. Have a look there, anything you like. The boeuf en croute is fantastic.
Waiter	Oh if I may suggest, sir … the pheasant à la reine, the sauce is one of the chef's most famous creations.
Man	Em … that sounds good. Anyway just have a look … take your time. Oh, er by the way – got a bit of a dirty fork, could you … er … get me another one?
Waiter	I beg your pardon.
Man	Oh it's nothing … er, I've got a fork a little bit dirty. Could you get me another one? Thank you.
Waiter	Oh … sir, I do apologise.
Man	Oh, no need to apologise, it doesn't worry me.
Waiter	Oh no, no, no. I do apologise. I will fetch the head waiter immediatement.
Man	Oh, there's no need to do that!
Waiter	Oh, no no … I'm sure the head waiter, he will want to apologise to you himself. I will fetch him at once.
Lady	Well, you certainly get good service here.

Man	They really look after you … yes.
Head Waiter	Excuse me monsieur and madame. (*examines the fork*) It's filthy, Gaston … find out who washed this up, and give them their cards immediately.
Man	Oh, no, no.
Head Waiter	Better still, we can't afford to take any chances, sack the entire washing-up staff.
Man	No, look I don't want to make any trouble.
Head Waiter	Oh, no please, no trouble. It's quite right that you should point these kind of things out. Gaston, tell the manager what has happened immediately! (*waiter runs off*)
Man	Oh, no I don't want to cause any fuss.
Head Waiter	Please, it's no fuss. I quite simply wish to ensure that nothing interferes with your complete enjoyment of the meal.
Man	Oh I'm sure it won't, it was only a dirty fork.
Head Waiter	I know. And I'm sorry, bitterly sorry, but I know that … no apologies I can make can alter the fact in our restaurant you have been given a dirty, filthy, smelly piece of cutlery …
Man	It wasn't smelly.
Head Waiter	It was smelly, and obscene and disgusting and I hate it, I hate it … nasty, grubby, dirty, mingy, scrubby little fork. Oh … oh …. oh … (*runs off in a passion as the manager comes to the table*)
Manager	Good evening, sir, good evening, madam. I am the manager. I've only just heard … may I sit down?
Man	Yes, of course.
Manager	I want to apologise, humbly, deeply, and sincerely about the fork.
Man	Oh please, it's only a tiny bit … I couldn't see it.
Manager	Ah you're good kind fine people, for saying that, but *I* can see it … to me it's like a mountain, a vast bowl of pus.
Man	It's not as bad as that.
Manager	It gets me *here*. I can't give you any excuses for it – there *are* no excuses. I've been meaning to spend more time in the restaurant recently, but I haven't been too well … (*emotionally*) things aren't going very well back there. The poor cook's son has been

	put away again, and poor old Mrs Dalrymple who does the washing up can hardly move her poor fingers, and then there's Gilberto's war wound – but they're good people, and they're kind people, and together we were beginning to get over this dark patch … there was light at the end of the tunnel … now this … now this …
Man	Can I get some water?
Manager	(*in tears*) It's the end of the road.
	The cook comes in; he is very big and carries a meat cleaver.
Cook	(*shouting*) You bastards! You vicious, heartless bastards! Look what you've done to him! He's worked his fingers to the bone to make this place what it is, and you come in with your petty feeble quibbling and you grind him into the dirt, this fine, honourable man, whose boots you are not worthy to kiss. Oh … it makes me mad … mad! (*slams cleaver into the table*)
	The head waiter comes in and tries to restrain him.
Head Waiter	Easy, Mungo, easy … Mungo … (*clutches his head in agony*) the war wound! … the wound … the wound …
Manager	This is the end! The end! Aaargh! (*stabs himself with the fork*)
Cook	They've destroyed him! He's dead!! They killed him!!! (*goes completely mad*)
Head Waiter	(*trying to restrain him*) Mungo … never kill a customer. (*in pain*) Oh … the wound! The wound! (*he and the cook fight furiously and fall over the table*)
	CAPTION: 'AND NOW THE PUNCH–LINE'
Man	Lucky we didn't say anything about the dirty knife. (*MP-FC* 3; pp. 36–7)

The offending item, the dirty fork, is described in successively more grotesque ways, from simply 'filthy' via a whole sequence of negatively evaluating adjectives to 'it's like a mountain, a vast bowl of pus'. This is again an absurd application of the maxim 'maximise dispraise of oneself'. If the offence is blown out of all proportion in such a way, the remaining parts of the apology of course need to be adjusted to correspond in strength. The redressive action (iv) thus concerns involving the head waiter as well as the manager of the restaurant in the event, thus highlighting its importance, and sacking the entire washing-up staff. The phrasing of the apology itself

is hyperbolically heightened first of all by the fact that it is repeated by three successive speakers (waiter, head waiter and manager) and secondly by the formulations becoming more emphatic, from 'I do apologise' via 'And I'm sorry, bitterly sorry, but I know that … no apologies I can make can alter the fact' to 'I want to apologise, humbly, deeply, and sincerely about the fork'. The social and linguistic reaction to something as insignificant as a dirty fork is highly incongruous and thus produces a humorous impression.

Additionally, this episode contains a twist in the plot that adds further incongruity, i.e., the nature of the staff and the restaurant's situation as indicated by the manager's description and the behaviour of the cook, which contradict normal expectations about a three-star restaurant and or any restaurant for that matter. Those aspects are also portrayed both hyperbolically and absurdly, cf., for example, the manager's 'this is the end' and the cook's murderous intentions. Similar to (25) above, the script associated with a restaurant visit is thus completely and comically violated. While the above four sketches illustrate the comic potential of hyperbole, it is astonishing how very little of the output of Monty Python depends on the use of hyperbole in the strict sense. Hyperbole is apparently not a hallmark of this type of humour, whereas absurdity is.

Nevertheless, there is one more Python-related piece that is of interest and that is the Four Yorkshiremen sketch.[14] The use of hyperbole here is embedded in competitive 'boasting' (cf. also Section 5.2.1), in this case the outdoing of each other in the description of one's squalid youth.

(30)   *Four well-dressed men sitting together at a vacation resort. "Farewell to Thee" being played in the background on Hawaiian guitar.*

Palin	Ahh. Very passable, this, very passable.
Chapman	Nothing like a good glass of Chateau de Chassilier wine, ay Gessiah?
Gilliam	You're right there Obediah.
Idle	Who'd a thought thirty years ago we'd all be sittin' here drinking Chateau de Chassilier wine?
Palin	Aye. In them days, we'd a' been glad to have the price of a cup o' tea.
Chapman	A cup o' COLD tea.
Idle	Without milk or sugar.
Gilliam	OR tea!
Palin	In a filthy, cracked cup.

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[14]   The sketch was written by John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Tim Brooke-Taylor and Marty Feldman for the British television comedy series *At Last the 1948 Show*, but later also performed by Monty Python on various occasions.

Idle	We never used to have a cup. We used to have to drink out of a rolled up newspaper.
Chapman	The best WE could manage was to suck on a piece of damp cloth.
Gilliam	But you know, we were happy in those days, though we were poor.
Palin	Aye. BECAUSE we were poor. My old Dad used to say to me, 'Money doesn't buy you happiness.'
Idle	'E was right. I was happier then and I had NOTHIN'. We used to live in this tiiiny old house, with greaaaaat big holes in the roof.
Chapman	House? You were lucky to have a HOUSE! We used to live in one room, all hundred and twenty-six of us, no furniture. Half the floor was missing; we were all huddled together in one corner for fear of FALLING!
Gilliam	You were lucky to have a ROOM! *We* used to have to live in a corridor!
Palin	Ohhhh we used to DREAM of livin' in a corridor! Woulda' been a palace to us. We used to live in an old water tank on a rubbish tip. We got woken up every morning by having a load of rotting fish dumped all over us! House!? Hmph.
Idle	Well when I say 'house' it was only a hole in the ground covered by a piece of tarpaulin, but it was a house to US.
Chapman	We were evicted from *our* hole in the ground; we had to go and live in a lake!
Gilliam	You were lucky to have a LAKE! There were a hundred and sixty of us living in a small shoebox in the middle of the road.
Palin	Cardboard box?
Gilliam	Aye.
Palin	You were lucky. We lived for three months in a brown paper bag in a septic tank. We used to have to get up at six o'clock in the morning, clean the bag, eat a crust of stale bread, go to work down mill for fourteen hours a day week in-week out. When we got home, out Dad would thrash us to sleep with his belt!
Chapman	Luxury. We used to have to get out of the lake at three o'clock in the morning, clean the lake, eat a

	handful of hot gravel, go to work at the mill every day for tuppence a month, come home, and Dad would beat us around the head and neck with a broken bottle, if we were LUCKY!
Gilliam	Well we had it tough. We used to have to get up out of the shoebox at twelve o'clock at night, and LICK the road clean with our tongues. We had half a handful of freezing cold gravel, worked twenty-four hours a day at the mill for fourpence every six years, and when we got home, our Dad would slice us in two with a bread knife.
Idle	Right. I had to get up in the morning at ten o'clock at night, half an hour before I went to bed, eat a lump of cold poison, work twenty-nine hours a day down mill, and pay mill owner for permission to come to work, and when we got home, our Dad would kill us, and dance about on our graves singing 'Hallelujah'.
Palin	But you try and tell the young people today that... and they won't believe ya'.
All	Nope, nope. (*Four Yorkshiremen*, as performed by Monty Python *Live at the Hollywood Bowl*, 1982)

Several ad-hoc scales (of a pragmatic and argumentative kind, cf. Section 2.2) are co-constructed by the participants of the conversation, which all involve hyperbole of things getting less or worse. While the timescale used in the context of working hours is based on clear numerical values, which are part of an ordered system, and is thus of the semantic type, the others are constructed pseudo-scales or pragmatic scales, largely working with a possible world with extraordinary characteristics. Thus, while *house*, *room*, *corridor* and even *hole in the ground* are possible places for living in the real world, *water* or *septic tanks*, *lakes*, *shoeboxes* and *paper bags* do not belong to this category in the normal world. A new category and scale is being constituted in the interaction, which is driven by a criterion such as 'how uncomfortable and impossible can I make things sound'. As Figure 7.1 shows, all the scales used in the sketch work along this line.

As the game played in this sketch consists of proving to have been worse off than the others, speakers aim high with their hyperbolic expressions, which means that completely unbelievable levels are reached very early. Thus, we find the impossible 'tea without tea', '29 hours a day' and eating poison – again, as in the sketches above, hyperbole is paired with absurdity. As we have seen in various cases in Chapter 4, absurdity can also mark everyday

Drink	wine	cup of tea	cold tea	tea without milk/sugar	tea without tea	tea from a filthy cracked cup	tea from a rolled-up newspaper	liquid from a damp cloth
Abode	tiny house with holes in roof	126 people in one room with part of floor missing	corridor	old water tank	hole in the ground	lake	shoebox in the middle of the road	brown paper bag in a septic tank
Getting up time	at 6 o'clock		at 3 o'clock		at 12 o'clock at night		at 10 o'clock at night, half an hour before going to bed	
Work	14 hours a day			24 hours a day			29 hours a day	
Food	crust of stale bread		handful of hot gravel		handful of freezing cold gravel		lump of cold poison	

Figure 7.1: Hyperbolic scales in the sketch 'Four Yorkshiremen'

examples, but the resulting output here is more similar to the grossly over-stated forms found in ritual insulting (cf. Section 5.2.1). Like the latter, the competition going on here is not really hostile, but has to do with the linguistic constitution of group identity and solidarity – this is clearly visible in the agreement at the end of the sketch, which is based on contrasting the old-age group and their constructed common experience with younger people. The combined elements of boasting, exaggeration, absurdness and solidarity actually link this piece with the genre of tall tales (cf. Section 7.3 below).

Let me round off the treatment of hyperbole and humour with two more recent sitcom examples, which can be used to illustrate different aspects. The British TV series *Coupling*, as the title indicates, has as its main topics relationships, love and sex, which the characters view and pursue from different perspectives and with different aims. The six main characters of this programme are, to a certain extent, types, of a more or less extreme kind, partly even caricatures. Their specific characteristics, types of behaviour and language use is thus comically exaggerated. Patrick, for example, is the prototypical sexually successful character, but also a misogynist as he tends to think only of the bodily side of things and to disregard women as persons. His being restricted to a kind of sex machine with not much of a brain is captured in Susan's hyperbolical metaphor:

(31) **Susan** Some men are born lucky. Some men are born very lucky.
  Sally What was Patrick born?
  Susan **A tripod**.
  Sally You let me dump a tripod! You bitch! (*Coupling*, 'Size Matters')

The three male characters are ultimately obsessed with female nakedness, but they deal with this in varying degrees of sophistication. While Jeff's

obsession is transported by hyperbolic repetition of and insistence on terms such as *breasts*, Steve is generally portrayed as more articulate. For instance, he ends a spirited defence of his watching pornographic films in the following manner:

(32)   Look, I want to spend the rest of my life with the woman at the end of that table there, but that does not stop me wanting to see several thousand naked bottoms before I die. **Because that's what being a bloke is**. **When man invented fire** he didn't say, hey, let's cook, he said, great, now we can see naked bottoms in the dark. **As soon as Caxton invented the printing press**, we were using it to make pictures of, hey, naked bottoms. We turned the **internet** into an enormous international database of – naked bottoms. So you see, **the story of male achievement through the ages**, feeble though it may have been, **has been the story of our struggle to get a better look at your bottoms**. Frankly, girls, I don't know how insulted you really ought to be. (*Coupling*, 'Inferno')

He links the male urge to see naked women to major advancements in human history, that is, to progress in general, essentially turning the hyperbolic Heraclitean 'war is the father of all things' into the equally hyperbolic 'sex/pornography is the father of all things'. He both explicitly and implicitly claims this urge to be the essence of manhood, which anchors himself in a type and thus justifies his behaviour. The expression of one's mind-set through hyperbolic language is very common in this series, the best example of which is Sally. She is completely fixated on her looks and especially on the impending dreadful effects of the ageing process. Partly, this obsession with outward appearance and thus, implicitly, with others' perception of her, is due to her excessive insecurity, but in a way she can also be seen as a prototypical embodiment of the contemporary beauty and youth mania. Moreover, she works as a beautician, and if one takes all this together, she turns into a perfect 'type'. Throughout the series, she produces outrageous remarks about her appearance (and females' in general) and its development, such as the following examples:

(33)   **Sally**   What if he's your last ever man? What if you've used up your goes? Remember, **every morning your face has slipped a little bit more**. Since thirty, I've had to put **a daily limit on facial expressions**. I only ever smile at single men, so I can justify the loss of elasticity.

         Susan   Is this how your mind works all the time? (*Coupling*, 'Flushed')

(34)   a.   (*to an old and very wrinkled lady*) Don't touch me. **I'm full of moisturizer**. (*she uses enormous quantities and has just put on some*

more) You might drain it all off. (*shrinking back*) **It'll be like rain on the desert**. It all gets sucked away. **You'd probably reflate**. (*Coupling*, 'Sex, death and nudity')

b.   A woman's **breasts are a journey**. **Her feet are the destination**. (…) **Gravity!** This time it's personal. (*Coupling*, 'The girl with two breasts')

c.   Bottoms are **our natural enemy**… They follow us around our entire lives, right behind us, and **constantly growing**. How do they do that? I'm sure mine's back there secretly snacking. (…) I'll have to do him (=Patrick) really soon before **my bottom takes over my entire body**. (*Coupling*, 'The cupboard of Patrick's love')

d.   … with **a neck that has seen D-day**. (*Coupling*)

She exaggerates both the speed (33) and the extent (34) of bodily changes. Furthermore, she takes ridiculous measures (33) and overestimates the effect of these (34a). The fact that Sally does think that way is highlighted by Susan's question in (33) and by several occasions on which Susan reminds her that she has actually spoken out loud instead of just thinking it to herself. What makes Sally's characterisation so consistent is that hyperbolic utterances about this one obsessive aspect are spread regularly across the episodes of the series. It is both the caricaturising characterisation and the very often hyperbolic language used that contributes to the overall humour of *Coupling*.

While the above examples were analysed mostly based on their verbal characteristics,[15] visual hyperbole producing a comic impact is, of course, also found. Visual caricatures are a case in point. A TV series that makes interesting use of visualisations is *Ally McBeal*, partly using digital technology to produce surreal images. The series attempts to make the feelings or attitudes of its characters visible by turning these into concrete visual representations. Often, these visualisations are connected with a linguistic expression, actually spoken or implied and retrievable by the viewer. One could say that they simply make a figurative or metaphorical phrase perceptible, as in the pilot episode when Ally, after the surprise encounter with Billy, ex-boyfriend and love of her life, says to herself that it's 'not a tragedy, just a funny bounce of the ball, that's all' – and promptly a ball falls on her. It could be argued that this is just illustrating her words and is not really hyperbolic. However, I would argue that the fact that something abstract is concretely visualised at all highlights its impossibility in the normal world and is thus hyperbolic at some level. Moreover, the usually outrageous manner of the visualisations and the way they advertise their artificiality make them additionally hyperbolic: in the scene mentioned we see a gigantic metallic ball collapsing

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[15]   I have ignored the contribution that was potentially added to the overall hyperbolic effect in the acting of the *Monty Python* sketches and the *Coupling* episodes.

onto and flattening Ally, who seems rather small in comparison on the floor. The latter aspect actually contradicts her words and shows her real feelings about the matter, i.e., that she does find the situation tragic and catastrophic. There are further visualisations of Ally's mental and emotional states in the series, which get their hyperbolic character either by being really overstated or by visualising a figurative statement – or by both. The series thus highlights the importance of the emotive function of hyperbole (cf. Section 4.2.1). For example, in the same episode, her feeling of inadequacy and of being irrelevant is portrayed by herself shrinking to the size of a small girl (cf. expressions like 'feel small', 'belittle somebody'), whose smallness is further emphasised by the contrast with the big office chair in which she is sitting. In 'Love unlimited' (season 2, episode 12), we see Ally actually hovering and moving about half a metre above the ground because she has fallen in love and feels extremely happy (cf. 'walk on air'). Both Ally's and another female character's longing for a very good-looking man in 'The blame game' (season 1, episode 12) is incongruously and hyperbolically transported by their incredibly lengthened tongues hanging out of their mouths and by them drooling (cf. 'make one's mouth water'). Ally's negative evaluations of other people are also drastically displayed by her mental visions involving them. A man who happened to spill some salad dressing on his chin during a date is envisaged with his whole head positively dripping in dressing ('The attitude', season 1, episode 7) – thus expressing hyperbolically the problem Ally has with this minor 'misbehaviour'. In 'The promise' (season 1, episode 5), Ally briefly imagines having a date with Harry Pippin, an extremely obese man: she sees herself sitting in the car, him getting in on the other side and, as a result, the car tilting over in slow motion towards his side. This clearly shows her attitude towards him and it does not come as a surprise that she is not going on a date with him. Another character in the series, Ling, is often shown actually growling at other people like a wild animal and also spewing fire at people when she is angry; in this case, it is the effect her behaviour has on other people that is being shown hyperbolically. All these visualisations are violations of the viewer's expectations about the course of things in the real world, but they concur with possible verbal hyperbole. What makes them humorous is the medium switch from word to image. This potential is also sometimes exploited by commercials, which visually emphasise effects or efficiency of a product or firm, and by being funny enhance the memorability of the ad (and hopefully the sales of the product).

7.3   Literary uses of hyperbole

William Safire produced a humorous piece of advice on 'How to write good', whose beginning is as follows:

(35)   Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
        No sentence fragments.

> It behoves us to avoid archaisms.
> Also, avoid awkward or affected alliteration.
> Don't use no double negatives.
> If I've told you once, **I've told you a thousand times: resist hyperbole**. (…)
>
> (quoted in: George Coote, 1994, *The Serious Joke Book*, London: Tiger Books, 297f.)

Fortunately, such advice has not always been heeded and there is hyperbole to be found in good writing. Kreuz *et al.* (1996: 91) have identified the following frequency order for the occurrence of non-literal language in a corpus of modern American short stories: metaphor, hyperbole, idiom, rhetorical questions, simile, irony, understatement and indirect requests, with hyperbole accounting for as much as a quarter of all occurrences. It is noteworthy that hyperbole comes in second place, before such forms as simile and irony, the latter of which is surprisingly infrequent. My intention here is not to do a frequency study like Kreuz *et al.*, 1996 but to look at the functional aspect, which has not been covered in their study. While I cannot offer a complete treatment of literary hyperbole, I would like to point out some of its uses in fiction. I will briefly present four such functions or contexts: (i) literature of praise, (ii) characterisation, (iii) setting the scene (description of fictional world) and (iv) parody and satire.

As to (i), Curtius (1978: 172) called hyperbole the major device of the panegyric style in all its realisations. Hyperbolic forms are employed to praise a character or an (implied) addressee in order to make the target of the praise stand out as an extraordinary person. This can be found in epic literature, for example, when the hero of the poem is praised by the narrator or other characters within the epic world. In *Beowulf*, for example, the warriors in the hall praise Beowulf after the return from the mere as essentially the best warrior on earth, using similar universal modification to those still common today (e.g., *ofer eormen-grund* 'in the whole vast earth'):

(36)   Ðǣr wæs Bēowulfes
        mǣrðo mǣned; monig oft gecwæð,
        þætte sūð nē norð be sǣm twēonum
        ofer eormen-grund ōþer nǣnig
        under swegles begong sēlra nǣre
        rond-hæbbendra, rīces wyrðra.

(There was Beowulf's glory praised; many men repeatedly said that neither south nor north, between the seas, over the whole wide world, and under the heaven's expanse there was nobody who was a better warrior or more worthy of the kingdom.)

(Wrenn and Bolton 1973, l. 856–61)

A perhaps less prototypical form of such praise is found in contexts of paying homage to a person, for which the beginning of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (I, i) can serve as an example. Lear poses the question which of his three daughters loves him most, so that he can distribute portions of his realm among them accordingly. He receives the following answers from Goneril (37a) and Regan (37b):

(37) a.   Sir, I love you more than [words] can wield the matter,
           Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty,
           Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,
           No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;
           As much as child e'er lov'd, or father found;
           A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable:
           Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

      b.   I am made of that self metal as my sister,
           And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
           I find she names my very deed of love;
           Only she comes too short, that I profess
           Myself an enemy to all other joys
           Which the most precious square of sense [possesses],
           And find I am alone felicitate
           In your dear Highness' love. (*King Lear*, I,i)

A question like Lear's, with such strings attached, of course invites clearly maximised and emphatic replies. Goneril resorts to describing her love by emphatic comparisons (*no less than*), universality (*e'er*) and its essential inexpressibility (*speech unable*), all of which are common hyperbolic means. Regan exceeds Goneril's avowal by claiming 'all this and more'. While the praise of Beowulf above is essentially honest (in the sense of emotional truthfulness), the exaggerated attestations of love by Lear's daughters are rather hyperbolic in form only, and lies with regard to content. This becomes clear in the play both by the contrast to Lear's favourite daughter, Cordelia, who refuses to pronounce her true-felt love, and to Goneril's and Regan's less than loving behaviour towards Lear later in the play. The speeches above thus illustrate the dishonest, scheming uses of hyperbole, which may reflect the Renaissance view that hyperbole is 'a marker of truth and of a writer's ability to manipulate it' (Stanivukovic 2007: 13). Furthermore, the speeches are an example of the grand or high style, which depended to a large extent on rhetorical amplification, of which hyperbole was an important means (2007: 14).

Another classical (and truly) panegyric locus is found in love poetry, with the lover praising the beauty of his beloved. Shakespeare's sonnets can serve as illustration here (cf. Standop (1995) for further discussion). In Sonnet 17, Shakespeare uses the topos of indescribability when he writes that his verse 'is but as a tomb / Which hides your life and shows not half your parts'. This

is hyperbolic in so far as the beauty of the person is so great that no words will serve adequately to portray it. Furthermore, he plays with the relationship of truth, hyperbole, lies and poetic licence several times in this sonnet when he envisages future readers saying that 'this poet lies, / Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces' and to see his description as 'a poet's rage / and stretched metre [= poetic hyperbole[16]] of an antique song' – that is, they would if he did offer a description of the beauty, which he, however, refrains from in this sonnet. Without using any of the standard hyperbolic expressions (except for 'heavenly touches'), Shakespeare manages nevertheless to produce a completely hyperbolic piece of praise. Other sonnets, such as 18 and 53, illustrate a different device. They employ the method of – explicit or implicit – comparison, but one which is outshone by its alleged inapplicability. The introductory question 'shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' of Sonnet 18, with summer's day standing for an obviously beautiful natural 'object', is promptly negated because the simile would not do justice to the eternal beauty of the addressee. In Sonnet 53, classical paragons of perfect beauty, such as Helen of Troy and Adonis, are said to pale in contrast to the grace of the addressee, cf. 'describe Adonis, and the counterfeit / Is poorly imitated after you'. These literary uses are partly complex versions of the metalinguistic-comment examples presented in Section 4.4.

Hyperbolic characterisation, the second function listed above, may partly overlap with praise, as the praised person is being described, but it is of course a wider concept. Fictional characters can be characterised by hyperbolical description or by their own hyperbolical speech. Chaucer uses exaggeration or at least maximisation techniques in the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales* in order to portray ideal 'types'. His pilgrims are not individuals, but each stands for a certain class of people, of which he or she is a perfect embodiment. Chaucer uses the device of comparison, or rather denied comparability of the kind that implies a superlative, in several cases, cf.:

(38) a. Ther nas no man nowher so vertuous (l. 251, Friar)
      b. Ther nas noon swich from hulle to cartage (l. 404, Shipman)
      c. in al this world ne was ther noon hym lik (l. 412, Physician)
      d. a bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys (l. 524, Parson)

What is remarkable in those instances is the clustering of (mostly negative) universal quantifiers such as *noon*, *nowher* and *al*. This group of quantifiers is highly frequent in the General Prologue, with 20.2 instances per 1,000 words, indicating how often Chaucer uses this or a very similar type of maximisation. The high incidence of the intensifier *ful* (9 / 1,000, e.g., *a ful solempne man* (l. 209), said about the friar) further adds to the highly emphatic and idealised impression created by instances like the above. In other cases, Chaucer packs

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[16] Textual note provided by *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (1969: 1456); similarly, 'poetic exaggeration' in the Signet Classic edition.

such a great amount of 'typical' detail into a description that the sheer quantity of things and deeds listed must exceed possible fact. The knight, who is described as a '*verray parfit* gentil knyght' (l. 72), is a case in point here. His exploits encompass the whole world, as indicated by 'hadde he riden, no man ferre, / As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse' (ll. 48–9), and the list of battles and places provided is excessive:[17] *alisaundre, pruce, lettow, ruce, gernade, algezir, belmarye, lyeys, satalye, the grete see, tramyssene, palatye* and *turkye* (ll. 51–66). Furthermore, he stood out in the estimation of his peers: he was 'evere honoured for his worthynesse' (l. 50) and he sat at the head of the table when with the Teutonic Knights (ll. 52–3). He also has all the necessary virtues for an ideal knight, cf. the references to chivalry, truth, honour, freedom, courtesy, wisdom and meekness (ll. 45–6, ll. 68–9). Real knights in the Middle Ages were generally less perfect figures. By maximising the Knight's exploits and his positive features (while being silent about negative ones), Chaucer creates an ideal person. The Franklin's portrait is a further good example of Chaucer's maximisation strategy. Here, we are provided with a listing description of his culinary delights (e.g., 'it snewed in his hous of mete and drynke' (l. 345)), but additionally, Chaucer links the Franklin with prototypical and proverbial figures of certain qualities, thus equating him with perfection in the respective field. He is called 'epicurus owene sone' (l. 336), emphasising his love of good food and a luxurious life, and 'Seint julian … in his contree' (l. 340), referring to the patron saint of hospitality and thus characterising the Franklin as a shining example of this virtue.

While Chaucer described his characters hyperbolically and the characters in *Coupling* (cf. Section 7.2 above) betray themselves by their hyperbolic language,[18] Charles Dickens combines these two methods and adds a further aspect of interest. The introduction of Miss Pross, a character in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, into the novel can serve as an example here. The novel's Chapter 6 gets its title 'Hundreds of People' from a hyperbolic claim made by Miss Pross, which is shown in (39), and which is reaffirmed by her on page 129:

(39)   'I don't want dozens of people who are not at all worthy of Ladybird, to come here looking after her,' said Miss Pross.
'*Do* dozens come for that purpose?' [spoken by Mr Lorry, CC]
'**Hundreds**,' said Miss Pross.
It was characteristic of this lady (as of some other people before her time and since) *that whenever her original proposition was questioned, she exaggerated it.* (p. 125)[19]

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[17]   The explanatory note in Robinson's edition points out that the martial events listed 'might all have been witnessed by a contemporary of the poet'. The *might* is crucial – the likelihood that *one and the same* person took part in all of these is probably rather small.

[18]   Another instance where hyperbolic speech is used for characterisation is Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (cf. Stanivukovic 2007: 19).

[19]   Quoted from the Penguin Classics edition (1970).

In this case, the author provides an explicit metacomment, both identi-fying Miss Pross' statement as hyperbolic and drawing a general evaluative conclusion about her character from this fact. The remainder of the chap-ter contains references showing how unsubstantiated her pronouncement is, especially clearly highlighted by the comic contrast between *hundreds* and *two* in (40c). Example (40a–c) constitutes a kind of 'mental' hearer reaction (Section 5.2), provided by the narrator but reflecting the thoughts of one of the present characters.

(40) a. But, **no Hundreds of people came** to see the sights, and Mr Lorry looked in vain for the fulfilment of Miss Pross's prediction. (p. 129)

  b. Still the **Hundreds of people did not present themselves**. (p. 130)

  c. Tea-time, and Miss Pross making tea, with another fit of the jerks upon her, **and yet no Hundreds of people**. Mr Carton had lounged in, but he made *only Two*. (p. 132)

These punctuate the chapter, so to speak, and thus add a certain rhythm and unity to it – a structural effect which may well be intentional, given the serial publication of the novel. The character flaw of Miss Pross identified and highlighted in Chapter 6 by an ultimately harmless hyperbole, namely that of misjudgement (of situations and people) and intransigence in the light of contradiction or counter-evidence, can be taken to stand symbolically for her greater misjudgement of her brother Solomon's unpleasant character, who has a double identity as the spy Barsad and as such has a negative role to play in the unfolding of the novel's plot.

As a final example of characterisation, I would like to mention Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. This novel deals with Alexander Portnoy's (protagonist and first-person narrator) neurotic disorder against the back-ground of his Jewishness and embeddedness in Jewish (family) culture. It is inherent in any neurosis that some aspects of life and experience attain an abnormally great importance and obsessive hold over the subject – to such an extent that from a 'normal' (non-neurotic) perspective the process and the resultant effects can be seen as hyperbolic in nature. The depiction of neurosis, if done by the neurotic person himself, will thus also be charac-terised by hyperbolic features.[20] The rambling report of Portnoy accord-ingly contains many individual hyperbolic instances and aspects which are hyperbolic through the obsessive amount of attention they receive. Sophie Portnoy, mother of the protagonist, for example, looms larger than life in Alexander's mind. He is caught in a love–hate dependency relationship with

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[20] One may remember here the high frequency of figurative language in therapeutic sessions mentioned in Section 4.1.

her, which dominates his life. This is made clear right from the first chapter, whose heading *The most unforgettable character I've met* is a hyperbole which is, ironically, true for Portnoy himself. As a small child he believed in the ubiquity of his mother (*believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise*, p. 3[21]) and in her being able to *accomplish anything* (p. 11), while she called him *Albert Einstein the Second* (p. 4); on the other hand, she would *point a bread knife at my* (Alexander's, CC) *heart* (p. 17) for not eating properly, or threaten her son with grave medical consequences for eating non-Jewish food, such as French fries and lobster (incontinence: *wearing a plastic bag to do your business in*, p. 32; *the risk of having paralyzed hands for the rest of your life*, p. 94). Nowhere in the novel is Sophie or the mother–son relationship portrayed in purely factual terms. As some of the above examples already show, there is a certain degree of absurdness present in the hyperbole. This is also the case for the graphic and repeated depiction of the father's chronic and, needless to say, symbolic constipation. This is so extremely intractable *that when they announced over the radio the explosion of the first atom bomb, he said aloud, "Maybe that would do the job."* (p. 5). A result of Portnoy's 'conflict' with his parents and his Jewishness is his obsession with sexual matters which completely pervades the book. Again and again the protagonist is indulging in masturbation or other sexual activity, to such an extent that it seems to overtake his life all the time (*half my waking life spent locked behind the bathroom door, firing my wad down the toilet bowl*, pp. 17f.) and everywhere (*whacked off on the 107 bus from New York*, p. 78). Once in the book, on page 102, the protagonist asks himself explicitly *Do I exaggerate?*, which he leaves partly open with a *could be* and which he partly repudiates – as most neurotic people he has a certain degree of critical awareness towards his problem (cf. also his references to Sigmund Freud). At various points in the novel, the hyperbole also takes on consciously aggressive tones and plunges into parody. One instance is when Portnoy denounces Rabbi Warshaw – and through him, Jewishness? – partly by making fun of his speaking habits:

(41)   a.   So no word he pronounces has less than three of them [syllables, CC], not even the word *God*. You should hear the song and dance he makes out of *Israel*. For him it's as long as refrigerator! (p. 73)

        b.   "I-a wan-tt to-a wel-come-a you-ew tooo thee sy-na-gawg-a." (p. 74)

Pinsker (1979: 257) characterised the type of talk found in *Portnoy's Complaint* as 'inverted boasting', in which not something positive, something to be proud of is being exaggerated, but instead, things which enhance the speaker's own misery and psychic defects. Furthermore, Pinsker categorised the novel as an urban tall tale, distinguished from

[21]   Quoted from the Vintage (2005) edition.

traditional tall tales by humorously exaggerating weaknesses rather than strengths (1979: 261).

Mention of the tall tale as such leads over to the third function of hyperbole listed above, namely that of 'setting the scene'. Hyperbole can help to evoke an extraordinary environment and an atmosphere that sets the world described or created apart in some ways from other worlds. Tall tales are seen as a quintessentially American form, although they are not wholly confined to this cultural tradition and Blair (1984) has made a point for the impact of Raspe's *Münchhausen* stories as an outside influence on the development of the tall tale. Exaggerated humour is the trademark of the tall tale, as Bosma (1992: 209) puts it, and this aspect is also highlighted in Brown's (1987: 2) definition of the tall tale as 'a comic fiction disguised as fact, deliberately exaggerated to the limits of credibility or beyond'. In this respect, the tall tale could also have been discussed under humour in Section 7.2. However, I want to highlight another aspect here. Tall tales are in origin an essentially oral form[22] and one that always has clear regional roots (usually, the regions of the American west), which is highlighted by Jones' (1976) point that it is often one or more aspects of the local environment that is exaggerated (quoted in Siporin 2000: 88). The tall tale remains grounded in the real world by mixing its flights of fantasy with realistic details (Caron 1986: 28, cf. also Brown 1987: 38, Wonham 1989, Thorne 1980), and both might be hard to separate. Bosma (1992: 209f.) links the tall tale to the pioneer's sense that the American West cannot be adequately described in factual terms. Only the use of hyperbole does (poetic) justice to this place; in Bosma's words (1992: 213) '[t]he germ of truth in the hyperbole gives the listener or reader a sense of time and place'. A tall tale is usually presented as a personal anecdote by a local person, who speaks for a group of (local) initiates or insiders and, through the telling, excludes outsiders who may not be sure what and how much to believe (cf. Thorne 1980: 98, Siporin 2000: 89). Tall tales thus are linked to a community making sense of a new environment, establishing itself in and identifying itself with this region, and representing it to the outside world.[23] Grobmann (1977) describes how many such typical tall-tale

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[22] A hybrid literary tall tale emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century (Wonham 1989: 285) that I will ignore here.

[23] The link to depicting and characterising a region (world) is also found in tall-tale postcards or 'boastcards' (Siporin 2000: 90). As hyperbolic size is the most easily visualised exaggeration, postcards specialise in this aspect (Welsch 1974: 317). Examples in Welsch (1974) and Siporin (2000) show gigantic produce, such as huge ears of corn, giant livestock, e.g., a larger-than-human pig and anglers with oversize fish. Welsch (1974: 323), who is concerned mostly with older cards, points out that some of these superficially 'positive-message' cards may, ironically, highlight the contrast between the anything but hyperbolical reality of places like the Great Plains with the rosy promises which had lured settlers there. In this case, such postcards are another instance of the common use of hyperbole for the purpose of criticism (cf. Chapter 4). Siporin, in contrast, rather highlights the postcards', and also the tales', promotional quality as advertisements for the respective regions, thus linking up to the persuasive function of hyperbole.

motifs and contexts are also used and reworked by Melville in *Moby Dick* in order to aid the creation of a certain atmosphere and to humorously depict the 'essential truth' (1977: 194). The description of Nantucket in (42) by its natives is offered as a background and reason to the fact that Nantucketers have felt compelled to leave their home and have 'overrun and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders':

(42)   Some gamesome wights will tell you that they have to plant weeds there, they don't grow naturally; that they import Canada thistles; that they have to send beyond seas for a spile to stop a leak in an oil cask; that pieces of wood in Nantucket are carried about like bits of the true cross in Rome; that people there plant toadstools before their houses, to get under the shade in summer time; that one blade of grass makes an oasis, three blades in a day's walk a prairie;… (Chapter 14, p. 62[24])

While Melville presents this description as second-hand, (imagined) speech attributed to unnamed characters and thus as something the narrator can distance himself from, there are other instances in this novel (cf. the *Alexanders* simile above) and in other novels where hyperbolic language is attributable to the narrator. In such cases the exaggeration contributes to the creation of a particular scenery and atmosphere that is important for the work in question. Hegerfeldt quotes the passage in (43) from Jeanette Winterson's novel *Gut Symmetries*, in which Stella, one of the narrators, talks about what life was like at the time of her birth:

(43)   It was a cold and snowy winter New York. Cold was master. Heat was servant. (…) Furnaces and boilers committed suicide under the strain and were dragged lifeless from the zero basements by frozen men in frozen overalls. The traffic cops, trying to keep order in the chaos cold, felt their semaphoring arm stiffen away from their bodies. It was a common sight, at shift change, **to see them shifted like statues off their podiums, and laid horizontally in a wheezing truck**. (quoted from Hegerfeldt 2005: 104)

Here, the cold weather, after being described in metaphorical but still believable language, is exaggerated to absurd heights by culminating in the image of the completely frozen policemen – a scene that has vivid visual qualities and is thus in a way reminiscent of the techniques applied in *Ally McBeal* dealt with above. Winterson's novel belongs to the genre of magic realism, a type of fiction that 'blends elements of the marvellous, the supernatural, hyperbole and fabulation, improbable coincidences and the extraordinary with elements of literary realism' (Hegerfeldt 2005: 51), and, importantly, takes the non-realist elements seriously, in the sense that they

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[24]   Quoted from the Norton Critical Edition, eds. Hayford and Parker (1967).

are true, integral parts of the world and plot of the work. While the police-men in (43) are, of course, such 'fabulous' and improbable elements, they are not as supernatural as some other aspects of magic realism are – there is, after all, still an experiential basis to things freezing solid. Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* also uses the freezing-solid image, but, in contrast to Winterson, he proceeds one step further into the really surreal:

(44)   a.   … my grandfather Aadam Aziz hit his nose against the **frost-hardened** tussock of earth while attempting to pray. Three drops of blood plopped out of his left nostril, **hardened instantly in the brittle air** and lay before his eyes on the prayer-mat, *transformed into rubies.* … he found that the tears which had sprung to his eyes had **solidified**, too; and at that moment, as he brushed *diamonds* contemptuously from his lashes, he resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man. (p. 10[25])

        b.   Tears – which, **in the absence of the Kashmiri cold, have absolutely no chance of hardening into diamonds** – slide down the bosomy contours of Padma's cheeks. (p. 345)

The blood and the tears do not simply turn to hard ice, but also transform into precious stones – magically, but without an overt awareness tangible in the narration that something out of the ordinary is happening. Rushdie is thus fading an ordinary hyperbole across into a much more powerful image. As (44b), a negated recurrence of the same image much later in the novel, can indicate here, the episode in (44a) characterises Kashmir, one of the settings of the novel, as an extraordinary-but-ordinary place against whose backdrop other magic–realist aspects of the novel can unfold (e.g., the telepathy of the protagonist). Hegerfeldt (2005: 105ff.) makes the point that hyperbole and absurd exaggeration is in fact fairly prominent in magic-realist works; she lists such authors as Nye (e.g., *The Late Mr Shakespeare*), Carter (e.g., *Wise Children*), Tennant (e.g., *Wild Nights*), Fevvers (e.g., *Nights at the Circus*) and Rushdie as good examples.

As I have named this aspect 'setting the scene', one can imagine that this use of hyperbole is especially interesting at the very beginning of fictional works in order to draw the reader into a world. Rushdie's (44a) does in fact occur on the second page of the novel, thus making it clear to the reader from the start what kind of world s/he is entering. The beginning of Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, written as a children's book, can serve as another example:

(45)   There was once, in the country of Alifbay, a sad city, **the saddest of cities**, a city **so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name**. It stood by a mournful sea full of glumfish, which were **so miserable to**

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[25]   Quoted from the Picador/Pan Books edition (1981).

> **eat that they made people belch with melancholy** even though
> the skies were blue.
>
> In the north of the sad city stood mighty factories in which (so I'm
> told) **sadness was actually manufactured**, packaged and sent all
> over the world, which seemed never to get enough of it. Black smoke
> poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the
> city like bad news. (p. 15)

With conventional (superlative) and metaphorical hyperbole, Rushdie
sketches out an unpleasant world, against which is contrasted, in similarly
hyperbolic mode, the cheerful Rashid, called the 'Ocean of Notions' because
of the 'never-ending stream' (p. 15) of stories told by him. The characteris-
tics of the sad environment can be read as a sign of things to come, namely
that Rashid will lose his powers of storytelling. Furthermore, the improb-
abilities mentioned here prepare the reader for a world in which all sorts of
unlikely and fantastic things can happen, such as the existence of a second
moon around the Earth, and of a land of perpetual sunshine.

Similar to Rushdie, Dickens starts *A Tale of Two Cities* with absolute
superlatives, which are used to create the first of a whole series of paradox-
ical antitheses, all of which are certainly maximised and many of which are
overstated:

(46)   It was **the best of times**, it was **the worst of times**, it was the age of
       wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was
       the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season
       of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,
       we had **everything before us**, we had **nothing before us, we were
       all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other
       way**…(*A Tale of Two Cities*, p. 35)

The novel is set in London and Paris at the time of the French revolution,
which makes these the time and the places to which the evaluations in (46)
refer. Instead of unequivocally creating one particular atmosphere or type of
setting, they confront the reader with highly divergent assessments which
cannot both be true at the same time, and thus encourage the reader to come
to his or her own conclusions about the period depicted. The extreme state-
ments serve the function of pointing out the extraordinariness and historical
importance of the epoch in question. In short, Dickens uses the device in
(46) to create a certain mental disposition in his readers.

Parody, the last of the aspects to be treated here together with satire, has
already been mentioned in the discussion of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Hutcheon
(2000: 7) characterises parody as 'imitation with a critical difference', thus
producing a different understanding, a critical or a humorous view of the
parodied object. The similarity of a parody to its 'original' works partly by
hitching on to particular characteristics of the target and carrying them to

the extreme; in this sense, parody makes use of hyperbolic means. The characters and the American Jewish community in *Portnoy's Complaint* can be regarded as parodistic caricatures to a certain extent, thus also giving the work features of a satire. In contrast to parody, which can be harmless, satire is meant to criticise, i.e., a negative evaluative attitude towards its target is a defining characteristic.[26] There seem to be hardly any other defining features, as satires can achieve their critical aim in different ways. However, exaggeration and, related to it, distortion are rather common satirical techniques (Harris 1990, Johnston 1999). First, exaggeration also plays a role in irony, often an essential ingredient of satires. Secondly, hyperbole keeps a balance between similarity to the target (necessary for parody and satire; cf. the aspect of reconcilability, Section 2.2, p. 10) and (critical) distance. Thirdly, hyperbole is striking and emphatic, making it easier for the audience to recognise the satirical aim and intention.

The satire can work either via hyperbole relating to form and language, or via hyperbole relating to content. The first type is found in mock-epic or mock-heroic writing, for example, which exaggerates by using language, depictive modes and tones which are not appropriate to its trivial or lowly subject matter. Pope's *Rape of the Lock* is a case in point and the scene of the actual rape, presented in (47), is a good example:

(47)   Just then, Clarissa drew with tempting grace
        A two-edged weapon from her shining case;
        So ladies in romance assist their knight,
        Present the spear, and arm him for the fight.
        He takes the gift with reverence, and extends
        The little engine on his finger's ends;
        This just behind Bellinda's neck he spread,
        (…)
        Thrice she looked back, and thrice the foe drew near.
        (…)
        The peer now spreads the glittering forfex wide,
        To enclose the lock; now joins it, to divide.
        Even then, before the fatal engine closed,
        A wretched Sylph too fondly interposed;
        Fate urged the shears, and cut the Sylph in twain
        (But airy substance soon unites again),
        The meeting points the sacred hair dissever
        From the fair head, for ever and for ever!
        (…)
        'Let wreaths of triumph now my temples twine,'

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[26]   As hyperbole seems to favour negative evaluations (cf. Table 4.5, p. 81), it seems well suited for purposes of satire.

> (The victor cried) 'the glorious prize is mine!' (*Rape of the Lock*,
> Canto III, 127–62)

While the real episode to which Pope is referring is a falling out of two families over a minor social faux pas (the cutting of the lock), the lexical choices in this passage refer to the world of war and of knighthood (*weapon, spear, engine, fight, foe, triumph, victor; ladies in romance, knight*). The two mentionings of *fate* provide a cosmic aura of inevitability, while *but airy substance soon unites again* is a reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (there, it is a reference to Satan). The scissors used to cut off the lock are described as a *weapon*, but also, probably more comically, with the ridiculous inkhorn Latinism *forfex*[27] – while the object of the scissors is called *sacred hair.* Thus, the lexical choices refer to spheres of life (war, religion[28]) and to registers (epic, scientific) which are immensely more important than the scene actually described.

A further instance of such language-driven hyperbole is found in burlesque plays, for example, Henry Carey's *Tragedy of Chrononhotonthologus*, which describes itself on the title page in hyperbolic mode as 'the most Tragical Tragedy, that ever was Tragediz'd by any Company of Tragedians'. It also has mock-heroic qualities to a certain extent, but what I would like to illustrate, rather, is its habit, already visible in the preceding quote, of piling up words of the same sense and stem in close sequence, thereby producing hyperbole by (absurd) accumulation, cf. (48):

(48)   Mean Time, bid all the Priests prepare their Temples
        For Rites of Triumph: Let the **Singing Singers**,
        With **vocal Voices**, most **Vociferous**,
        In sweet **Vociferation**, **out vociferize**
        Ev'n Sound itself; So be it as we have order'd.
        (*Chrononhotonthologus*, Scene I, 92–6)

This kind of foregrounded language play seems to be more important in Carey's tragedy than a really clear satirical purpose.

Returning to more typical satire, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* should certainly be mentioned here, in particular given its inversions of size in the first two parts of the work – and given that size and hyperbole are intimately connected. Of course, one can argue that the relative bigness (Gulliver in Part I, the Brobdingnagians in Part II) and smallness (the Lilliputians in I, Gulliver in II) simply very graphically establish the foreign worlds described. However, these facts can be used for or turn into hyperbole. Gulliver's huge size, originally seen from the Lilliputian perspective, can be taken as a hyperbolical statement on the monstrosity of humans if seen

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[27]   Pope's use in this passage is the first attestation given by the *OED*. Cf. also the role of lexical register in hyperbole mentioned in Section 5.1.
[28]   Compare, also, the previous description of Belinda's toilet as an altar (Canto I: 121–8).

from the human reader's perspective, who is confronted with descriptions of Gulliver that make him seem much larger than the reader. For example, *Six Hundred Beds of the Common* [Lilliputian, CC] *Measure* (p. 17[29]) are necessary to construct a bed for Gulliver, and he *shall have a daily Allowance of Meat and Drink, sufficient for the Support of 1728 of our* [the Lilliputian king's, CC] *Subjects* (p. 31): humans can be regarded as expansive, domi-neering and gluttonous. In contrast, humans are portrayed as insignificant by hyperbolically (again from the reader's perspective) shrinking Gulliver to the size of a small bird, kept as a pet, in Part II. He lives in a box which is often set *upon a Window, as she* (Glumdalclitch, CC) *usually did in fair Days to give me Air, (for I durst not venture to let the Box be hung on a Nail out of the Window, as we do with Cages in England)* (p. 101). This is carried further by Gulliver feeling the *utmost Terror* at the attack of wasps, which *were as large as Partridges* (p. 101). Here, humans (represented by Gulliver) are seen as dependent, largely defenceless creatures, who are certainly not superior to animals.

Furthermore, hyperbole works within the story. The tiny Lilliputians, for example, use language and behaviour which is more appropriate for much larger creatures and thus seems comically overstated. The law drafted for the freedom of Gulliver begins in the following manner:

(49)   GOLBASTO MOMAREN EVLAME GURDILO SHEFIN MULLY ULLY GUE, **most Mighty Emperor** of *Lilliput*, Delight and **Terror of the Universe**, whose Dominions extend five Thousand Blustrugs, (about twelve Miles in Circumference) **to the Extremities of the Globe**: **Monarch of all Monarchs**: **Taller than the Sons of Men**; whose Feet press down to the Center, and **whose Head strikes against the Sun**: …(*Gulliver's Travels*: 29)

Clearly, the Lilliputians have an inflated sense of their own importance, which is expressed in such hyperbolical flourishes as (49). On the second level of interpretation, such arrogance is, of course, also attributed to eight-eenth-century England. In at least one passage, the narrator provides a metacomment (cf. Section 4.4) with relevance to hyperbole by stating about his report from Brobdingnag:

(50)   … perhaps I should be hardly believed; at least a severe Critick would be apt to think **I enlarged a little**, as Travellers are often suspected to do. To avoid which Censure, I fear I have run too much into the other Extream … (*Gulliver's Travels*: 107)

His assurance that he was, if anything, understating things, only serves further to strengthen the existing instances of exaggeration.

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[29]   Quoted from the World's Classics paperback, OUP (1986).

Two modern works with satirical intentions, though of very different kinds, are Julian Barnes' *England, England* and Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Nünning (2001) states about the former that '[as] *England, England* – in a highly exaggerated fashion – shows, the inventions of cultural traditions serve the purpose of coming to terms with the present'. So what precisely is exaggerated in the novel? The major instance of hyperbole is certainly how *England, England*, the invented tourism entity constructed by the Pitman Company on the Isle of Wight, takes over from the 'real' England, which in turn regresses into an agrarian state and assumes the name of *Anglia*.[30] Jack Pitman describes the aim of the *England, England* enterprise in the following manner:

> It is world-boggling time. We shall offer far more than words such as Entertainment can possibly imply; even the phrase Quality Leisure, proud though I am of it, perhaps in the long run, falls short. We are offering *the thing itself*. (p. 59, italics original).

Thus, the enterprise tops other tourism attractions, such as Disney World, Legoland, etc. (mentioned by Pitman himself earlier), by far, but more crucially it also in a way will (have to) top – and replace – the original, as only one *thing itself* of the same entity can really survive. As the novel progresses, this is shown to be the case. Thus, the tourist construction England, England in its success is a hyperbolic entity as seen from the point of view of the reader in the real world. What happens to the original England is also hyperbolically overdrawn, both in the way that it simply yields to the new entity without much resistance and in the kind of state it ends up as. Anglia exaggerates and brings to the fore those characteristics and stereotypes of England that have to do with the rural, pre-industrial world and with isolation from the world at large. In contrast, *England, England* reduces Englishness to a consumer good by exaggerating and highlighting some few marketable English 'features', such as the royal family, the Battle of Britain, Robin Hood and cream teas. As neither *England, England* nor *Anglia* is portrayed in a positive manner, the hyperbole here serves a critical purpose, criticising both existing conceptions of Englishness and the mistaken notion of authenticity itself.

Adams' 'trilogy in five parts' (a description hyperbolically absurd) aims its parodistic and satirical treatments both at the genre of science fiction and at the real world of the reader. Adams uses elements of classical science fiction, such as ways and means of space travel, robots and the presently known laws of the universe, and pushes them to such extremes that they acquire comical, absurd and thus critical potential. Antor (1998) discusses some such instances, for example, the overdone exploitation of the principle

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[30]   Note how the repetition of the original name could also be seen as formally indicating the maximisation of being more *English* than *England*.

of improbability, found in the *Infinite Improbability Drive* of the spaceship *Heart of Gold*, for example. This leads in one instance to the last-minute rescue of the two protagonists, Ford Prefect and Arthur Dent, 'from certain death at an improbability level of two to the power of two hundred and seventy-six thousand to one against – possibly much higher' (p. 68[31]) after they had been thrown into outer space without protective suits, an event which should lead to almost instant death. In another episode, improbability mechanisms save the protagonists from two atomic weapons directed at their spaceship by turning the former into a bowl of petunias and a sperm whale floating in space before smashing on the planet surface (pp. 98ff.). The choice of transformations here makes the mocking intention especially clear. Another absurd hyperbole is constituted by the fact that the earth is being destroyed twice (in vols I and V), as the first destruction only affected the earth in one of the probable worlds. Also, the fact that planets can be manufactured from scratch, as the Earth turns out to have been, tops other science fictions in which existing planets might merely be transformed (e.g., terra-forming in *Star Trek*). Antor further mentions the anthropomorphisation of computers and robots as a hyperbolic element satirising science–fiction conventions. The exaggeration with respect to usual science fiction is constituted by the fact that technological entities are so far advanced as to function like humans and to have human characteristics,[32] while the satire is transported by these human characteristics being grossly overstated negative ones, such as deep depression and neurosis. The android Marvin is so depressive that he can talk a computer into committing suicide (p. 148).

Two examples can illustrate the hyperbolic-satirical treatment of aspects of the readers' world, namely the portrayal of Zaphod Beeblebrox, President of the Galaxy (also mentioned by Antor 1998), and the rock band Disaster Area. Beeblebrox is the exaggerated representation of a politician and the political process fulfilling possible negative stereotypes: he is a fraudulent and irresponsible self-serving egomaniac, who, moreover, only presents a façade for the real hidden powers. He has spent two years of his presidential term in prison for fraud and has stolen the spaceship *Heart of Gold* – neither of which apparently disqualifies him for office. The depiction of a concert of Disaster Area is an exaggerated rip-off of noisy and showy rock concerts and of rock-star personalities in general. We find descriptions like the following (pp. 251ff.): 'anyone within five miles of the speaker silos wouldn't have survived the tuning up', 'the city of speakers', 'the lead singer … locked himself into the bathroom with a bottle of pills and was refusing to come out till it could be proved conclusively to him that he wasn't a fish', 'the bass player was busy machine-gunning his bedroom' (251), and environmentalists

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[31] Quoted from the Heinemann edition (1995).
[32] In contrast to, e.g., Data in *Star Trek*, who is repeatedly portrayed as lacking essential human characteristics (though not unambiguously).

claiming that the concert 'will cause earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes …' (253). The musicians will distance-operate the instruments from space and as a show effect a spaceship will crash into the nearby sun.

It is not only in satire that hyperbole serves the function of communicating a deeper truth; this function is present in most literary uses as well as those presented for humour in Section 7.2. Thus, we are back at Leech's 'honest deceptions'.

Conclusion

Norrick (2004: 1738) stated that 'hyperbole in general, and ECF in particular, suggest endless avenues for future research' – but books are not endless and this one has now reached its end. In it, I have walked down some of the avenues, not all of them, and I have not always followed those I have chosen through to their very ends.

I have decided to treat hyperbole as a unified phenomenon, combining hyperbole, overstatement and extreme case formulation under one big umbrella, although separated by Gibbs and Norrick. I think this is justified by the likely fact that non-extreme *I've been waiting for hours* and extreme *you're always late* will be perceived as functionally and stylistically equivalent, and by the impossibility of pinning down intentionality in specific cases. Thus, all the above labels are covered by the definition given in Chapter 2, which contrasts the surface meaning and contextual fit of the hyperbolic and possible literal expressions and derives the transferred, emotively coloured meaning from the nature and degree of this contrast. Expressions falling within this definition have been found to come in various guises. Basic types, i.e., those where only hyperbole is at work, are joined by composite realisations, which combine hyperbole with metaphor or metonymy and are less frequent on the whole. These types have been treated together in the study (except for with regard to comprehension, cf. Chapter 5), because in many everyday cases the distinction in effect might be minimal (cf. hyperboles based on *die*). Formally, hyperbole is inherent most of all in single words, (much) less frequently in phrases and clauses. The dominance of single-word hyperboles can be explained by their ease of use, their adaptability to many contexts and their potential for conventionalisation. The diversity of the material has resisted a more detailed formal classification, even if numbers, superlatives, comparison and repetition have been highlighted as noteworthy forms.

The general usage and functions of hyperbole have been investigated by taking both the speaker perspective (Chapter 4) and the hearer perspective (Chapter 5) into account. Hyperbole has been found to be used with moderate frequency in spoken conversational context, with an average of one hyperbole per every thousand words. I have highlighted two speaker

motivations for using hyperbole, or functions, namely the expression of an emotional attitude and the presentation of an appropriate 'image' of one-self. The attitude expressed by hyperboles, which is a negative one in the majority of cases, is somewhat more often directed at people than at objects and events, and clearly more often at absent rather than present targets. The 'image'-function of hyperbole is an aspect of positive face-work, with speakers presenting themselves as, e.g., humorous, competent, likeable and interesting. Hyperboles of the nonce variety, i.e., non-conventional, (semi-) creative ones, are useful in this context, and are indeed found in a substantial number of cases. Speaker groups with a more frequent use of hyperbole, also specifically of the (semi-)creative type, are women and teenagers, which may show that they have greater need for the two functions identified here. Hyperbole is used together with both downtoning and emphasising items, making a point both about the force of the hyperbole and about the degree of speaker commitment to it. This last is even more at issue in those cases where the hyperbolic statement is reformulated, for which a fairly stand-ardised pattern has been identified, or even (implicitly) retracted. Speakers' explicit awareness of hyperbole is indicated by metalinguistic references and comments, which occur mostly in written, i.e., more conscious, contexts and are often directed at others' hyperbolic productions. While nine different functions of this usage have been identified, the overarching effect of meta-linguistic comment is making the hyperbole more prominent and bringing the evaluation contained in any hyperbole to the fore.

In understanding hyperbole, hearers may make use of these different routes depending on the nature of hyperbole with which they are confronted, in particular its degree of conventionalisation. While particularised conver-sational implicature will be applicable to nonce-uses, generalised conver-sational implicature can be used for fairly routinised hyperbolic instances, and finally, polysemy resolution via salience will work for completely con-ventionalised items. Hearers do not only silently comprehend hyperbole, but they also react to it. While many reactions are unspecific, thus proving the 'normality' of many hyperbolic uses, hyperbole can also be challenged or questioned by the addressee or it can receive positive appraisals and playful comments. Hyperbole can even be co-constructed in certain contexts, one of which is ritualised insulting and boasting. Finally, hyperbole has a strategic use within politeness, both as a means to produce (strong) face-threatening acts, and for (redressive) realisations of positive politeness.

As the distinction between more or less conventionalised hyperbolic items has recurred throughout the study, Chapter 6 dealt more closely with the process of conventionalisation. The diachronic development of six (groups of) items was investigated in order to arrive at a more general model of hyperbole and change, which is in line with models such as that by Traugott and Dasher (2005). A given item proceeds from an original coded mean-ing (stage 0), via an utterance-token meaning (nonce-usage and early uses;

stage I) to a generalised utterance-type meaning (stage II) and finally a new coded meaning (stage III). On stage II an item is fairly conventional, but still hyperbolic, while on stage III it is completely conventional and often no longer hyperbolic in nature.

The fact that specific discourse types, genres or registers might have an influence on the occurrence of hyperbole has been touched on at various points in the study. Chapter 3 contrasted conversation and news language while investigating realisations, specific written uses (i.e., the explicit metalinguistic cases) were highlighted in section 4.4, and ritual insults were identified as a hyperbole-prone genre in section 5.2. Chapter 7 complements these individual points by looking at political, humoristic and literary uses of hyperbole. While hyperbole is not very common in modern political speeches, it there fulfils some functions also identified in other contexts such as self-presentation, humour and politeness, but also some more clearly political ones like emphasizing the seriousness of the situation, the urgency of action, criticising the political opponent and praising one's own party or policies. Hyperbole in British humour seems to be mostly of the absurd kind. Literary uses of hyperbole must be manifold, but this study has concentrated on showing four typical contexts and uses: (i) within the literature of praise, which has links to politeness, (ii) the characterisation of fictional personae, in particular but not exclusively, of stereotypical and otherwise extreme characters, (iii) setting the scene, i.e., the description of the fictional world as found in American tall tales, for example, and (iv) parody and satire, where hyperbole provides the evaluative clues.

Let me close by highlighting some open questions and interesting research avenues:

– I have touched on intonation and prosody in several places, but not treated it systematically. This was mainly due to lack of sufficient and high-quality data. While I do not think that there are unambiguous prosodic signals for hyperbole, the aspect is nevertheless important and needs further treatment. However, I also think that a promising way forward lies in an even more comprehensive approach, taking in facial expressions, body posture, gestures etc. Multimodal corpora will be helpful in this respect, at least if it is possible to capture larger amounts of authentic interactions.

– Through the data used, the emphasis of this study was put mostly on present-day British English uses of hyperbole. It is, of course, possible, even likely, that hyperbole is linked to culture and is thus more or less prominent in some speech communities and at certain times. Spitzbardt (1963) hypothesised a greater American (than British) predilection for hyperbolic expression, Harris (1988) noted relatively little Old English use (at least in *Beowulf*), while Stanivukovic (2007) finds hyperbole very relevant for Renaissance views of language (production). More detailed

studies of speech communities and time periods as well as comparisons between them are necessary. The latter would ideally require equivalent, comparable texts and genres, which is possible for the British–American situation but more problematic for diachronic comparisons.

– Chapter 4 singled out two function groups which I believe are important, namely emotive communication and self-presentation. I have neglected functions grounded more intimately in discourse organisation, as, for example, pursued by Drew (2005). At which points in a conversation or written text hyperbole occurs and why it occurs exactly where it does deserves more scrutiny.

– Generally speaking, I have also neglected the discussion of the relevance of genre for the use of hyperbole. In Chapter 7 the role of hyperbole in three different types of discourse was illustrated and I hope to have shown some interesting uses. Nevertheless, all of them, but especially literary uses, need a more thorough and less eclectic treatment. Also, my choice of discourse types has concentrated on the obvious, the usual suspects, so to speak. What about other genres, registers and text types? Advertising and media uses were mentioned in section 5.2 and newspapers were used as data throughout the study, but the focus was not on how hyperbole and the given genre or register interact. It may be an uncontroversial assumption that advertising makes much use of exaggeration (23 per cent of all hyperbole in the newspapers used here is found in ads), but which types does it employ and to what extent? It might be supposed that creative, humorous and visual hyperbole is more successful in this genre than straightforward exaggeration. A TV commercial for bread, for instance, instead of exaggerating the healthy ingredients of the bread (such as minerals), humorously overstated the effects of eating the bread by showing a boy so strengthened by it that he inadvertently broke everything he touched. Looking more closely at the newspaper data, one finds that hyperbole is not evenly distributed there, also indicating textual or genre preferences. There is more hyperbole in social and cultural reporting (37 per cent of all) and in sports news (25.5 per cent) than in political (13 per cent) and business (only 1 per cent!) news. More than the simple hard versus soft news distinction seems to play a role in this distribution. Furthermore, one might ask whether hyperbole is used at all in texts with a dominant factual and objective orientation, for example, in academic and scientific writing. If so, for which purposes?

– As stated above, I have suggested three different routes to understanding hyperbole, but further progress in this matter will only be possible with the help of the methodology of experimental pragmatics, i.e., an approach that combines pragmatics with experimental psychology (cf. Noveck and Sperber 2004). Two examples shall suffice here: as salience seems to play a role in the more conventional hyperboles, experimental studies testing the graded salience hypothesis (e.g., Peleg *et al.* 2004) may be useful for

investigating hyperbole as well. Coulson (2004) used electrophysiological methods, namely, measuring event-related brain potentials, to show that there is a continuum in metaphor comprehension, ranging from literal to metaphorical, but no sharp dichotomy between the types of interpretation. A similar approach might also prove fruitful for hyperbole.

– Chapter 6 has shown how far it is possible to trace usages into the past, even in the face of a less-than-optimal data situation. One remarkable aspect here concerns the long-standing use of features that one might regard as very colloquial, as fairly recent in origin and/or as relatively more typical of youth language, such as intensifying *dead* (sixteenth century) or *load*(*s*) (seventeenth century). Why is it that such features survive so long? How do they move from one generation to the next, in particular if some of them might be specific to certain age-groups? And why is it that they still seem so relatively fresh or innovative to observers? These are questions that need to be addressed beyond the confines of hyperbolic expressions.

Appendix 1 Modern corpora used (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6)

Sources of modern data used throughout the study

> *BNC* = *The British National Corpus*, version 2 (*BNC* World*)*. 2001. Distributed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the *BNC* Consortium. Available at: http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/
>
> *COLT* = *Corpus of London Teenage Language*, compiled by Anna-Brita Stenström *et al.* In *ICAME Collection of English Language Corpora* (CD-ROM), 2nd edn, eds. Knut Hofland, Anne Lindebjerg, and Jørn Thunestvedt, The HIT Centre, University of Bergen, Norway.
>
> *FLOB* = *Freiburg–LOB Corpus*, 1991 clone of *LOB*, compiled by Christian Mair *et al.* In *ICAME Collection of English Language Corpora* (CD-ROM), 2nd edn, eds. Knut Hofland, Anne Lindebjerg, Jørn Thunestvedt, The HIT Centre, University of Bergen, Norway.
>
> *LOB* = *London/Oslo–Bergen Corpus of British English*. In *ICAME Collection of English Language Corpora* (CD-ROM), 2nd edn, eds. Knut Hofland, Anne Lindebjerg, Jørn Thunestvedt, The HIT Centre, University of Bergen, Norway.
>
> *SBC* = *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English, Part 1*. 2000. By John W. Du Bois, Wallace L. Chafe, Charles Meyer and Sandra A. Thompson. Philadelphia: Linguistic Data Consortium.

SBC – PART 1 USED IN CHAPTERS 3 AND 4

Fourteen files; 51 different speakers (precise word count not possible).
List of files, with some of the information given in the segment information file accompanying the corpus

SBC1
   segment title: Actual Blacksmithing
   neighbourhood: outskirts of small town
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   event: mother and daughter catching up after daughter's absence
   speakers: 3

SBC2
   segment title: Lambada
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   speakers: 4

*SBC*3
   segment title: Conceptual Pesticides
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   speakers: 3

*SBC*4
   segment title: Raging Bureaucracy
   neighbourhood: downtown
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   event: drinking coffee
   speakers: 6

*SBC*5
   segment title: A Book About Death (Partners)
   neighbourhood: private home in Santa Barbara
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   event: chatting in bed
   speakers: 2

*SBC*6
   segment title: Cuz
   neighbourhood: Los Angeles
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   event: 2 participants hadn't seen each other for several weeks
   speakers: 2

*SBC*7
   segment title: A Tree's Life
   neighbourhood: rural housing project – Indian reservation
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   event: sisters talking about problems, a friend who is dying in the hospital, kid
   speakers: 2

*SBC*8
   segment title: Tell the Jury that
   neighbourhood: downtown
   event type: interview/task-related talk
   event: trial preparation
   speakers: 4

*SBC*9
   segment title: Zero Equals Zero
   event type: task related talk/face-to-face conversation
   event: girl helps boyfriend with math problems
   speakers: 2

*SBC*10
   segment title: Letter of Concerns
   neighbourhood: downtown
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   event: talking about political problems of an arts organisation
   speakers: 3

SBC11

   segment title: This Retirement Bit
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   event: face-to-face conversation
   speakers: 3

SBC12

   segment title: American Democracy is Dying
   event type: teaching/discussion
   event: teacher discussing history of Chicano Studies to students
   speakers: 9

SBC13

   segment title: Appease the Monster
   neighbourhood: Ft. Wayne, IN home
   event type: face-to-face conversation
   event: dinner party for Kendra's birthday
   speakers: 5

SBC14

   segment title: Bank Products
   neighbourhood: rural downtown neighborhood, middle-class
   event type: task-related talk
   event: loan officer and 2 board members are having a loan meeting
   speakers: 5

BNC SUBCORPUS USED IN CHAPTERS 3 AND 4

Thirteen files; 314,725 words; 95 different speakers.
List of files – with descriptions as in BNC Manual (Burnard 2000):

KB1

17 conversations recorded by 'Albert' (PS01A) between 1 and 6 February 1992 with 9
   interlocutors, totalling 5856 s-units, 39,285 words, and over 3 hours 6 minutes 40
   seconds of recordings.
   PS01A 'Albert', 53, unemployed, central northern England, DE, male
   PS01B 'June', 47, forecourt attendant, central northern England, DE, female
   PS01C 'Ada', 70, retired, central northern England, female
   PS01D 'Corrinne', 18, student, central northern England, DE, female
   PS01E 'Colin', 39, unemployed, central northern England, male
   PS01F 'Karen', 38, housewife, central northern England, female
   PS01G 'Sasha', 5, student, central northern England, female
   PS01H 'Rose', 67, retired, central northern England, female
   PS01J 'None', 46+, shopkeeper, Scottish, female

KB6

8 conversations recorded by 'Angela' (PS029) between 2 and 6 December 1991 with 7
   interlocutors, totalling 2,360 s-units, 12,953 words and 1 hour 22 minutes 59 seconds
   of recordings.

PS029 'Angela', 29, out work (pt), central south–west England, DE, female
PS02A 'Chris', 25, engineer, central south–west England, DE, male
PS02B 'Angela', 32, housewife, London, female
PS02C 'Angela', 32, housewife, London, female
PS02D 'Zoe', 28, housewife, central south–west England, female
PS02E 'Sue', 29, hairdresser, central south–west England, female
PS02F 'Ben', 3, student (state pre), DE, male

KB9

44 conversations recorded by 'Annette' (PS1CX) between 1 and ?? February 1992 with 6 interlocutors, totalling 5,497 s-units, 31,762 words and over 2 minutes 5 seconds of recordings.
PS1CX 'Annette', 44, administrative assistant, Lancashire, C1, female
PS1CY 'Teresa', 19, stable hand, Lancashire, C1, female
PS1D0 'David', 26, engineer, Lancashire, male
PS1D1 'Tracy', 24, housewife, Lancashire, female
PS1D2 'Donald', 71, retired, northern England, male
PS1KS 'Pat', 48+, Lancashire, female

KBK

228 conversations recorded by 'Chris' (PS05X) between 31 May and 1 June 1991 with 8 interlocutors, totalling 7,432 s-units, 53,920 words and over 5 hours 39 minutes 52 seconds of recordings.
PS05X 'Chris', 51, export merchant, Home Counties, AB, male
PS101 'Norrine', 54, teacher, London, AB, female
PS102 'Lynda', 44, export assistant, London, female
PS103 'Susan', 30, cleaner, London, female
PS104 'Bill', 30+, plastics company director, London, male
PS106 'Tony', 60+, retired, London, male
PS107 'David', 45, property manager, London, male
PS108 'Evelyn', 60+, retired, London, female

KBY

11 conversations recorded by 'Elizabeth' (PS08X) between 11 and 17 January 1992 with 5 interlocutors, totalling 1,038 s-units, 6,316 words (duration not recorded).
PS08X 'Elizabeth', 19, student, north–west Midlands, C1, female
PS10H 'None', 18, student, north–west Midlands, male
PS10K 'Matthew', 23, manager, north–west Midlands, C1, male
PS10L 'Anne', 48, clerk (pt), north–west Midlands, C1, female
PS10M 'Mike', 53, computer operator, north–west Midlands, C1, male

KC7

7 conversations recorded by 'Gill' (PS0BK) on 15 January 1992 with 5 interlocutors, totalling 1,640 s-units, 15,279 words (duration not recorded).
PS0BK 'Gill', 21, waitress, Home Counties, DE, female
PS0BL 'Jemma', 22, unemployed, Home Counties, DE, female

PSoBS 'Nancy', 18, business student, London, female
PSoBT 'Jim', 21, student, Home Counties, male

KCA

22 conversations recorded by 'Gordon' (PSoDL) between 10 and 13 January 1992 with 8 interlocutors, totalling 3,033 s-units, 21,431 words (duration not recorded).
PSoDL 'Gordon', 32, unemployed, Welsh, DE, male
PSoDM 'Debbie', 29, housewife, Welsh, DE, female
PSoDN 'Hayley', 29, housewife, Welsh, female
PSoDP 'Lyn', 32, housewife, Welsh, female
PSoDR 'Tom', 56, factory worker, Welsh, male
PSoDT 'Sean', 6, student (state primary), Welsh, DE, male
PSoDU 'Kirsty', 3, student (state pre), Welsh, DE, female

KCE

24 conversations recorded by 'Helena' (PSoEB) between 12 and 20 March 1992 with 9 interlocutors, totalling 7,370 s-units, 50,776 words, and 5 hours 47 minutes 8 seconds of recordings.
PSoEB 'Helena', 16, student, north-east Midlands, C2, female
PSoEC 'Emma', 16, student, upper south-west England, female
PSoED 'Sheila', 41, driving instructor, north-east Midlands, C2, female
PSoEE 'David', 17, student, north-east Midlands, C2, male
PSoEF 'Joanne', 13, student, upper south-west England, female
PSoEG 'Andy', 18, insurance clerk, upper south-west England, male
PSoEH 'Scott', 19, student, upper south-west England, male
PSoEJ 'Mark/shrimpy', 18, spring inspector, upper south-west England, male
PSoEK 'Susan', 16, student, upper south-west England, female

KD4

7 conversations recorded by 'Margaret' (PSoJW) between 13 and 14 January 1992 with 5 interlocutors, totalling 887 s-units, 7,068 words (duration not recorded).
PSoJW 'Margaret', 34, teacher (pt), Midlands, AB, female
PS138 'Sheila', 40+, teacher, Midlands, female
PS13A 'Ben', 5, student (state primary), Midlands, AB, male
PS13B 'Katie', 3, student (state pre), Midlands, AB, female
PS13C 'Adrian', 35, environmental health officer, Midlands, AB, male

KD9

17 conversations recorded by 'Mark2' (PS1G2) between [date unknown] and ?? April 1992 with 13 interlocutors, totalling 2,788 s-units, 12,902 words (duration not recorded).
PS1G2 'Mark', 17, unemployed, Irish, C2, male
PS1G3 'Kerry', 36, housewife, Irish, C2, female
PS1G4 'Angela', 10, student (state primary), Irish, C2, female
PS1G5 'Michael', 12, student (state secondary), Irish, C2, male
PS1G6 'Albert', 16, barman, Irish, male

PS1G7 'Robert', 19, shipyard employee, Irish, male
PS1G8 'Leigh', 17, postman, Irish, male
PS1G9 'Debbie', 15, student, Irish, female
PS1GA 'Anne', 16, student, Irish, female
PS1GB 'Jonston', 37, Irish, male
PS1GC 'Ormo', 21, Irish, male
PS1GD 'Julianne', 19, Irish, female
PS6TK 'None'

KP8

*7 conversations recorded by 'Christopher' (PS52T) between 30 January and 8 February
1992 with 6 interlocutors, totalling 3,884 s-units, 20,442 words and 2 hours 1 minute
42 seconds of recordings.*
PS52T 'Christopher', 33, civil servant, Scottish, AB, male
PS52U 'Wendy', 33, nurse (pt), Scottish, AB, female
PS52V 'Jonathan', 5, student (state primary), Scottish, AB, male
PS52W 'Michael', 3, student (state pre), Scottish, AB, male
PS52X 'Norma', 60, retired (physiotherapist), Scottish, female
PS52Y 'Hazel', 72, housewife, London, female
PS530 'None', 65+, *Watchtower* representative, Scottish, female

KPP

*8 conversations recorded by 'Matthew' (PS57A) [dates unknown] with 7 interlocutors,
totalling 1,319 s-units, 7,616 words (duration not recorded).*
PS57A 'Matthew', 13, student, AB, male
PS57B 'Josh', 17, student, male
PS57C 'Ryan', 18, student, male
PS57D 'Lara', 17, student, female
PS57E 'Rob', 19, student, male
PS57F 'Alex', 13, student, male
PS57G 'Aaron', 13, student, male

KSS

*16 conversations recorded by 'June2' (PS6R8) between 2 and 8 April 1992 with 9 inter-
locutors, totalling 5,147 s-units, 34,975 words and over 1 hour 19 minutes 18 seconds
of recordings.*
PS6R8 'June', 53, housewife, north-west Midlands, DE, female
PS6R9 'Arthur', 45, unemployed, Lancashire, DE, male
PS6RA 'Richard', 21, radar operator, northern England, male
PS6RB 'Angela', 19, care assistant, Lancashire, DE, female
PS6RC 'Peggy', 72, Salvation Army, Lancashire, female
PS6RD 'Ernest', 75, Salvation Army, northern England, male
PS6RE 'Karen', 23, nursery teacher, northern England, female
PS6RF 'David', 27, unemployed, northern England, male

BNC SUBCORPUS USED FOR NUMERICAL HYPERBOLE
IN CHAPTER 3

Twenty-two files

KB3	KCB	KDR	KPM
KBA	KCJ	KDS	KPR
KBJ	KCK	KDY	KR2
KBN	KCM	KE5	KSN
KBR	KDF	KPH	KSR
KBU	KDG		

Appendix 2 Modern sources other than corpora (Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5)

Quotations marked CC = spoken data from the author's own collection

Newspapers and magazines used

'CORPUS' USED IN CHAPTER 3:

– *Daily Telegraph* (*DT*), 13 June 2002
– *Daily Mail* (*DM*), 17 June 2002
– *Daily Express* (*DE*), 17 June 2002
– *The Times* (*Tim*), 27 June 2002
– *The Times* (*Tim*), 1 July 2002
– *The Times* w/b, 31 Aug 2002 (TV guide)
– *Daily Mail* (*DM*), 11 July 2002
– *Guardian* (*GU*), 1 August 2002
– *Evening Standard* (*ES*), 20 August 2002
– *The Sun* (*Sun*), 4 September 2002

Other newspapers used (various issues)

– *Guardian Weekly*
– *Prospect*
– *Die Zeit*

Appendix 3   Conventionalisation in dictionaries (Chapter 6)

Dictionaries used for conventionalisation, Chapter 6

Oxford English Dictionary (*OED*)
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (*OALD*)
Cowie *et al.* 1983. *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*, vol. 2. Oxford University Press.

List of hyperbolic idioms

Idiom	Hyperbolic in itself	Hyperbolic in context
a / the bed etc. to end all beds etc.	×	
a / the promised land		×
a bag / bundle of nerves	×	
a cut-throat price	×	
a disaster area		×
a fate worse than death	×	
a gift from the gods	×	
a heart of gold	×	
a knight in shining armour	×	
a land fit for heroes to live in	×	
a needle in a haystack	×	
a prophet of doom		×
a split second	×	
accept sth as/for gospel	×	
achieve wonders/miracles	×	
all day and every day	×	
all ears / eyes	×	
all hell breaks / is loose	×	
all the days of one's life	×	
all the world and his wife	×	
all this and heaven too	×	
arise(/rise like) a phoenix from the ashes	×	
as blind as a bat		×
as bold / brave as a lion		×
as cheap as dirt	×	
as clear as crystal		×
as cold as ice		×
as common as dirt / muck		×
as cross as a bear with a sore head		×

Idiom	Hyperbolic in itself	Hyperbolic in context
as dead as a doornail	×	
as dead as mutton	×	
as dead as the dodo		×
as deaf as a post	×	
as different as chalk and/from cheese	×	
as dry as a bone		×
as dry as dust		×
as dry as paper		×
as easy / simple as ABC		×
as flat as a board		×
as flat as a fluke / flounder		×
as flat as a pancake		×
as gentle as a lamb		×
as hard as (a) stone		×
as hard as flint		×
as hard as iron / rock		×
as hard as nails		×
as hard as steel		×
as heavy as lead		×
as helpless as a (newborn) babe		×
as innocent as a (new-born) babe		×
as light as a feather		×
as light as air	×	
as light as thistledown		×
as like as two peas (in a pod)		×
as obstinate / stubborn as a mule		×
as old as Methuselah	×	
as old as the hills	×	
as old as time	×	
as pale as death	×	
as patient as Job		×
as plain as the nose on your face	×	
as proud as Lucifer		×
as pure as the driven snow		×
as quick as a flash / lightning		×
as quiet / silent as the grave / tomb		×
as quiet as a mouse		×
as rich as Croesus	×	
as smooth as a baby's bottom		×
as steady as a rock		×
as still as a statue	×	
as still as death	×	
as still as the grave	×	
as strong as a horse / an ox		×
as sure as death	×	
as sure as eggs is eggs	×	
as sure as fate / death	×	
as sure as God made little apples	×	
as sure as hell / death		×
as thick as two short planks	×	
as thin as a rake / lath		×
as timid as a mouse		×
as white as chalk / a sheet		×
as white as snow		×

Idiom	Hyperbolic in itself	Hyperbolic in context
as wise as an owl		×
as wise as Solomon		×
at a snail's pace		×
at all hours (of the day / night)	×	
at the last minute		×
avoid sth like the plague		×
be / take a matter of seconds		×
be a (dead / real) ringer for sb / sth		×
be all Greek to sb		×
be an angel (and do sth)	×	
be dead against sth	×	
be dying for sth / to do sth	×	
be etc. dead right / wrong	×	
be off like the wind / go like the wind	×	
before you can say Jack Robinson / knife		×
break one's neck (doing sth / to do sth)	×	
break the sound barrier		×
come hell or high water	×	
cross my heart and hope to die	×	
darkest Africa		×
dead drunk	×	
dead easy / simple	×	
dead from the neck up	×	
dead to the world	×	
die like flies		×
do / perform wonders / miracles	×	
do a / one's disappearing act	×	
drink like a fish		×
eat / drink until it comes out of one's ears	×	
every schoolboy knows	×	
everything but the kitchen sink		×
everything etc. under the sun	×	
far and near		×
far/miles away		×
feel / look like a million dollars	×	
fight like a tiger		×
fit sb like a glove		×
for ages (and ages)	×	
for all time	×	
from / since time immemorial	×	
from here to eternity	×	
give sb / get hell	×	
give sb / get the fright of one's life	×	
go etc. blue (in the face)	×	
go like a bomb	×	
God's gift to sb / sth		×
hate sb / sth like poison	×	
have (got) / with a memory like a sieve	×	
have / need the patience of Job / a saint		×
have a hide / skin like a rhinoceros	×	
have a will of iron	×	
have all the money etc. in the world	×	
have enough luggage etc to sink a battleship	×	
have etc. nothing between one's ears	×	

Idiom	Hyperbolic in itself	Hyperbolic in context
have etc. eyes in / at the back of one's head / neck	×	
have etc. more goodness etc. in one's little finger than sb	×	
have got / with the Midas touch	×	
heaven on earth	×	
hell has / knows no fury like a woman scorned	×	
hell on earth	×	
here, there and everywhere	×	
I'll see you in hell first	×	
in a flash		×
in a minute		×
(in) half a sec		×
in ten etc. seconds flat		×
in the twinkling of an eye	×	
know sth like the back/palm of one's hand	×	
larger than life	×	
leave no / not any stone unturned	×	
life is hell	×	
like a (hot) knife through butter/ margarine		×
like a bat out of hell	×	
like a cat with nine lives	×	
like a ton of bricks		×
like greased lightning		×
(look for) a needle in a haystack		×
lose one's tongue	×	
make one's hair stand on end	×	
meet one's Waterloo		×
move heaven and earth	×	
never in all one's born days	×	
not / never bat an eyelid	×	
not / never for a / one (single) minute / moment	×	
not / never in a million / hundred / thousand years	×	
not do a hand's turn	×	
not for all the tea in China	×	
not for worlds / the world	×	
not harm / hurt a fly		×
not harm etc a hair of sb's head		×
not have / without a care in the world	×	
not have / without one penny to rub against another	×	
not have / stand a ghost of a chance	×	
not know one is born	×	
not lift / raise a finger	×	
not stand a cat in hell's chance	×	
not stand a chance in hell	×	
not trust sb an inch	×	
oceans / poles apart	×	
of all time	×	
old soldiers never die (they only fade away)	×	

Idiom	Hyperbolic in itself	Hyperbolic in context
on a shoestring		×
one's feet are killing one	×	
over my dead body	×	
pigs may / might fly	×	
promise sb the earth / the moon	×	
quiver / shake like a jelly / leaf	×	
rain / pour cats and dogs	×	
raise Cain / hell	×	
sb / one never said / spoke a truer word	×	
sb's word is law		×
second to none		×
seventh heaven	×	
sick to death of sb / sth	×	
skin and bone		×
sleep like a log	×	
smoke like a chimney	×	
sound the death knell of sb / sth	×	
split hairs	×	
spread like wildfire		×
stink to high heaven		×
strike sb dumb / speechless	×	
swallow the dictionary	×	
swear black is white	×	
take sth as / for gospel	×	
talk etc. till/until one is black/blue in the face	×	
ten feet tall		×
the apple of sb's eye	×	
the distant / four corners of the earth / world	×	
the dust of ages		×
the end of the world	×	
the sixty-four thousand dollar question		×
the sky's the limit		×
the war to end wars	×	
there are fairies at the bottom of the / one's garden	×	
there is etc. the devil (and all (hell)) to pay	×	
time flies	×	
wave a magic wand (and do sth)	×	
weigh a ton		×
wild horses couldn't / wouldn't drag him there		×
with one hand / both hands tied behind one's back		×
work a miracle / wonders	×	
worlds / poles apart	×	
worship the ground sb walks / treads on		×
would (a)waken the dead	×	
wouldn't be seen dead with sb / sth	×	
you name it (they have it etc.)		×

Source: Cowie *et al.* 1983. *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*, vol. 2. Oxford University Press.

Appendix 4   Corpora, dictionaries and texts used for the diachronic investigation (Chapter 6)

Chaucer, Geoffrey. 1987. *The Riverside Chaucer.* 3rd edn, ed. Benson, Larry D. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Shakespeare, William. 1997. *The Riverside Shakespeare.* 2nd edn, ed. Evans, Gwynne Blakemore. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Harbage, Alfred (gen. ed.). 1969. *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works.* The Pelican Text Revised. New York: Viking Press.

The Bible, Authorised version (1611)

The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts. 1991. Compiled by Rissanen, Matti, Merja Kytö, Leena Kahlas-Tarkka, Matti Kilpiö, Saara Nevanlinna, Irma Taavitsainen, Terttu Nevalainen and Helena Raumolin-Brunberg. Department of English, University of Helsinki. In *ICAME Collection of English Language Corpora* (CD-ROM), 2nd edn, eds. Hofland, Knut, Anne Lindebjerg and Jørn Thunestvedt, The HIT Centre, University of Bergen, Norway.

- – used in this study: Middle English and Early Modern English parts
- – time period: 1150–1710
- – size: 1,159,570 words
- – contents: text types/registers/domains included are handbooks, philosophy, homilies, religious treatises, history, biography, documents, fiction, rules, the Bible, travelogue, letters, law, science, drama, diaries
- – manual: Merja Kytö. 1991. 1993 (2nd edn). 1996 (3rd edn). *Manual to the Diachronic Part of the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*: *Coding Conventions and Lists of Source Texts.* Helsinki: Department of English, University of Helsinki.

Corpus of Early English Correspondence, Sampler. 1998. Compiled by Nevalainen, Terttu, Helena Raumolin-Brunberg and Arja Nurmi. Department of English, University of Helsinki.

- – time period: 1418–1680
- – size: 450,000 words
- – contents: 1,147 private and business letters by 194 writers
- – manual: Arja Nurmi. (ed.) (1998) *Manual for the Corpus of Early English Correspondence Sampler CEECS.* Department of English. University of Helsinki. Available at <http://khnt.hit.uib.no/icame/manuals/ceecs/INDEX.HTM>.

Lampeter Corpus of English Tracts. 1999. Compiled by Claridge, Claudia, Josef Schmied and Rainer Siemund. In *ICAME Collection of English Language Corpora* (CD-ROM), 2nd edn, eds. Hofland, Knut, Anne Lindebjerg and Jørn Thunestvedt, The HIT Centre, University of Bergen, Norway.

- time period: 1640–1740
- size: 1,193,385 words
- contents: 120 pamphlets, covering the subject areas politics, religion, economy, law, science and miscellaneous
- manual: Claudia Claridge. 1999/2003. *'Life is ruled and governed by opinion': The Lampeter Corpus of Early Modern English Tracts. Manual of Information.* Available at <http://khnt.hit.uib.no/icame/manuals/index.htm>

A Corpus of English Dialogues. 2006. Compiled by Kytö, Merja, and Jonathan Culpeper, in collaboration with Terry Walker and Dawn Archer.

- time period: 1560–1760
- size: 1,157,720 words
- contents: 168 texts, distributed among trial proceedings, witness depositions, comedy, didactic works and prose fiction
- manual: Merja Kytö and Terry Walker. 2006. *Guide to A Corpus of Dialogues 1560–1760.* Uppsala Universitet.

Zurich English Newspaper Corpus. Version 1.0. 2004. Compiled by Fries, Udo, Hans Martin Lehmann *et al.* University of Zürich.

- time period: 1661–1791
- size: 1.6 million words
- contents: 349 complete newspaper editions representing 52 different papers

Corpus of Nineteenth-century English. Compiled by Kytö, Merja, (Uppsala University) and Juhani Rudanko (University of Tampere).

- time period: 1800–1900.
- size: 1 million words
- contents: covers the following speech-related and non-speech-related genres, and formal and informal written genres: correspondence, scientific writing, history writing, fiction, trial proceedings, parliamentary debates and drama comedy.
- not generally available (accessed at the English Department of Uppsala University)

A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers (Archer). Compiled by Biber, Douglas, and Edward Finegan

- time period: 1650–1990
- size: 1.7 million words
- contents: 1,037 texts representing seven written (e.g., diaries, letters, fiction, news, science) and three speech-based (fictional conversation, drama, sermons) genres; British and American English

   – not generally available (accessed at the English Department of Uppsala University)

The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd edn 1989. Prepared by Simpson J. A. and E. S. C. Weiner. Oxford: Clarendon Press. CD-ROM.
  use of quotations database

   – time period: unrestricted (fourteenth century onward: more than 1,000 quotations per year*)
   – size: 33–35 million words*
   – contents: unrestricted

*based on: Sebastian Hoffmann, 2000. 'Using the *OED* quotations database as a corpus – a linguistic appraisal.' *ICAME Journal* 28, 17–30.

Appendix 5   Sources used in Chapter 7

Political speeches

John Hamilton, Lord Belhaven: *The Lord Beilhaven's speech in the Scotch Parliament, Saturday the second of November, on the subject-matter of an union betwixt the two kingdoms …* (Lampeter Corpus, PolB1706)
John F. Kennedy: Inaugural Address
Enoch Powell: 'Rivers of blood' speech
Gordon Brown: *Speech to the Annual Labour Party Conference in Brighton*, 2005

CONSERVATIVE PARTY, GREAT BRITAIN

13 speeches; 43,185 words (abbr. Cons.)

1. Iain Duncan Smith: Address to the LGA conference, 4 July 2002
2. Oliver Letwin: Sustainability and society, 3 July 2002
3. Michael Howard: Supply-side economics: What scope for consensus?, 1 July 2002
4. Iain Duncan Smith speaks up for the mentally ill, 25 June 2002
5. Liam Fox: Speech to the Second Conservative Mental Health Summit, 25 June 2002
6. Tim Yeo: Towards a twenty-first century model of public service broadcasting, 19 June 2002
7. Oliver Letwin: A new approach is needed to youth offending, 19 June 2002
8. Iain Duncan Smith: Conservatives will free charities from 'suffocating' government meddling, 13 June 2002
9. Michael Ancram: Britain and Europe: A Conservative Renaissance?, 12 June 2002
10. Eric Pickles: The social aspects of housing, 12 June 2002
11. David Willetts: Our commitment to the people, 29 May 2002
12. Theresa May: Making life better for Wales, 25 May 2002
13. Iain Duncan Smith: We are ready to make life better for all the people in Wales, 24 May 2002
                    (Downloaded from www.conservatives.com/speeches.cfm, June 2002)

LABOUR PARTY, GREAT BRITAIN

23 speeches; 58,780 words (abbr. Labour)

1. Speech by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott to the Local Government Association conference, 'Local government: From partnership comes progress', 03 July 2002

2. Speech by Transport Secretary Alistair Darling to the Railway Forum, 'Getting on with it', 02 July 2002

3. Chancellor Gordon Brown's annual address at the Mansion House, 'Mansion House Speech', 26 June 2002

4. Tony Blair's statement to the House of Commons, 'European council, Seville', 24 June 2002

5. Speech by Tony Blair at the Modernising criminal justice conference, London, 'Rebalancing the criminal justice system', 18 June 2002

6. Tony Blair, Speech on welfare reform, 10 June 2002

7. Speech by Gordon Brown at the Amicus MSF/ AEEU Conference, Blackpool, 'Goals that show there is purpose in politics', 10 June 2002

8. Speech by David Miliband at the NAHT Conference in Torquay, 'Getting our state education system right', 6 June 2002

9. Tony Blair, 'Jubilee tribute to the Queen', Guildhall, London 04 June 2002

10. Jack McConnell's statement to Parliament in Aberdeen, 'Statement on legislative programme', 30 May 2002

11. Speech by Health Secretary Alan Milburn, NHS Confederation Conference, Harrogate International Conference Centre, 'Diversity and choice in the NHS', 24 May 2002

12. Speech by Tony Blair on scientific research, the Royal Society, 'Science crucial to our economic and social future', 23 May 2002

13. Speech by Health Secretary Alan Milburn on Foundation Hospitals 21 May 2002

14. Statement to the House by Robin Cook MP, Leader of the House of Commons, 'House of Lords reform: Next steps', 13 May 2002

15. Speech by Alistair Darling at the NAPF Annual Conference, Brighton, 'Making pension products simple', 10 May 2002

16. Speech by Charles Clarke following the local elections, 'Labour sees off Tories', 3 May 2002

17. Speech by Tony Blair, King George's Hall, Blackburn, 'Campaigning on the nitty gritty everyday issues', 26 April 2002

18. Speech by Jack Straw, King George's Hall, Blackburn, 'Labour tackling housing and the local environment', 26 April 2002

19. Speech by Cllr Kate Hollern, Deputy Labour Leader of Blackburn council, King George's Hall, Blackburn, 'Labour building effective partnerships', 26 April 2002

20. Speech by Charlie Falconer, King George's Hall, Blackburn, 'Building foundations for our communities', 26 April 2002

21. Gordon Brown's Budget statement, House of Commons, 'A Budget to make our NHS the best insurance policy in the world', 17 April 2002

22. Alan Milburn, Health Minister, highlights the difference between Labour's investment and reform and the Tories cuts agenda, 'Exposing the Tories real agenda', 15 April 2002

23. Speech by Tony Blair at the George Bush Senior Presidential Library, Texas, 'The message to Sadam is clear', 7 April 2002

(Downloaded from www.labour.org.uk, July 2002)

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Index