

Claudia Claridge. *Hyperbole in English: A corpus-based study of exaggeration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011. xiii + 301 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-63750-4. Reviewed by **Magnus Levin**, Linnaeus University.

The monograph *Hyperbole in English* presents findings on quantitative distributions from spoken and written (historical) corpora, a number of synchronic and diachronic case studies of some frequent types of hyperbole and qualitative analyses of nearly five hundred examples. Throughout the book, hyperbole is connected to many different aspects of semantics, pragmatics, conventionalization and routinization. Chapters 1 and 2 present the background and define the variable, while Chapters 3–7 cover the results.

The brief introductory chapter sets out to define the aim of the study: How frequent is hyperbole, what forms are used and what are their functions? Spoken data are sampled from the demographic sub-corpus of the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC). A selection of print issues of British newspapers provide the synchronic written data, while the diachronic data come from a number of corpora, such as the Helsinki Corpus. Supplemental material was found in everyday conversations, films, TV shows, political speeches, fiction and English and German newspapers and magazines.

Chapter 2 takes on the daunting task of defining hyperbole. Claridge shows that it is necessary to take an encyclopedic approach to meaning in order to identify hyperbole since specific contextual knowledge is needed. Hyperbole is seen as both semantic and pragmatic in nature, and it is the contrast between hyperboles and ‘literal expressions’ that triggers the interpretation. The examples chosen illustrate that the expression of emotions and subjective attitudes is integral to the use of hyperbole.

Synchronically ‘dead’ hyperboles like *terrific* are excluded from the study, but there is a continuum here. For instance, Chapter 6 deals with conventionalized hyperboles such as *always*, *horrible* and *loads of*; such examples show that it is difficult to decide where to draw the line on what to include in the category of hyperbole. Chapter 2 presents a complex model that handles the definition of

hyperbole. Even though this model makes good sense, the author admits that decisions in individual cases may still be controversial. However, she is explicit about her reasoning and explains that she has tried not to be over- or underinclusive.

Chapter 3 presents the different realizations of hyperbole. Although the author wisely concedes that this chapter illustrates 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” (p. 70), this section presents a valuable overview of the different forms found. The author distinguishes basic hyperbole where the domain is preserved (e.g., *I’ll wait forever*) and metaphorical hyperboles which switch domains (e.g., *asking for someone’s head*). Most metaphorical hyperboles are of the conventionalized type. Hyperboles in the synchronic material from speech and newspapers are classified according to their formal realizations, i.e. whether they consist of individual words, phrases, clauses/sentences, and some minor categories. Single-word hyperboles mostly consist of nouns (*just a second; for ages*). Such expressions highlight the problem of restricting the hyperbole to a single word, but it is argued that the hyperbole only resides in the word itself. It is argued that single-word hyperboles are easy to use; they are at least potentially unobtrusive and can fairly easily become conventionalized.

Phrasal hyperboles are shown to mostly consist of noun phrases (*the end of the world*). In clausal hyperbole, there has to be at least two clausal constituents that combine to produce the hyperbolic effect (*I was the only kid who only had to walk past the bakery to gain weight*). Such hyperboles are more common in newspapers than in speech due to the former containing more deliberate and creative language. As regards the forms of clausal hyperbole, however, it turns out to be hardly possible to draw any conclusions.

Surprisingly, numerical hyperbole is rare in the material, and an extended corpus search in the BNC shows that even what could be thought of as typical examples of hyperbole (*millions*) only rarely occur. Superlatives, another type usually connected to hyperbole, do not express overstatement alone but in conjunction with other ‘all-encompassing’ elements (e.g., *the world’s worst speakers*).

The speaker perspective on hyperbole is presented in Chapter 4. In the spoken material there is roughly one hyperbole per 1,000 words, and women use more hyperboles than men. Around three-quarters of all spoken instances are of the conventionalized type. Hyperbole is shown to be an instrument of the expression of speaker attitude. Hyperbole mostly expresses negative subjective attitudes, and this is also true for hyperboles directed at communication partners.

Moreover, the use of creative instances promotes the speaker's image as an imaginative and witty person. Instances of hyperbole are often modified in some way, such as hedging (*probably the best beer in the world*), intensification (*do absolutely nothing*) and negation (*I don't say that it was like being grilled by the KGB ... But he was going to find out where Paul was*). Such strategies can either serve to tone down or to stress the overstatement by putting more focus on it. A lengthy section on explicit hyperbole (*and even that is probably an overstatement*) concludes the chapter. Explicit comments from speakers are found to occur both with strong instances and with instances which are hardly noticeable as hyperboles – the important feature is the reactions of the hearers.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the hearer perspective and hearers' reactions. It is argued that the Gricean Maxim "do not make your contribution more informative than is required" (Grice 1989: 26) is central here. Informativeness is in this case not taken to relate solely to linguistic material, but to entailment. From this perspective the numeral in the phrase *fifteen spoonfuls of sugar* contains more information than, say, *four spoonfuls*, since the former entails the latter. This way of redefining the maxim is perhaps less convincing. A stronger part of this chapter is found in the qualitative analysis which discusses hearers' negative reactions (*How d'ya know that?*), positive reactions such as laughter and non-existent ones where the conversation continues without any specific reaction. It is also demonstrated how hyperbole functions in face-threatening acts. They can both be used to strengthen FTAs (*You stop poking into my stuff or I'll kill you*) and softening them (*mummy's gotta get on darling I've got tons to do!*).

Chapter 6 concerns diachronic studies of the conventionalization of hyperboles. The chapter starts with a thorough discussion of conventionalization and the communicative goals of using hyperbole (e.g., emphasizing the importance of something and enhancing the speaker's status). This forms the backdrop to the case studies of words and phrases becoming conventionalized. It is nevertheless striking how rare the hyperboles investigated are in historical corpora, and the instances analysed (e.g., *thousand* and *death/dying*) mainly have to be discussed from a qualitative perspective. There appears to be a genre effect here since hyperbole appears to be more frequent in genres close to speech. The examples discussed are well chosen and illustrate the paths of change. Some of the types have lost their original meanings (such as *awful*) while others retain them (e.g., *death*). An interesting quantitative finding deserves mentioning: *thousand* has lost ground in polite formulae (*I thank you ten thousand times*), a usage that is still frequent in Scandinavian languages (e.g., Swedish *tusen tack*). The semantic and pragmatic changes discussed in this chapter are explained in terms of Traugott and Dasher's (2005) theories of language change.

In Chapter 7, Claridge approaches the rhetoric of hyperbole. The relation of hyperbole to political discourse, humour and literature is illustrated in case studies. Three political speeches are analysed: one from a 1706 debate on the proposed union of Scotland and England, and one each by President Kennedy and Enoch Powell. While the oldest speech is replete with hyperbole, the modern ones are more restrained. It is striking, however, how similar Powell's use of hyperbole is to that of present-day European right-wing populists. Claridge shows (p. 225) how Powell exaggerates the feelings of native Britons, the amount and nature of immigration and also the effects of immigration.

As regards hyperbole in humour, it turns out that this is a rare trope in sitcoms such as Monty Python to Ally McBeal. The discussion of hyperbole in literary texts is based on texts ranging from Beowulf and Chaucer to *Hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy*. As with the discussion of humour, the discussion of fiction is based on extensive qualitative analysis.

The brief concluding section summarizes the results, addresses some of the limitations and proposes some avenues for further study. More studies of different speech communities, genres and time periods are suggested, as well as an extended investigation into the discourse functions of hyperbole.

This monograph covers a wide range of data and approaches, and it is clear that the author has a firm grasp of the material and theories. There are some points that deserve comment, however. To begin with, it is obviously difficult to draw the line on what instances to include in a study of hyperbole, as is illustrated by the different scopes of previous studies. In some instances it is possible to disagree with the classifications made in the present study, e.g., in the discussion of *love* and *hate* on pp. 35–36, where the bleached meaning of these verbs would suggest that these could have been classified as 'dead' hyperboles. The author is nevertheless always explicit about her choices and what she bases these on. The treatment of the definition of hyperbole in Chapter 2 shows a strong command of the area and proposes a model that can handle the definition of hyperbole.

A volume on such a sprawling and hard-to-pin-down topic as hyperbole may run the risk of becoming unfocused and hard to follow, but through the division into separate chapters Claridge manages both to keep the different sub-studies separate and to present them as a unified whole. One of the many strengths of this monograph is that such a wide range of materials are sampled. Present-day spoken data and diachronic corpora are combined with genre-specific investigations into political speeches, fiction and other genres.

The argumentation is lucid and convincing throughout the study, and the findings are related to a host of previous studies from many different areas. Due

to the nature of the material, however, there are few statements about quantitative distributions. The few that occur are usually well-founded, but on p. 48 clausal hyperbole is claimed to be the second most frequent type in newspapers with only weak quantitative support. This conclusion would at least require some hedging. The qualitative analyses of examples, on the other hand, are well substantiated and thorough.

The writing is clear and accessible and new concepts are introduced throughout the chapters in a way which helps readers follow the progression of ideas. A minor exception to this is the introduction of metonymic hyperbole on p. 43, which comes across as slightly abrupt and does not fit well with the immediately preceding discussions of basic and metaphorical hyperbole. Most chapters (but unfortunately not Chapters 5 and 7) end with useful summaries and conclusions of the main points.

These minor considerations aside, this monograph constitutes an important contribution to the study of linguistic aspects of hyperbole. Although the volume covers so many varied aspects of hyperbole, Claridge points out avenues for future research. Hyperbole in English is bound to spawn future studies of hyperbole in other areas, genres and languages.

References

- Grice, Paul. 1989. *Studies in the ways of words*. Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press.
- Traugott, Elizabeth Closs and Richard B. Dasher. 2005. *Regularity in semantic change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.