

Hyperbole in Everyday Conversation

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Abstract: This paper focuses on hyperbole, a long neglected form of non-literal language despite its pervasiveness in everyday speech. Hyperbole (also referred to as exaggeration or overstatement) has been studied in rhetoric and in literary contexts, but only relatively recently in everyday contexts. This paper analyses hyperbole in everyday Cypriot Greek conversations from a conversation analytic perspective. The aim is to analyse hyperbole in order to identify its most prominent features such as lexicogrammatical features, context of occurrence, and recipient reception. In this study I present only two types of hyperbole. The first is expressed with numerical expressions and the second with impossible descriptions.

Key words: hyperbole, extreme case formulations, impossible descriptions, turn-constructive units, everyday conversations.

1. Introduction

Hyperbole is a kind of ‘structuring’ of reality where there are competing realities; it can enable sharp focus on one account of reality and downplay rival account, and it brings the listeners into the perspective of the speaker in a powerful way. Although it may be heard as a counter to other claims to describe reality, or as describing impossibilities, hyperbole is not heard as an act of lying. (McCarthy and Carter 2004: 152)

Hyperbole is according to classical rhetoric, “a figure of speech of bold exaggeration” (Preminger 1974: 359). It has a long history of study as a rhetorical figure of speech in written texts, and has been, since the time of ancient Greeks, one of many figures of speech discussed within the general framework of rhetoric. Rhetoric, in the ancient world, was associated with persuasive speech and the exercise of power, and centuries of treatises on eloquence and techniques of expression testify to this. Only relatively recently have pioneers such as Fontanier (1968) shifted the study of figurative rhetoric into the domain of common language. However, not a great amount of research exists into everyday spoken hyperbole (e.g. McCarthy and Carter 2004), and much of the literature on hyperbole in spoken language is subsumed within studies of verbal irony and humour (e.g. Gibbs 2000).

This paper is concerned with purposeful exaggeration in everyday Cypriot Greek conversation. It is a regular feature of informal talk that speakers exaggerate narrative, descriptive and argumentative features and make assertions that are overstated, literally impossible, inconceivable or counterfactual in many different types of discourse context (McCarthy and Carter 2004: 150). Such hyperbolic expressions usually pass without challenge by listeners, who accept them as creative intensifications for evaluative or affective purposes such as humour and irony, and who often make their own supportive contribution to the figure of speech (id.). In this paper, I include examples of two types of hyperbole. The first refers to overstatements of number and quantity and the latter to impossible descriptions.

Research on hyperbole, except Norrick’s study (2004), has generally lumped hyperbole together with extreme case formulations (ECFs). In this study I differentiate

between the two since they occur in different contexts (Christodoulidou 2009).¹ Hyperbole is defined as a form of extremity, an exaggeration that either magnifies or minimises some real state of affairs (Cano Mora 2004) whereas ECFs are descriptions or assessments that deploy extreme expressions such as every, all, none, best, least, as good as it gets, always, perfectly, brand new, and absolutely (Pomerantz 1986).

The present study cannot by definition be exhaustive, since hyperbole may be both conventional and creative, and the possibilities for linguistic creativity are infinite; what I shall attempt to do is to illustrate some of the most frequently occurring lexicogrammatical types of hyperbole in everyday contexts.

2. Data and methodology

The study of hyperbole investigated in this work is based on recordings of informal, spontaneous, face-to-face conversations among close friends or relatives. These are exclusively conducted in Cypriot Greek. They comprise transcriptions of 35 hours of tape-recorded natural interactions produced by young native Cypriot Greek speakers during a variety of gatherings or occasions, e.g. dinner, gathering for coffee in friends' houses etc. The extracts included in this article comprise transcriptions of approximately 3 hours. The recordings included here consist of same sex conversations among women.

The method that is adopted in the analysis of the data is Conversation Analysis (CA), which has its origins in the pioneering work in the sixties by the sociologist Harvey Sacks (1992a, 1992b).

First and foremost, conversation analysis has focused its analytical attention on “recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction” (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 14). These recordings of actual speech are transcribed using a system which is intended to capture in detail the characteristics “of the sequencing of turns, including gaps, pauses and overlaps; and the element of speech delivery such as audible breath and laughter, stress, enunciation, intonation and pitch” (Hutchby and Drew 1995: 182). At this point it should be noted that the shift of focus from sentences to “turn constructional units”, proposed by Schegloff (1996), proves to be essential for this study. Turn constructional units are sentential, clausal, phrasal and lexical units, which can constitute complete turns (Sacks et al. 1974: 702). On their potential completion, transition to another speaker turns out to be relevant (id.). The turn is seen as “the habitat in which turn constructional units –henceforth TCUs– are housed” (Schegloff 1996: 56) and this reframing deepens our understanding of turns-at-talk.

The transcription symbols used in this study are based on the transcription conventions developed by Jefferson for the analysis of conversational turns in English conversation (see Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) and are adopted in the form presented by Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson (1996) and Clift (1999). The relevant transcription symbols for this study are cited in appendix I.

The phonetic inventory used for reading transcription is based on the International Phonetic Association [IPA] which is adjusted to the Greek language by Nespor (1999) and on the phonetic inventory of Cypriot Greek presented and described by Newton (1972).

¹ As was shown in Christodoulidou (2009), a regular place for the occurrence of ECFs in storytelling sequences is on the punchline of the story and more specifically on the culmination of the reporting of opposition type conversations.

2.1 Identification of hyperbole

For the identification of hyperbole, the criteria for labelling hyperbole are adopted from by McCarthy and Carter's (2004) study. Hyperboles in the conversations, therefore must display at least three of the following characteristics (162-163):

- *Disjunction of context*: the speaker's utterance seems at odds with the general context.
- *Shifts of footing*: there is evidence (e.g. discourse marking) that a shift in footing is occurring to a conversational frame where impossible worlds or plainly counterfactual claims may appropriately occur.
- *Counterfactuality not perceived as a lie*: the listener accepts without challenge a statement which is obviously counterfactual.
- *Impossible worlds*: speaker and listener between them engage in the construction of fictitious worlds where impossible, exaggerated events take place.
- *Listener take-up*: the listener reacts with supportive behaviour such as laughter or asserting back-channel markers and/or contributes further to the counterfactuality, impossibility, contextual disjunction, etc.
- *Extreme case formulations and intensification*: the assertion is expressed in the most extreme way (e.g. adjectives such as endless, massive) and/or extreme intensifiers such as nearly, totally are used. These are not necessarily counterfactuals or absurd worlds, as many may be heard as (semi-) conventional metaphors.
- *Relevant interpretability*: the trope is interpretable as relevant to the speech act being performed, and is interpreted as figurative within its context, though there may also be evidence of literal interpretations being exploited for interactive/affective purposes.

3. Hyperbole in context

Based on the criteria listed above, this study investigates hyperbolic assessments in context. At this point it should be noted that the test of impossibility or counterfactuality will be of considerable assistance in dealing with a large number of utterances in the present study, but the particular context will always be a deciding factor. What is of greater interest is the evaluative context of hyperbole and how tellers use it to express affective meanings and how recipients receive such acts (McCarthy and Carter 2004). As with other acts of linguistic creativity, hyperbole is validated in interaction and can only be described adequately by including the recipient's contribution to the emergent act (id.)

Another important factor that needs to be considered is that, in the present study, hyperboles are directed at non-present parties and at the speakers themselves. This phenomenon was identified in several studies on Cypriot Greek which investigated the use of non-literal language (e.g. irony and ECFs) in the context of criticism and/or complaints (e.g. Christodoulidou 2006, 2008, 2009).

In the following sections, I analyse two types of hyperbole. The first is expressed with overstatements of number and quantity and the second with impossible descriptions.

3.1 Overstatements of number and quantity

Hyperboles (and ECFs) in my data were identified in numerical expressions of years and times such as hundreds, thousands and their singular form a hundred or a thousand or in expressions like "he hasn't gone anywhere for three years". With these expressions

the teller emphasizes her point and intensifies contrasting situations. Some examples are as follows:

(1)

1. G peθca::, leo tis, ime i fili tis Irini::s. a ne! lei mu. ise kala? kala::, lei
2. mu::: Xristina:: itan sasmeni:: sto fu::l [tʃ efenetu::n=
3. C [polla?
4. G → =deka xrona pco meya::li pu tin ilicia tis.
5. C ate re?

Translation

1. G gu::ys, I say to her, I'm Irini::ne's friend. oh yes! she says. how are
2. you::? fine::, she say::s. Christina:: she was to::tally dressed out
3. C [that much?
4. G =ten years o::lder than her age.
5. C really?

(2)

1. K ides tʃin tin niχta pu eleen oti ekanonisen na pai savvatociriako::,
2. M panajia mu, θimume oti kati elee.
3. K ne
4. M elee na kanonisume kanena::,
5. K → ne eʃi tria xrona pu ton ikserw pu::pote en epie
6. M tʃ ullo lali oti kanonizi::?

Translation

1. K (do you) remember that night that he was saying that he was planning for the weekend, to go::,
2. M gosh, I remember he was saying something
3. K yes
4. M he was saying we should arrange to go::
5. K → yes he hasn't gone a::nywhere the last three years that I know him.
6. M does he say all the time that he has pla::ns?

In the examples above, it is striking that the hyperbolic assessment occurs in the context of talking about a third non-present party and the recipients react with supportive behaviour such as laughter or back channel markers or contributes further to the counterfactuality. The teller gives emphasis to the point she makes by overstating the number of years and times of occurrence of each instance

As we have seen earlier in section 3, one of the criteria of identifying hyperbole is the co-occurrence in the same utterance with an ECF. This is the case with extracts (1) and (2) where the teller makes a claim consisted of a hyperbole and an ECF. Thus, in (1) the teller's hyperbolic claim in 1: 4: "she looked ten years older" is proffered as the outcome of the claim proffered with the ECF that she was "fu::lly dressed up". Another criterion that confirms the existence of hyperbole is that the trope is interpretable as relevant to the speech act being performed and it is interpreted as non-literal within context, that is as an exaggeration which is the outcome of a comparison ("she looked ten years older than her age"), used as an intensification of her claim. The third criterion for the identification of hyperbole is that the the recipient (1: 3, 5) accepts and supports the exaggerated claim contributing with an on-topic questions "that much?", "really?".

Also in extract (2), the hyperbolic assessment “he hasn’t gone anywhere for three years” comes as a counterclaim to the reported claim of the non-present party that “he was saying that he was planning for the weekend to go:”. Notice how counterfactuality is not perceived by the recipient as a lie. On the contrary, the recipient contributes further to it with her question “does he say all the time that he has pla:ns?”. The use of the ECF “he hasn’t gone anywhere” offers another criterion for framing this assessment as hyperbole.

Thus in extracts (1) and (2) the speaker proffers an exaggerated claim consisting of hyperbole and ECF and the recipient takes-up contributing to the exaggeration and counterfactuality with a question, enhancing further on-topic talk. Hyperbole here is interpretable as relevant to the speech act being performed, in this case evaluation, and is not interpreted literally within its context

In extract (3) that follows, the teller reports that the principal asked her “a hundred times” the same question.

(3)

(The participants are teachers. K is talking about the principal at her school.)

1. K e proxtes pu itan na paw Anglia tje vala ađia
2. M ne
3. K → erotise me ekato fore::s. e:: oi ekato fores, ennoo::, e ja spuđe::s I e ja
4. prosopikus loyu::s?
5. M θeli na maθi
6. K ne.
7. M θeli na tu pis

Translation

1. K the other day that I was going to England I asked for leave of absence
2. M yes
3. K → he asked me a hundred ti::mes. Well not a hundred ti::mes, I mea::n, is
4. it for stu::dies or for personal rea::sons?
5. M he wants to know
6. K yes.
7. M he wants you to tell him.

With 3:3, the teller criticizes the non-present party. The hyperbole “a hundred ti::mes” is used as intensification of the criticism of the reported claim: “he asked me a hundred ti::mes....is it for stu::dies or for personal rea::sons?” (criterion 1). The proffer of exaggeration is hearable as an impossible description (“he asked me a hundred ti::mes”) is employed to criticize the deliberation of the non-present party’s side who insists on asking the same question, and this is why he is being criticized (criterion 2). The self-repair “Well not a hundred times” is another indicator that underlines the exaggeration of what had just been asserted. The teller accepts the exaggeration as it is shown by her supportive response in 3:5: “he wants to know” (criterion 3)

3.2 Impossible descriptions

In the following extracts the teller makes a hyperbolic description of a situation which serves as an impossible description. According to Torode (1996: 33), “impossible descriptions” are like fantasies which are produced in a manner designed to show that they are not possible descriptions of the actual object or event and so must be treated rhetorically or figuratively. However such fantasies do not serve as impossible

descriptions on every occasion of their use, for it is literally possible to bang one's head against a brick wall, or to kill a child (id.).

The following extracts illustrate the case of hyperbolic assessments that serve as impossible descriptions.

(4)

(The participants are students in the UK. T is in the hospital and they visit her every day.)

1. C tu kaθiyiti elalun tu fkatī asinartīsiesf
2. M ego eparakalousa na men me rotisi ti::pote::.
3. A jati rota sas?
4. T rota sas?
5. M a ne tora ejinen i taksi m̄na sizitisi:: Sizitu::men.
6. C nevriazun me i taksis pu ine m̄na sizitisi.
7. M tʃe:: e ute to vivlion en to pira, ute ta fillaḍia en ta pira:: den ksero ti
8. → epaθen o nus mu. estamatisa (.) [ime se koma.
9. T [ama re fteo eyo?²
10. M oi re en eyo pu fteo.

Translation

1. C I was saying ffoolishnessf to the professor
2. M I was praying not to ask me anythi::ng.
3. A why does he ask?
4. T does he ask?
5. M oh yes now the class has become a discu::ssion. We discu::ss.
6. C I hate classes that are like discussions.
7. M and I didn't even take my book, I didn't even ta::ke the articles. I
8. → don't know what has happened to my brain. I stopped (.) [I'm in a coma.
9. T [is it my
fault?
10. M no re it's my fault.

(5)

(The participants are students in the UK. The last four years M was a student in Athens. The conversation is about Greek biscuits and chocolates.)

1. T stin ellaḍa efi tʃe ta piskoTTAḍika:: f̄ennoo tʃe ta:: f̄
2. M ne::, ne::, papaḍopulu::³ °en orea tʃe dʒi::na:: °.
3. A etsi lalun, tʃ i f̄iokoLA::tes.
4. T dʒ inta fru [fru tʃe ta baka::ndi::s,⁴
5. M [aku, i siffititries mu ulles, f̄i m̄na ekratuse piskotta
6. fraulas, i alli portokka::li, I alli sokola::taf
7. A >tora pou pes sokolata< efas tin tu Pavliḍi:: ti ne::a::n tin io::n? (.)
8. → en oryio(h):: huh huh huh

² She blames herself because girls visit her everyday and they neglect their studies.

³ Greek biscuit company.

⁴ Cypriot biscuit companies

9. T EN Q(h)RGIO(h)::? ha [ha ha ha
 10. M [huh huh huh huh huh huh huh £ποιαν ίον?£
Translation
 1. T in Greece you can find great BUiscui::t £I mean grea::t£
 2. M ye::s, ye::s, papadopulu °they are nice°.
 3. A they say so, their CHO::collates are nice too.
 4. T ((not like)) fru [fru and baka::ndi::s
 5. M [listen, all my classmates £one was having strawberry
 6. biscuits, the other orange::, the other chocola::te£
 7. A >now that you mentioned chocolate< have you tried Pavlide::'s new::
 8. → io::n? (.) it's an orgy(h):: huh huh huh
 9. T IT'S AN O(h)RGY(h)::? [ha ha ha
 10. M [huh huh huh huh huh huh huh £which ion?£

(6)

(T is in the hospital. Her friends visited her. C is washing her hair.)

1. C Marina mu::,
 2. M ela::
 3. C ferto fampu.
 4. M °ne°.
 5. C £scipse diar£
 6. T huh
 7. A £ate I kommotria::£=
 8. T → =£kaθarismu:: tu te::rato::s£
 9. C valle
 10. M °ejine kommotirio°.

Translation

1. C Marina::
 2. M ye::s
 3. C bring the shampoo.
 4. M °yes°.
 5. C £bend dear£
 6. T huh
 7. A £here comes the hairdresse::r£=
 8. T → =£clea::ning the mo::nste::r£
 9. C pour
 10. M °it became a hair saloon°

In the extracts above the teller proffers a hyperbolic description and this occurs in turn final position. Thus in extract 4: 7-8, the teller is reporting a personal trouble. The extremity of the description is obvious in the repeated use of the ECF “even” (4:7): “I didn’t even take my book, I didn’t even ta::ke the articles” and the association of this event with an impossible event, that is, a brain distortion “I don’t know what has happened to my brain”. The troubles-telling comes at peak at the end of the turn with the use of the hyperbolic expression “I’m in a coma”. Notice that the teller upscales her description by leaving for the end as a final comment that closes the turn the most hyperbolic description. On this occasion this description is hearable as a non-possible description of the actual event, and so must be treated rhetorically or figuratively (Torode 1996) (criterion 1). Hence, it is an “impossible description” where an

extraordinary reality is momentarily acknowledged and shared (id.). The recipient (4: 9: “is it my fault?”) reacts supportively by taking responsibility (criterion 2). This shows that the hyperbole of the expression is interpreted as figurative within its context and it is employed for affective purposes (criterion 3).

In extract (5: 7-8) the teller initiates a shift of topic from the previous turn (5-6) with a surprise source turn “have you tried Pavlide::’s new:: ion?”. The turn final positioned TCU “it’s an *orgy(h)::*” is a hyperbolic impossible description (criterion 1) which involves certain degree of conventionality. The laughter that follows this description illustrates the speaker’s stance towards her saying, thus the realisation that this is an overstated and hyperbolic description of a chocolate, not taken literally (criterion 2) The recipient’s laughter illustrates that what is asserted is perceived as exaggerated and impossible description and has a humorous effect (criterion 3).

In 6: 8 the hyperbolic description *£clea::ning the mo::nste::r£* comes as a continuation of the general joking about washing the hair of T in the hospital. Actually turn 8 is a continuation of the previous turn (7). Thus *£here comes the hairdresse::r£* is hearable as a TCU occurring in turn final position. This is another impossible description of the patient (criterion 1), exaggerating on the fact that she hadn’t taken a shower for two days. The humorous take-up by the recipient (6:10: “it became a hair saloon”) shows supportive continuation of the humorous exaggeration criterion 2), interpreted as non-literal description (criterion 3)

4. Conclusion

Examination of hyperbole in interactive contexts underlines the expressive and interpersonal meanings foregrounded in its use: intensification, humour and banter, solidarity, antipathy, intimacy, along with evaluative and persuasive goals, are all recurrent features. The present study has investigated the occurrence of hyperbole in everyday conversation. Due to the limit of space, I presented here only two types of hyperbole: overstatements of number and quantity and impossible descriptions.

As was shown hyperboles are used to upscale reality and are directed at third non-present parties or at the teller herself. Usually when hyperbole is directed at a non-present party takes the form of criticism and is accompanied with ECFs too. This study confirms other conversation analytic studies in Cypriot Greek which showed that face-threatening acts are not commonly directed at the addressees (e.g. Christodoulidou 2006, 2008, 2009). In the extracts under study, hyperbole is expressed with overstatements of number and quantity and is presented as a counterfactual claim.

In the case that hyperbole is directed at the teller herself, it takes the form of self-deprecation that has a figurative sense. In the latter case, hyperbole occurs in turn final position and with that the teller proffers the strongest point of her complaint or criticism. With the hyperbolic assessment, she actually proffers a figurative and impossible description of herself and closes her turn. As was shown recipients react supportively to the hyperbolic assessment with further surprise responses (e.g. really?), further on topic questions, and laughter.

Last but not least, this study has emphasized the interactive nature of hyperbole: listener reaction is crucial to its interpretation and the success of hyperbole depends on the listener entering a pact of acceptance of ECFs, the creation of impossible worlds and apparent counterfactuality.

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Appendix I

Transcription System

- [Separate left square brackets, one above the other on two successive lines with utterances
[by different speakers, indicates a point of overlap onset, whether at the start of an utterance or later.
- [[Double separate left square brackets, distinguish pairs of overlapped utterances.
- [[
- = Equal signs ordinarily come in pairs – one at the end of a line and another at the start of a next line. If the two lines connected by the equal signs are by the same speaker, then there was a single, continuous utterance with no break or pause, which was broken up in order to accommodate the placement of overlapping talk. If the lines connected by two equal signs are by different speakers, then the second followed the first with no discernible silence between them.
- (2) Numbers in parenthesis indicate silence.
- (.) A dot in parentheses indicates a micropause.
- . The period indicates a falling or final, intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence.
- ? A question mark indicates rising intonation, not necessarily a question.

,	A comma indicates continuing intonation, not necessarily a clause boundary.
::	Colons are used to indicate the prolongation or stretching of the sound just preceding them. The more colons the longer the stretching.
-	A hyphen after a word or part of a word indicates a cut-off or self-interruption, often done with a glottal or dental stop.
<u>word</u>	Underlining is used to indicate stress or emphasis.
WOrd	Capital letters indicate louder than the rest talk.
° °	Two degree signs indicate that the talk between them is markedly softer than the talk around it.
↑	The up arrow indicate a segment starting on sharper rise.
> <	The combination of “more than” and “less than” symbols indicates that the talk between them is compressed or rushed.
.hhh	The dot followed by “h’s” indicates inbreath
(h)	The letter “h” in parentheses inside the boundaries of a word indicates laughter.
(())	Double parentheses are used to mark transcriber’s descriptions of events, e.g. ((telephone rings)), ((sniff)) etc.
(word)	When all or a part of an utterance is in parentheses, this indicates uncertainty on the transcriber’s part, but represents a likely possibility.
£word£	Word or Words enclosed by pound sterling signs indicate the word is articulated through a hearably smiling voice.
()	Empty parentheses indicate that something is being said, but no hearing can be achieved.
→	An arrow marks significant turns.