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# Broadly reflexive relationships, a special type of hyperbole, and implications for metaphor and metonymy

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## ABSTRACT

As the author has previously argued, a statement of form “Y is X” can often be taken as hyperbolic for a notably high degree of *likeness* between Y and X, or, instead, as hyperbolically stating how *important* Y is as a *part* of X. The present article goes further and argues that these types of hyperbole, as well as various others, are just special cases of *reflexive hyperbole*, a style that appears not previously to have been explored in its own right. The article therefore serves to introduce this style and to unify under it various more specific, disparate-seeming types of hyperbole, revealing their deep similarity. They all rest in a uniform way on a special property that some relationships have, namely of being reflexive in a broadened sense. The relationship of likeness is reflexive in the standard sense that *any* entity bears the relationship to itself with *maximum* possible strength. But some other relationships of interest in this article are only reflexive in a broader way that relaxes these universality and maximality requirements to an extent. The article also explains how reflexive hyperbole about likeness is a novel addition to the theory of metaphor, involving a distinctive interpretative process with special effects, and how reflexive hyperbole about part importance is not reducible to whole-for-part metonymy, because the latter does not systematically access sufficiently important parts. In addition, the article briefly considers the defaultness or otherwise of reflexive hyperbolic interpretations.

## Introduction

In hyperbolic uses of, say, “*Peter has hundreds[or thousands/millions/...] of pets,*” “*Mary’s suitcase weighs a ton,*” or “*Everyone in the audience was crying,*” the speaker is emphasizing how many pets Peter has, how heavy Mary’s suitcase is, or how large a proportion of the audience was crying. The literal meaning involves an extreme quantity or intensity, but the hearer engages in a descent on the relevant scale (e.g., weight) to some less extreme value. The intent might simply be to communicate dispassionately an unusually high value, but, according to many researchers, such as Brdar-Szabó and Brdar (2010), Carston and Wearing (2015), McCarthy and Carter (2004), and Peña and Ruiz De Mendoza (2017), there is often an expression of some pointed affect (e.g., (dis)approval of the number of pets or frustration at how difficult the suitcase is to carry). In fact, even in the most dispassionate cases there is arguably some weak affect such as mild surprise or interestingness. It is convenient, for the purposes of this article, to sum up the effect of hyperbole as conveying that the relevant graded circumstance (number of pets, etc.) holds to a *notably high* degree. What counts as “notable” depends on discourse context and varies widely both as to how high the degree is and as to the amount and type of affect. A degree can be notably high in that most people would regard it as unusually high in most practical circumstances, as in a suitcase weighing 50 kg, or because it is high

enough in context for strong affect: for example, even in the case of a much lighter suitcase, a particular speaker who is frustrated at not being able to lift it could say it weighs a ton (cf. the analysis of hyperbole in Peña & Ruiz De Mendoza, 2017). This example is similar to one mentioned by McCarthy and Carter (2004), where “dozens” of priests, lost in a lingerie department in a comedy show, numbered in fact no more than half a dozen priests, but where the situation in question had high affect in being “crazy and zany.”

Now consider the following sentences, where double angular brackets mark out the main phrases of interest for this article:

- (1) “*John isn’t simply like Hitler, <<he is Hitler>>.*”
- (2) “*Sailing isn’t just a part of Mike’s life, <<it is his life>>.*”
- (3) “*Daniel Craig [the actor] isn’t just good as James Bond, <<he is James Bond>>.*”
- (4) “*Whenever Sally watches a Batman film, <<she becomes Batman>>.*”
- (5) “*<<I am Charlie [Hebdo]>>.*”

I will call a clause of form *Y is X*, although not necessarily in present tense, a “Y-BE-X clause.” I include here also clauses using related verbs such as *become* and *turn into*. A Y-BE-X clause could have a wide variety of literal or figurative meanings depending on circumstances. As just one possibility, in the context of the facial make-up room for some actors, “*John is Hitler*” could mean John is the make-up person for the actor playing Hitler, via a metonymic step from Hitler to the actor and another from the actor to relevant assistant. Among the plethora of meanings that one could imagine for Y-BE-X clauses such as those in (1)–(5), including for instance ironic meanings, the following ones are important and natural in (1)–(5), in the light of evidence from discourse context in sections below, and experimental evidence in cases such as (1). The meanings in question are: in (1), John has a notably high degree of likeness to Hitler; in (2), the importance of the role that sailing plays in Mike’s life is notably high; in (3) Daniel Craig acts the part of James Bond in a notably convincing way; in (4) Sally engages in a notably high degree of mental identification with Batman when watching the films; and in (5) the speaker feels a notably high degree of solidarity with the staff of the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine, assuming here a metonymic step from magazine to staff.

Although it may be intuitively obvious that, in all these interpretations, the bracketed clause such as “*John is Hitler*” is being understood hyperbolically, the central, novel contribution of this article is that all the interpretations fundamentally involve the *very same*, neglected type of hyperbole — “reflexive” hyperbole. It therefore opens up a new area of hyperbole study, and simultaneously applies it deeply to unify the noted interpretations of statements such as (1)–(5). The proposal adds to metaphor theory, because of examples about likeness such as (1), and throws new light on part/whole metonymy, because of examples about parts such as (2). It has also led to a new account of intensifying uses of the word “literally” (Barnden, 2017; and briefly touched on below).

The hyperboles in (1)–(5) are about the degree to which some graded relationship applies between entities Y and X: *Y being like X* in (1); *Y being a part of X* in (2), with the gradation being how important a role Y plays in X; *Y making one feel one is watching X* in (3), as the underlying reason for acting being convincing; *Y mentally identifying with X* in (4); and *Y having solidarity with X* in (5). Across all these cases, the hyperbole works because the relationship has the following property:

**Broad Reflexivity:** for any entity X (that is of the appropriate sort for the relationship to apply), X bears the relationship to itself to an extremely high degree, at least under normal circumstances.

Hyperbolic opportunities are opened up by this, because the extreme degree with which an entity Y would bear the relationship to X, if it were counterfactually the same entity as X, can be used as hyperbole for some notably high degree with which Y actually bears the relationship to X. I call this type of hyperbole *reflexive hyperbole*.

A prime case is when the relationship is one of likeness. Any entity is like itself, and indeed the degree of this likeness is the maximum possible: nothing can be more like it than it itself is. So any entity is extremely, indeed *maximally*, like itself, in *all* circumstances. So the likeness relationship is certainly broadly reflexive. In particular, example (1) exploits the fact that nothing is more like Hitler than Hitler himself. So if John *were* the very same person as Hitler, he would have the maximum possible likeness to Hitler. This maximum point can then be taken as hyperbolic for a notably high degree of likeness between John and Hitler.

Similarly, for any entity X, the whole of X is the part of X that has the maximum possible importance that any part of X can have, in terms of the role it plays in X, as it includes all the different elements of importance that any part of X has. Thus, for (2), if sailing *were* the very same entity as Mike's life it would have the maximum possible importance that any part of his life could have. Again, this maximum can be taken as hyperbolic for notably high importance of sailing in Mike's life. We will see that analogous analyses apply to (3)–(5), although generally the “extreme degree” in the definition of broad reflexivity will not necessarily be maximal or arise in all circumstances.

That relationships such as those addressed by (1)–(5)—likeness, importance-graded parthood, mental identification, and so on—are broadly reflexive has rarely been noted explicitly. Concomitantly the particular type of hyperbole that broad reflexivity automatically opens up appears not to have been explored. This article is about reflexive hyperbole in general, not just about the particular types arising for those particular relationships, but those types are individually important, and I will call them *reflexive hyperbole about likeness* [e.g., for (1)], *reflexive hyperbole about part-importance* [e.g., for (2)], and so forth. Further specific types will be explored in this article.

Broad reflexivity is a very special condition that most relationships do not obey. The relationship physically-smaller-than radically disobeys it, as no object at all is smaller than itself. The relationship of hating between people disobeys it—while someone may conceivably hate him/herself to an extreme degree, this is abnormal. But there are infinitely many relationships that do obey it, because for instance we can invent infinitely many restricted likeness relationships such as *facially alike*.

This article's notion of broad reflexivity loosens the standard mathematical concept of *reflexivity*. A graded relationship is reflexive when *every* of the appropriate type bears the relationship to itself to the *maximal* possible degree, without exception—not just to an extreme degree, and not just in normal cases. So, reflexivity is a very special, limiting case of broad reflexivity. Likeness and importance-graded parthood relationships are reflexive, and hence broadly reflexive, but the other relationships discussed in this article are only broadly reflexive. (What we are calling a relationship is called a “relation” in mathematics, and a graded relationship where degrees of holding are on a continuous scale of zero to 1 is called a “fuzzy” relation. The notion of reflexivity in this article is borrowed from the standard notion of reflexivity for fuzzy relations (Zadeh, 1971), which is in turn a natural extension of the standard notion of reflexivity for non-fuzzy relations.)

Some cautions: First, broad reflexivity is (deliberately) imprecise because of the imprecision of what counts as an “extreme” degree and “normal” circumstances. Second, reflexivity and broad reflexivity are properties of a relationship itself, not of specific instances of its application such as to Hitler. Third, an entity X's bearing some relationship to itself to the maximal degree does not, of itself, stop other entities bearing the relationship to X just as strongly—it's just that they cannot do so more strongly. Finally, reflexive hyperbole, about, say, part importance, is not the only way of being hyperbolic about it: one could hyperbolically say “*Sailing is such a big part of Mike's life he might as well live on his boat.*” This is not *reflexively* hyperbolic.

Reflexive hyperbolic interpretation is just one possibility available to a hearer of a Y-BE-X clause. Whether this interpretive route is appropriate, and for which relationship, depends on X, Y, and the context. “Y is X,” considered literally, implies that Y and X have *all* of the above relationships—likeness, mental identification, and so on—to an extreme degree, under normal circumstances at least. While the word “like” in the first clause of (1) suggests that its “*John is Hitler*” clause is about likeness, other reflexive hyperbolic possibilities are in principle available to the hearer. For instance,

in some other context “*John is Hitler*” could plausibly be about John mentally identifying with Hitler. But the hearer need not assume reflexive hyperbole at all and can ignore all of the mentioned implications. He or she might be led to some other type of interpretation, such as a literal interpretation or standard metaphorical interpretation (see below for what this article means by the latter).

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. The next two sections say more about reflexive hyperbole about likeness and reflexive hyperbole about part-importance, drawing from Barnden (2015, 2017). The section on likeness shows the way in which reflexive hyperbole extends metaphor theory, and the section on part-importance shows a useful contrast with metonymy. Succeeding sections are wholly new contributions, extending reflexive hyperbole to the other relationships: making one feel one is watching someone (the relationship behind convincing acting); mental identifying with a person or fictional character; or having solidarity with someone or something. A Further Discussion section follows. Among other things, it briefly explores connections to defaultness; illustrates some additional potential types of reflexive hyperbole; and further explores the general nature of reflexive hyperbole. There is a brief concluding section.

### Reflexive hyperbole about likeness

A *corrective juxtaposition* such as (1) is a setting where a reflexive hyperbolic interpretation of a Y-BE-X clause is highly appropriate. In (1), the Y-BE-X part serves to correct the Y-is-like-X part—not because the latter says something wrong, but rather because it does not adequately bring out the intended, heightened degree of likeness between Y and X.

(1) is a variant of the first of the following real examples found in discourse (see Barnden, 2015 for more). In examples, upper case indicates either the emphatic use of upper case, italics, and so on in a textual original such as (6) or spoken stress as in (7).

(6) “*You aren’t just like Hitler, <<YOU ARE HITLER>>! You’re a socialist, a racist, who hates the founding principles of Western Civilization, and you have a ridiculous little mustache.*”<sup>1</sup>

(7) “*She doesn’t just LOOK like me, ... <<she IS me>>. She’s thirty-two.*” [The speaker is looking at a photograph of her mother (the “She”) when she was about the same age as the speaker. The rough equality of age is added to the similarity of appearance in forming the heightened likeness expressed by the speaker.]

The simile “*You are like Hitler*” that is corrected in (6) does *allow* a notably high degree of likeness, while also allowing lower degrees of likeness. But the apparent identity “*You are Hitler*” goes further in *ensuring* that a notably strong likeness is understood, when taken as reflexively hyperbolic concerning likeness. Analogous points apply to (7). When the Y-is-like-X is negated as in (6), we have a case of metalinguistic negation (Horn, 1985) rather than ordinary negation. However, negation-less forms such as “*Y is like X. Well, Y is X*” also serve as corrections—see the experimental items used by Chiappe and Kennedy (2000), and some corrections in sections below.

Adopting a reflexive hyperbolic interpretation does not in itself provide particular grounds of likeness between the Y and X, such as a dictatorial quality in a comparison of John to Hitler. Just as with a simile “*Y is like X,*” grounds must be conjectured by hearers in a context-dependent way. Thus, in (6) the speaker conveys that socialism, racism, and moustache ridiculousness, and possibly further qualities, should be included in the likeness, not just a dictatorial quality. The aspects of the source or target that are involved in the likeness grounds can be objective or generally agreed ones, such as the dictatorialness and racism of Hitler, but they could also be subjective or idiosyncratic, and indeed the ridiculousness of a moustache is a subjective matter. The nature of the aspects is immaterial as regards the possibility of reflexive hyperbole about likeness, which rests solely on any

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.gotoquiz.com/how\\_much\\_like\\_hitler\\_are\\_you/comments.html](http://www.gotoquiz.com/how_much_like_hitler_are_you/comments.html). This site contains comments submitted for a satirical quiz. (accessed on 23 March 2012).

entity's being the same as itself in all respects, no matter how subjective or idiosyncratic those respects are.

The above is about apparent identities between individual entities Y and X, and such identities are the focus of the remainder of the article. But we should briefly touch on a form of reflexive hyperbole about likeness that is warranted for apparent categorizations rather than identities. An example is “[*Non-governmental*] organizations aren’t only like polities, <<they are polities>>,” where a “polity” is literally a political organization or a body of people organized under a government. A reflexive hyperbolic interpretation exists, to the effect that [*non-governmental organizations*] are like polities to a notably high degree. This is because if big government were an instance of show business then it would be maximally like that particular instance (and, as additionally pointed out by Barnden, 2015, 2017; it would be extremely like prototypical instances or best exemplars of show business; in being more like them than things that are not instances of show business at all).

### **Reflexive hyperbole about likeness without corrective juxtaposition**

The examples of reflexive hyperbole about likeness above are all within corrective juxtapositions, where a Y-is-like-X is intensified by Y-BE-X. But, importantly, there are other situations making this type of hyperbole appropriate as an interpretation.

Barnden (2017) discusses two such situations. The first is when an entrenched metaphor is qualified by “literally,” as in “*Journalists are literally animals*” (slightly adapted from Nerlich & Chamizo Domínguez, 2003). Suppose that an entrenched, lexically coded metaphorical meaning conveyed by saying that someone is an animal is that (s)he behaves aggressively. Barnden (2017) argues that the “literally” is likely to prompt a reflexive hyperbolic interpretation, concerning likeness, of “*journalists are animals*,” typically intensifying the aggressiveness. While the hearer could work out a metaphorical meaning afresh from the literal meaning of “animals,” this would be more laborious and open-ended than simply intensifying the already available entrenched meaning. A similar analysis applies to examples like “*Mike literally exploded [with anger]*” through treating them as if they stated identities such as “*Mike did something that was literally an explosion.*”

The second situation is when an entrenched metaphor’s source terminology is used literally and close by, as in “*The journalists had dangerous-looking dogs with them and were themselves animals.*” Plausibly, the literal concept of dogs and therefore the concept of animals are activated in the hearer’s mind, again prompting a reflexive hyperbolic interpretation intensifying the entrenched meaning.

### **Why not just standard metaphor interpretation?**

Is reflexive hyperbole about likeness just a feature of metaphorical interpretation in general, and already implicit in existing theories of metaphor? If so, it is nothing new. If metaphor conveys or rests on a significant degree of likeness, then surely an apparent Y-BE-X identity involves exaggeration of this degree of likeness. However, we now argue that such exaggeration does not systematically amount to hyperbole as described in the Introduction, that a metaphor need not be *about* likeness, and in this and other ways reflexive hyperbole adds meaning beyond that from standard metaphor interpretation. By standard metaphor interpretation I mean metaphor interpretation as portrayed in the literature, whether by accessing particular entrenched metaphorical meaning, transferring salient features from source to target, discovering an analogy between source and target (e.g., as in Bowdle & Gentner, 2005), constructing a superordinate-category construction (as in Glucksberg, 2001), or some other method.

First, one cannot explain corrective juxtapositions such as (6) and (7) just by pointing out that a simile is being corrected by the corresponding Y-is-X metaphor, because there is evidence that metaphorical Y is X for a particular Y and X does *not* systematically convey more likeness than Y is like X. For one thing, Barnden (2015), Carston & Wearing (2011), and Nowotny (1965) note that in

discourse where a likeness between Y and X is repeatedly maintained, people may flip between the simile and metaphor forms with no sign that a meaning difference is intended. But there is also direct psycholinguistic evidence, from the study of corrective juxtapositions by Chiappe and Kennedy (2000). The participants did judge the metaphor part of such a juxtaposition to involve much higher likeness than the simile part, in terms both of the number of shared properties and of the strength of application to the target of individual shared properties. But the participants were also presented with the same similes and metaphors *not* in juxtaposition with each other. Here the participants showed no statistically significant tendency to see different levels of likeness.

Thus, given a Y-BE-X clause, one interpretive possibility available to a hearer is to recall or work out likeness between target and source using standard metaphor processing, and *also* to take the likeness-hyperbolic route when this is contextually appropriate. The latter route adds something to the standard processing by ensuring a notably high degree of likeness. Likeness might be intensified either by intensifying a feature of an entrenched meaning (e.g., speed of explosions) or a feature uncovered afresh through analogy-finding, and so on, or might involve prompting the analogy-finding, and so on to deliver more shared features than it otherwise would have.

Chiappe and Kennedy's findings chime with the results of Xu (2010) showing that, for a given level of Y/X likeness-degree, people find the simile and nominal-metaphor forms equally natural. On the other hand, Utsumi's (2007) results link metaphor form preferentially to cases with higher "interpretive diversity," a quantity positively related in part to the number of features transferred from source to target, suggesting that nominal-metaphor form does have some tendency toward stronger likeness. But again Haught (2013), while much concerned with differences between the two forms, only claims that they *sometimes* convey different meaning, from which we can presumably infer that they only sometimes have marked likeness-degree difference, and relatedly Glucksberg (2011) says there is no direct evidence for metaphors being "somehow richer" than similes.

Second, reflexive hyperbole provides for the case of a hearer understanding that a heightened degree of likeness is intended without yet working out any particular likeness. One example studied in Barnden (2015) is "*The internet isn't 'like' crack, it is crack,*" used as the title of an article. Clearly, the reader can, and is expected to, immediately understand that notably high likeness is expressed, even before reading the article and even before working out for himself what particular notable likeness the Internet might have to crack cocaine that is not adequately conveyed by just saying that the Internet is like crack. The reflexive hyperbolic interpretation straightforwardly explains this ability. But standard metaphor processing theory does not cater for this—it only tries to explain how particular likenesses might be used or uncovered.

Third, the more entrenched that some metaphorical phraseology is, the less plausible it becomes that the metaphor is conveying target/source likeness at all, as opposed to just using entrenched metaphorical meaning to convey something about the target. For instance, the use of "explosion" to convey rapid, large rise in some quantity is standard, as in "there has been an explosion of cute cat images on the Internet." It is not at all clear that this is drawing attention to a likeness to literal explosions at all. Similarly, even when no entrenched metaphorical meaning is available, so that some likeness is worked out afresh from the literal meanings of the target and source terms, there is still no guarantee that this likeness is itself part of the point of the utterance rather than just a stepping stone to some useful comment on the target. (Cf. the comments of researchers such as Dirven [2002] and Warren [2006] about metaphor tending not to preserve the target/source relationship as part of the message of the utterance, often by contrast to the case of metonymy. Steen's [2008] notion of deliberate metaphor also brings this issue in. See Barnden [2016] for further discussion.) Any activation of the literal explosion concept need only be used to produce some information about the target by virtue of whatever similarity is relevant. It need not be taken to point out that particular similarity or to emphasize the degree of similarity, rather than just relying on there being enough similarity to warrant calling the target phenomenon an explosion, for example.

Fourth, reflexive hyperbole takes us beyond the common observation that metaphor is often hyperbolic in transferring particularly intense features of the source to the target in weakened form

(see, e.g., McCarthy & Carter, 2004). This arguably happens with “*John is Hitler*” under existing accounts of metaphor. But it still leaves room for a reflexive hyperbolic interpretation to make John even more like Hitler, whether by strengthening dictatorialness yet further or by adding extra similarities. Moreover, the features captured in reflexive hyperbole need not apply intensely to the source—likeness can be heightened by transferring features that only apply weakly to the source.

Finally, reflexive hyperbole about likeness is distinct from the much-discussed abbreviated-simile or elliptical-simile theory of metaphor (see, e.g., Fogelin, 2011), according to which “Y is X” just metaphorically means what “Y is like X” means in the same context: there is no heightening of likeness. Moreover, this equivalence is merely stipulated, whereas reflexive hyperbole about likeness arises in a principled way from the reflexivity of likeness and the general nature of hyperbole.

### A partial summary

A sentence such as “*John is Hitler*” or “*Journalists are animals*” can be interpreted in a reflexive hyperbolic way as regards likeness, or in a standard metaphorical way, or in a combined way. Which route is appropriate is a matter of context in any given case. The reflexive hyperbole route may possibly be followed only in certain circumstances, such as in the presence of corrective juxtaposition, the word “*literally*,” or nearby literal use of the source terminology. The reflexive hyperbolic route provides effects additional to those of standard metaphor processing.

### Reflexive hyperbole about part-importance

Use of a Y-BE-X clause to express notably high importance of the role that a part plays in a whole, rather than notably strong likeness, is common. First, it can occur within corrective juxtapositions, as in the following examples.

(8) “*James recalls going to church at least three times a week, and how the Christian faith has been an integral part of his life. In fact, <<it is his life>>. He can’t recall a time without God in his life.*”<sup>2</sup>

(9) “*But in an era when a company’s technology infrastructure isn’t just part of the business, <<it IS the business>>, the [investment-return] formula gets complex. ... Now you’ve got to calculate not only what an investment will save you but also what it will earn you. ... Consider, for example, all the indirect ways a new Internet-based CRM [Customer Relationship Management] system can generate revenue.*”<sup>3</sup>

(10) “*At L&W Supply, we’re more than just the nation’s top building supply distributor. We’re a company that’s made safety our top priority. Every employee is fully trained on safety procedures and strictly adheres to or exceeds OSHA and DOT regulations. Plus, the L&W Supply Jobsite Delivery Checklist keeps our focus on safety at every point, enabling you to keep your focus on getting the job done. When partnering with L&W Supply, you’ll see that safety isn’t just part of our culture, <<it is our culture>>.*”<sup>4</sup>

A typical example not involving corrective juxtaposition is

(11) “*Ray Charles just can’t stop. At 72, he’s still making music that grabs the soul. ... Charles can’t stop the music because <<music, he says, is his life>>. ‘Ever since I was 3 years old, music has always fascinated me,’ says Charles. ‘Music is number one in my life.’*”<sup>5</sup>

In some cases the word “*literally*” is involved, as in

(12) “*I love sharing the stories of our daily screw-ups [in caring for a small child], but refuse to be ‘one of those’ people ... that only posts about their kids (but let’s face it, I’m taking a six-month break from work, so <<the child literally is my day’s story now>>).*”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup>From [https://www.cbn.org/700club/guests/bios/james\\_ingram\\_021009.aspx](https://www.cbn.org/700club/guests/bios/james_ingram_021009.aspx) (accessed on 27 February 2017).

<sup>3</sup>From <https://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,1,160,567,00.asp> (accessed on 23 August 2017).

<sup>4</sup>From <https://www.lwsupply.com/about-us/safety/> (accessed on 23 August 2017).

<sup>5</sup>From <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/ray-charles-music-is-his-life/> (accessed on 28 February 2017).

<sup>6</sup>From <http://babyexperiment.blogspot.co.uk/#!> (accessed on 16 February 2017).



(Here I assume that “the child” is being used metonymically to refer to the child-caring.) The question of whether the word “literally” supplies (additional) intensification is addressed in Barnden (2017).

When Y is an activity and X is person P’s life then the heightened importance of the part can consist in, for instance, how much of P’s lifespan has been occupied with Y, how much of each of P’s days is currently taken up by Y, the extent to which Y is in P’s thoughts, how much of P’s emotional energy is taken up with Y, or how big a role Y plays in governing Y.

Whatever type of part-importance is in play, we have the following, for any entity X: no other part of X can play a more important role in X than X itself does. For instance, when the importance is a matter of time taken up or effort expended, then, obviously, no part of X can be more important than the whole of X—no part can require more time or effort than the whole of X. Equally, no part of X can be more emotionally important than the whole of X, because the emotional importance of the whole includes at least the emotional importance of any one part. And so forth for the other types of importance mentioned above. So, X itself is the maximally important part of X, whatever the type of relative part importance: that is, the part-of relationship, graded as to importance of the part in the whole, is reflexive, and so Y-is-X can be hyperbolic for Y’s being a notably important part of X.

This analysis assumes that any entity X is a part of itself. According to the entry on the theory of parthood relations (mereology) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,<sup>7</sup> most accounts of parthood do take this stance. Not taking this stance would complicate the description of reflexive hyperbole about part-importance but would not upset the phenomenon. The whole of X would still provide an upper bound on part importance, in that, as before, no part of X could play a more important role in X than the whole of X.

### **Metonymy and reflexive hyperbole about part-importance**

Is the notion of reflexive hyperbole about part-importance redundant, given the much-studied phenomenon of WHOLE FOR PART (W4P) metonymy (see, e.g., Littlemore, 2015; Warren, 2006)? In such metonymy the part is always a salient one in some sense, and one might therefore assume that salient parts play notably important roles in the respective wholes.

But reflexive hyperbole about part-importance fails to drop out of W4P metonymy. The metonymic ability to use a particular whole W to stand for a particular part P does not guarantee that one can use “P is W” as a reflexive hyperbole. While we can say “John washed his car” with an intended metonymic step from the whole car to the bodywork, this does not justify saying “The bodywork of John’s car IS his car.” For W4P metonymy, the part’s importance need only be high in the sense that it has some particular importance relative to other parts in standard contexts, whereas reflexive hyperbole conveys a level of importance that is special to a particular circumstance being talked about: exceptionally high, or meriting especially strong affect.

Conversely, the fact that one can appropriately take some P-is-W to be reflexively hyperbolic about part-importance does not guarantee that one can use W metonymically for P. Consider “sailing is Mike’s life,” where usually Mike spends most of the day sailing. This does not justify a metonymic step from Mike’s life to his sailing. On a day when he is not sailing, it would be odd, indeed comical, to say “Mike is not engaging in his life today” or “The weather is too rough for Mike’s life today.” Equally, despite (12) it would be odd to say “I gave my day’s story some milk” or “My day’s story is finally taking a nap, phew!”

Those odd statements could, however, be said in a playful, metalinguistically aware way, and one can invent such statements *ad infinitum*. Another example would be to respond to “safety is [this company’s] culture” in (10) with the comical “Aha, so you manufacture stylish culture harnesses” or “I hope you carefully place culture warnings on all your inflammable products” (as a way of referring to safety harnesses and safety warnings respectively). The humor or sarcasm in such comments

<sup>7</sup><https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mereology/>

capitalize on the impropriety of extending the use of the hyperbole by an attempt to use the whole (the company's culture, the mother's day's story) metonymically. (This point was made by an anonymous reviewer.)

Despite these comments one could, if one wished, categorize reflexive hyperbole about part-importance as a particular type of metonymy, in that the importance of a whole is being used indirectly to refer to a lower but notably high level of importance. (This is just a special case of a general observation about hyperbole of any scalar type, cf. comments by Brdar-Szabó & Brdar, 2010.) However, this is not whole-for-part metonymy.

### Reflexive hyperbole (indirectly) about acting convincingly

Statements like “*Daniel Craig is James Bond*” or “*Daniel Craig became James Bond in a resurgence of the Bond franchise*” are often used simply to mean that an actor such as Daniel Craig plays or came to play the part of a character such as James Bond in one or more films, and so on.<sup>8</sup> However, there is a more marked use of *to be* or *to become* in the acting sphere, as illustrated in the latter case by

(13) “*Steve Carrell’s melting performance as Jon du Pont is [brilliant]. He’s not just playing a part with makeup on. <<He literally becomes someone other than himself.>>*”<sup>9</sup>

(14) “*A Musical Tribute Starring Caesare is a live, on-stage recreation of the performance of Elvis Presley. Caesare not only sounds like [Elvis], but <<he literally becomes Elvis>> on stage. ... Caesare’s looks, sound, and charisma are second to none.*”<sup>10</sup>

The apparent identity between Carrell and du Pont, or that between Caesare and Elvis, conveys that the acting is notably convincing, as the context within the excerpts makes clear. The question is how. [Again, we do not address the role of “literally” in (13) and (14), except to suggest that it is an alternative to capitalizing, italicizing or otherwise stressing the word “becomes” itself.]

I will assume that when one is immersed in watching a highly convincing piece of acting or impersonation one is typically suspending disbelief and forgetting that one is watching an actor at all: one feels then that *one is watching the acted character’s activities*. The identities in (13) and (14) can then be analyzed as conveying that *the actor, to notably high degree, makes one feel that one is watching the character [rather than watching the actor]*. And we can easily get this meaning by a hyperbolic route. *Normally* at least, no-one can more strongly make one feel that one is watching X than X him/herself can. That is, the P-makes-one-feel-one-is-watching-Q relationship between people P and Q is broadly reflexive. Thus we get a notably high degree of that relationship between the actor and the character, and hence indirectly a notably high degree of acting-convincingly. Notice that this argument gives *reflexive* hyperbole only about the makes-one-feel-one-is-watching relationship, not about acting as such. It is not clear whether P-being-able-to-act-Q is itself broadly reflexive.

The broadly reflexive relationship just discussed is our first example of one that is not, simply, reflexive. An aspect of the “normally” above is that X’s identity not be obscured. One might not feel one was watching X when actually doing so if his identity were obscured. It is also conceivable that an unusually good impersonator could seem more like X than X himself, so it is not certain that *any* given person in *any* circumstance is the person who most makes one feel one is watching him or her.

(13) and (14) may have implications other than the notably convincing acting as such. One is that Caesare, for example, in his role as Elvis is distinctly different from his real self. However, this seems subsidiary to the main point, the becoming-Elvis. As for the explicit departure-from-self in (13) and the lack of an explicit mention of becoming du Pont, the reader can plausibly assume that the “someone” has specific reference, namely to du Pont, so that the main point is this becoming.

<sup>8</sup>See sense 10d of the verb “be” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* online, at [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

<sup>9</sup>From <http://www.allthehitsof.com/2015/01/thoughts25-best-films-of-2014.html> (accessed 29 June 2017).

<sup>10</sup>From <https://www.gigsalad.com/caesarebelvano> (accessed 29 June 2017).

## Reflexive hyperbole about mental identification

It appears to be common experience, in reading a novel, watching a film, and so on, to “identify with” a character in it. One puts oneself in the character’s shoes, feeling that one is engaging to some degree in that character’s emotions, thoughts, and activities, and, more broadly, sharing their worldview, aims, and so on. Surprisingly, consulted dictionary definitions of “*identify with* [a character or real person]” do not capture this feeling fully. But it is attested by discourse examples, and is a standard, long-standing notion in the study of narrative (see, e.g., Cohen, 2001; Igartua, 2010). Igartua (2010) reviews various definitions, and quotes Cohen (2001, p. 245) as saying that identification is a mechanism “through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them.” Following Cohen, Igartua takes identification to involve “the ability to feel what the characters feel and become effectively involved in a vicarious way[,] ... adopting the point of view of or putting oneself in the place of the characters[,] ... sharing or internalizing the character’s goal and ... having the sensation of becoming the character or a [temporary] loss of self-awareness and imagining the story as if one were one of the characters.”

The important point for us is that strong mental identification can be expressed via identity, as in:

(15) “I ... put myself in Harry Potter’s position. <<I was Harry. I was the hero.>>”

(16) “[S]ome of my fondest memories with the people I love have been at midnight screenings. We get to play pretend & for a couple hours everyone is a little kid again. For that night we’re not just watching the movie, <<we BECOME the movie>>. We’re transported into that world & everyone shares in the adventure. When Professor Dumbledore died in Harry Potter & the Half Blood Prince everyone in that theatre lifted up their wands, ...”<sup>11</sup>

(15) was said by a guest on *Front Row* programme, BBC Radio 4, United Kingdom, June 23, 2017, about her experiences, when a child or teenager, reading the Harry Potter books, in which Harry Potter is a boy hero with magical powers. I assume in (16) that “we become the movie” is effectively to be read as “we become the characters in the movie,” by virtue of a metonymic step from movie to characters.

Mental identification can also be with a real person, as in the following two examples:

(17) “And I’ve also got superpowers whenever I stick these glittery statement jewellery tattoos on: I feel Beyonce. No. Not LIKE Beyonce. <<But literally Beyonce>>. Yeah, sans the billions, sans Jay-Z, sans the talent, the looks, the tattoo line she just launched. But other than that I’m practically her. ... Delusion is a common condition in my case, which I’ve learned to embrace. It gives me freedom <<to be whoever I want>>, without a care in the world.”<sup>12</sup>

(18) “<<I AM Heathcliff>> He’s always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure ... but as my own being.” (Brontë, 1994, p. 81).

Passage (18) is uttered by fictional character Cathy in the *Wuthering Heights* novel. Of course, Heathcliff is another fictional character, but he is real for Cathy. The example is more complex than the previous ones in that Cathy seems to be thinking of her own being as something within herself, and it is this being that is identified with Heathcliff and denoted by the pronoun “I.”

I claim that in all four examples what is being expressed by the Y-BE-X clauses is not just mental identification but a notably high degree of it. The nature of the contexts shown in (16)–(18) support this reading, and it is reasonable to read (15) in this way as well. An additional point about (17) is that the speaker is presumably not saying she is actually suffering delusion when she mentally identifies with another person: the mention is an additional, metaphorical, expression of her *high* degree of mental identification. As for (16), the “everyone is a little kid again” strengthens the identification in a special way, if (a) we analyze it as itself being reflexively hyperbolic—about likeness, not mental identification—and hence effectively saying the adults are greatly like little

<sup>11</sup>From <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/midnight-screening> (accessed 27 November 2012).

<sup>12</sup>From <http://thefashiontag.com/2015/08/10/flash-tattoos-barebaroque/> (accessed 28 August 2015).

children watching the film and if (b) children's mental identification with the characters would be especially intense.

The use of a Y-BE-X clause to mean that Y notably-strongly identifies with X is explainable as reflexive hyperbole, because mental identification is a broadly reflexive relationship. There is an immediate sense in which anyone X mentally identifies with him/herself (if not suffering from certain cognitive pathologies). That is, X (normally) feels as though he/she is engaging in *his/her own* emotions, thoughts and activities, and shares *his/her own* worldview, aims, and so forth. Moreover, (in normal circumstances) no other person can more strongly feel that they are engaging in X's emotions, thoughts and activities or that they share X's worldview, aims, and so on than X him/herself does.

The relationship is not plain reflexive, because we had to exclude non-normal circumstances such as pathologies where one feels dissociated from oneself. Also, if one is conflicted in one's worldview, aims, etc., then one could be said not to share one's own worldview and so on to a maximal extent, and it may not be clear what should be identified as one's worldview and so on in the first place.

### Reflexive hyperbole about solidarity

After the terrorist murders of many staff at the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015 it became common for a supporter of the victims to declare

(19) “<<I am Charlie>>” or “<<I am Charlie Hebdo>>”

Judging by many discussions in the media, for example Volokh (2015), the core intent of the declaration is to express strong solidarity with the magazine staff. It is not (or not primarily) to state, say, strong likeness to the staff or magazine, or a mental identification with the staff.

This use of Y-BE-X clauses to express strong solidarity appears to be well-established. In particular, note the following example, which explicitly mentions solidarity, and is translated from a French newspaper editorial published soon after the “9/11” terrorist murders on 11 September 2001:

(20) “*In this tragic moment, when words seem so inadequate to express the shock people feel, the first thing that comes to mind is this: <<We are all Americans! We are all New Yorkers>>, just as surely as John F. Kennedy declared <<himself to be a Berliner>> in 1962 when he visited Berlin. Indeed, ... how can we not feel profound solidarity with those people, that country, the United States, to whom we are so close and to whom we owe our freedom, ... ?*”<sup>13</sup>

The word “solidarity” is itself metaphorical and its meaning is not entirely obvious. *The Chambers Dictionary* defines it as “unity of interests, aims, opinions, etc.” The *Oxford Living Dictionaries* defines it as “unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group.” This adds an important element of support. The *Cambridge Dictionary*<sup>14</sup> defines it as “agreement between and support for the members of a group, especially a political group.” The notion of “support” in these definitions presumably mainly means moral support (as opposed to, e.g., financial support). It presumably includes readiness to state support in public, and to be attacked in the same way that the supported entity is (Volokh, 2015).

The strong-solidarity usage of Y-BE-X is reflexively hyperbolic. The relationship of possessing solidarity toward someone or something is broadly reflexive. Presumably, any person X normally has the maximal possible degree of solidarity with herself. She has the maximal possible “unity of

<sup>13</sup>From [http://www.worldpress.org/1101we\\_are\\_all\\_americans.htm](http://www.worldpress.org/1101we_are_all_americans.htm) (accessed 23 June 2017), taken from *World Press Review*, 48, No. 11, November 2001, reporting an editorial in the newspaper *Le Monde* on 13 September 2001 (available at [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2007/05/23/nous-sommes-tous-americains\\_913706\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2007/05/23/nous-sommes-tous-americains_913706_3232.html)). I am grateful to Gareth Carroll for bringing the example to my attention.

<sup>14</sup><http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/>.

interests, aims, opinions, etc.” with herself, although with qualifications about worldview, aims, and so on like those at the end of the previous section. She presumably morally supports herself, although it’s conceivable that someone else could show more public moral support for her than she herself does. But if X is an entity such as a satirical magazine, or a country, it typically does strongly declare moral support for itself, and at least claims that it is prepared to be attacked in the way it is in fact attacked.

## Further discussion

### *Defaultness and entrenchment*

Is reflexive hyperbole related to defaultness (as defined in, e.g., Giora, Givoni, & Fein, 2015; Giora, Givoni, Heruti, & Fein, 2017; and Filik, Howman, Ralph-Nearman & Giora, this issue)? This notion covers both lexically coded meanings and noncoded interpretations constructed on the fly (Giora et al. 2017). I will use “meaning” to cover both cases. For a meaning to count as a default, its arising must be (among other things) fast, and also contextually unconditional in arising even if the context provides no support for it or acts against it. A default meaning is only initial—it may ultimately be overridden by another meaning because of the particular context. The main consideration is when this other meaning is non-default, but for completeness I allow for several default meanings possibly arising, so that one default meaning can be overridden by another.

There is nothing about reflexive hyperbole that suggests that, without any restrictions on Y and X, Y-BE-X clauses have reflexive-hyperbolic default meanings. Certainly it would be surprising if there were such meanings *and* they were generally retrieved/constructed faster than literal ones, as this would mean that simple statements such as “*His boss is Mary*” and “*Donald is a liar*,” which would overwhelmingly be taken literally, would only be so taken after the entertainment of one or more reflexive hyperbolic meanings. However, this argument does not preclude literal and reflexive hyperbolic meanings being derived in parallel, with context then quickly selecting a literal meaning.

If we place restrictions on Y and/or X, then in some cases defaultness, or at least some of the features involved in defaultness, become much more plausible. For instance, discourse often includes examples following the pattern “Y [BE] [someone’s]life” where Y refers to some activity, so that reflexive hyperbole about part-importance is plausible, whereas a literal interpretation is implausible. It would therefore be worthwhile to explore experimentally whether the parthood-importance hyperbolic meaning unconditionally arises for the “Y [BE] [someone’s] life.” (This meaning, however, would still not be a default interpretation, as it has some internal incongruity.) Note that if that hyperbolic meaning arises regardless of the nature of Y there would be a battle with the idiomatic meaning of “*It’s his/her/... life*” that is paraphrasable as “*It’s his/her/... responsibility and not really our business.*” This meaning might qualify as a default.

As another special case, we could ask whether reflexive hyperbole about mental identification or (indirectly) acting convincingness is a default for Y-BE-X clauses when the Y and X expressions can quickly be determined to refer to people. Such detection would at least mildly violate the context-unconditionality feature of defaultness, but the meanings might be unconditional in other respects. (And again in some cases they might not be defaults because of internal incongruity.)

The question of whether a reflexive hyperbolic meaning is contextually unconditional is in principle independent from whether it is produced by simple retrieval or by construction from first principles. The verb *to be* may conceivably have one or more lexically encoded meanings such as *is notably highly like* or *has notably strong solidarity with*. (A similar point applies to particular sorts of Y-BE-X constructions as above: they could be immediately treated as if they were of form Y-BE-notably-important-part-of-X.) Such retrieved meanings would therefore bypass, but remain theoretically motivated by, the process of using broad reflexivity to infer an extreme point on a scale and then performing hyperbolic descent. But the meanings would not necessarily be *unconditionally* retrieved. Conversely, it could be unconditional that a verb or construction is approached as some sort of reflexive hyperbole,

but with this treatment always proceeding afresh, and in a context-dependent and potentially defeasible way, via inferring an extreme scale point and performing hyperbolic descent.

### ***Involvement of likeness in other relationships***

While acting that is highly convincing naturally involves strong likeness between the behavior of the actor and the depicted behavior of the character, it (arguably) also involves the audience feeling that they are watching the character, not the actor as such, as we noted above. An actor might exhibit extreme likeness to the character but still might have a characteristic that prevents strong suspension of disbelief. So while reflexive hyperbole about acting convincingly could be said to be a form of reflexive hyperbole about likeness, it is special enough to be worth distinguishing in its own right.

Mental identification of Y with X is a type of likeness, in that Y is to some extent *temporarily feeling like X*. So, reflexive hyperbole about mental identification is arguably a special case of reflexive hyperbole about likeness. But it has special, distinguishing features. It is not just that someone identifying with Hitler has feelings, views, and so on that are similar to Hitler's, but rather that he adopts an approximation to those feelings, and so on *believing that they are Hitler's*. Moreover, the adoption is typically temporary and episodic, whereas "*John is Hitler*" in a context such as (6) would presumably be about long-enduring characteristics, ones that furthermore do not imply that John is mentally identifying with or even knows anything about Hitler.

Finally, one might suggest that solidarity is a matter of (felt) likeness, in the light of the terms "unity," "agreement," and "common interest" mentioned in the section on reflexive hyperbole about solidarity. But moral support goes beyond mere likeness of interests and aims, for instance through involving public statements of such likeness and being prepared to suffer similar attacks. Thus, reflexive hyperbole about solidarity may include a form of reflexive hyperbole about likeness as one aspect, but is hyperbolic about other factors as well.

### ***Other possible cases of reflexive hyperbole***

For a relationship to be subject to reflexive hyperbole it must be broadly reflexive. But a relationship's being broadly reflexive does not appear to be *sufficient* for reflexive hyperbole, in practice. Consider *alike-in-hair-color*. Any person bears this relationship to him/herself to the maximal degree—it is reflexive. But it seems infelicitous to say "*John is Peter*" to mean merely that John has very similar hair color to Peter, even when that quality is explicitly at issue, as in

(21) "*John doesn't merely have similar hair color to Peter, <<he IS Peter>>.*"

This would more readily be used to convey that John is very like Peter in overall physical appearance, not just hair color. A possibility, needing further research, is that a broadly reflexive relationship can only readily be subject to reflexive hyperbole, in a particular context, if it is not a special case of another broadly reflexive relationship that would also reasonably be subject to reflexive hyperbole in the same context. As regards (21), it would not be remarkable if the strong likeness extended beyond hair color, so hyperbole on broader likeness would be reasonable, making hyperbole on hair-color likeness dispreferred. By contrast, even though the *temporarily-feeling-like* relationship that underlies mental identification is a type of likeness, it would be remarkable if a Bond-film watcher who strongly identified with Bond turned out actually to be similar to Bond in broader, long-term ways, such as in physical appearance and everyday behavior. Hence, "*he becomes James Bond*" can be hyperbolic on mental identification because hyperbole on broader likeness is not very reasonable.

As for types of reflexive hyperbole beyond those so far discussed, consider first:

(22) “... Jason de Caires Taylor’s underwater sculptures literally come to life. ... To me, ... over time these works aren’t just displayed in the ocean, <<they literally become the ocean>>. They wear away, erode into liquid, and plant life spreads itself across them.”<sup>15</sup>

The bracketed clause arguably exhibits *reflexive hyperbole about integration*, with the sculptures becoming integrated with the ocean. Particles erode off the sculptures and get mixed into the surrounding ocean, and, conversely, plant life that is a natural part of the ocean becomes attached to the sculptures. Both the sculptures and the ocean become parts of a larger, integrated whole. *Integrated-with* is a reflexive relationship—nothing can be more integrated with something than that thing itself.

Consider now (23), from the *Peanuts* cartoons featuring “Love is ...” aphorisms,<sup>16</sup> and also (24):

(23) “<<Love is loaning your best comic magazines>>.”

(24) “<<Happiness is waking up, looking at the clock and finding that you still have two hours left to sleep.>>”<sup>17</sup>

(Note that the Y/X order can be reversed: for example “*Loaning your best comic magazines is love*” would also work.) These examples do not seem hyperbolic about any relationship we have discussed. If loaning of the sort mentioned in (23) were a part of some particular loving relationship, then (23) would perhaps imply that it is notably important within that relationship. However, (23) seems to be more a statement about what is possible in love relationships in general, and it does not say or presuppose that love relationships typically have the mentioned loaning as a part, or that if they did so then the loaning would play a notably important role in it compared to other parts. Rather, “*love is X*” is plausibly a hyperbolic way of saying that the loaning, *if it occurred*, would be a notably good piece of *evidence for, example of, illustration of, or expression of* love. In sum, the loaning is a *notably good potential sign of* love. Being-a-potential-sign-of is broadly reflexive: normally, any item—or at least any ordinary item in everyday life—is an extremely good and perhaps maximally good sign of itself. (An exception might be when the thing is so complex to grasp that something simpler would be a better sign.) So we can have *reflexive hyperbole about sign quality*.

While major dictionaries that I have consulted do not, largely, cover the uses of “to be” that are addressed in this article, an exception is in the *Oxford English Dictionary* ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)):

[OED sense 10c] “to be identical in function or essence (though not in literal fact) with, to be as good as; (also) to be the embodiment or expression of.”

The most relevant examples the dictionary proposes for this sense are:

(25) “People of my generation began to read the *New Statesman* a few years after that and for us ... <<Kingsley Martin, in a certain sense, WAS the *New Statesman*>>.”

(26) “Health-and-wealth teaching (holding that <<material blessing IS the gospel>>, or at least a key component of the gospel).”

The 10c sub-sense that fits (25) best is *embodiment/expression-of*, suggesting that the example exhibits reflexive hyperbole about sign quality, perhaps together with metonymy from Kingsley Martin to his writings. But, taking him to be part of the magazine, (25) can instead be analyzed as reflexive hyperbole about part-importance. Or perhaps it is both, if we take the part also to be a sign.

It is not clear how (26) fits OED sense 10c. Instead, assuming a metonymic step from the gospel to what it advocates, “*material blessing IS the gospel*” is easily analyzable as reflexive hyperbole about part-importance. The importance is portrayed as possibly higher even than that of a “*key component*.”

<sup>15</sup>From <https://shapeandcolour.wordpress.com/2009/01/23/jason-de-caires-taylor/> (accessed 29 June 2017).

<sup>16</sup>See for instance <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/03/30/love-is-walking-hand-in-hand-schulz-peanuts/> (accessed 27 June 2017). Example (23) is from this site.

<sup>17</sup>From [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/209672.Charles\\_M\\_Schulz](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/209672.Charles_M_Schulz) (accessed 29 June 2017).

Finally, we should comment on the fact that all the broadly reflexive relationships considered in this article have a degree scale that is, arguably at least, closed, in the sense of having a maximum. Scales of likeness, graded parthood, and integration are clearly closed, but presumably also there is a limit to how much one can mentally identify with someone, and so on. However, in principle, open-scale relationships could be broadly reflexive (though not reflexive) and thus support hyperbole. We leave it to further research whether this arises in actual discourse. Perhaps the sign-quality scale should be considered open.

### **Some related phenomena**

The literal meaning of hyperboles can be logically absurd. People say logically absurd things like “*I had absolutely minus amounts of [sleep]*” (McCarthy & Carter, 2004), and “*I agree with you 200%*.”<sup>18</sup> In the latter example, using a value beyond the logically possible maximum amount of agreement boosts the emphasis or other affect, leaving the intended, notably high, level of agreement itself to be at most 100%. The speaker is not deluded about how much agreement is logically possible, but is just using the imaginary possibility of going beyond maximum *agreement* to go beyond the intensity of *affect* that would be appropriate to that maximum: there are two different scales. The following example is directly analogous:

(27) “*Harry is even more Hitler than Hitler.*”

(This and the remaining examples in this subsection were raised by the anonymous referees.) One option is to interpret this as a form of reflexive hyperbole concerning likeness, taking it as if it were “*Harry is even more like Hitler than Hitler.*” The literal meaning then goes absurdly beyond maximum possible likeness, and (27) conveys more intense affect than “*Harry is Hitler*” would when reflexively hyperbolic about likeness.

However, reflexive hyperbolic interpretation is a special sort of interpretation, and may need special context to become appropriate. So a more normal approach to (27) might be to exploit an entrenched metaphorical meaning of the first occurrence of “*Hitler*” in terms of salient characteristics such as intense dictatorship, and thus understand that Harry has these characteristics even more strongly than Hitler does. He out-does Hitler on key Hitlerish things. Notice that this works in the direction of *reducing* the likeness to Hitler himself. Analogous comments apply to the construction “*to out-X X*” as in “*Jason Bourne out-Bonds Bond,*” Bourne being a secret agent in a well-known film series.

By contrast, consider an apparent tautology such as “*Alison is just being Alison,*” which would normally be taken to mean that Alison is behaving in a typical way for her. It is difficult to propose reflexive hyperbole as an alternative interpretation. For instance, it would be strange to interpret this as saying that Alison has a notably strong likeness to Alison or is very convincingly acting herself.

Consider now the following:

(28) “*Baseball isn’t just life. It’s more important than that.*”

Let’s assume that “*life*” in (28) means human life overall, with baseball a part of it. Then one literal meaning of (28) is that baseball is more important *in human life* than it would be if baseball were identical to human life. So that literal meaning is absurdly implying that baseball plays a more important role in that whole than the whole does. But a different interpretation of (28) is that baseball has importance *to the universe* that goes beyond the its notably high importance in human life (the latter importance being conveyed by reflexive hyperbole on the implicit baseball-is-human-life). This no longer involves that logical absurdity, because there is a switch to a different importance scale.

<sup>18</sup>From [https://investorshub.advn.com/boards/read\\_msg.aspx?message\\_id=129965341](https://investorshub.advn.com/boards/read_msg.aspx?message_id=129965341) (accessed 30/7/17).



## Conclusion

This article has explored reflexive hyperbole, a neglected but widespread type of hyperbole, arising with relationships that have the special property of broad reflexivity. It provides a deep, unprecedented unification of various different ways in which a Y-BE-X clause can be interpreted in suitable contexts. These ways differ only on which broadly reflexive relationship is involved. Reflexive hyperbolic interpretations also provide a new account of certain types of corrective juxtaposition and of the intensifying use of “literally.”

Reflexive hyperbole about likeness and about part-importance serves to push forward the theory of metaphor and metonymy. Previous metaphor theory, while much concerned with likeness and hyperbole, does not systematically deliver hyperbole about likeness, whether reflexive or not. Reflexive hyperbolic interpretation is useful for understanding that strong likeness is intended without needing to retrieve or discover any particular likeness, as would be required by existing metaphor theories. But it can also be used together with standard metaphorical interpretation to boost the level of understood likeness and/or to focus attention on the target/source likeness itself as well as on the message about the target *per se*.

Equally, the standard notion of whole-for-part metonymy does not itself provide reflexive hyperbole about part-importance, even though one could categorize the latter as a special type of metonymy. The contrast between such hyperbole and whole-for-part metonymy helps to illuminate just what sorts of part-importance are involved in each.

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