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Hyperbolic Figures

Abstract: It's natural for hyperbole to mix with metaphor and irony, and other figures of speech. How do they mix together and what kind of compound, if any, arises out of the mixing? In tackling this question, I shall argue that thinking of hyperbolic figures along the lines familiar from ironic metaphor compounds is a temptation we should resist. Looking in particular at hyperbolic metaphor and hyperbolic irony, I argue, they don't yield a new encompassing compound figure with one figure building on another. Instead, what we have is one dominant figure – metaphor and irony, respectively – that is coloured with hyperbolic tinges. So, what does hyperbole bring to the mixing pot? I suggest we should think of hyperbole in hyperbolic figures as being an interpretive effect, modulating the working of the figure it mixes with, and thereby rendering it more emphatic.

Keywords: hyperbole, metaphor, irony, hyperbolic metaphor, hyperbolic irony, ironic metaphor, order of interpretation

1 Introduction

Hyperbole is the neglected sister of metaphor and irony. As Carston & Wearing (2005: 79) put it, “it’s a less interesting, substantial or effective use of language, perhaps even facile or trivial” compared to other figures. It’s not uncommon to hear people making utterances such as “the best thing ever”, “the greatest”, “unbelievable”, “jaw-droppingly great”, “tremendous”, “triumphant”, “formidable”. These promote something as being better than it is. Conversely, someone may present things in a more negative light than justifiable, saying that it is “all terrible”, “absolutely horrendous”, “a real killer”, “the end of the world”, and so forth. Clearly, what one says is more than what one means, whether good or bad. So, what’s the communicative function hyperbole fulfils? I argue that the point of hyperbole is *emphasis*. We do so by drawing attention that a certain order of

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things turned out to be *greater*, or *lesser*, than we expected or desired, and thus convey a degree of *greater*, or *lesser*, surprise, excitement, or frustration, disappointment, had things been otherwise.

This idea builds on recent work (Popa-Wyatt forth), where I've argued that the essence of hyperbole is to increase the salience of the target property. Key to this is overstating the gap between what one says and how one would have expected things to normally turn out. This thus increases the gap between how things actually are and how they were expected to be in order to show how much the former exceeded the latter. As a result, the target property that the speaker aims to put forward becomes much more salient than if it were expressed literally. Correlatively, by increasing the gap between reality and expectation, the speaker is also able to express a range of more intense and colourful affective responses that are typically associated with surpassed, or thwarted, expectations.

Here I want to extend this idea by looking at cases where hyperbole co-occurs with other figures of speech to form *hyperbolic figures*. This question has been recently pursued by Carston & Wearing (2015) who discuss hyperbolic compounds such as hyperbolic metaphor and hyperbolic irony as working on a similar pattern to a more familiar compound such as ironic metaphor (see Stern 2000, Bezuidenhout 2001, 2015, Camp 2006, 2012, Popa-Wyatt 2009, 2010, 2017, ms.). While I agree with Carston & Wearing that hyperbole is a “distinctive figure in its own right”, I disagree with the suggestion that hyperbolic figures are anything like a figurative compound in the way ironic metaphor is.

By figurative compounds I mean cases where two figures mesh together to form a more encompassing figure, which contains elements of both, but where only one figure fulfils the speaker's primary communicative goal, while the other is merely subservient to achieving this goal. For example, when someone utters (1) about a messy piece of handwriting, illegible and covered in ink blotches:

(1) What delicate lacework! (from Stern 2000)

what the speaker means is that the handwriting is illegible. The utterance is intended both metaphorically and ironically, but the speaker's main communicative point is ironic, not metaphorical. The metaphor merely serves as input to achieve ironic purposes.

This raises a familiar question of the order in which two figures in a compound are to be interpreted. This is important because it is telling of the kind of constraints they put on the interpretation of each other, and ultimately the kind of compound they yield. In cases of ironic metaphor, the ironic content is conditioned on the metaphorical content, which thus functions as the object of ironic

ridicule (Popa-Wyatt 2017; see Stern 2000, Bezuidenhout 2001). This suggests that the compound is primarily ironic in that irony corresponds to the overarching intention, whereas metaphor is subsumed to making an ironic point.

Can we explain hyperbole mixing with other figures along similar lines? I argue this is a temptation we should resist. This is because in such hyperbolic mixing, the hyperbole is neither an overarching figure subsuming the other figure in its service, nor does it function as a vehicle in the service of the other figure. In both hyperbolic metaphor and hyperbolic irony, the speaker is concerned primarily to make a metaphoric and ironic point, respectively, not a hyperbolic one. This means that hyperbole doesn't lend a substantive content to the mixture in the way metaphor does in ironic metaphor. Instead, the hyperbole modulates the working of the figure it mixes with, so that it intensifies its effects. Thus, we can think of the contribution made by hyperbole as an interpretive effect that infuses hyperbolic tinges into the figure it mixes with.

2 Hyperbolic figures

It is very common for hyperbole to mix with other figures of speech within a single utterance. Carston and Wearing (2015: 81) list some examples:

- (2) That child is the devil incarnate. (*hyperbole and metaphor*)
- (3) They go about together like Siamese twins. (*hyperbole and simile*)
- (4) The gargantuan paunch over there is my step-father. (*hyperbole and metonymy*)
- (5) It's the end of the world. (*hyperbole and irony*)
[describing someone's angry reaction when he finds he's got a parking fine]
- (6) Those tickets cost an arm and a leg. (*hyperbole and idiom*)
- (7) Money is the root of all evil. (*hyperbole and proverb*)
[in response to a situation in which someone has claimed a little more on their expenses than they were strictly entitled to].

What makes hyperbole so flexible in mixing with all sorts of figurative uses, as well as stock phrases like idioms and proverbs? In this paper I will focus on

hyperbolic metaphor and hyperbolic irony as two paradigmatic cases of hyperbole mixing with other figures of speech.

To understand what goes on in such hyperbolic figures, we can ask which figure is conditioned upon the other? In other words, what is the *logical order of interpretation*?¹ Second, how do hearers interpret such combinations? In other words, what is the *temporal order of interpretation*? Applied to hyperbolic figures the question becomes: do we first interpret the utterance hyperbolically and only then determine the other figurative interpretation, or the other way round?

I will approach these questions by looking at parallel arguments deployed in relation to ironic metaphor. There, the order of interpretation has been *the* driving argument to establish the distinctiveness of metaphor and irony (see Stern 2000, Bezuidenhout 2001, Popa-Wyatt 2010, 2017). The distinctiveness uncovered has taken the form of distinct *types of content or speech-acts* – where metaphorical content is asserted; ironic content is implicated. A more general way to uncover the distinctiveness is to say that metaphor is in the business of putting forward a *representation* of the world, while irony is in the business of *evaluating or expressing* attitudes of the speaker towards the thoughts or actions of others (Popa 2009, Carston & Wearing 2015). Such differences are indicative of a certain complementarity between metaphor and irony, so when they combine together it is natural for a metaphorical description of a situation to serve as object of critical ironic attitudes. Can we conclude a similar kind of distinctiveness between hyperbole and metaphor on the one hand, and hyperbole and irony on the other, by looking at their respective mixing?

This is a question that Carston & Wearing (2015) take seriously, especially given that the status of hyperbole is less clear. Assuming that we can divide, following Stern (2000: 236), figurative uses in two distinct families of figures – *M*-type and *I*-type (with *M*-type family including figures that work roughly on the pattern of metaphor, such as simile, metonymy, synecdoche, oxymoron; and *I*-type family including figures that work roughly on the pattern of irony and understatement) – where shall we group hyperbole? Stern lumps it in the *I*-type family. On the other hand, Sperber & Wilson (2008), Wilson & Carston (2007), lump hyperbole with metaphor. Elsewhere I've argued that hyperbole is more of a mixed figure in that it has characteristics of both *M*-family and *I*-family: it is descriptive like metaphor, and evaluative like irony (Popa 2009: 270).

Carston & Wearing (2015) go further in refining this distinction. They argue that hyperbole is a figure in its own right: it is neither like metaphor nor like irony,

1 Stern 2000, Bezuidenhout 2001, 2015, Camp 2006, 2012, Popa-Wyatt 2009, 2010, 2017, ms.

though it has features in common with each. It is like metaphor in that it describes the world as experienced by the speaker, though by appeal to “a shift of magnitude along a dimension which is intrinsic to the encoded meaning of the hyperbole vehicle” (2015: 88). It is like irony in that it expresses an evaluation, though it’s an evaluation of the state of affairs in the world, and not of other people’s thoughts and expectations. As Carston & Wearing note, a hyperbolic speaker is expressing that she finds the situation she is describing to “have (much) more of some property than she expected or wanted” (2015: 90). This is something that transpires in typical paraphrases of hyperboles along the lines that there is “more or less of [some property] *F* than the speaker expected (or wanted).[...] the paraphrase of what the speaker meant doesn’t merely capture a quantity or degree which is more factually accurate than the encoded quantity; it also expresses an element of evaluation of the state of affairs described” (2015: 85). This is very much on the right line; however Carston and Wearing are not explicit about how this evaluation comes about.

Walton (2017) provides precisely such a mechanism to account for this evaluative component. He argues that in overstating, the speaker is representing, by what she says, a quantity as being larger than what she asserts it to be. To measure how much larger, he introduces a notion of “salient contrast” to characterise what the speaker is especially concerned to indicate is not the case in a context. Thus, an utterance counts as hyperbole if the distance between what the speaker says and the salient contrast is bigger than the distance between what she actually means and the salient contrast. In Popa-Wyatt (forth) I propose to think of the salient contrast as a *normative point* on the relevant scale, which captures the range of expectations, hopes and desires that are raised to salience only to convey that they have been either surpassed or thwarted. This is useful because it helps locating what is meant on the relevant scale, as a point in between what is said and what is expected, hoped or desired. What matters is that even though what is meant is *more* (or *less*) than what is said, it’s still *less* (or *more*) than what would normally be expected.

Thus, the point of hyperbole is *emphasis*. By overstating that things are *greater* (*lesser*) than expected, hoped, or desired, we shift the salience of the target property, thus making it more salient. This is, after all, the whole point in exaggerating: presenting reality in a more emphatic light. In addition, the speaker is expressing surprise or other relevant affect in reaction to how much, or how little, our expectations have been either exceeded or thwarted. The bigger the gap between what the speaker says and how she expects things to be, the bigger the contrast between expectations and reality is, thus eliciting a greater sense of surprise. Conversely, the smaller the gap is (i.e. the closer to the literal meaning we get), the less surprising it is.

The gist of hyperbole thus resides in conveying that things have turned out way better, or way worse, than what one might have expected, hoped or desired in the circumstances. This comparison is possible precisely because of the anchoring in the normative point, which enables to compare how things have turned out to be relative to how they were expected to be in the circumstances. In this way we are able to appreciate how much more the former exceeded, or conversely fell short of, the latter. Thus, the driving force in making a hyperbolic point is to shift the salience of the target property to make a more emphatic point, and in so doing express how one feels about the gap between how things are and how they were expected to be.

Having sketched the main features of hyperbole in pure uses, I now consider what happens when hyperbole mixes with other figures. I start with hyperbolic metaphor, and then turn to hyperbolic irony.

3 Hyperbolic metaphor

Hyperbole often co-occurs with metaphor. We often say of someone that she's a "saint", "angel", "star", "Maria Teresa"; that he's a "giant", "rocket", "dynamite", "towering figure", "devil", "genius", "Spartan", etc. Admittedly, these are worn-out metaphors. Nevertheless, they are indicative of the sense in which they count as hyperbolic. This is because the vehicle for the metaphor is also a vehicle for hyperbole in the sense that the property that it literally encodes is both a property that exploits a qualitative difference between the subject and how they are characterised, and a property that is quantifiable along a relevant scale. For example, saying of Mary

- (8) She's such an angel. Always there for you; I can't imagine my life without her.

conveys that she's extremely kind and good, ready to help, perhaps more than anyone else, but she is not really as good as an angel. What happens here is that because the property of goodness associated with "angel" is very high on a scale of human kindness, then the metaphorical properties selected as what the speaker seeks to convey will be much more intense than what a counterpart literal expression of "*she's very kind*" would be able to express.

How does mixing metaphor and hyperbole work here? Which figure is input for the other? Do we first derive metaphorical properties, and then interpret them hyperbolically? Or do we first derive the hyperbole, and then use it as input to the metaphor?

Carston and Wearing don't address this question full on, though they make useful suggestions about the distinct mechanisms involved in understanding metaphor and hyperbole, respectively. Metaphor, they say, is about a *qualitative shift*, whereas hyperbole is about a *quantitative shift*. This results in different kinds of content which bear a different relation to the literal meaning of the word used as vehicle: "hyperbolic uses involve a shift of magnitude along a dimension which is intrinsic to the encoded meaning of the hyperbole vehicle, while metaphor involves a multi-dimensional qualitative shift away from the encoded meaning of the metaphor vehicle" (2015: 86). This means that different operations are applied to adjust the meaning of words along different dimensions: metaphor involves broadening the literal meaning of the vehicle in search of similarities between distinct conceptual domains; while hyperbole involves a weakening of the stated claim. For example, saying of Mary that "*she is a saint*", they argue that "the property of being canonised is given up altogether at the same time that those literal saints who are known for their 'saintly' behaviour are excluded from the denotation on the figurative interpretation. And there's also something to the idea that these utterances have a hyperbolic quality, that in each case one has moved to a more extreme point on a *quantitative* scale (she may be virtuous but not to that extremely high degree)" (2015: 87).

What does this tell us about what goes on when metaphor and hyperbole mix? Carston and Wearing are non-specific about the order of interpretation and the kind of compound that arises. They do mention a difference in purpose: "metaphor is a bid to give precise expression to a thought or experience for which there is no literal linguistic encoding, while what is fundamental to hyperbole is the expression of an evaluation (positive or negative) of a state of affairs" (2015: 89). This suggests that we might expect hyperbole to be conditioned on metaphor, such that the hyperbolic evaluation concerns the metaphorical, and not the literal, content. This seems correct as far as it goes.² But this also suggests, if we take ironic metaphor as a paradigmatic compound, that hyperbole is the overarching figure subsuming metaphor in its scope. This doesn't seem right. Instead, I shall argue, what we get is metaphor tinged with hyperbolic effects, rather than a hyperbolic compound in the way ironic metaphor is. This is because there is no hyperbolic content feeding into a metaphorical interpretation, nor vice versa.

I shall start by noting that the relationship between metaphor and hyperbole is in practice much more intimate than Carston and Wearing take it to be. Going back to our example in (8) of Mary being an "angel", it is important to note that the utterance cannot but be interpreted metaphorically first. This is because there

² This bears on the logical order of interpretation.

is no sensible literal reading of the utterance such that hyperbole could operate first, by weakening the property that is literally associated with “angel”. If anything, “angel” taken literally might invoke a scale of worthiness or importance of supernatural beings, ranking them along their powers to help, say, including elves, fairies, oracles, angels, culminating perhaps with God. Surely, trying to find a point on this scale that is lower than the point corresponding to “angel” would be putting the cart before the horses. Instead, it would be much more natural if hyperbole operates on the metaphorical features of “angel”, so that metaphor and hyperbole work in tandem.

This provides us with a hypothesis about what the temporal order of interpretation might look like. The starting point, I assume, is for the hearer to grasp the speaker’s metaphorical intent. This need not require working out the full-blown metaphorical content. The same holds for grasping the speaker’s hyperbolic intent. In this way, the hearer can pull out interpretive characteristic resources of both metaphor and hyperbole until the computation of content is stabilised. One possibility is to work out the metaphorical interpretation under the guidance of a prospective hyperbolic interpretation. In other words, whatever metaphorical dimension and properties are chosen as relevant in context – say, in the case of “angel”, goodness, kindness, helpfulness – these are the very properties which will further undergo a hyperbolic operation of downscaling in order to convey properties of human-like goodness, allowing faults and failings. Thus, an utterance of (8) conveys that Mary is a good-hearted person with a natural propensity to help others, but not at any time, and without fail.

In addition to making processing more efficient, this interleaved interpretation presents a further advantage of setting clear constraints on the metaphorical interpretation. Instead of undergoing an open-ended metaphorical search of similarities, as when metaphor is used for its own sake, we can expect that in hyperbolic metaphor the metaphorical search can be narrowed down to only those features which can be further weakened via a hyperbolic operation of scaling down the target property. Thus, metaphor and hyperbole undergo an interleaved processing.

Now, what kind of figure do we get out of this mix? Is hyperbolic metaphor anything like an ironic metaphor compound? I argue we should resist this temptation. In ironic metaphor like (1), the speaker is not committed to being metaphorical. Rather, she exploits the communicative power of metaphor to achieve ironic purposes. In contrast, in hyperbolic metaphor like (8), the speaker aims primarily to make a metaphoric point. The hyperbole is neither an overarching figure, in the way irony is in ironic metaphor, nor is it subsumed to the metaphorical content. Thus, there is no parallel structure to that of the compound that we find in ironic metaphor. Instead, the metaphor is conveyed as the primary figure, whereas the hyperbole serves to render the metaphorical effects even more colourful and

forceful than they would have otherwise been. This suggests that hyperbole is more like an interpretive effect, modulating the metaphor with *hyperbolic tinges*, rather than as a full-blown hyperbolic content as when used for its own sake.

Having considered simple cases of hyperbolic metaphor, I argue that the analysis extends straightforwardly to more creative uses as below:

- (9) She's the Empire State Building.
- (10) Writing a PhD thesis may sometimes be a painful marathon.
- (11) After winning the English cup Manchester United fans reached the Everest of optimism for winning the European cup. (BBC-radio 4)
- (12) Sara's bedroom is the size of Cornwall (Carston & Wearing 2015; from Wilson)
- (13) Here I am, brain the size of a planet, and ask me to take you to the bridge. Call that job satisfaction, 'cause I don't. (Adam Douglas, *Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy*)

What stands out in these examples is that the characteristic metaphorical effects are rendered more intense and colourful precisely by the choice of a vehicle that is also a vehicle for hyperbolic exaggeration. For example, what we exaggerate in (9) is the impressive stature of a woman; in (10) the sustained effort that writing a thesis requires; in (11) that Manchester United fans were extremely optimistic about winning the European cup; in (12) that Sara's living arrangements were very spacious and comfortable; and finally in (13) that Marvin is a highly intelligent robot.

These are colourful metaphors not only because of the multi-dimensionality of the vehicle used, but also precisely because these are vehicles that can invoke a surprising scale for measuring the target property. Thus, by choosing a metaphoric vehicle that is at one extreme end of the relevant scale, the speaker is able to convey more emphatic metaphorical effects than had she chosen a less evocative vehicle.

4 Hyperbolic irony

Irony and hyperbole function very differently in conversation. We use irony typically to criticise or complain about something or other which hasn't lived up to

our expectations. We do so by pretending to do one thing in order to draw attention to something else we aim to complain about. It's dramatising something, in a ridiculing way, with a view to mocking, disparaging, expressing contempt, and thereby conveying some inverted content. Hyperbole, on the other hand, is typically used to draw attention to how much something has exceeded our expectations, whether they have been surpassed or thwarted. By presenting something as larger, or smaller, than expected, hoped or desired, we make the target property salient, thereby making a more emphatic point.

So, both hyperbole and irony are evaluative: they are both in the business of expressing how the speaker feels about how things turn out compared to how they were expected, hoped or desired. They differ however in their object of evaluation: hyperbole involves an evaluation of some state of affairs in the world, whereas irony involves evaluating someone's thoughts, hopes and expectations, with a view to ridiculing them. Now, if both hyperbole and irony are evaluative, which one is the driving figure when they mix together?

Let us consider some examples:

- (14) (*after a boring movie*) I was on the edge of my seat. (Wilson 2017)
- (15) (*about a dump of a house advertised as perfect for a romantic weekend*) This is absolutely the most amazing spot for a quiet weekend. That's all we dreamt about.
- (16) (*to a lousy friend*) Wow, that was the most brilliant piece of advice I've ever had in my entire life. The best friend ever, that's what you are.

Clearly, these are intended ironically, but there is also an element of exaggeration. However, in contrast to cases of hyperbolic metaphor (see §3), where the vehicle for hyperbole is the same as the vehicle for metaphor, in (14)-(16) the vehicle for hyperbole need not be the same as the vehicle for irony. Hyperbole might be identified locally at the level of words and expressions which encode properties that can be located on a relevant scale. Irony, in contrast, is not necessarily lodged in words, but it's a matter of contextual contrast between what the speaker presents herself to be saying and known/manifest facts about how the world really is.

That irony is global in this sense, whereas hyperbole is local, might suggest an order of interpretation where hyperbole is derived first, so that irony can build on it. This doesn't seem right, though. This is because if hyperbole were interpreted first, then the utterance would convey that a weaker description in fact holds. This weaker description, however, would provide less of an incentive

to grasp the contrast between what the speaker says and how things are in reality, compared to what one would have expected, hoped or desired them to be. To see this, compare the non-hyperbolic utterance in (17) to the hyperbolic one in (18):

(17) Sure, he's very clever.

(18) He's a genius.

(18) is clearly stronger in effect than (17), but this would get lost if “genius” were taken to mean merely “very clever”.

So, what's the role of hyperbole in the mix? Various people have noted that hyperbole works to facilitate the perception of irony (Kreuz and Roberts 1995). Wilson (2017) notes that hyperbole functions as a cue to the speaker's mocking, scornful, or contemptuous attitude. For example, in (14), the speaker exaggerates the extent of her excitement only to ridicule the expectation that the film would be exciting. Similarly, in (15), the speaker exaggerates the extent to which the chosen house might be thought to be an excellent spot for a romantic weekend, only to ridicule the expectation that it might be thought so.

What hyperbole does then is to exaggerate the claim literally expressed, making it less credible, so that it's unlikely to be taken at face value. By heightening its ridiculousness, it can thus function as a cue for the hearer to look for other interpretation than literal. This does not mean that the hearer has to infer the hyperbolic content by scaling down the literal claim to a weaker claim. If that were so, then the weaker claim would be a less suitable claim to be derided ironically. So, hyperbole is a cue rather than a full-blown content used as input for irony to build on.

Carston and Wearing make precisely this point when they say that the object of the ironical attitude is the proposition literally expressed:

the thought that is metarepresented and dissociated from [...] is the literal proposition expressed rather than a representation containing an ad hoc concept recovered by pragmatic weakening of the encoded meaning [...] If it were first adjusted, then that clue to the intended ironic meaning would be lost and even if a dissociative attitude were recognised the proposition echoed would less obviously be a thought to be derided (2015: 88).

This is important because the ironic ridiculing attitude is expressed toward the literal claim, and not toward the claim resulting from a hyperbolic scaling down or scaling up. Indeed, as Carston and Wearing (2015: 84) note, when hyperbole is used ironically, it may be used to convey mockery toward the proposition literally expressed.

Imagine, for example, I utter (19) in response to you serving me a considerable portion of cake, after I've told you I'm on a slimming diet.

(19) This cake is tiny.

Clearly, it's not the case that the cake is small; after all it's a normal size portion. It's just bigger than I wanted. So, if there is a sense in which I'm exaggerating, it's not exaggerating how small it is, but rather how big it is. Thus, I'm not only hyperbolic, but also ironic because I say something I don't mean. What I mean instead is that you gave me a bigger piece of cake than I expected, thereby drawing attention to how much this fell short of my expectations.

Carston and Wearing are careful to note that if such cases are used to express any ridiculing or mockery, that is due to irony, and not to hyperbole. This is evidence for them that hyperbole is not in the business of expressing a characteristic tone of voice, like irony does. On the other hand, it has been suggested by Kreuz and Roberts (1995) that the ironic tone of voice may be confounded with the presence of hyperbole, contending that it may be the case that "the ironic tone of voice is nothing more than the use of exaggeration". I don't have the space to delve into this issue here, but clearly there are multiple uses of irony in the absence of hyperbolic exaggeration.³ Notwithstanding, Kreuz and Roberts are right in pointing out that hyperbole has significant effects on the perception of irony, making it more manifest in some cases that the speaker has ironic intent. Carston and Wearing also note that "the excessiveness of the metarepresented propositional content plays a very helpful role in cueing the dissociative attitude of the speaker" (2015: 88).

So, if the attitude expressed in hyperbolic irony is the characteristic ironic mockery, what does hyperbole add to the mix? Here I want to draw attention to an interesting effect that arises out of mixing irony and hyperbole, which hasn't received much attention. This concerns the idea of *attitude transfer* from the perspective that the speaker pretends to be putting forward (call it *F*) towards the perspective which she presents as object of ridicule (call it *G*).⁴ The suggestion is that by giving due weight to the role of pretence in understanding irony, we can see what role hyperbole plays in the mixing. Essentially, the hyperbole helps

³ In obviously ironic utterances – where the utterance clearly sits in contrast to the known facts – there is less need for such cues (such as sarcastic intonation), and skilled users of irony may minimise these extra linguistic cues in order to slow the listener's inference of the ironic implicature. This is a common strategy among British speakers who relish appearing sincere to a naive audience, relying on the hearer's perception of a clash with known facts. This is culturally regarded there as being funnier.

⁴ Thanks to John Barnden for encouraging me to explore this point.

boosting the pretence by making the pretend thought/perspective *F* that is put forward even more ridiculous than it would have otherwise been, had the speaker used a non-hyperbolic vehicle.

For example, imagine we've completed a long, arduous trail, climbing various hills through undergrowth. At the end you are totally distressed showing me all the nasty scratches you've got along the way. In response I say:

(20) My darling, soon you'll need a blood transfusion.

Here the target of ironic ridicule is the fact that the addressee's complaints could be found a justifiable source of lamentation. Thus, by way of exaggerating the pretence the speaker has more free room of manoeuvre to put the hearer in the mind of a related thought/perspective *G*, as long as the pretence can be taken to allude to or echo specific expectations related to the situation at hand.⁵

There is a further implication of exploiting hyperbole for ironic purposes. The mockery or ridiculing attitude one would have toward the kind of pretend thought/perspective (*F*) can be transferred towards the targeted thought/perspective (*G*), though it will be a less strong attitude toward *G* than toward *F*. Nevertheless, there is a correlation in the strength of the evaluation from *F* to *G*: the more ridiculous the pretence associated with the literal claim, the more heightened the ironic attitude expressed. Thus, for example in (19), were I to describe the cake as "minuscule", "microscopic", instead of "tiny" or "small", we might expect that I was able to express a greater sense of frustration or dissatisfaction with the waiter who ignored my request. In short, there is a certain correlation between the degree of ridiculousness of the claim put forward, and the intensity of the mocking attitude towards anyone who would entertain such a claim.

Wrapping up, we might ask the same question that we asked about hyperbolic metaphor. Here, it would be: what kind of compound, if any, do we have from mixing hyperbole and irony? The answer is that the mixing, again, doesn't yield a compound with a structure similar to that of ironic metaphor where metaphor and irony condition and constrain one another. Instead, the speaker is making primarily an ironic point, if only a bit more colourful and forceful due to hyperbolic tinges. The overall effect of using hyperbole is not to convey a weaker claim than literally stated, but to exploit the exaggeration for ironic purposes. This thus makes the ironic point more emphatic, and thereby eliciting a more heightened attitude or affect.

⁵ See Currie (2006), Wilson (2006), Clark, H. H. and R. J. Gerrig. (1984), Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995), Walton (1990, 2017), Popa-Wyatt (2014).

5 Conclusion

In this paper I looked at cases of hyperbole mixing with metaphor and irony, respectively. The starting point was whether we can think of such mixtures as a figurative compound along the lines familiar from ironic metaphor compounds. I've argued this a temptation we should resist. This is because when hyperbole mixes with either metaphor, or irony, the result is not a new encompassing compound where one figure builds on another. Instead, the figure that is primarily communicated is coloured with hyperbolic tinges. Hyperbolic metaphor is nothing more than a metaphor with a more emphatic point. Hyperbolic irony is nothing more than irony with a more emphatic point. So, what else does hyperbole bring to the mixing pot? I suggested we should think of hyperbole in hyperbolic figures as being an interpretive effect, modulating the characteristic effects of the figure it mixes with. This is why hyperbole is so versatile in mixing with all sorts of figures of speech.

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