

A Pragmatic Analysis of Hyperbolic Expressions in Shakespeare's Hamlet

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الملخص:

يعالج هذا البحث حدوث صيغ المبالغة في مسرحية هاملت. لقد درست المبالغة في المنطق والادب، الا ان الدراسات التي وجهت لتناول المبالغة كصيغة مجازية مستقلة هي قليلة. ويؤكد البحث على الطبيعة التفاعلية للمبالغة. وفي مسرحية هاملت، تلعب المبالغة، بالإضافة الى الصيغ المجازية الاخرى، دورا بارزا في تشكيل جو المسرحية الفريد من نوعه. وتستخدم صيغ المبالغة كوسيلة لتحقيق غايات اخرى. ففي بعض الاحيان هي تعبر عن الدهشة او الغضب، وفي احيان اخرى، تضخم الحيرة النفسية للشخصية. لذلك اي حدوث للمبالغة يسترعي ابلغ اهتمام القارئ او المشاهد ولان القليل من الاهتمام قد انصب على دراسة المبالغة، ولغياب الاطار النظري اللغوي التداولي لتحليل المبالغة، اتخذ البحث تحليل هذه الظاهرة هدفا له.

Abstract

This paper examines the occurrence of hyperbole in Hamlet. Hyperbole has been studied in rhetoric and literary contexts. The paper emphasizes the interactive nature of hyperbole. In Hamlet, hyperbole, in addition to other tropes, play a very significant role in Hamlet means for an end. Sometimes, it expresses surprise, or anger, in other times; it exaggerates the character's psychological ambivalence. Thus, any instance of hyperbole, attracts the readers' or audiences' utmost attention.

Since little attention has been paid to the study of hyperbole and there has been no linguistic and pragmatic considerable framework for the analysis of hyperbole, investigation has been assigned as the objective of this research.

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with hyperbole in one of Shakespeare's big tragedies. It is a regular feature that speakers exaggerate narrative features and make assertions that are overstated. Such hyperbolic expressions usually pass without challenge by readers.

Hyperbole has a long history of study as a rhetorical figure of speech in written texts, and has been, since the time of ancient Greek, one of many

figures of speech discursual within the general framework of rhetoric, which for many centuries formed, along with grammar, the two principal pillars of language study. Rhetoric, in the ancient world, was associated with persuasive speech and the exercise of power, and centuries of treatises on eloquence and techniques of expression testify to this.

The present paper aims to explore the ways in which hyperbole is used in written texts. The study cannot, by definition, be exhaustive, since hyperbole may be both conventional and creative, and the possibilities for linguistic creativity are infinite. What we shall attempt to do is to illustrate some of the hyperbolic expressions in the text. Hyperbole is defined as a form of extremity, an exaggeration that either magnifies or minimizes some real state of affairs. It is hypothesized that English writers reflect the English reserved character when they write in matters related to themselves, despite the occurrence of instances of hyperbole.

Hamlet is one of the greatest tragedies Shakespeare had written. Hamlet, the hero, had different morals towards every character he meets. He adopts himself to every person and situation he meets and, hence, every character has a different opinion of him. There is much discussion and little agreement among his critics about his mood and what it implies. The text of Hamlet to which we refer is R. R Young, London: University Tutorial Press Ltd, 1965.

2. Previous Studies on Hyperbole

Although hyperbole has been, since late antiquity, one of the many figures of speech discussed within the general framework of rhetoric, the emphasis has been primarily laid on defining, classifying and illustrating this trope. In contemporary language theories, the paucity of studies addressing hyperbole is most notable, probably because in other disciplines it has been considered a classic trope whose study belongs to that of rhetoric. Thus, no serious attention has been paid to the study of hyperbole in the domain of linguistics, psychology, philosophy or literary criticism. Most of the empirical work on hyperbole has involved comparison of frequency and use in different cultures (e.g. Spitzbardt 1963, Cohen 1987, Edelman et al, 1989). Apart from these cross-cultural studies, most interest in hyperbole has been almost invariably directed at explaining the psychological processes operating on their understanding, being much of this literature subsumed within studies of verbal irony or theories of humor.

McCarthy and Carter (2004) have argued in favour of a conversational and discourse analysis approach when investigating the role of exaggeration

in naturally-occurring speech. Their study reveals that key recurring items such as listener acceptance token, laughter, and listeners' own further contribution to the emerging hyperbolic context are crucial to the interpretation of hyperboles as joint activities between conversational partners.

Saeed (2006) analyzed understatement and overstatement linguistically, rhetorically and pragmatically in selected literary letters in English and Arabic. The aim of her contrastive study was to identify and investigate the features of understatement and overstatement.

3. Grice's Pragmatic Model (1975)

Grice's Model in pragmatics is known as the conversational implicature in which he develops a theory of relationships among an expression, its meaning, the speaker's, and the implication of the utterance. He postulates a cooperative principle and a set of maxims. This principle is introduced to show that the differences in meaning the philosophers noticed in sentences using the same sentence itself.

Instead of proposing rules for successful communication, Grice prefers to speak of maxims which participants conversationally adhere to in communication. His pragmatic theory proposes that conversation is usually a cooperative activity, and that in all communications there is a general agreement between the speaker and the hearer to be called the cooperative principle : *make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.* Grice gives a number of sub-maxims. These are as follows;

Maxim of Quality:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Quantity:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relevance : Be relevant

Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous;

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.

If the speaker does not observe these maxims he may violate, opt out, clash or flout them in which case a kind of implicature ensues since Grice has no term for this, Bach and Harnish (1979 : 167) adapt the neutral term "infringement" for any failure to fulfill a maxim. Grice distinguishes between the speaker secretly breaking them, e.g., by lying, while he terms violating the maxims; and overtly breaking them for some linguistic effect, which he calls flouting. Finch (2000 : 160) draws a distinction between flouting and violation. Violation of a maxim involves some elements of communication failure, i.e., providing too little, or too much whereas flouting is apparent rather than real violation. On

Grice's account, hyperbole is a flouting of the maxim of Quality (Do not say what you believe to be false).

4. Hyperbole, Irony and Metaphor

In addition to hyperbole, irony and metaphor are recurring tropes in Hamlet. Therefore, it is felt necessary, at this stage of the study, to distinguish among these concepts. Hyperbole is defined as a form of extremity and exaggeration that either magnifies or minimizes some real states of affairs. Irony is defined as saying the contrary of what one means, or saying one thing but meaning another, as praising in order to blame and blaming in order to praise.

According to classical rhetoric, in metaphor, hyperbole and irony, the encoded literal meaning is replaced by a figurative meaning. On Grice's account, metaphor, hyperbole and irony are blatant violations/floutings of the maxim of truthfulness, "Do not say what you believe to be false", designed to convey a related true implicature. The only difference is in the type of figurative implicature conveyed: with metaphor it is a related simile, with hyperbole it is a weaker proposition and with irony it is the opposite of what was said. There is no more similarity between metaphor and hyperbole than there is between metaphor and irony, or hyperbole and irony. Each involves a different but related pattern of inference. McCarthy and Carter (2004: 153) believe that "...hyperbole seems to be a recurring phenomenon in ironic utterances."

In literature, Gibbs (1993: 262) states that irony is concerned with the technique of using incongruity to suggest a distinction between reality and expectation, e.g. saying one thing and meaning another with the audience aware of both.

Metaphor, which is making a similarity between two dissimilar things, is often interpreted with the two expressions. Consider the following example from Hamlet;

Hamlet I'll speak daggers to her, but use none;
My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites-
How in my words so ever she be shent,
To give them seals, never my soul, consent. III. ii P. 127

Hamlet is invited by Polonius to speak to his mother, the Queen, so that a solution to Hamlet's predicament would be arrived at. Hamlet uses the metaphor of dagger to show that his discourse with his mother will be so cruel. He wants to confirm his words by putting them into action.

Hamlet [Aside] A little more than kin, and less than kind. I. ii P.15

Hamlet is responding to the King's enquiry that Hamlet is not in his mood. The King addresses him as "my cousin" and "my son", but Hamlet exploits the

opportunity to direct his criticism to the King. The meaning is that I'm closer to you than a mere relative, because you are supposed to be my father now, but not very kindly disposed to you. This playing on words example implies a sense of irony.

Hamlet So excellent a king, that was, to this
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother. I. ii P. 19

This is an example of metaphor. Hamlet is making an indirect comparison between his father and the new king. The comparison indicates a severe criticism to the King.

Hamlet It was brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there. II. ii P. 111

The exchange now is between Hamlet and Polonius. He is speaking ironically about Polonius. Hamlet continues to treat Polonius unkindly; perhaps this is a feature of his assumed madness.

5. Hyperbolic Expressions in Hamlet

Intuitively, what happens in hyperbole is that the meaning communicated by use of a particular word or phrase differs from the linguistically-encoded 'literal' meaning assigned by the grammar. It is argued that the encoded meaning of a word or phrase is ®. The encoded meaning typically undergoes pragmatic processes of broadening when an utterance is understood. In interpreting hyperbole, the hearer uses his encyclopedic knowledge of the exaggerated concept as a starting point

for inferring the concept the speaker wants to express, and the implications he intends to convey. Having derived enough implications to satisfy his expectations of relevance, he stops. This framework for explaining and assimilating hyperbole is useful in understanding the following instances extracted from Hamlet.

BERNARDO Have you had quiet guard?
FRANSISCO Not a mouse stirring. I. i P.1

The play begins with the changing of the guard on a cold winter's night. Fransisco, to make sure that he has quiet guard, reassures his friend that the guard is so calm that a mouse could not move. This idea is not conveyed directly but through an example of implicature. The implicature overstates the situation i.e., we have an instance of hyperbole. As can clearly be seen, this hyperbolic expression violates the maxim of relevance since Bernardo uses a yes no question and receives an answer which, overtly has

no relation to his question. Any plain or direct answer would not have the same effect on the hearer. In other words, the use of hyperbole in this particular situation attracts the attention of both the readers and/or the audience of the performance on stage. A good reading of the play shows that the situation is not that secure as Fransisco is trying to imply.

KING The head is not more native to the heart,
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father. I. ii P.15

Here is a hyperbole which takes the form of a flattery. The head reasons out and puts into practice what the heart wishes. The King, as a habit, flatters Polonius. On the other hand he carefully has to acknowledge the favoured social position of the Lord Chamberlain. A clear violation of the maxims of quantity and relevance can be observed. The King is saying too much and indirectly implying his intention. The significance of this hyperbole lies in the King's attempt to get Polonius' support.

KING This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet
Sits smiling to my heart, in grace whereof
No jocund health that Denmark drinks today,
But the great canons to the clouds shall tell,
And the king's rouse the heaven shall bruit again
Re-speaking earthly thunder. Come away. I. ii p. 18-19

The King takes a good opportunity to drink. The great guns firing to tell it to the sky and the sky shall echo back the noise of the King's drunken revels. He violates/flouts the maxim of quality. There is also a violation of the quantity maxim because he is talking more than is required. The King is aware of Hamlet's state of affairs. He tries his best to bring him to practice an ordinary life. Mistakenly, he takes Hamlet's response to the Queen "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" as an agreement offered freely to the very King's planning to do something. This extract reflects the King's friendly attitude towards his attendants. The hyperbolic expression is meant to reveal the King's high spirit on this particular occasion.

HAMLET So loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visits her face too roughly. I. ii P.19

He loves her so much. He might not allow the wind visit her face far roughly. There is a flouting of the maxim of quality because the King had not got the power to prevent the wind visit her face. The hyperbolic expression

reflects a comparison between the way Hamlet's father loves his wife, the Queen, and the way the new husband treats her.

**HAMLET Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral backed meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. I. ii P.23**

The food, that was served hot at the funeral, was served cold at the wedding. Hamlet wants to show that his mother married his uncle very quickly. As far as violations are concerned, Hamlet violates the quality maxim. In reality the King has not married her in such a speed. It is hyperbole that makes it so. By the use of hyperbole, Hamlet expresses his surprise. (Colstone and Keller, 1998, cited in McCarthy and Carter, 2004). It is believed that ease of determining that a speaker is surprised increases as degree of exaggeration increases. How can his mother get married so hastily after his father's death? Pragmatically speaking, Hamlet is ironic and cynical. He exaggerates his ironic tone through the use of hyperbole. This tone is representative of his psychological ambivalence.

**HAMLET ...would the night were come!
Till then, sit still, my soul ! foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes. I. iii P.25**

Hamlet expects some tragic events. Dirty deeds will rise even though earth tries to hid them. They cannot remain hidden. Hamlet flouts the maxim of quality by saying "Though all the earth o'erwhelm them". Earth will not swallow them, of course.

**GHOST I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their sphere,
Thy knotted and combined lock to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fretful popentine. I. v p. 41**

A series of floutings to the maxim of quality is taking place: "harrow up thy soul". A harrow is a big machine with teeth, which is used to plough Hamlet's flesh. "Freeze your young blood", apparently the young blood is well known for it is hot. "Make your two eyes like stars which will jump out of sphere, your hair will be like the hair of popentine. The use of these hyperbolic expressions is so significant to the development of events in the play. They occur at a point where Hamlet is curious to be given any hint about the true story behind the killing of his father and the hasty marriage of his mother. The appearance of the ghost in this turning point, carrying all this hard news,

represents the trigger that would ignite Hamlet's subsequent reactions. No other trope, save hyperbole, would accomplish this goal.

HAMLET Haste me to know't that I, with wings as swift
As meditation of the thoughts of love
Many sweep to my revenge. I. v P. 41

Let me know it quickly, with wings quick as meditation or thoughts of love would move to my aim. If we know that Hamlet is true, we would say he is ready. But if we know that Hamlet is hesitant the idea is something else. Later on, with the advance of the play, Hamlet is proving himself hesitant. In this instance, hyperbole is overtly stated through the use of simile. He is exaggerating his speed into taking revenge, whereas a keen observation reveals that he has always sought for justifications to cover his hesitancy. Pragmatically speaking, Hamlet is violating the maxim of quantity.

OPHELIA As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of harrows – he comes before me. II. i P. 57

As if he had been released of hell he comes in front of me. The image is that he had been released of bonds.

HAMLET Do the boys carry it away?
ROSENCRANTZ Ay, that they do Hercules and his tool too. II. ii P. 79

The boys carry out this responsibility. A flouting of the maxim of quality is done. They shoulder this duty as if it was as heavy as Hercules. In classical history, Hercules changed places with Atlas, who carried the sky at his shoulder. A hyperbole takes place, because in reality the boys cannot carry them.

FIRST PLAYER Pyrrhus at Priam drives; in a rage strikes wick,
But with a whiff and wind of his fell sword
Th' unnerved father falls. Then senseless Illium
Seeming to feel his blow. II. ii P. 87

In Greek mythology Pyrrhus kills Priam. The hyperbole gets thus;

with the air that accompanies the blow he falls and with him falls Illium. A flout of the maxim of quality ensues. Though the city is senseless, it seems to feel his blow. The hyperbole is of the city with a swift falls. A hyperbole of the severity of the blow takes place.

HAMLET What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears

And cleave the general ear with horrid speech
Make mad the guilty, and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and a more, indeed,
The very faculties of eyes and ears.

II. ii P. 91

What would the actor do had he had the true passion that I have? He would drown the stage with tears, shriek, change the mad to guilty. He will amaze the face. He would split everyone's with terrifying speeches. A comparison is taking place between Hamlet and the actor's. A clear flouting to the maxim of quantity is taking place in this extract. The use of hyperbole implies a self criticism Hamlet is directing to himself. He exaggerates the reaction of the actor who performs his role with great passion and affectation in an attempt to criticize and, at the same time, to encourage himself to take revenge. It can safely be said that no other trope

can express this meaning better than hyperbole. The point to be discussed in this regard is whether Hamlet is lying in his use of this hyperbole or not. A superficial reading would suggest so, but he does not intend to deceive anyone. To lie means that the liar tries to conceal the truth to deceive someone.(McCarthy and Cater, 2004). A careful analysis would show that Hamlet is just intensifying the scene at a point where he hesitates in taking his revenge. The aim is to encourage himself to take an action.

PLAYER KING Full thirty times Phoebus' cart gone round
Neptune's salt wash and Tellus orb'd grand
And thirty dozen moons with borrowed sheen
About the world have times twelve thirtee's been
Since love our hearts and Hymens did our hands
Unite commutual in most sacred bonds. III. ii P. 115

A great promise wit reference to Greek mythology. A Greek study told how the sun was Phoebus' chariot draw across the sky each day by horses. Neptune was the Roman god of the sea; Tellus was the ancient Italian goddess of the earth. The player king reassures that their love is stronger than these things. A false hyperbole takes place. Later on we will see the fallacy of this.

QUEEN Be assured, if words be made of breath
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou most said to me. III. iv P. 145

The queen reassures Hamlet of keeping his words as a secret. Even though they will be breath of life, I will not breathe these out. We will see whether she will keep his promise or she will break it. The violation is of the maxim of quality.

HAMLET Examples, gross as earth, exhort me.

IV. iv P. 159

Many examples appear in front of Hamlet to exhort him to work. He says these examples are as big as earth. It is, of course, hyperbole.

GENTLEMAN The ocean, overpeering of his list,
Eats not the flats with more impetuous haste
Than young Laertes.

IV. v P. 167

Laertes comes like an ocean which rises above its shores. The image is of the rising tide quickly covering the flat lands of the seashore.

HAMLET I loved Ophelia, forty thousand brothers,
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

V. I P. 203

The hyperbole is that Hamlet reveals his love to Ophelia. His love exceeds the love of forty brothers altogether. He violates the maxim of quality by not telling the truth. Only after her death, we come to know that Hamlet loves Ophelia to this extent.

Conclusions

In line with the studies advocating a conversational and discourse analysis approach, this paper has attempted to provide a general framework for the description and understanding of hyperbole in interaction, a long neglected trope despite its pervasive frequency of occurrence and co-occurrence with other figures in everyday speech.

We have, hopefully, explored the role of conversational interaction in the collaborative conversation and message comprehension of exaggerated remarks.

The results of the samples discussed may also serve to demonstrate that the role of hyperbole is not rare or limited to poetic situations, but rather, and given that hardly ever do they pose problems of comprehension, they are happening everywhere features in everyday conversation. This adheres to a prevailing view among figurative language researches, namely that figures provide parts of the figurative foundation of everyday thought (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1950, Gibbs 1994, Turner 1998). The samples chosen point out that this figure of speech is used in poetic language as well as in everyday speech on the same footing. English writers reflect the English reserved character when they write about matters related to themselves.

There is a pervasive use of hyperbolic expressions in Hamlet. Hyperbole is used as a means for an end. Sometimes, a character uses hyperbole to express surprise, sometimes it is used to express anger or self-reproach. In other examples, hyperbole shows that the character is ironic, cynical, or humors.

The use of hyperbole is usually accompanied by a flouting of one or more of Grice's maxims. This flouting draws much attention in comparison with the adherence to these maxims.

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