AT THE RISK OF EXAGGERATING: HOW DO LISTENERS REACT TO HYPERBOLE?

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Abstract

The intensive focus on the reception process of figures of speech, in terms of the psychological processes operated on their understanding, explains that nowadays a crucial limitation in figurative language theories is the production process of non-literal forms, as joint activities between speaker and hearer. Since the object of study has traditionally been the figurative sentence, either in isolation or in the context of an artificially constructed text, it is not surprising that the collaborative nature of figures has been overlooked. This paper focuses on hyperbole, a long neglected trope, despite its pervasive frequency of occurrence and co-occurrence with other tropes in everyday speech. It attempts to explore, from a conversation and discourse analysis framework, the ways in which hyperbole is used in interaction, paying special attention to listeners' responses, since any full account of hyperbole, like any other act of linguistic creativity, must refer to its interactive dimension. With this aim, a set of naturally-occurring conversations, chosen at random from the BNC, were analysed, and the occurrences of hyperbolic items identified. The results suggest that hyperboles need to be viewed interactively, by including listeners' responses and further contributions to the unfolding act, rather than being studied as single, creative acts by the speaker alone. Finally, the data also shows that hyperbole might be classified as a low-risk figure, since the chances of misunderstanding are low.

1 Introduction to figurative language

Although figures of speech have a long history of study within the general framework of rhetoric, for centuries one of the pillars of language study, contemporary rhetoric has, nevertheless, tended to underestimate the importance of figures "with the surprising and humbling result that the study of figure, one of the oldest bodies of knowledge in the human sciences, remains in our age still in its infancy" (Turner 1998: 83). In the last twenty years, there has been a renewed interest in figurative language, especially in cognitive psychology, but with a few exceptions, most of this interest has been directed at explaining how figures of speech are comprehended, given their non-literal nature.

Since the literature on the subject has almost invariably focused on the psychological processes operated on understanding, it is not surprising that nowadays a crucial limitation in figurative language theories is the production process of non-literal language, as a joint activity between addresser and addressee. Up to date,

figures of speech have been largely regarded as acts by the speaker alone, thus overlooking listeners' responses to figuration. In this sense, it is worth highlighting that although the reception process, in terms of understanding, has been widely studied, hearers' verbal reactions to figurative language have been almost systematically neglected. Only in the last few years has this interactive or "joint activity view of discourse" (Clark 1994: 986) been applied to figurative language theories. The scant literature, however, has mainly concentrated on metaphor and irony, often considered the master tropes, and to a lesser extent, on idioms, while the study of other figures has been set aside. This is certainly the case of hyperbole, a long neglected trope despite its pervasive frequency of occurrence in everyday speech.

A major limitation in previous research is perhaps that there has been little systematic investigation into the use of figures in naturally occurring dialogue. Rhetorical scholars have often listed striking examples from literary writers, especially poets, to illustrate figures. On the other hand, the bulk of psycholinguistic research makes use of artificial texts as stimulus materials. In short, it appears that across all fields of research, figures have almost invariably been abstracted from any actual interactive setting. Since the object of study has traditionally been the figurative sentence, either in isolation or in the context of an artificially constructed text, it is not surprising that the collaborative nature of figures has been overlooked.

This paper aims to explore, from a conversation and discourse analysis framework, the ways in which hyperbole is used in interaction, paying special attention to the reception process, in terms of listeners' reactions to overstatement, since any account of figurative language would be incomplete without making reference to the interactive dimension of figures. In order to analyse this collaborative nature, listeners' reactions and their own further contributions to the speaker's overstatement will be examined.

2 Focus on hyperbole: ubiquity of exaggeration in discourse

Within figurative language theories, tropes such as metaphor and irony have received the greatest amount of attention, while other non-literal forms, like hyperbole, have been relatively ignored as a result of such intensive research effort. In fact, some researchers seem to equate metaphor and irony with all forms of figuration, although arguably, "this tendency only serves to blur important distinctions between the tropes" (Kreuz and Roberts 1993: 155).

Hyperbole is usually defined as a form of extremity, an exaggeration that either magnifies or minimises some real state of affairs. Exaggerated expressions have traditionally been thought of as overstated simulacrums of reality. It is striking, though, that despite its pervasive frequency of occurrence, the study of hyperbole tends to be neglected by figurative language scholars. Kreuz et al. (1996), after studying eight main forms of non-literal language in a corpus of contemporary American short stories, adduce empirical evidence of this pervasiveness by showing that after metaphor, hyperbole is the commonest trope. And so they claim that "in terms of sheer occurrence, hyperbole seems to deserve more notice than it has received to date" (p. 91). The importance of hyperbole becomes even clearer after an inspection of the co-occurrence matrix in the aforementioned study. They also demonstrated that exaggeration is by far the trope that most often co-occurs with other figures. It was involved in almost 80% of the cases of co-occurrence, and it interacted with every other type of non-literal language with the exception of its logical opposite, understatement.

2.1 Previous research 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 domains of linguistics, psychology, philosophy or literary criticism. Most of the empirical work on exaggeration has involved comparisons 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 hyperboles has been almost invariably directed at explaining the psychological processes operated on their understanding, being much of this literature subsumed within studies of verbal irony or theories of humour.

Two competing views on hyperbole comprehension have been identified. The first is the so-called *Mere Inconsistency Hypothesis*, whereby an implicature is said to underlie hyperbole understanding since it flouts conversational maxims (e.g., Grice 1975, Brown and Levinson 1987). The most recent and widely accepted view, however, embraces the notion of *contrast* as postulated in cognitive psychology. As Colston and O'Brien (2000a: 1559) clearly put it:

In using the term "contrast" we do not only mean the incongruity of a remark with its referent topic. We additionally refer to the specific effect of the perception or judgement of a topic or event being changed via direct comparison with a different topic or event that varies along some relevant dimension.

Modern theories of non-literal language incorporate this notion as a defining feature of hyperbole and related tropes (e.g., Colston 1997b, Colston and O'Brien 2000a, 2000b, Colston and Keller 1998). In the case of hyperbole, this is succinctly explained by McCarthy and Carter (forthcoming) in noting that "hyperbole magnifies and upscales reality, and, naturally, upscaling produces a contrast with reality".

Within the production process, hardly ever has the pragmatic functioning of overstated remarks been discussed, probably because of the intensive research effort on comprehension. Although some functions of exaggeration have been pointed out, especially humour and evaluation, they have not been fully described, the existing literature has been restrained to their identification, nor is there any full account of hyperbolic functions published to date. Nowadays, most interest in the pragmatic accomplishments of hyperbole is concentrated on the field of psycholinguistics and embedded within studies of other tropes, especially irony and understatement, to compare how they accomplish the same functions but to different extents or with different degrees of success (e.g., Roberts and Kreuz 1994, Sell et al. 1997, Colston and Keller 1998, Colston and O'Brien 2000a, 2000b). Even though it is meriting that these studies have not totally disregarded the production process in favour of the comprehension issue, they only hint at the variability in the pragmatic functions accomplished by these tropes.

Hyperbole has a long history of study, going back to Aristotle, as a rhetorical figure in written texts. Since rhetoric practice has traditionally been associated to the production of persuasive speech, and later to aesthetics and literature, only relatively recently has the study of figurative language been switched into the domain of banal, everyday language. Although hyperbole is a ubiquitous feature in everyday speech, not a great amount of empirical research exists into everyday spoken hyperbole. This explains that overstatement has not been analysed interactively in conversation, as a joint activity between speaker and hearer, and taking into account listeners' responses to figuration.

3 Joint activity view of discourse

Discourse is a joint activity carried out by an ensemble of two or more people trying to accomplish things together (Atkinson and Heritage 1984, Sacks et al. 1974). The idea is that "conversations [...] are not created by speakers acting autonomously.

Rather, they are the emergent products of an ensemble of people working together" (Clark 1994: 986). This joint activity view of discourse has been recently applied to figurative language theories, especially to the master tropes, metaphor and irony, although there is also some research on idiomatic expressions. The majority of studies about the interactive and collaborative creation of figures can be found in the field of psychotherapy, as attempts to understand how clients and, to a lesser extent, therapists conceptualise and negotiate subjective experiences in terms of figures.

Ferrara (1994), for example, in her *Therapeutic Ways with Words*, devotes an entire chapter to the collaborative creation of metaphor, to how speaker and listener interactively construct metaphorical statements in therapeutic discourse. She illustrates how the same metaphors, variations on them, arise again and again during the course of a therapy session, not only repeated by the client but expanded upon in a variety of ways by the therapist. She also provides other examples in which metaphors were less readily understood and the ensuing discussion focused on clarification rather than expansion.

Similarly, Fussell and Moss (1998) addressed the role of conversational interactivity in figurative language use in a corpus of affective communication. They found numerous examples of joint productions containing figurative language, such as repetition of speakers' figurative utterance and listeners' prediction of what is implied by a figurative expression. The presence of feedback also enabled speakers and hearers to ensure that expressions having a figurative interpretation were understood correctly. Finally, they note that listeners also commonly responded to figurative remarks with a reformulation in other figurative terms, or they suggested figurative paraphrases.

Haverkate (1990: 108) was probably the first to suggest studying hearers' reactions to irony in noting that "at the level of discourse it would be interesting to investigate the relation between the interactional attitude of the ironic speaker and the reaction to it by the hearer". In this line, a major contribution to the discussion of irony is that of Clift (1999), who examines irony within a conversation analysis framework, paying particular attention to shifts in footing. Many of her examples contain instances of hyperbole within the ironic frame, since footing often shifts "toward the extreme" and invokes "extraordinary, impossible worlds" in ironic contexts (p. 540). She takes an interactive perspective in addressing hearers' reactions to ironic utterances, with laughter and/or the continuation of irony been typically the response of the addressee to recognised irony.

Gibbs (2000) has also analysed listeners' responses to irony and how speaker and listener actively collaborate to create ironic scenes. His account of verbal irony includes five main forms: hyperbole, understatement, sarcasm, rhetorical questions and jocularity, although a closer look to hyperbolic utterances reveals that they are indeed instances of hyperbolic irony. Even though sometimes addressees ignored the intended irony or changed the subject right away, clues in the data such as laughter, literal remarks indicating understanding of the speaker's ironic intent and the take-up and continuation of irony by participants, says Gibbs, are crucial to demonstrate this collaborative construction of irony. In his concluding remarks, Gibbs (2000: 25) notes:

> Perhaps the most interesting finding from this project were the large degree to which addressees responded to a speaker's irony by saying something ironic in return. This result had not been previously noted, but suggests how irony is as much a state of mind jointly created by speakers and listeners, as it is a special kind of figurative language. The give-and-take nature of irony also illustrates the importance of collaboration in psychological models of speaking and listening.

On the other hand, Drew and Holt (1998) have inquired into the interactional role that idiomatic expressions play in language, paying special attention to their sequential distribution in conversation. A clear distributional pattern was found in their data: idioms occur regularly in topic transition sequences, and specifically in the turn where a topic

is summarised, thereby initiating the closing of that topic. They treat figurative expressions as one of those linguistic components of turn design "through which speakers manage, collaboratively, certain sequentially embedded activities" (p. 497). Thus, the production of an idiomatic summary, followed by each of the speakers declining to develop the topic further, and the subsequent introduction of a next topic, can be considered a topic transition sequence "through which co-participants collaboratively disengage from a current topic and move to a next" (p. 505).

These approaches seem equally valid for the study of hyperbole, since exaggeration is implicit in many of the figures discussed above and indeed, many of the transcribed examples in the aforementioned studies contain exaggerated and counterfactual utterances. Yet, this collaborative nature of hyperbole has only been discussed with regard to interpretation. In this sense, Clark (1996: 143) argues that hyperbole depends on "a kind of joint pretence in which speakers and addresses create a new layer of joint activity". Fogelin (1988: 13) also shares the view that hyperbole fundamentally depends on a joint acceptance of a distortion of reality, in explaining that figures such as irony, overstatement and understatement, demand of the listener a kind of inward, corrective response which is mutually recognised by speaker and hearer. Only McCarthy and Carter (forthcoming) 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 tokens, laughter, and listeners' own further contribution to the emerging hyperbolic context" are crucial to the interpretation of hyperboles as joint activities between conversational partners.

4 Methodology

The aim of this paper is to explore the role of conversational interactivity in hyperbole construction and comprehension. Since hyperbole needs to be viewed as a collaborative act, involving both the speaker and listener, we will pay special attention to listeners' responses within the reception process.

In order to analyse listeners' reactions to overstatement, a corpus of naturally-occurring spoken conversations, chosen at random from the *British National Corpus* (BNC, henceforth), was examined. The BNC can be defined as a collection of samples of contemporary British English, both spoken and written, stored in electronic form, although for the present study only transcribed spoken material was subject to analysis. The focus is on speech, rather than writing, since not a great amount of empirical work exists into spoken hyperbole and only conversational interactivity can show the collaborative nature of the trope.

Nine interactions of an informal nature, normally between relatives or friends, totalling 10,158 words were examined. The entirety of the conversations was analysed and the occurrences of hyperbolic phrases and clauses identified. The texts vary in terms of length and number of hyperboles, since speakers obviously differ in their creative abilities. The total amount of overstated remarks was eighty-eight. The following table shows the total amount of words and hyperbolic occurrences per interaction.

BNC text	KB0	KB2	KB7	KBA	KC6	KP9	KPC	KPE	KSR
Word count	1451	550	1026	335	581	2253	2692	497	773
Hyperbolic occurrences	7	5	9	6	8	23	18	6	6

5 Results and discussion

Within the reception process, two broad types of listeners' reactions to hyperbole can be clearly distinguished in our data, namely positive and negative evidence. There was just an instance where the hearer's response could not be determined, since the speaker's exaggerated remark closes the conversation. The table below offers a detailed typology of listeners' responses to overstatement and, in brackets, the number of occurrences in our corpus.

	Back channel responses (22)	
Positive evidence (59)	Relevant next contribution (37)	Literal remark (12)
		Humorous remark (5)
		Laughter (4)
		Take-up and continuation of figures (5)
		Collaborative completion (2)
		Repetition or figurative paraphrase (4)
		Non-verbal response (5)
Negative evidence (38)	Non-recognised hyperbole (15)	Missed hyperbole and/or negation or correction (6)
		Request for clarification, confirmation, repetition (9)
	H ignores hyperbole and/or shifts topic (23)	

Positive evidence, indicating understanding of the speaker's overstatement, was the most recurrent pattern of listeners' responses to hyperbole. It accounts for 60% of the hearer's reactions in our data. This kind of evidence operates both at the level of message comprehension and joint creation of non-literal expressions. Positive evidence has, as Clark (1994: 993) has noted, two common forms. The first is the relevant next contribution, whereby listeners typically initiate a contribution that is the appropriate next contribution given their understanding of the speaker's utterance. The second common form of positive evidence is what has been called "back channel responses" or "continuers" (Yngve 1970, Schegloff 1982; quoted in Clark 1994: 994), which were also numerous in our data. Acknowledgements like these include forms such as "yes", "yeah", "oh", "ah", "mm" and the like. Rather than claims for a turn, they prompt the speaker to keep holding the floor. The following example may serve to illustrate these acceptance tokens which signal that the hearer understands and accepts the speaker's hyperbole. To facilitate comprehension of the illustrative samples, the speaker's hyperbole appears in italics and in bold face, the hearer's response.

(1) <KB2 text>
Joyce: I'm not envious of their heating.
Alec: Eh?
Joyce: I'm not envious of their heating **...** *freezing in their hall*, isn't much, *you can nearly see the ... outside through their door* and *all cold's coming in*, it's worse than our door.

Alec: **Mm**.
Joyce: It is. ... She's right though about Annie, Annie will just have what she wants.
Alec: Yeah, mm.

Relevant next contributions were by far the most common type of response to hyperbole in the data. It refers to any kind of reaction which is appropriate to the speaker's overstated remark. The adequacy or relevance of the response indicates an optimal understanding of hyperbole. There is a wide range of forms through which a relevant next contribution may be realised. Seven different types were identified in our transcriptions. The most recurrent pattern was a literal remark indicating understanding of the speaker's intent.

(2) <KSR text>
Clare: Now this one, if you, you can work out how it works, cos I can't work out ... how ... to get that antiperspirant to go on your body. ... It's a bit stupid.
Gary: Like that.
Clare: What did you do?
Gary: Just push it up the bum.
Clare: Well, I couldn't work out how to do that! Oh, oh. What have you done now?
Gary: I pushed it right out. Push it, when you want it, just push it ... up there.
Clare: Yeah.
Gary: So it comes out.
Clare: And I was trying like, *I was going like that for ages***.**
Gary: **Push it like that.**
Clare: Oh don't, oh don't waste it.

Other forms of relevant next contribution include the use of humorous responses and laughter by the listener. Since humour has often been pointed out as a prominent goal of exaggeration (e.g., Long and Graesser 1988, Roberts and Kreuz 1994, Colston and O'Brien 2000b), laughter is commonly, as McCarthy and Carter (forthcoming) have noted, an accompanying feature of many hyperbolic remarks that serves to emphasise the alignment between participants. The excerpt below is illustrative enough.

(3) <KB7 text>
Stuart: What's going on outside? ... Car or lorry or something going by by the sound of it.
Ann: About that little ... flat in ... in Albany Road.
Stuart: Yeah.
Ann: You have to realize that ... *we're never gonna get away from work. 'Cos when the wind blows you can smell a tandoori* and [laugh]
Stuart: **[laugh]**
Ann: It's when you walk up that way you know you're getting near it.
Stuart: Yeah.
Ann: Cos you can smell it.

Sometimes, the listener contributes with a humorous remark, often hyperbolic too. The following extract is remarkable for the accumulation of hyperboles to produce a comic effect. Claire's utterance, *No, I've got a beard*, in response to Craig's overstated description, *No, Vicky's got a beard*, is not only an exaggeration but an instance of humorous self-deprecation. Since the hyperbolic event is an extended scenario where participants jointly create humour, it appears that figures need to be examined over turn-boundaries.

(4) <KP9 text>
Craig: Who? [whispering] Yeah, oh, I don't like her. *She's got a moustache***.**

Claire: Well, Vicky has, but she can't help it.
Craig: No, *Vicky's got a beard*.
Claire: No, **I've got a beard.**
Craig: [tut]! Oh. Teaspoon.
PS000 >: If you dry up and put them there now cos it's nearly...
Jo: I got nice baggy arse here.
Craig: [laugh] ... *Are they ... riding jodhpurs, aren't they?*
Jo: Yeah, well, such a shame.

This leads us to another type of relevant next contribution, namely the take-up and continuation of figuration. When an exaggeration occurs, it is not rare to find that the listener responds with another figure of speech that contributes to the emergence of a non-literal context. In our data, this normally means the use of another hyperbole or a form of verbal irony. In the following example the hearer's contribution is also clearly exaggerated, and therefore we can talk about the take-up and continuation of hyperbole by participants, as well as the joint creation of a hyperbolic frame.

(5) <KBA text>
Chris: I like Mr Bean.
Dave: Mr Bean, *that's fucking brilliant*, that is.
Chris: **He just cracks me up.** I tell you what, I can sit there ... two things I like ... no three. A good film.
Dave: Yeah.
Chris: I mean a good film. Cartoons.
Dave: Oh fuck, yeah.
Chris: I love cartoons. Tom and Jerry I like.

Another curious form of contribution is the "collaborative completion" (Clark 1994: 994), whereby the listener typically anticipates what the speaker means or predicts the speaker's words and completes the utterance. The following extract may serve to illustrate the case.

(6) <KB7 text>
Stuart: Yes. It's going slowly now.
Ann: [laugh] Yeah.
Stuart: Going much more slowly now as it records more ... conver conversations.
Ann: That's it. ... Mm ... Don't stop talking now. silly. [laugh] ... *It's all gonna go quiet now*, isn't it? Nobody else'll say anything ...
Stuart: **at all**.
Ann: [laugh] That's ridiculous! [laughing] You gotta
Stuart: We'll just have to ... put it down there some time and just ... put it on.
Ann: Yeah.
Stuart: So you wouldn't know when it's on or when it's off.
Ann: Mm.
Stuart: Just have to try and, take a little while to get used to it. Once you're used to it, it's probably... It's all a matter of getting used to being recorded. Conversation.

Although rarely in our transcriptions, listeners sometimes repeated the speaker's hyperbole or paraphrased it in other figurative terms. The following is an example of repetition of the speaker's words, where the hyperbole is intended for aggression.

(7) <KPE text>
Ian: Are you stuck? Yes or no, are you stuck?
Grace: But, why?

PS000 >: If I ask somebody stuck, you're not gonna go why. Then I'm gonna say little bit.
Grace: A little bit?
Ian: Yes.
Grace: So am I, a little bit. Why?
Ian: Smelly bitch.
Grace: *That's all you can say*, *innit? Can't say nothing else*.
Ian: **Can't say nothing else**.
Grace: Can I have a pen?
Ian: You got anything to say, say it out loud. Fucking bitch. Alright, if you've got anything to say ... don't smoke. You understand English? Are you cooperating properly?

Finally, non-verbal reactions were also found in our data. Curiously enough, they all occur in the same conversation, between a mother and her children. A clear pattern emerges after examining the role of hyperbole in this context: overstatement is used to mitigate a command or request, and so the expected response is typically non-linguistic. In the following excerpt Frances reprimands her daughter, Kaley, and asks her to behave and to be quiet for a little while, which she obediently does.

(8) <KPC text>
Kaley: Can I tell dad something?
Francis: Tell dad I wanna tell him something.
Frances: It's all gone. Toy's eat it all. What's going on? Kaley you get some milk out the fridge please. ... Oh. *Right there's gonna be trouble in a second*, mind. *Kaley you can talk in a minute* cos ... when Shirley comes back, Shirley wasn't there. Kaley, don't cry. Brett, give Kaley a cuddle now.
Brett: No.
Frances: Yes, you villain. Milk. ...

Addressees are expected to provide speakers not only with positive evidence when they have understood something but also with negative evidence when they believe they have not (Clark 1994: 993). Negative evidence accounts for 39% of listeners' reactions to hyperbole in our data. Apart from defective comprehension of the speaker's words, this kind of evidence refers to any type of reaction which was not expected or not intended by the speaker. There are two main forms of negative evidence in our transcriptions. By far, the most recurrent type is ignoring the hyperbole and/or shifting the topic, as in the excerpt below.

(9) <KBA text>
Kevin: Three's ... a load of crap. That's the 3D one.
Chris: This one though I think it's not, I think it's just the people having nightmares about it.
Achmed: I don't know. It's supposed to be down in th, that, him following that, following that family, innit? Supposed to be, supposed to be following the family wherever they go on the beach.
Chris: Is it?
Achmed: Something like that. Michael Caine's in it. Although er *it looked pretty pathetic* ... it was on. We had a preview of it at home.
Dave: **Fucking miss erm ... We missed Carrot, Carrot was on last night, weren't it?**
Chris: Mm, Jasper, yeah.

Other forms of negative evidence signal that the hearer has missed or misunderstood the speaker's words. In cases of non-recognised hyperbole, listeners

may, for example, interpret the utterance literally, and so it is not rare to find that they negate or correct the hyperbole to make the words fit the world. In this example the hearer corrects the speaker by uttering a literal remark which depicts the real state of affairs.

(10) <KB7 text>
Ann: [cough] ... Oh, I'd better go and wash our dishes dear.
Stuart: Not many to do now ... *done them all.*
Ann: **Most of them. There's only yours**. Have you had
Stuart: What about?
Ann: enough to eat?
Stuart: Yes, thank you. Fine. I would have done it actually when, when I took the plate out but the water in the bowl was cold. Thought it was hot but it was cold.
Ann: I think I've used most of the hot water.

In some other cases, the hearer is forced to request for clarification, confirmation or simply repetition. The following extract may serve to exemplify this negotiation of meaning between conversational partners when the listener has doubts about whether to interpret the speaker's utterance literally or figuratively.

(11) <KC6 text>
Gavin: Anybody see Central last night?
Nick: Er ... did I see it or not? No, I didn't see it last night. ... *Polished off three bottles of champagne last night!*
Gavin: **Did you?**
Nick: Jo, Jo, Joan had sixteen bottles of it!
Gavin: Who?
Nick: We, Joan wanted to take it into the party the other night ... they wouldn't let her. So she gave them to, loads to Joe, she got loads of .... Joan had one and me and Mark had two which .... Still got that teacher accused of er ... [cough] ... insulting the kids at ... schools.

The fact that speakers can use listeners' responses to monitor their comprehension may help explain that the rate of figurative language use might be higher in conversation than in non-interactive settings, because there is less risk of misunderstanding when feedback from listeners can be used to indicate that clarification is needed (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986, Kraut et al. 1982). Nevertheless, the total amount of non-recognised hyperbole in our data, strongly suggests that speaking hyperbolically, rather than literally, is not such a risky activity, especially when considering that the problem of misunderstanding is actually a pretence (for example, to avoid a face-threatening act), or due to defective hearing in six out of fifteen cases.

Finally, we must also note that, although rarely, the hearer's contribution may be classified as a combination of different response types. This poses problems to calculate percentages, even though, these compound responses usually occur within the same evidence type, whether positive or negative. The following example is striking since four different types of responses can be clearly identified: a request for confirmation, an acceptance token, laughter and a literal remark indicating understanding of the speaker's overstated description.

(12) <KC6>
Gavin: No, I didn't see that film last night. The one about the musician killed, committed suicide?
Nick: *It was totally shit!*
Gavin: **Was it, yeah? Oh, [laughing] I'm glad I didn't watch it then**.

Nick: Can you imagine *the worst American teen corn movie ... that you've ever seen?* This was.

6 Conclusions

In line with studies advocating a conversational and discourse analysis approach to the study of non-literal language, 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. Rather than addressing the psychological process operated on hyperbole comprehension, this study has addressed the production process of exaggerated remarks in naturally-occurring conversations, an issue which almost invariably has been solely associated to the speaker alone. By contrast, we have tried, through the examination of listeners' responses, to show the collaborative and interactive nature of hyperbole, as a joint activity between speaker and hearer, an aspect that only recently has been discussed in the literature on irony and metaphor. Thus, we adhere to the view that the study of psychological factors should be complemented by one focusing on the production and joint creation of figurative language.

We have, hopefully, explored the role of conversational interactivity in the collaborative construction and message comprehension of exaggerated remarks. The results suggest that besides providing feedback about listeners' understanding of messages, conversational interaction allows for collaboration in the creation of figurative messages themselves. Listeners' responses, apart from signals of comprehension, whether effective or defective, also allow to contribute to the emergence of a figurative frame. Key evidence, both positive and negative, such as back channel responses, relevant next contributions, shifts in topic, refusals to acknowledge the speaker's overstatement and evidence of non-recognised hyperbole, strongly suggests that hyperbole needs to be viewed interactively. Hyperbole, as McCarthy and Carter (forthcoming) clearly put it, "is only validated in interaction and can only be described adequately by including the listener's contributions to the unfolding act, rather than being examined as a single, creative act by the speaker alone, or solely within the domain of intention". The study of listeners' reactions and responses to figures also shows the need of examining figures over turn-boundaries and within the constraints of placement and sequencing of conversational analysis. It also suggests that researchers should examine the entirety of a conversation, rather than studying figurative language in isolation or in decontextualised situations.

The results may also serve to demonstrate that the use of hyperboles is not rare or limited to poetic situations, but rather, and given that hardly ever do they pose problems of comprehension, they are ubiquitous features in everyday conversation. This adheres to a prevailing view among figurative language researchers, namely that figures provide part of the figurative foundation for everyday thought (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Gibbs 1994, Turner 1998). The application of this finding to the area of foreign language teaching may also be useful to raise students' awareness that figures of speech are part and parcel of everyday speech, and therefore should be taught as part of students' communicative competence.

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