

A Pragma-rhetorical Study of Hyperbole in American Press Discourse

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Abstract:

This study tackles hyperbole in American Press discourse from a pragma-rhetorical perspective. Studying hyperbole pragma-rhetorically in American press discourse has not received enough attention. Accordingly, this study attempts to develop a pragma-rhetorical model for the analysis of hyperbole. It is hypothesized that pathos is the most pragma-rhetorical strategy employed to persuade the audience through hyperbolic utterances. Also, metaphor is the most common pragma-rhetorical device utilized in American press discourse. Finally, Hyperbole is used in American press discourse for different pragmatic functions and evaluation is the most frequent function. To test these hypotheses, qualitative and quantitative methods are adopted. 30 situations selected randomly from 4 American newspapers are analyzed. The results supports the first and second hypothesis but neglect the third one.

Keywords: Pragma-rhetorical, Hyperbole, American Press Discourse.

دراسة تداولية- بلاغية للمبالغة في الخطاب الصحفي الأمريكي

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الملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة المبالغة في الخطاب الصحفي الأمريكي من جانب تداولي - بلاغي. دراسة المبالغة من هذا الجانب لم تتلقى الاهتمام الكافي من قبل الباحثين. بناءً على هذا تحاول هذه الدراسة تطوير نموذج تداولي- بلاغي لدراسة المبالغة. تفترض هذه الدراسة أن العاطفة هي الاستراتيجية التداولية- البلاغية الأكثر توظيفاً لإقناع الجمهور من خلال العبارات البلاغية. أيضاً، المجاز هو الوسيلة الأكثر شيوعاً لخلق المبالغة في الخطاب الصحفي الأمريكي. وأخيراً، المبالغة تستخدم لوظائف تداولية متعددة وأن التقييم هو الوظيفة الأكثر شيوعاً. لإختبار هذه الفرضيات، تم تبني منهجين هما: الكمي والنوعي. ثلاثون موقف من أربع صحف أمريكية تم إختيارها عشوائياً ليتم تحليلها. تدعم النتائج الفرضيتين الأولى والثالية وتهمل الفرضية الثالثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تداولية-بلاغية، مبالغة، الخطاب الصحفي الأمريكي.

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1. Introduction

Press (journalism) refers to the collection, editing and publishing news periodically (Merriam-Webster online dictionary: press). Press discourse is concerned mainly with the language used in periodicals that are divided into different types of newspapers and magazines like: popular, trade and scholarly. Thus, it is also referred to by 'newspaper discourse' (Richardson, 2007:1). This kind of discourse attracts the analysts' attention from different Specializations due to its richness in content (Ibid.). Press is part of the mass-media system which includes various means of mass communication. These means are like: the print media (newspapers, magazine, books, electronic media (television, radio, video games, and all kinds of internet-based communication media, advertising (Turow, 2009: 25). Indeed, much of the influence of mass-media relies on the effective use of language. Press is powerful for it can affect the public opinion, hold government accountable, and to provide necessary information of value (Ritchie, 1978:203).

Hyperbole is found in the language utilized in the newspapers, magazines and news stories with diversity of forms (Claridge, 2011:57). In addition, hyperbole is defined as a pragmatic phenomenon in relation to certain aspects as recognized by researchers. This pragmatic phenomenon can be actualized through different strategies and devices to achieve various goals. However, pragma-rhetorically, hyperbole has not received enough attention. Accordingly, this study attempts to develop a pragma-rhetorical model for the analysis of hyperbole. Thus, it concerns itself with achieving the following aims:

- (1) Revealing the pragma-rhetorical strategies of hyperbole as well as their percentage of occurrence in the analyzed data.
- (2) Investigating the pragma-rhetorical devices of hyperbole in relation to their occurrence in the data under scrutiny.
- (3) Finding out the pragmatic functions that are actualized through using hyperbole in American press discourse.

In relation to the aims introduced above, it is hypothesized that:

(1) Pragma-rhetorical strategies of hyperbole are divided into: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Pathos is the most common pragma-rhetorical strategy employed to persuade the audience through hyperbolic utterances.

(2) Pragma-rhetorical devices of hyperbole are various. Yet, Metaphor is the most common pragma-rhetorical device utilized in American newspapers.

(3) Hyperbole is used in American press discourse for different pragmatic functions. However, evaluation is the most frequent function.

To achieve the aims and to test the hypothesis, the following procedures are adopted:

(1) Choosing random political situations taken from the most common American newspapers' articles on different issues to be the data of this study.

(2) Using the developed model to conduct a qualitative pragmatic analysis of the data under study.

(3) Using statistical means, represented by the percentage equation, for calculating the quantitative results of analysis.

(4) Discussing the findings from both the qualitative and the quantitative analyses.

2. Hyperbole in Pragmatics

Hyperbole is a pragmatic phenomenon on the base of two main aspects. These are: **a)** hyperbole's dependency on context, and **b)** as a form of indirectness. The following points will tackle these two aspects in detail:

a) Context Dependence

Hyperbole has a strong relation with context which is one of the reasons that makes it a pragmatic phenomenon (Cano Mora, 2005:108). Cartson & Wearing (2011: 284) have mentioned that hyperbole and other tropes like metaphor are all associated with context for it helps to interpret the utterance appropriately. The notion of context is wide since it embraces different elements like: setting, relationships among participants, their shared knowledge (Claridge, 2011: 12). Hence, it is very hard to understand or identify any hyperbolic expression without having some information about the contextual knowledge. At least there must be a general world knowledge and expectations to be able to interpret hyperbolic utterances (ibid.).

In spite of this close relationship, hyperbole makes a contradiction (disjunction or contrast) with reality (Ferré, 2014: 29). This contrast is unique because it is a contrast of 'magnitude' or 'degree' rather than a contrast of 'kind' (Colston and O'Brien 2000:193). This means that hyperbole focuses on contrasting thing of the same kind but in a different degree. The same kind indicates: size, volume, time, and capacity, etc...

b) As a Form of Indirectness

When the transferred meaning does not match the implied meaning a case of indirectness occurs (Thomas ,2013 :119). Intentional indirectness is an interesting topic in pragmatics. The reasons of using indirect meaning are various. However, Thomas (2013: 122) has mentioned that indirectness is perfectly rational, if it enables the speaker to achieve goals or to avoid unpleasantness. These goals are like: a) to exhibit the speaker's ability to use language cleverly, b) to affect the hearer's feeling, c) to avoid using direct meaning in cases where it is better to be avoided (e.g. Taboo topics).

Figurative language represents a form of indirectness for it implies meaning that is different from the exact meaning of the expression. The same is true with hyperbole since the literal meaning of the exaggerated utterances does not agree with their intended meaning. For example, in: `

(1) I have told you million times not to do so.

In the example above, the literal meaning indicates an exact numerical value (1,000,000). However, the intended meaning does not indicate this values. Rather, it implies an intensified blame. Such a contrastive relation between the literal and the intended meaning is very important. Claridge (2011: 27) states that this contrast leads to the intended meaning. Accordingly, the literal meaning is the starting point for understanding the hyperbolic meaning.

However, it is worth to mention here that in spite of the mismatch between the literal and the intended meaning or the clear contrast with context, hyperbole is not considered as a 'lie' (McCarthy & Carter, 2004: 162).

In the light of the two aspects of hyperbole mentioned previously, it is possible to describe hyperbole pragmatically as:

An intentional action of indirectness used by the speaker for implying an exaggerated meaning beyond the literal sense which exhibits a contrast in magnitude with the real context.

In this definition, hyperbole is presented as an action that is created intentionally by the speaker (not by mistake) through the use of an expression. The literal meaning of that expression contrasts reality. The hearer notices this contrast; thus, s/he does not believe the exact meaning of the expression. In reverse, the meaning comprehended is away from the extreme hyperbolic meaning.

3. The Eclectic Model of Analysis

The eclectic model that will be adopted in this research consists of pragma-rhetorical strategies and devices for creating hyperbole. Additionally, it covers various functions that are actualized through the use of hyperbole in the analyzed data. The following points discuss these strategies, devices and functions:

3.1 Pragma-Rhetorical Strategies of Hyperbole

The Persuasive appeals and figurative devices are part of the basic tenets of general rhetorical pragmatics (Al- Hindawi & Al-Timimi, 2012; Al-Hindawi et al., 2017). Pragma-rhetorical strategies of hyperbole that will be included in the eclectic model of analysis are divided into: a) Aristotle's persuasive appeals and b) figurative devices. Both of them will be discussed below:

3.1.1 Persuasive Appeals

Hyperbole can be used to achieve the three following persuasive appeals:

a. Ethos

Ethos is related to the demonstration of the speaker's good character which is evidenced in his speaking (Sloane, 2006: 96). The appropriate use of hyperbole can contribute to ethos through proving the speaker's strong personality and enthusiasm. However, it should be used carefully for it can make a negative damage on the credibility of the speaker. Claridge (2011: 217) has mentioned that using exaggeration constantly may appear the speaker untrustworthy.

b. Pathos

Pathos is the technique of simulating the listener's emotions. These emotions are like: fear, pity, sadness, satisfaction, anger and shame (Sloane, 2006: 188). Hyperbole can contribute to pathos by making things look "more important, more frightening or more desirable" than reality (Claridge, 2011: 217).

c. Logos

Logos is a persuasive appeal to reason. It is realized by means of reasoning, questions and answers, statistics, evidence, and arguments (Solane, 2006: 477). Hyperbole can be used to make the strongest cases of argumentation and to make effective attacks as well as maximizing proofs. This is due to the power of amplification it carries (Henkemans, 2013:5).

3.1.2 Figurative Devices

Hyperbole can be created through the use of other rhetorical devices to make the excessive effect (Claridge, 2011: 41). These rhetorical devices can be employed to make more powerful exaggerated effects than using basic hyperbole alone. The following points illustrate these devices:

a. Metaphor

Metaphor is known as an indirect comparison between two things that share certain aspects. Claridge (2011: 104) has mentioned that metaphor can be used to create a metaphorical type of hyperbole by employing metaphorical signals. Also, Barnden (2015: 56) clarifies that metaphor can be used to exaggerate one or more characteristic such as:

(2) "John is Hitler" (Ibid.)

The use of metaphor here exaggerates one or more negative characteristic of John like "anti-Semitism".

b. Simile

Simile is an explicit comparison between two distinctly different things by using 'as' or 'like' (Abrams & Harpham, 2009 :119). Fussel & Kreuz (1998: 93) state that simile can be used to make exaggeration for an impossible degree. For example:

(3) Bob's heart beat like a jet engine. (Ibid.)

This example clarifies the use of simile for creating hyperbole. Of course, it is impossible for Bob's heart to beat like a jet engine in reality. But simile is used here hyperbolically to indicate his extreme worry from future.

c. Idioms

Idioms are a type of formulaic language which consists of fixed expressions used as units (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2017:6). Concerning its

relation with hyperbole, Fussell & Kreuz (1998: 95) illustrate that idioms can be used to make hyperbole. For example:

(4) "it is raining cats and dogs" (Ibid.)

It is an idiom that is used hyperbolically to indicate the intensity of the rain. Claridge (2011: 172) mentioned that idiomatic hyperboles are usually conventionalized.

3.1.3 Pragmatic Functions of Hyperbole

Hyperbole is used for different functions that vary according to the speaker himself. The following points discuss the major functions behind using hyperbole.

3.1.3.1 Emphasis

It is the most prominent function of hyperbole that has been recognized by researchers. This is due to the force it adds to utterances (Cano Mora, 2004: 203). The use of superlatives, repetitions and universal quantifiers is intended to achieve this purpose.

(5) Never, never, never do it again.

3.1.3.2 Evaluation

Hyperbole plays an evaluative function in two directions: positive and negative. This function exhibits the subjective use of hyperbole by speakers according to their emotional orientations. Evaluation is concerned with putting things on a scale. Things which are preferred receive the highest positive evaluation. In contrast, things that are not preferred receive the lowest negative evaluation (Claridge, 2011: 20).

(6) The greatest president in the world.

3.1.3.3 Humour

Sometimes, hyperbole is used for the sake of humour. Dynel (2009: 1288) mentions hyperbole as one of the stylistic figures of humour. It occurs in many types of verbal humour, usually, in relation to irony (McCarthy & Carter, 2004: 157). In public speeches, the speaker can use hyperbole for mitigating the atmosphere and attract the audience. This function is found frequently in political speeches and literature (Claridge, 2011: 253).

(7) He is the greatest man in the history of idiots.

3.1.3.4 Persuasion

Persuasion is known as the social influence or effect over others (Cialdini, 2001:76). In rhetoric, persuasion is a central goal and different means are used to reach this goal. Different figures of speech are

frequently employed for this purpose. (8) He is going to kill your passion.

3.1.3.5 Clarification

One of the main functions of hyperbole is clarification. Kreuz & Roberts (1994: 160) have mentioned that one of the frequent goals of hyperbole is to clarify ideas by making the speaker's feelings or states of mind clear to the addressee. For example, hyperbole here informs us that the Pittsburg football team has lost and it is not their first time:

(9) I have watched the Pittsburg football team lose for the thousandth time!

After discussing the pragma-rhetorical strategies and pragmatic functions of hyperbole, the following diagrams sums up the eclectic model of analysis. Figure (1) investigates the pragma-rhetorical strategies and devices of hyperbole. Figure (2) represents the functions of hyperbole. Both of the figures are utilized in the process of analyzing the data.

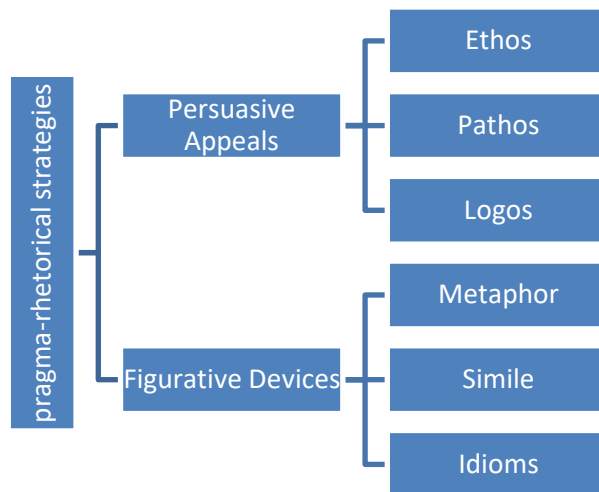


Figure (1) Pragma-rhetorical Strategies of Hyperbole

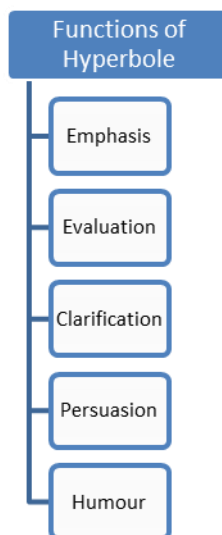


Figure (2) Pragmatic Functions of Hyperbole

4. Data Analysis

The current section represents the qualitative analysis of the data. The data are collected from different American newspapers' articles and reports from 2016 to 2020 which consist of (30) situations. These situations are selected from different articles that are all political in nature. The reason for choosing these dates due to their richness in political events. The eclectic model illustrated in the previous sections will be the basic tool for the pragmatic qualitative analysis. In addition, a quantitative statistical analysis will be adopted to calculate the frequencies and percentages of the data under study.

Situation (1):

“A flood of masked demonstrators tells a different story” Web source (1)

This utterance is from an article that is titled *“The Medical Mask Becomes a Protest Symbol”* written by “Amanda Hess” published in June 2, 2020 by “New York Times”.

This article deals with the demonstrators' issue during the presidency of Donald Trump. The writer has used this topic to speak of Republicans' refusal to wear masks during the crisis of COVID-19. Democrats think that wearing masks is a sign of 'civic duty, an affirmation of scientific authority and a show of respect'. However, Republicans believe that it is

a sign of cowardness and weakness. Hyperbole is employed for proving the huge number of protestors who reflect the Democratic view. The following strategies are used to create hyperbole:

1. Figurative Devices

Metaphor

Demonstrators are compared implicitly to the flood in order to portray their huge number and their unity for reaching one target. The ground of similarity is the influx in movement on the ground. Metaphor is used purposefully by the writer to indicate the hugeness of protestors in number. In addition, the choice of metaphoric hyperbole reflects the writer's support with those who protest over the death of George Floyd.

2. Persuasive Appeals

Pathos

The use of metaphor in describing protestors is meant to stimulate the readers' emotion of dislike toward Trump and Republicans.

3. Pragmatic Function of Hyperbole

Persuasion

The use of hyperbolic metaphor in "A flood of masked demonstrators tells a different story" is for the sake of persuasion. It is meant to persuade the readers that the majority of Americans wear masks which is in line with the ideas of Republicans.

Situation (2)

"but the nausea meter hit the roof when Nancy Pelosi took the microphone." Web source (2)

The utterance stated above is by *Michael Goodwin* published by the 'New York Post' in the article that is titled "*Nancy Pelosi's stomach-turning impeachment charade damages America: Goodwin*" in December 18, 2019. In this article, the writer is criticizing Pelosi's insistence for impeaching Trump in a hyperbolic way. The following strategies are used:

1. Persuasive Appeals

Pathos

The use of images can be directed to stimulate the audience's emotion toward something. The writer has created an excessive image in

the utterance in order to make hyperbole. The scale described is imaginative since there is no such scale in reality. Moreover, the pointer of the scale has reached the roof which transcend the highest point of any scale. This illustrative image is meant to maximize the event so as mockery will be stronger.

2. Pragmatic Function of Hyperbole

Humour

In the utterance “the nausea meter hit the roof when Nancy Pelosi took the microphone”, the writer of the article wants to make a sarcastic scene through the hyperbolic description of Nancy Pelosi’s way of speaking in the congress. Thus, he creates a scale called “nausea meter” and claims that it hits its highest degree (the roof) because of Nancy Pelosi’s speech. The whole image is for the sake of humour.

Emphasis

Besides humour, this utterance carries a great deal of emphasis. The contrast between literal utterance and reality makes the emphasis stronger. This supports Fogelin (1988:13) who thinks that the contrast determines the emphasis created. In other words, the more the contrast is huge the more the emphasis will be.

Situation (3)

“Not a fanner of the flame” web source (3)

This utterance is in the article titled “*Trump’s Response to Protests Draws Bipartisan Rebuke in Congress*” written by “Catie Edmondson” in June 2, 2020 published by the New York times. In this article, Trump has been criticized for his ill-treatment with the angry protesters.

1. Figurative Devices

Idiom

“Not a fanner of the flame” is an idiom used to indicates someone who makes bad things worse. In this situation, Trump is described as a person who is blowing on the fire to make it bigger. The fire represents the angry protesters outside the white house who are hindered by the police so as the president can make his photo session.

2. Persuasive Appeals

Pathos

As mentioned before, pathos is the technique of simulating emotions. Using figurative language, telling stories, using images are

among the best ways that serve pathos. The speaker of the utterance is trying to stimulate the readers' emotions of anger through using metaphoric hyperbole. In other words, the speaker (Pelosi) attempts to persuade the audience that Trump supports disturbance in the USA through showing his contempt for protestors which contradicts the civil liberties in America.

3. Pragmatic Function of Hyperbole

Persuasion

The use of figurative devices is usually for persuading the reader. Thus, hyperbolic idiom that is used in the utterance is for creating a conventional image that makes an impact on the reader.

Situation (4)

“to hold a Bible aloft like a championship trophy for the cameras”

web source (4)

This utterance is in an article titled “*What Democracy Scholars Thought of Trump’s Bible Photo Op*” by Matt Flegenheimer published in “The New York Times”. The writer of the article is criticizing Trump for his photo with the Bible in front of St. John’s church.

1. Figurative Devices

Simile

The writer has employed simile to make his hyperbolic utterance. He has used ‘like’ to compare Trump’s holding for the Bible to holding a trophy in front of cameras.

2. Persuasive Appeals

Pathos

The use of simile to create a hyperbolic utterance makes the utterance directed toward stimulating the audience’s feelings of disrespect toward Trump. Therefore, the mode used is pathos.

3. Pragmatic Function of Hyperbole

Clarification

Hyperbole can help to clarify things, ideas, feelings or events. In the article, the writer wants to clarify the event that happened in front of St. John church as well as his feeling about the event. In other words, the writer informs the readers that Trump has hold the Bible in front of the St John’s Church which is something unusual in the American politics.

Also, his emotions of criticism are delivered through the use of hyperbole.

Situation (5)

“drain the swamp” in Washington. Now, he’s president of that swamp. And polls show that most Americans believe the country is sinking, fast.” Web source (5)

This utterance is in an article titled “The Virus Is Stealing the Show, but Trump Is Sticking with Reruns” **By** Lisa Lerer published in “The New York Times” in July 15, 2020.

The following strategies are personalized:

1. Figurative Devices:

Metaphor

The only metaphoric hyperbole used in the article is “the country is sinking fast”. America is described as a ship that is sinking fast because of the mismanagement of Trump.

2. Persuasive Appeals

The following persuasive appeals are found:

Ethos

Mentioning ‘polls’ is to reinforce the writer’s idea that most of the Americans are accusing Trump to be the source of disturbance in the country. Thus, this technique is part of ethos because it makes the utterance more reliable.

Pathos

The use of figurative devices like metaphor is to stimulate the reader’s feelings. Through “the country is sinking fast” the writer wants to stimulate the emotions of fear and anxiety of the reader so as they will not vote for Trump.

3. Pragmatic Function of Hyperbole

The functions are detected as follows:

Persuasion

Metaphoric hyperbole and the use of ethos is for the sake of persuading the audience. The first one persuades the audience by stimulating their emotions. The second one convinces the audience by the use of credible or reliable information.

Situation (6)

“President Trump’s worst behaviors can infect us all just like the flu, according to science” web source (6)

The utterance above is a title of an article written by Ashley Merryman, published in the Washington post in March 29, 2018.

1. Figurative Devices

The following pragma-rhetorical devices are personalized:

Simile

Simile is used in the headline. Trump's bad behavior is resembled to flu for it can infect members of the American community. Of course, this utterance is hyperbolic because infection is transmitted through germs, viruses, or bacteria while behavior cannot be transmitted in the same way.

2. Persuasive Appeals

Since logos is related to reason, the use of scientific arguments in the article is in the core of logos. Therefore, the writer utilized it in the title to convince the audience through logic, argument, and scientific support.

3. Pragmatic Function of Hyperbole

Persuasion

Hyperbole is used in the headline through a direct comparison (simile). The use of hyperbole with other figures of speech makes the utterance more persuasive.

5. Statistical Results

The results of the quantitative analysis have been summarized in the tables below:

Table (1) The Results of Pragma-rhetorical Devices in the Analyzed Situation

Device Type	Fr	Per
Metaphor	21	78 %
Simile	3	11 %
Idiom	3	11 %
Total	27	100 %

Table (2) The Results of the Persuasive Appeals (Modes) in the Analyzed Situations

Mode Type	Fr	Per
Pathos	21	60 %
Logos	10	28.5 %
Ethos	4	11.4%
Total	35	100 %

Table (3) The Pragmatic Functions of Hyperbole in the Analyzed Situation

Pragmatic Functions of Hyperbole	Fr	Per
Emphasis	21	40.4 %
Persuasion	15	28.84 %
Clarification	4	7.7 %
Humor	6	11.53 %
Evaluation	6	11.53 %
Total	52	100 %

6. Conclusions

1. Metaphor (78%) is found to be the most common pragma-rhetorical device used in American political newspaper articles. Clearly, composite hyperbole in the data are created by using hyperbole and metaphor.
2. Pathos (60%) is the most frequent persuasive technique used in American political newspaper articles. It is obvious that the stimulation of the audience's emotion is a common technique which is achieved by the creation of figurative hyperbolic images.
3. Emphasis (40%) is the most dominant function of hyperbole followed by persuasion (28.8%). This supports what has been noticed by other researchers like Cano Mora (2006).

4. Creative hyperbole is stronger in effect than conventional hyperbole which are created by using known idioms. Mainly, such types are used for emphasis.
5. The use of hyperbole reveals the speaker's intended meaning. When the function of using the hyperbolic utterance is known, then, the intended meaning is uncovered.

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(6)<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2018/03/29/president-trumps-worst-behavior-can-spread-among-us-just-like-the-flu-according-to-science/>

