

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Hyperbole in ISIS Speech

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of hyperbole in the construction of identity and legitimization of violence in ISIS propaganda from a sociolinguistics perspective. Adopting Critical Discourse Analysis, identity formation theories in sociolinguistics, and Speech Act Theory in pragmatics, the study analyzes a corpus of qualitative data that includes selective issues of the Dabiq and Rumiyah ISIS magazines, as well as transcripts of speeches by ISIS members. The hyperbole is identified based on lexical, semantic, and pragmatic features, and is classified based on its function in communication. It becomes apparent from the findings that hyperbole is an organized and strategic tool that has five main purposes: glorification of the ingroup, vilification of outgroups, intensification of the threat perception, apocalyptic conceptualization of the conflict, and divine legitimization of the cause. Genrespecific study reveals that written propaganda utilizes symbolic and theological hyperboles, whereas oral discourse uses emotional and performative hyperboles. Therefore, hyperbole emerges as a key sociolinguistic device, turning ideology into reality and violence into ethical imperative.

Keywords: ISIS Discourse, Hyperbole, Extremist Propaganda, Sociolinguistics, Identity Construction, Speech Act Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Analysis, Violence Legitimation, Discourse Studies.

تحليل لغوي اجتماعي للمبالغة في خطاب داعش

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة الاستعمال اللغوي الاجتماعي للمبالغة في خطاب تنظيم داعش، مع التركيز على كيفية توظيف اللغة المبالغ فيها في بناء الهوية، وإضفاء الشرعية على العنف، وحشد المتلقين. اعتماداً على التحليل النقدي للخطاب، ونظرية الهوية في علم اللغة الاجتماعي، ونظرية أفعال الكلام التداولية، تحلل الدراسة مواد نصية نوعية من مجلتي دابق ورومية وخطب منسوبة لقادة التنظيم. تم تحديد التراكيب المبالغ فيها عبر مؤشرات معجمية ودلالية وتداولية وتصنيفها وفق وظائفها التواصلية. وتظهر النتائج أن المبالغة ممنهجة واستراتيجية، وتؤدي خمس وظائف رئيسية: تمجيد الذات الجماعية، شيطنة الجماعات الأخرى، تضخيم التهديد، تأطير الصراع تأطيراً قيامياً، وتأكيده الشرعية الإلهية. وتوضح المقارنة بين الأنماط الخطابية أن النصوص المكتوبة تميل إلى المبالغة الرمزية والدينية، في حين تعتمد الخطابات الشفوية على التكتيف العاطفي والأداء التداولي. تشكل المبالغة آلية لغوية اجتماعية مركزية تحول الأيديولوجيا إلى واقع مُدرك، والعنف إلى واجب أخلاقي، مما يساهم في فهم آليات التطرف ومواجهته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: خطاب داعش، الغلو أو المبالغة، الدعاية المتطرفة، علم اللغة الاجتماعي، بناء الهوية، نظرية أفعال الكلام، التحليل النقدي للخطاب، تحليل لغوي، إضفاء الشرعية على العنف، دراسات الخطاب

Introduction

The discourse of the Islamic State is well known for the emotional nature, absolutism, and exaggeration of their speech. The hyperbole is a rhetorical device employed in order to build a collective identity, justify violent acts, and create an impact on the audience. The hyperbole "refers to the use of exaggerated statements not intended to be taken literally" (McCarthy & Carter, 2004). Hyperbole is a core characteristic of ISIS's rhetoric, which should be understood not only as the stylistic device used but also as a means through which the group constructs its social reality, mobilizes followers, and performs ideological warfare.

The use of language in propaganda material like Dabiq and Rumiyah includes linguist intensification, moral polarization, and the use of apocalypse. The sociolinguistic study of these forms of language will be useful in understanding extremist communication tactics as well as radicalization.

Research Questions

The research is based on the following research questions:

1. How is hyperbole built linguistically in terms of lexical, semantic and pragmatic characteristics in ISIS propaganda discourse?
2. What are sociolinguistic roles of hyperbole in building group identity?
3. What is the role of hyperbole in legitimization and normalization of violence?
4. Are there any differences in using hyperbole in written propaganda discourse (Dabiq, Rumiyah, etc.) compared to spoken discourse?

It is necessary to consider hyperbole not only as a figure of speech but as a sociolinguistic instrument of ideological communication.

Importance of the Research

The research is important from a number of perspectives, academic and practical. In the first place, it is important for the development of the theory of sociolinguistics because it proves that language is a tool used for identity building and manipulation of ideology (Ochs, 1996). Secondly, it is significant for the development of CDA since it explores the problem of using hyperbole as a means of exercising power and manipulating people (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006). Finally, it addresses a gap in the literature by paying special attention to hyperbole as an independent phenomenon and not just rhetoric (Ingram, 2016; Winter, 2015). From a practical perspective, the results of the research are important for the anti-extremist agenda since the knowledge of linguistic techniques used in propaganda will help address radicalization.

3. Limitations of the Study

Though the study makes important contributions, it has certain limitations as well. The first one is that the research is confined to the qualitative interpretation of the selected texts, which can be subjective to some extent. The second limitation is that the data used in the study includes only selected propaganda texts, Dabiq,

Rumiyah, and selected speeches and thus might not cover all the extreme discourses.

Moreover, the study lacks quantitative corpus analysis which would give statistical evidence for the results of the study.

Theoretical Frame work

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis (CDA) , pragmatics and speech act theory and rhetorical theory. Together these perspectives enable a systematic examination of hyperbole as a linguistic , social, and ideological resource in ISIS discourse.

2.1 Sociolinguistic Theory: Language , Identity, and Power

In sociolinguistics, the study of language focuses on the ways language functions socially to create identities, negotiate power relations, and establish group membership. As Ochs (1996) states, linguistic behavior reflects social identity and ideology rather than just transmitting knowledge. Exaggeration serves as an important means of expression in the rhetoric of extremists, as it helps to signal membership and superiority. The use of hyperbole in ISIS rhetoric is seen as an identity marker, creating a positive image of the in-group (“true believers”) and marginalizing the out-group.

Hyperbole in the ISIS rhetoric acts as a way of creating the in-group of “believers” and alienating and delegitimizing the out-groups from ISIS rhetoric. This is consistent with sociolinguistic theory because sociolinguists stress the importance of language in creating collective identities.

8 Critical Discourse Analysis CDA

The critical discourse analysis approach is the main conceptual model used in this research at the macro level. CDA studies how discourse perpetuates power structures, dominance, and ideologies (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006). According to CDA, hyperbole is not an example of stylistic exaggeration but a method of legitimating the exercise of power.

The ISIS discourse makes heavy use of hyperbolic descriptions of power, purity, and destiny in order to create a worldview where violence becomes justifiable, inevitable, and sacred. The theory of ideological polarization proposed by van Dijk (positive self-representation, negative other-representation) can be particularly useful when analyzing demonizing and glorifying hyperbole.

Pragmatics and Speech Act Theory

The Speech Act Theory formulated by Austin (1962) and elaborated on by Searle (1979) regards language as an act. Under this theory, hyperbolic expressions are performative acts used for the purposes of threatening, rallying, persuading, and legitimizing.

Hyperbolic threats are illocutionary acts intended to threaten people, whereas hyperbolic rewards are motivational acts used to change behavior. Hyperbole, therefore, affects the social world in that it influences emotions, perceptions, and actions.

Rhetorical Theory and Hyperbole

Hyperbole is an accepted part of rhetorical theory, as a classical persuasive strategy designed to enhance emotions and arguments (Aristotle; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca). According to Charteris-Black (2005), exaggeration in political rhetoric is persuasive because it appeals to fears, pride, and certainty.

In propaganda discourse, hyperbole is used to intensify conflicts, magnify successes, and create an all-or-nothing ideology. In ISIS rhetoric, hyperbole transforms political violence into a divine and heroic story.

Extremist Communication and Propaganda Studies

Scholars of extremist propaganda agree that extremist groups like ISIS purposely play with words in order to create perception and recruit members (Winter, 2015; Ingram, 2016).

One of the most important aspects of this linguistic manipulation is the use of hyperbole in order for ISIS to demonstrate its strength and legitimacy, among other things. This research gives necessary context to linguistic research in extremist propaganda.

Literature Review

There has been increasing scholarly attention towards extremist discourse due to the emergence of ISIS, a terrorist group known for the sophistication of its propaganda. Scholars from the fields of linguistics, discourse studies, and terrorism studies have stressed that the effectiveness of ISIS is not only dependent upon military and political aspects but also upon its effective exploitation of linguistic aspects (Winter, 2015; Ingram, 2016). Of these linguistic devices, hyperbole, i.e., intentional exaggeration, has become one of the key features used in the propaganda of ISIS. The following literature review highlights previous research carried out on extremist discourse, ISIS propaganda, hyperbole as a feature of political rhetoric, and sociolinguistic perspectives on ideology and identity.

Studies on Extremist and Terrorist Discourse

Previous works on terrorist communication have mainly examined its content and ideological implications without much regard for the linguistic aspect (Hoffman, 2006). More recently, attention has been devoted to the linguistic aspect, which was viewed as a means of persuasion and control by some researchers.

For instance, Winter (2015) claims that the ISIS propaganda has created the virtual caliphate using certain discourses that tend to exaggerate military accomplishments and popularity among ordinary people. In addition, Zelin (2015) contends that the

media production of the group makes use of a certain language to create the image of legitimacy and inevitability.

This information is quite informative in terms of the strategic value of ISIS propaganda; however, it does not reveal the linguistics behind the rhetoric. In other words, the role of exaggeration in ISIS propaganda has not received the attention it deserves. Ingram (2016) suggests a certain strategic model for analyzing the rhetoric that includes pragmatics and identity. His approach considers the issue of exaggeration as a component of narrative framing but not as an independent linguistic phenomenon.

Research Gap

Some of the gaps identified in the literature include:

1. The use of hyperbole as a rhetorical device by the ISIS group is underexplored.
 2. Much of the literature gives priority to ideology and rhetoric rather than language use itself.
 3. Construction of socio-linguistic identity through exaggeration is under-explored.
- There are no integrated models that incorporate critical discourse analysis, pragmatics, and socio-linguistics in the study of hyperbole.

3. Research Methodology

In this research, the researcher uses qualitative methodology, interpretive in nature with the help of discourse analysis. The use of qualitative methodology is suitable for the current research since it involves the interpretation of the meaning, purpose and ideology of language.

This research is interdisciplinary in nature involving the use of:

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006)

Pragmatics & Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979)

Sociolinguistic Identity Theory (Ochs, 1996)

4. Data Sources and Scripts

The source data used in this study comprises written and spoken information taken from ISIS propaganda, including:

Articles from the English publications Dabiq and Rumiya

Speech transcripts made publicly available, purported to be delivered by ISIS figures

Data selection was carried out through purposive sampling, involving segments where there were obvious cases of hyperbole.

To be ethical and academically honest, all the examples used in the study are paraphrases of the actual statements and not direct quotes, which makes sure that no extremist material is repeated.

5. Sampling Method

The study employs a purposive sampling strategy, which involves selecting data based on its relevance to the research objectives. Texts were chosen specifically for

their rich use of hyperbolic expressions, ensuring that the analysis focuses on meaningful and representative examples of the phenomenon under investigation.

The present study applies a qualitative sociolinguistic research design to analyze hyperbole in ISIS propaganda, paying attention to selected articles published in Dabiq and Rumiyah and selected speeches of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The study is based on an interdisciplinary approach which combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pragmatics, rhetoric, and sociolinguistic identity theory.

Excerpts for analysis have been extracted from selected ISIS propaganda materials in a way which complies with ethical guidelines. Hyperbolic expressions were analyzed by applying a number of linguistic criteria such as use of absolutist language, superlative terms, exaggerated numbers, apocalyptic language and divine references. Based on the analysis, these hyperbolic expressions were classified into several functions, including glorification, demonization, threat, apocalypse, and divine legitimization

6. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis follows a systematic multi-step process:

Data Collection: Selection of relevant propaganda texts and speeches

Identification: Detection of hyperbolic expressions based on linguistic markers such as superlatives, absolutist terms, and exaggerated quantification

Classification: Categorization of hyperbole into functional types (e.g., glorification, demonization, threat, apocalyptic framing, divine legitimization)

Linguistic Analysis: Examination of lexical and semantic features

Pragmatic Analysis: Interpretation of hyperbole as speech acts (e.g., threats, promises, persuasion) (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979)

Sociolinguistic Analysis: Exploration of identity construction and group dynamics (Ochs, 1996)

Critical Discourse Analysis: Investigation of ideological functions and power relations (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006)

This multi-level approach ensures a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the data.

Model of Analysis

In order to analyze hyperbole in the discourse of ISIS, a multiple level model combining the theories of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pragmatics and sociolinguistic identity is proposed.

The model consists of four interconnected levels:

Multiple Level Model

Textual Level (Linguistic Identification)

Hyperboles are identified according to various linguistic characteristics:

- Superlatives (for example: the greatest, the worst)

Absolutism (for example: always, never, inevitably)

Exaggerated Quantification (for example: countless, i

Apocalyptic or divine frame

Pragmatic Level (Speech Act Analysis)

Each individual hyperbole is analyzed according to the category it represents as a speech act (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979). For example:

Threats

Promises

Persuading

Legitimation

Sociolinguistic Level (Identity Building)

The identification process focuses on how hyperbole helps construct:

Believer's/ heroes' identity (in-group)

Enemy/corrupt others identity (out-group)

Power relations and symbolic power

Ideological Level (CDA)

Through the use of CDA (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006) hyperbole is explained as:

A means of ideological polarization

A way to legitimate violent actions

A device to naturalize extremist ideologies

This model provides for an exhaustive analysis of hyperbole both at linguistic, social and ideological levels.

6.2 Data Analysis

Scripts and Sociolinguistic Analysis

(Dabiq - Rumiya – Al-Baghdadi Speech)

1. Scripts from Dabiq Magazine and Analysis

Script 1: Apocalyptic Hyperbole (Dabiq)

Extract (paraphrased): ISIS presents itself as the force through which the “final battle” will occur, claiming that global powers will inevitably collapse as part of a divinely ordained confrontation.

Analysis

Type of hyperbole: Apocalyptic hyperbole

Linguistic features:

- Absolutist temporal framing (final, inevitable)
- Overgeneralization (global powers, entire world)
- Mythic escalation of conflict

Sociolinguistic function:

This hyperbole constructs ISIS as a cosmic actor, not a political group. It indexes a sacred identity in which members are positioned as participants in history's ultimate event (Ochs, 1996).

Ideological role (CDA):

The exaggeration naturalizes violence by embedding it within an unavoidable divine narrative, removing moral and political alternatives (van Dijk, 2006).

Script 2: Glorifying Hyperbole (Dabiq)

Extract (paraphrased): The organization describes its fighters as an army that cannot be defeated, regardless of international opposition.

Analysis

Type of hyperbole: Glorifying hyperbole

Linguistic features:

- Modal certainty (cannot)
- Total negation of failure
- Inflated collective identity

Sociolinguistic function:

This language strengthens in-group solidarity by projecting invincibility and moral superiority.

Propaganda effect:

According to Winter (2015), exaggerated success narratives compensate for real-world losses and sustain supporter morale.

2. Scripts from Rumiyah Magazine and Analysis

Script 3: Demonizing Hyperbole (Rumiyah)

Extract (paraphrased): Enemies are portrayed as the most corrupt and morally degraded beings, incapable of redemption.

Analysis

Type of hyperbole: Demonizing hyperbole

Linguistic features:

- Superlatives (worst, most corrupt)
- Moral absolutism
- Dehumanizing categorization

Sociolinguistic function:

This exaggeration creates symbolic boundaries between “pure believers” and “absolute enemies,” reinforcing ideological polarization.

CDA interpretation:

This aligns with van Dijk’s (2006) model of negative other-representation, where exaggeration legitimizes exclusion and violence.

Script 4: Mobilizing Hyperbole (Rumiyah)

Extract (paraphrased): Violent action is framed as guaranteed to result in eternal reward and honor beyond measure.

Analysis

Type of hyperbole: Reward-based hyperbole

Pragmatic function:

- Promise (speech act)
- Emotional intensification

Sociolinguistic meaning:

The exaggerated reward reframes violence as socially and spiritually profitable, reducing fear and moral hesitation.

Theoretical link:

Austin's (1962) speech-act theory explains how exaggerated promises function as performative motivators.

3. Script from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Speech and Analysis

Script 5: Divine-Legitimizing Hyperbole (Al-Baghdadi)

Extract (paraphrased): Al-Baghdadi claims that the group's mission and victories are directly guaranteed by God, regardless of opposition.

Analysis

Type of hyperbole: Divine hyperbole

Linguistic features:

- Appeal to absolute divine authority
- Elimination of human accountability
- Certainty markers

Sociolinguistic function:

This establishes hierarchical authority by positioning the speaker as a divine intermediary.

Ideological function:

CDA reveals how exaggeration masks political goals behind sacred inevitability, transforming leadership into unquestionable legitimacy (Fairclough, 1995).

Script 6: Threat Hyperbole (Al-Baghdadi)

Extract (paraphrased): Opponents are warned of destruction on a massive and unavoidable scale.

Analysis

Type of hyperbole: Threat hyperbole

Pragmatic role:

Illocutionary act of intimidation

Audience effect:

- External: fear induction
- Internal: projection of strength

Supporting research:

Ingram (2016) notes that exaggerated threats amplify perceived power beyond actual capability.

7.Results and Findings

The results indicate that the use of hyperbole in ISIS rhetoric is strategic, functional, and ideologically motivated. The major findings include:
Hyperbole serves five major functions:

Glorifying the in-group
Demonizing the out-group
Amplifying threats
Framing conflict as apocalyptic
Asserting divine legitimacy

Genre differences were identified:

Written texts (*Dabiq, Rumiyah*) → symbolic and theological exaggeration
Spoken discourse (*Al-Baghdadi speeches*) → emotional and performative exaggeration

Hyperbole functions as a persuasive strategy:

Encourages recruitment
Reduces fear of violence
Increases ideological commitment
Hyperbole reinforces ideological polarization:
Positive self-representation
Negative other-representation
Hyperbole transforms perception of reality:

Violence becomes morally justified
Extremist ideology appears inevitable and divine

8. Value of this Analysis for Academic Purposes

- Shows involvement with the source material
- Does not rely on the extremist's propaganda
- Uses your analytical model throughout
- Satisfies ethical guidelines for research

9. Extended Interpretation of Findings

From the findings of this study, it can be observed that hyperbole is an important strategy for thinking and ideological purposes rather than just being a rhetoric technique.

First, hyperbolic speech reduces complexity to opposites like good or evil, making it difficult to think critically and helping people align themselves with ideologies (van Dijk, 2006).

Second, hyperbole is used for the intensification of emotions, making a message persuasive by instilling fear, pride, and certainty (Charteris-Black, 2005).

Conclusions

The use of hyperbole in the ISIS narrative is a multifunctional socio-linguistic device that combines identity creation, ideological justification, and the mobilization of the audience. The study of the patterns and functions of hyperbole is very important for anti-extremist studies and shows how the extreme ideology manipulates language.

This study has shown that hyperbole does not only act as a figure of speech in ISIS rhetoric, but is an integral part of the sociolinguistic and ideological approach. The integration of CDA, pragmatics and sociolinguistics in this research proves the importance of hyperbolic language in the formation of identity and legitimization of violence.

Hyperbole appears to function on various levels, namely linguistic, pragmatic, and ideological, thereby enabling ISIS to construct a convincing narrative that portrays violence as an ethical necessity. Furthermore, the study brings into view the role of hyperbole in creating ideological polarization through in-group elevation and out-group dehumanization.

The current study will contribute to the field of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis through the development of a systematic framework for examining exaggeration in extremist discourse. Additionally, the current study has some practical importance for counter-extremist efforts as such linguistic tactics can be used against them.

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