"There's millions of them": hyperbole in everyday conversation

Michael McCarthy, Ronald Carter*

School of English Studies, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

Abstract

This paper examines the occurrence of hyperbole in a five-million-word corpus of everyday English conversation (the CANCODE corpus). Hyperbole (also referred to as exaggeration or overstatement) has been studied in rhetoric and in literary contexts, but only relatively recently in banal, everyday contexts. It is often associated with irony, but the present paper also examines it in the broader context of exaggerated assertions for a variety of types of interpersonal meaning. The paper emphasises the interactive nature of hyperbole: listener reaction is crucial to its interpretation and the success of hyperbole depends on the listener entering a pact of acceptance of extreme formulations, the creation of impossible worlds, and/ or apparent counterfactuality. Corpus extracts from concordances generated for key lexical items within core semantic fields such as time and number are used to illustrate hyperbolic expressions in context, and the hyperbolic instances of the key items are identified according to a list of criteria. Figures are given for the degree of hyperbole-proneness of items, and the syntactic environment is also addressed, along with the clustering of particular kinds of signals. The paper concludes that an interactive approach to hyperbole is indispensable for its proper understanding, and that the use of large corpora offers new insights with theoretical implications for the study of tropes.
© 2003 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Trope; Hyperbole; Spoken language; Corpus; Linguistics; Conversation; English

"And azaleas—we've got truckloads!"
(first author's friend talking about his garden)

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: ronald.carter@nottingham.ac.uk (R. Carter).

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with purposeful exaggeration in everyday British English conversation. It is a regular feature of informal talk that speakers exaggerate narrative, descriptive and argumentative features and make assertions that are overstated, literally impossible, inconceivable or counterfactual in many different types of discourse context. Such hyperbolic expressions usually pass without challenge by listeners, who accept them as creative intensifications for evaluative or affective purposes such as humour and irony, and who often make their own supportive contributions to the figure of speech. In the paper, we examine data from the 5-million-word CANCODE spoken English corpus and begin to build a framework for the description and understanding of hyperbole in interaction. CANCODE stands for 'Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English'. The corpus was developed at the University of Nottingham, UK, and funded by Cambridge University Press, UK, with whom sole copyright resides.[1] The corpus conversations were recorded in a wide variety of mostly informal settings across the islands of Britain and Ireland, and then transcribed and stored in computer-readable form. Details of the corpus and its design may be found in McCarthy (1998).

Hyperbole has a long history of study as a rhetorical figure of speech in written texts, and has been, since the time of the ancient Greeks, one of many figures of speech discussed within the general framework of rhetoric, which for many centuries formed, along with grammar, the two principal pillars of language study (see Capt-Artaud, 1995 for a useful summary of the influence of rhetoric, especially on the desire to create taxonomies of logical operations for tropes[2]). 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. Only relatively recently have pioneers such as Fontanier (1968) shifted the study of figurative rhetoric into the domain of banal, common language. However, not a great amount of research exists into everyday spoken hyperbole, and much of the literature on hyperbole in spoken language is subsumed within studies of verbal irony and humour (e.g. Gibbs, 2000). In this paper, we include examples of hyperbole that occur in ironic contexts, but we have a wider aim: to illustrate the importance to theory-building of the use of large corpora, and in doing so to describe a range of linguistic expressions and contextual configurations that create hyperbole in ironic and non-ironic utterances as found in a contemporary spoken corpus. 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 most frequently recurring lexico-grammatical types of hyperbole in everyday contexts.

---

[1] CANCODE forms part of the larger Cambridge International Corpus (CIC).

[2] But see also Schenkveld (1991) on the less than precise boundaries between grammar and rhetoric in the ancient world.

2. Frameworks for the study of hyperbole

2.1. Hyperbole as a general rhetorical strategy

The term hyperbole has a long history going back to Aristotle, and features throughout the historiography of rhetoric. In Smith's (1657) *Mysterie of Rhetorique Unvaild*, for example, hyperbole is defined as: "when the trope is exceedingly enlarged, or when the change of signification is very high and lofty, or when in advancing or repressing one speaks much more than is precisely true, yea above all belief" (p. 54). Two kinds of hyperbole are identified by Smith: auxesis and meiosis (ibid.: p. 55), the exaggerated intensification, expanding or enlarging of an entity and the exaggerated reduction or attenuation of it, respectively. These essential elements of the definition remain with us today. Ravazzoli (1978), drawing on examples from written sources, proposes a number of linguistic types of hyperbolic expressions, including metaphors which expand/magnify as well as those which attenuate (*metaforica amplificante* and *metaforica attenuativa*), in utterances such as referring to someone as *a colossus* and referring to someone as *an insignificant little pipsqueak*, respectively, as well as types of simile and metonymy (*X is like a thunderbolt* and *Y is all arms and legs*). The categorisations are intuitively appealing, but the overlap with metaphor, simile and metonymy is problematic.

Many metaphors and other figures of speech (including hyperboles) have become so conventionalised or even 'dead' that they may not be perceived as hyperbole in the sense of purposeful exaggeration in a specific context with a specific evaluative goal. For example, to say one has not seen someone for *ages* may not normally have an exaggerated or overstated force, such is the frequency and conventionality of the expression *for ages*, simply meaning 'for a long time'. Similarly a verb such as *be dying to* (e.g. *dying to meet someone*) may not be heard as exaggerated or overstated at all, even though counterfactual in its literal interpretation. These are what Bhaya et al., (1988) call low-risk metaphors, in contrast to "creative risk-taking" (p. 27) with non-institutionalised metaphors. A problem raised by Kronfeld (1980) is that dead or conventional metaphors become the 'normal' way of talking about something (p. 16) and are perceived as close to the literal, achieving the status of 'established senses' (p. 17). Around the same time, Searle (1979) argued that dead metaphors bypass original literal meanings and acquire new literal meanings identical with their former metaphorical meanings. Traugott (1985) continues the argument that dead metaphors no longer have metaphorical force, but distinguishes completely dead metaphors from 'conventional' ones which still retain at least some vestige of metaphorical value. This may be the case with some of the numerical expressions dealt with in this paper (and would certainly seem to be the case with high frequency dead hyperboles such as *for ages* or *be dying to do sth*), where the frequency of occurrence suggests a degree of conventionality of the hyperbole, and this is one contribution the quantitative evidence of a corpus-base study may be able to make to the debate on dead metaphors in general and on the degree to which hyperboles are dead, conventional or creative. As in the case of metaphor, and as Traugott (ibid.) discusses, core conceptual fields are crucial to our understanding of how experience is

organised, and the fact that number, quantity and size are frequently upscaled suggests that at least a degree of conventionality is to be expected in hyperbolic expressions based round those fields.

The test of impossibility or counterfactuality will be of considerable assistance in dealing with a large number of utterances in the present study, but the particular context will always be the deciding factor. It may indeed be the case that an expression such as *ages* can be used hyperbolically in particular contexts (e.g. comparing the millisecond of time one's brand-new, state-of-the-art computer takes to do the same task that one's two-year-old computer took a whole two seconds to perform: *The old one took ages to save a document*.). Other exaggerated metaphors, similes and metonymies may be more obviously original, creative and non-institutionalised, and thus carry more contextual force as hyperboles. Equally, listener response is crucial, as we shall argue below: one might hypothesise a different response to what is received as hyperbole from what is heard simply as institutionalised, dead metaphor or other conventionalised trope.

2.2. Hyperbole, competing realities and lies

Looking at the broader, more strategic uses of hyperbole, Swartz (1976) considers its occurrence in spoken political rhetoric in solving disputes among the Bena people of Tanzania. Hyperbole is a kind of 'structuring' of reality where there are competing realities; it can enable sharp focus on one account of reality and downplay rival accounts, and it brings the listeners into the perspective of the speaker in a powerful way. Although it may be heard as counter to other claims to describe reality, or as describing impossibilities, hyperbole is not heard as an act of lying.[3] This is in line with Clark's (1996: 143) explanation of hyperbole vis-à-vis Grice's (1975) conversational maxims: the maxim of quality enjoins speakers not to say deliberately that which they know not to be true. Hyperbole depends, says Clark, on "a kind of joint pretense in which speakers and addressees create a new layer of joint activity" (*ibid.*).[4] But when someone tells a lie there is no joint pretense between sender and receiver, and as Barbe (1995: 119) points out, 'an ideal lie does not give any signals'. Similarly, Bhaya (1985) distinguishes hyperbole from other violations of the Gricean maxim of quality by its overtness, and adds another factor which differentiates it from lying, the fact that lying is normally socially unacceptable. Haverkate (1990) makes an important point that metaphors display an 'empirical falsehood' in their propositional content (p.102), while understatement and hyperbole do not display propositional discrepancy vis-à-vis the real world, but instead describe the world 'in terms of disproportionate dimensions' (p.103). On the relationship between utterance and truthfulness, Gibbs (1994) advocates a distinction between hyperbole and simple overstatement, labelling the latter as unconscious or unintentional, while hyperbole

---

[3] See also Fontanier (1968: 123) who sees the function of hyperbole as "non de tromper, mais d'amener à la vérité même, et de fixer, par ce qu'elle dit d'incroyable, ce qu'il faut réellement croire".

[4] The willing supension of disbelief on the part of the hearer may be compared to that of the reader of literary fiction.

is intentional. The obvious difficulty here is how one would operationalise a speaker-internal notion of intention in examining a corpus of naturally occurring data, and it is not clear precisely what would be gained from an analysis that distinguished overstatement from hyperbole for the purpose of the present paper, which is to examine a range of devices whereby speakers may achieve either overstatement or hyperbole. What is of greater interest to us is the evaluative context of hyperbole/overstatement and how speakers use it to express affective meanings, and how listeners receive such acts. Thus any full account of hyperbole must have an interactive dimension. As with other acts of linguistic creativity, hyperbole is validated in interaction and can only be described adequately by including the listener's contributions to the emergent act, rather than being examined as a single, creative act by the speaker alone, or solely within the domain of intentionality, whether on the part of the speaker or listener.

2.3. Hyperbole and irony

Much useful insight into hyperbole may be found in the literature on irony and sarcasm, and, indeed, hyperbole seems to be a recurring phenomenon in ironic utterances. Gibbs (1994) notes that both hyperbole and understatement are closely related to irony in traditional rhetoric "in that each misrepresents the truth" (p. 391). Roberts and Kreuz (1994) found that irony and hyperbole co-occurred in discoursal contexts where the goals were humour, emphasis and clarification. One linking characteristic between hyperbole and irony is what Kreuz and Roberts (1995) call 'nonveridicality', a discrepancy between an utterance and reality, what we refer to as counterfactuality. Hyperbole, the nonveridicality condition and the ironic tone of voice (e.g. heavy stress, nasality) all contribute to ironic interpretations of utterances. In terms of linguistic items, Kreuz and Roberts (ibid.) offer a list of intensifying adverbs which, they claim, characteristically combine with a set of "extreme positive adjectives" (p. 25) to produce hyperbolic irony. The adverbs include *absolutely, certainly, just,* etc., and the adjectives include *amazing, adorable, brilliant,* etc., so that collocations such as *just amazing, absolutely brilliant,* and so on, will often occur with hyperbolic-ironic intent.[5] While this list may indeed generate a number of collocations that may occur in ironic contexts, quite clearly a good deal of contextual information is required to support the ironic interpretation, and many more *intensifying adverb + extreme adjective* collocations could serve the same ends.

An important distinction in the study of irony has been made between 'use' and 'mention', where use is defined as reference directly to what an expression refers to, while mention involves reflexive reference to the expression itself. Sperber and Wilson,

---

[5] One such example from our corpus is of speakers ridiculing something heard on a news report:
<$1> In the IRA bomb attack on Manchester ten days ago they say two or more Irish men may have been together in the Greater Manchester area.
<$2> Oh right.
<$3> Oh **great**. [Laughs] Oh **bloody brilliant**!
<$2> Well that'll narrow it down a bit won't it!

(1981), in elaborating the distinction, assert that the illocutionary force of a sentence when mentioned is not that of its use, and posit 'echoic mention' as a central element of ironic utterances. Echoic mention brings, as it were, another voice into the discourse; the utterance echoes someone else's utterance, some other situation, and crucially encodes the speaker's attitude towards a situation. There may, similarly, be evidence of echoic mention in hyperbolic utterances which assist their interpretation as tropes.

A recent 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', after Goffman (1979, 1981). Goffman (1981) describes footing as "alignment, or set, or stance, or posture, or projected self" (p. 128); changes to the alignment produce new 'frames' in which the talk is interpreted.[6] Turn construction and placement create the shift in footing and render the conversational frame more visible: in interpreting irony, conversational participants will take account of the frame in which the utterance occurs.[7] In Clift's paper there is considerable overlap with how she accounts for irony and how we may account for hyperbolic interpretations; indeed, many of her transcribed examples contain exaggerated and counterfactual utterances within the ironic 'frame'. In ironic contexts, footing often shifts "toward the extreme" (p. 540), and a typical ironic utterance creates a "framed, impossible world" (ibid.). Clift also points out that paralinguistic and articulatory cues (e.g. the ironic tone of voice, echoic tones, etc.) are not always present and are not necessary in the creation of irony: "irony emerges from the placement of the turn itself" (p. 546), and clues in the data such as laughter and the take-up and continuation of irony by participants are crucial.[8] Clift, therefore, also takes an interactive perspective. Her approach would seem valid for the study of hyperbole, both in ironic and in more general evaluative contexts.

Though not using corpus linguistic techniques (defined by at least partial automatic retrieval of data), Gibbs (2000) bases his major study of the occurrence of irony in informal talk among friends on a large body of 62 conversations,[9] and his study is much in the spirit of the present paper. However, for Gibbs, hyperbole is just one form of irony, alongside jocularity/teasing, sarcasm, understatement and rhetorical questions implying a humorous or critical assertion. Most importantly,

---

[6] Though the definition and use of the term 'footing' has appeared in various contexts (see Tannen, 1993; Tannen and Wallat, 1993; Wortham, 1996, for example), this paper will use the term 'footing' in the original sense as referred to in Goffman (1979) (and reprinted in Goffman, 1981): a "change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production and reception of an utterance", where a change in footing is "another way of talking about a change in our frame of events" (Goffman, 1981: 128), pre-disposing us to receive language use and reference in a particularly marked way or enabling us to reflect upon, and mark as distinctive, the communicative processes we participate in.

[7] It is worth noting here that Drew and Holt (1998), also working within a conversation analysis framework, find that figurative expressions, when examined sequentially, can be important signals of shifts in discourse topic. Some of Drew and Holt's examples of such figurative expressions include hyperbolic ones.

[8] Similarly, Gibbs and O'Brien (1991) point out that listeners can interpret utterances as ironic even though speakers may not intend irony, and can understand sarcasm without intonational cues. Gibbs (2000) concludes that "there appears not to be a single pattern of prosodic cues when people speak ironically" (p. 25).

[9] Gibbs does not give a total word-count for his corpus but, based on average speech rates in the CANCODE corpus, it would be reasonable to suggest his data were around 100,000 words.

Gibbs is concerned with addressees' reactions to irony, such as laughter or reciprocation of an ironic utterance. Central to all the forms of irony is "the idea of a speaker providing some contrast between expectation and reality" (p. 13). Hyperboles in Gibbs' data were principally directed at some aspect of the present situation, but were also directed at the addressee, other, non-present parties and speakers themselves. Echoic mention and pretense (defined as the speaker pretending to be some other persona and to be addressing some person other than the listener) both figure in the hyperboles, with pretense being the stronger element, but many utterances contained neither element. A special tone of voice was often present, but not always, and was considerably less evident than in sarcasm. Addressees often responded to hyperbole with laughter, a reciprocal ironic utterance or a literal remark that indicated reception of the speaker's ironic intent. All of these are also present in our own data. Overall, jocularity and sarcasm were more frequent than hyperbole in Gibbs' data, with rhetorical questions and understatement being less frequent.

2.4. Hyperbole and affect

A further dimension to the interactive nature of hyperbole (in terms of counterfactuals) is provided by Slugoski and Turnbull (1988), who assert the central importance of the affective context. Against the framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) face and politeness theory, they demonstrate experimentally that interpersonal liking and disliking among conversational participants and their like or dislike of non-present, third-person targets of counterfactual 'insults' influence how such utterances are received. What may be heard as an insult when directed at a disliked, remote person may be heard as non-insulting and simply affectionate humour when aimed at a liked, intimate conversational partner.

The affective dimension in interpreting irony and hyperbole has recently been taken up by Leggitt and Gibbs (2000), who reiterate the importance of the interactive dimension, stressing the need to attend to "particular speaker-listener interactions when examining people's emotions in ironic communication" (p. 21). Leggitt and Gibbs examine non-personal irony (i.e. directed at third-parties), understatement, satire, sarcasm, overstatement and rhetorical questions as speaker reactions to problematic situations. Listeners' reception of such acts varies, with more negative affect being created by overstatement and sarcasm than by irony, understatement and satire. Hyperbole is sometimes perceived as speakers making a 'big deal' of matters that do not deserve it. The overstatement of problems is, of course, only one type of hyperbole, and many of the examples we shall examine in the present paper occur in non-problematic contexts such as performed narratives and general evaluations of situations, both positive and negative, but Leggitt and Gibbs once again do remind us of the importance of listener reception and of the interactive dimension.[10] This underscores the importance of an interactive approach to the function and

---

[10] Similarly, in the study of sarcasm, Toplak and Katz (2000) demonstrate that victims of sarcastic criticism felt more severely criticized than those receiving direct criticism, while Haiman (1998: 33–35) suggests a direct link between hyperbole and sarcasm.

interpretation of counterfactuals, which the present paper will adhere to. Corpus data, where speaker relationships and other interpersonal contextual conditions are retrievable, offer a (potentially supportive) alternative to the elicited affective responses of psycholinguistic experimentation, as we shall attempt to demonstrate.

2.5. Hyperbole in everyday language

A significant contribution to the linguistics of hyperbole is offered by Spitzbardt (1963), who supports the need to look at hyperbole in everyday speech (as opposed to its occurrence in literature) and who focuses on the lexico-grammatical repertoire for hyperbole. As in this paper, Spitzbardt attempts to list common lexical and grammatical features used in hyperbolic utterances, such as numerical expressions, expressions of spatial extent (*miles, oceans*), intensifying and extreme adjectives and adverbs, verbs such as *dying to*, comparatives and superlatives, extreme metaphors and similes, and so on. Spitzbardt also makes a cultural claim that American English is more hyperbole-prone than British English, certainly a claim rooted in anecdote but one difficult to prove, and not an issue in the present paper.[11]

Norrick (1982) usefully summarises three basic characteristics of hyperbole: its affective dimension, its pragmatic nature, and its function as *amplificatio*, a vertical-scale metaphor (as opposed to horizontal metaphors of the kind *X is an angel*), where the utterance is marked as saying "more than necessary or justified" (p. 169). Norrick sees the affective involvement of the speaker as crucial to the interpretation of hyperbole. While hyperbolic utterances are usually perfectly well-formed lexico-grammatically, they appear odd in context, and this disjunction with context emanates from the speaker's production of the hyperbole as a personal, affectively involved, overstated simulacrum of reality.[12] Thus, in Norrick's view, hyperbole is a pragmatic category, and one which can be realised in any word class or lexico-grammatical configuration.

Loewenberg (1982) looks at three frequent linguistic items relevant to our present concerns and considers their ability to signal counterfactuality and hyperbole: *really, literally* and *actually*. On the face of it, *literally* might seem the very opposite of a signal of a non-factual, figurative assertion, but Loewenberg explains its hyperbolic use in terms of an assertion by the speaker that the hyperbole could not be closer to the truth in its intense descriptive power. As we shall see below, *literally* does indeed repeatedly have this force, and it has come to be a characteristic conversational marker of hyperbole. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that Quirk et al. (1985: 619) take a prescriptive line and refer to the hyperbole-marking function of *literally*

---

[11] American 'frontier humor', at least, does seem to be characterized by wild overstatement (see Hansen, 1977). Another culture with a claim to hyperbole in the tall tales of its frontier humour is Australia, seen by early settlers as 'a weirdly fantastic place where impossible events and phenomenal exploits occur' (Jones, 1987: 66). In the Australian tall-tale context, exaggerated humour is often associated with resignation to the harsh challenges of outback life (ibid.).

[12] This accords with the importance placed by Attardo (2000) on *appropriateness* in context as an important factor in the interpretation of irony, over and above considerations such as truthfulness and relevance.

as occurring in "careless and informal speech, and even indeed in writing". Along with *literally*, other adverb modifiers, especially *nearly* and *almost* may also be possible signals of overstatement.

Referring to what she terms *extreme case formulations*, Pomerantz (1986) examines data containing a number of features of conversation that chime in with the notion of hyperbole as understood in the present paper. Pomerantz's examples include utterances such as *He didn't say one word*, and *Whenever he's around he's utterly disparaging of our efforts*, where entities and events are described in the most extreme way possible. Such extreme assertions (involving lexical items such as *completely, perfectly, forever, every time, everyone*, etc.) regularly occur in contexts where speakers wish to set up a defence against challenges to complaints, accusations and so on, or where they attribute the cause of a state of affairs to some (perhaps only vaguely identified) other party, or, thirdly, when they wish to state behaviours which the speaker holds to be right or wrong. Thus for Pomerantz, the evaluative context of extreme formulations is central, and particular lexico-grammatical configurations correlate with such formulations. There is clearly overlap between extreme formulations and counterfactuality, but the difference may lie in the affective context: extreme formulations are not necessarily heard as absurd or counterfactual and often display a degree of conventionality (e.g. *x was absolutely covered in mud*).

2.6. Meaning: the literal and the figurative

Counterfactuality in ironic utterances is linked to the question of literal versus figurative interpretations. While the counterfactuality condition orients listeners towards figurative hearings, there is evidence that literal meanings are not entirely obliterated by the figurative process. Dews and Winner (1999) see both literal and figurative meaning as significant in the effectiveness of ironic utterances, and stress the interplay of both in the listener's reaction. Similarly, Giora (1999) asserts the importance of salient meanings (i.e. the meanings retrievable from the mental lexicon rather than from specific context, in other words the prototypical and literal meanings) in the interpretation of metaphor and irony. However, receivers are quick to latch on to counterfactuality in the online processing of metaphors, and use it as a key factor in interpretation, as Pexman et al., (2000) show experimentally with subjects interacting with a 'moving window' computer-based reaction test.

The contrast between reality (or expectation) and utterance that irony so often depends on is central to its effect, and Colston and O'Brien (2000a) argue that as a result irony asserts greater contrast, and thereby greater force, than does understatement or literal statement, in the achievement of discoursal goals such as humour, condemnation, unexpectedness, etc. They propose a scale of strength of effect running from the literal, through understatement, to irony.

2.7. The special nature of hyperbole

Apart from claims about the scale of strength of effect as between irony and other choices of tropes such as over- or understatement, there remains the question of

whether hyperbole and irony can and should be conceptually separated, even though there clearly are cases which can be labelled 'hyperbolic-ironic'. In the present paper, as stated above, we take a broader approach and look at overstatement in a variety of contexts, many of which can hardly be said to be ironic, but which simply express delight, antipathy, humour and other affective reactions. Hyperbole has this broader scope because of its special nature as a trope. Fogelin (1988) explains this succinctly: figures of speech such as over- and understatement, and ironic utterances demand of the listener a kind of inward 'corrective' response. The corrective response is "mutually recognised" (p. 13).[13] In the case of irony, there is a difference between the utterance and reality; the one negates or contradicts the other, and the corrective response is one of kind (the listener who hears _What a lovely day!_ on a horrid, cold, rainy day, 'corrects' the assertion to _What a horrible day!_). In the case of under- and overstatement, the difference is not one of kind, but of degree; the corrective response is to up- or downscale the assertion to accord with reality (the listener who hears _I almost starved to death when I stayed at my aunt's house!_ 'corrects' it to something like _My aunt was very mean with food/did not feed me nearly enough so I was hungry_). Hyperbole, therefore, magnifies and upscales reality, and, naturally, upscaling produces a contrast with reality which, given the right contextual conditions, may provide the kind of negation or mismatch with reality that is heard as ironic. Thus to say _She praised my every single move to the high heavens_ need not mean any praise was uttered at all, and said of a person known never to praise anyone will probably be heard as hyperbolic-ironic. Said of a person who is a bit too gushing with praise, the corrective response may be to hear the remark simply as meaning 'She went a bit overboard in praising me', thus hyperbolic but not necessarily strongly ironic. Colston and O'Brien (2000b) take up this argument, and recognise the kind/degree difference between irony and hyperbole but advocate "the simultaneous study of families of tropes" (p. 179) as a way of accessing possible underlying general psychological conditions pertinent to their interpretation, a challenge which Gibbs (2000) takes up. Thus, while accepting the qualitative difference, Colston and O'Brien set out to test the hypothesis that irony, as a contrast-of-kind trope, will be more effective in creating, for example, humour, than contrasts of magnitude such as are projected by hyperbole, and claim this indeed to be so. On the other hand, Colston and Keller (1998) find that hyperbole is more effective in creating an element of surprise.

2.8. Corpus linguistics and the study of tropes

Implicit in the present paper is the claim that a corpus-base study of hyperbole can add substance to the already healthy existing literature on rhetorical strategy, conventional and creative metaphor, irony and over- and understatement. But the question of what contribution corpus linguistics can make needs to be made more explicit and answered before the analysis and results are presented and discussed. Corpus linguistics has made a significant impact on the study of lexico-grammatical issues (e.g. the major grammar of Biber et al., 1998) and, increasingly, on the concerns

---

[13] For a brief critique of Fogelin's position regarding corrective responses, see Nogales (1999: 170).

of discourse and conversation analysts and sociolinguists, a recent important example being Stenström et al. (2002). However, the study of tropes using large corpora presents even greater challenges than those faced by corpus linguists who have moved beyond closed-class item analyses in grammar and lexis to the study of above-sentence phenomena within the conventional frameworks of discourse- and conversation analysis, and a theoretical justification for using corpora needs to be elaborated, as it is not self-evident.

In the present paper we propose the following five-part framework to address the theoretical concerns raised by a corpus-based study of hyperbole (and, we would hope, by extension, of other tropes):

2.8.1. Lexico-grammatical form

Where linguists have posited or identified either from intuition or from limited or invented data lexico-grammatical items or sets commonly used in hyperbole, a large conversational corpus-based investigation should be able to substantiate or repudiate the occurrence of those items and features in everyday talk. Pomerantz's (1986) extreme formulations seem to coincide with particular lexico-grammatical configurations, raising the question as to whether this is true of hyperbole in general. Loewenberg (1982) mentions words such as *literally* and *really* in connection with the signalling of counterfactuality, adding another component to the framework, that of an investigation of to what extent explicit lexical signals are a characteristic of hyperbole in everyday talk. Similarly, Kreuz and Roberts' (1995) examples of adverbial intensifiers plus adjectives should be testable both in terms of the individual items and as a type or class using corpus data. Likewise, in the study of irony, Barbe (1993, 1995) has considered explicit markers used by speakers to frame ironic evaluations, such as *it is ironic that ...*, *ironically*, ... etc., and conventionalised joking frames such as *I am serious now* and *no kidding* (1995: 119) It will be important to investigate whether speakers acknowledge their own and others' utterances as hyperbolic.

2.8.2. Rhetorical strategy

To what extent can a corpus offer evidence for the production and reception of conventional and creative figures of speech? Corpus analysis depends on the quantification and interpretation of regular, repeated, patterned phenomena (most typically in the sorted output of concordance lines for particular search items or strings). If corpus analysis can attest to both the reinforcement *and* the breaking of conventional patterns, then important issues concerning the relationship between 'dead', conventional and creative tropes may be resolved more effectively using large amounts of data. This relates to Norrick's (1982) and others' preoccupations with the reception of tropes as creative or otherwise, and the degree to which hyperbolic uses of expressions have become the 'normal' senses of those expressions (Searle, 1979; Kronfeld, 1980).

2.8.3. Context

One of the major advantages of a corpus-based study is the automatic retrievability of extra context for individual events and repeated contexts over a wide range of data samples. Norrick (1982) stressed the importance of oddity in context as a

marker of hyperbole. Our framework therefore considers whether there is evidence that utterances are constructed and received as at odds or in disjunction with their context and co-text. If Clift (1999) is right in homing in on changes of footing as significant framing devices for irony, it becomes important to investigate whether the characteristics of footing shifts and other boundary phenomena as observed by conversation analysts be shown to recur across a wide range of data samples in the environment of contextually disjointed utterances. In other words, can corpus linguistics lay claim to the retrievability of real contextual factors in a way that experimental elicitations cannot? The present corpus is profiled in its database according to speech genre (settings and purposes), and speaker information (e.g. age, gender, social background) and thus gives a powerful tool for including contextual information.

2.8.4. Meaning: literal and figurative

In the study of the reception of tropes, oscillations between literal and figurative interpretations have been considered important, as noted in the reviews of work by Dews and Winner (1999), Giora (1999) and Pexman et al., (2000), above. Thus any corpus evidence of literal interpretation or wordplay between the literal and figurative will be considered significant. Such evidence cannot by any means be retrieved automatically, but examination of specific events where hyperbole occurs will serve to test the occurrence or non-occurrence of external evidence for interplay between literal and figurative interpretations.

2.8.5. The interpersonal stratum: affect and reaction

Although perhaps least amenable to the techniques of corpus linguistics, the interpersonal dimension of tropes needs must form part of a coherent theoretical framework for their analysis. To date, the most illuminating work has been carried out within the experimental tradition, reliant upon elicited informant reactions to simulated data (Gibbs, 2000, being a notable exception). A selection of such studies was reviewed above, including key papers on the reception of irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, understatement and other tropes by researchers such as Slugoski and Turnbull (1988), Colston and Keller (1998), Leggitt and Gibbs (2000) and Colston and O'Brien (2000b). A corpus offers only the evidence of the listener's verbal reaction as transcribed (plus any extras such as laughter or other non-verbal signalling which may have been noted by the transcriber); nonetheless, such evidence will be considered vital in the substantiation or otherwise in actual use of the kinds of claims made in the experimental context.

The five-part framework of analysis provides us with a potential model for the interpretation of hyperbole as shown in diagrammatic form in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 illustrates the all-enveloping influence of context, where the conversational setting, the roles and relationships of the participants and the conversational goals (e.g. narrative, phatic, descriptive, argumentative, etc) are brought to bear on the occurrence and interpretation of hyperbole. Within any given context, shifts in footing (the next inner box), where they occur and are retrievable, provide the immediate, local frame for the occurrence and interpretation of the hyperbole sequence (as opposed to an individual hyperbolic utterance). The process of speaker

context: setting, goals, relationships

footing shifts: establishing frames

speaker

rhetorical strategy: upscale reality

shared lexico-grammatical repertoire: conventional versus creative

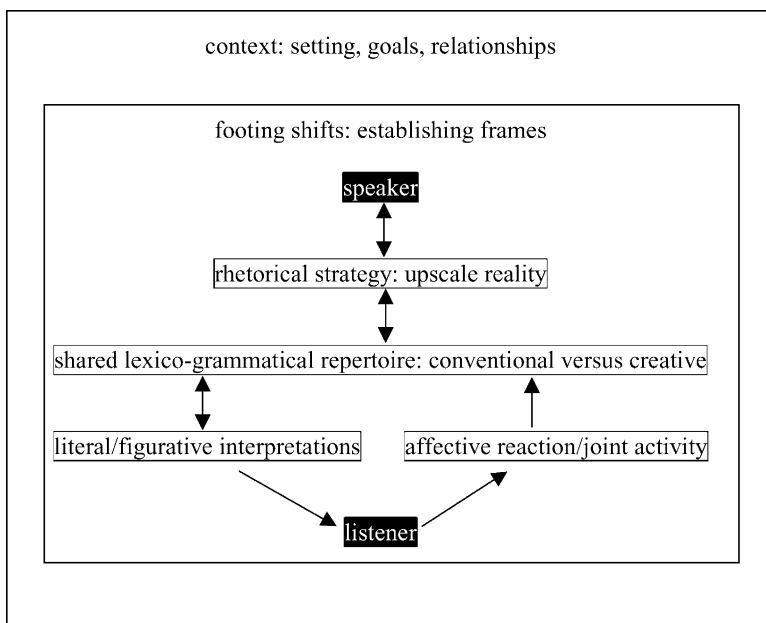literal/figurative interpretations   affective reaction/joint activity

listener

Fig. 1. A contextual model of hyperbole.

choice of trope, in this case hyperbole, is realised through the exploitation of the shared lexico-grammatical repertoire as between speaker and listener to upscale reality, whether conventionally or (by degrees) creatively, and is seen in the reception of the hyperbole as figurative (or with some interplay of literal meaning). The listener's response is seen in verbal feedback and any evidence of affective reaction or reciprocation, which also has the potential to continue the creative sequence. Where arrow-heads are double this suggests bi-directionality, in that the speaker engages in a similar process of interpretation of listener feedback where feedback expands or continues the trope.

2.9. Summary of the theoretical background

Studies of rhetorical strategy and studies of irony point to a complex picture. Hyperbole is recognised by researchers as a trope which is implicated in creative metaphor and in the creation of irony. It has an affective dimension, and is best examined interactively, since it fundamentally depends on a joint acceptance of a distortion of reality, whether that distortion is an upscaling of reality or pressed to the extreme of counterfactuality or absurd, wild impossibility. What all this suggests is that there will be a very wide range of utterances that may count as hyperbolic, in that many utterances will upscale and magnify reality to varying degrees. This raises a problem of practicality, especially for the corpus linguist, whose best efforts are usually directed to setting up frameworks that will, at least in part, permit automatic retrieval of data. To achieve a compromise between the need for the widest possible apprehension of the resources of everyday conversational hyperbole and the need

for quantifiable evidence, we shall consider in the subsequent sections of this paper a sample of core semantic fields, some drawn in part from the literature reviewed above, which speakers seem routinely to overstate for evaluative and affective purposes. The situations will include irony, humour and the expression of affective responses such as repulsion, liking, criticism, excitement, boredom, and so on. The core experiential fields include number and quantity, spatial extent, time, and degree of intensity. Each of these categories offers the possibility of corpus searching for specific, frequent items, and the concordancing of the relevant data, which in the CANCODE corpus is tagged for speaker-turns and other phenomena such as overlaps and laughter. The corpus file headers provide important contextual information on settings, goals and relationships and are linked to a database of speaker information. This enables contextual and interactive aspects to be brought into play to explore whether hyperbole may be intended and heard, and what the listener's reaction is.

3. Corpus analysis

3.1. Identification of hyperbole

Within each semantic field, a selection of items is searched for, based on frequency, and concordances are generated. From the concordance lines, examples which satisfy the criteria for labelling as hyperbole are extracted and counted. These counts are given in tables in the appendix. The criteria for labelling hyperbole are the following (based largely on the literature as reviewed above and the framework elaborated in Section 2.8). Hyperbolic episodes in the talk must display at least three of the following characteristics:

- Disjunction with context (Norrick, 1982): the speaker's utterance seems at odds with the general context (e.g. example 3 below, where it is unlikely that a domestic do-it-yourself practitioner will drill 'hundreds' of holes in the wall of their apartment).
- Shifts in footing: there is evidence (e.g. discourse marking) that a shift in footing is occurring to a conversational frame where impossible worlds or plainly counterfactual claims may appropriately occur.
- Counterfactuality not perceived as a lie (Swartz, 1976; Bhaya, 1985; Clark, 1996): the listener accepts without challenge a statement which is obviously counterfactual (e.g. example 6 below, where the speaker asserts that there were *millions* of people in a shop).
- Impossible worlds (Clift, 1999): speaker and listener between them engage in the construction of fictitious worlds where impossible, exaggerated events take place (e.g. example 17 below, where speakers create an absurdly impossible world after a nuclear disaster).
- Listener take-up: the listener reacts with supportive behaviour such as laughter or assenting back-channel markers and/or contributes further to the counterfactuality, impossibility, contextual disjunction, etc.

- Extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) and intensification: the assertion is expressed in the most extreme way (e.g. adjectives such as *endless, massive*) and/or extreme intensifiers such as *literally, nearly, totally* are used. These are not necessarily counterfactuals or absurd worlds, as many may be heard as (semi-) conventional metaphors (e.g. someone being *absolutely covered* in mud/grease/etc.).
- Syntactic support: syntactic devices (e.g. polysyndeton,[14] as in *loads and loads and loads,* or complex modification such as *really great big long pole*) are used to underline the amplification of the expression.
- Relevant interpretability: the trope is interpretable as relevant to the speech act being performed, and is interpreted as figurative within its context, though there may also be evidence of literal interpretations being exploited for interactive/affective purposes.

With these criteria, non-hyperbolic uses of keywords may be excluded. For example, when a speaker says during a discussion on health and social security issues that social security fraud amounts to *millions of pounds* there is no disjunction with context, no sense of impossibility or counterfactuality and no particular shift in footing or syntactic signalling. However, when a speaker, in a conversation about shopping for household items, claims to possess *millions of mugs* bought from a particular shop, there is a disjunction with the normal domestic context, the case is stated in extreme terms and an impossible world is suggested, and when the assertion is unchallenged and not received literally by the listener (who in fact simply responds by saying they like that particular shop), we clearly have a case of hyperbole. Similarly, when a speaker says a space probe cost *millions and millions and millions and billions of pounds*, the sum may not be far from factual, but the syntactic intensification of the polysyndetic structure, the listener acceptance and the extreme case formulation all suggest a hyperbolic intent. This is not to suggest that all cases of hyperbole are easily identifiable, and borderline cases occur which have to be excluded. However, the criteria taken together provide a reliable instrument by which most clear cases of hyperbole may be captured.

3.2. Expressions of number, amount and quantity

In this category we deal with expressions such as *hundreds, thousands, millions*, and their singular forms *a hundred, a thousand*, etc. We also include *dozens, scores, tons* and words often used metaphorically such as *heaps, piles*, and the words *number* and *amount* themselves when modified by extreme adjectives.

Table 1 (Appendix A) gives figures for the total occurrence of the plural forms of the key words in the 5-million-word corpus and the number of apparently hyperbolic uses ('apparently', since one cannot, of course, ever be certain, and interpretation depends on clusters of contextual and co-textual features, along with the tests of the criteria

---

[14] Polysyndeton is defined as the use of several conjunctions in close succession, typically involving repetition of the same conjunction to connect a number of co-ordinated words, phrases or clauses.

established for this study). There now follow extracts and discussion of the examples. Main examples will be presented here; supporting examples are to be found in Appendix B. <$1>, <$2>, etc. denote different speakers.

1) [Speakers are chatting informally and laughing about a zany comic TV series called *Father Ted*, in which two naïve rural Irish Catholic priests find themselves lost in the lingerie department of a big store in the capital city, Dublin. As they try to find their way out, they encounter several other priests also 'lost' in the same department]

  <$1> And they go up, they go up to Dublin to do their Christmas shopping in the department store and they get lost and they end up in the underwear department. Ladies' underwear. And they can't get out of there. They can't find their way out. [laughter] And they need to go at twelve and have a drink. [laughs] **I mean there's literally like dozens of other priests [laughter] who are all claiming to be lost. [laughter]**

Dozens of always seems to be used figuratively and in an overstated way. In example 1), in actual fact the number of 'lost' priests in the original TV scene was little more than half a dozen. But the show was crazy and zany and so the hyperbole is appropriate. Laughter from the conversational participants accompanies the narration, there is a footing shift suggested by the marker *I mean*, and the use of *literally* (a repeated marker of figurative intent when speakers present unbelievable information). The upscaling of reality provides an intensified contrast between the possibility of two priests getting lost in the lingerie department and a large number of priests simultaneously. Contrasts, whether implicit or explicit, are an important feature of many hyperbolic utterances, as we shall see in further examples.

2) [Speakers are family members discussing the fact that older houses tend to have a chimney pot connected to every room instead of one central one; the house they are in at the time of speaking had four]

  <$2> Every chimney has its own pot.
  <$1> Really. Why?
  <$2> You look at roofs of old houses+
  <$3> Toujours. Toujours.
  <$2> **+there are dozens and dozens of pots aren't there?**
  <$1> Well why can't they just feed into the same flue as the+
  <$2> Well they don't.
  <$1> +chimney downstairs or something?
  <$2> They don't.
  <$3> I don't know why they don't.
  <$2> Mm.

Here the repetition of *dozens* is important, since it stretches the number reference vertically to an impossible level, as well as exploiting the general rhetorical effect of repetition (see Tannen, 1989, on repetition in general; Yamanashi, 1997, on repeti-

tion in irony). The speaker's house, and those referred to as *old*, typically have four or six chimney pots; only huge mansions or palaces could have in excess of a dozen. There is also evidence of a lighthearted, informal, mock-pompous tone with the use of the French *toujours, toujours* (*always, always*). The listeners accept the hyperbole as appropriate to the context and continue with the discussion.

Hundreds of is used literally in the corpus to refer to sums of money and numbers of people, but it is also frequently used hyperbolically (in half of all its occurrences) to overstate number and quantity. In extract 24) (Appendix B), the speaker feels a wall dividing two residences will fall down given the 'hundreds' of holes drilled in it by the parties who live on either side. The listener clearly accepts the joke and offers (though truncated) a further contribution to the humour about the holes in the wall. The hyperbolic utterance is prefaced by the discourse marker *d'you know*, suggesting a shift in footing.

Thousands is also used hyperbolically, but to a lesser extent than *hundreds* in our corpus. Example 3) shows speakers looking at family and friends' photographs and deciding which ones to photocopy for one of the speakers:

3) <$4> Yeah. Should we, shall I, shall I leave that one out?
   <$3> Ooh. [laughs]
   <$1> [laughs]
   <$3> Yes, do that Sarah. Any that you want we'll, we'll copy them straight away now.
   <$4> **Oh God there's thousands**. I'll not need them all.
   <$3> **[laughs] You can be here all night**. Erm yeah. I'll sh = show, show you what we do just to make a copy of this.

Laughter and the exclamative *Oh God* (which also suggests a shift in footing into an exaggerated reactive frame) tell us much about the lighthearted affective context here (rather than, say, seriously counting a large photographic archive), and once again listener uptake is important: speaker 3 also uses a hyperbole (*You can be here all night*), which recalls Clift's (1999) observation of the importance of the interactive continuation of irony by conversational participants. Extract 25) (Appendix B) involves the speaker encouraging someone to tell a joke by praising her for knowing *thousands of jokes*, and the overstatement simultaneously acts as a compliment and a conversational frame for the joke-telling activity, prefaced by the marker *come on*, and the vocative.

4) [Story about unexpectedly discovering a special Sunday sale at a department store]
   <$2> … and suddenly they walked past Woolworth's and they burst out laughing. She said **It was heaving**.
   <$1> Yeah.
   <$2> **There was**[15] **millions of people in Woolworth's**.

---

[15] The use of *there was* plus plural complement frequently correlates with hyperbolic expressions such as *there was loads of, there was …s everywhere/all over the place*, suggesting a perception of the hyperbole as mass rather than count.

<$1> On a Sunday.
<$2> On a +
<$1> Yes.
<$2> + Sunday. She said **the whole street was deserted and they couldn't move and they all had trolleys and they were banked up here**. She thought Why?

Example 4) shows a typical narrative context, where hyperboles often occur. The story is about a reduced price shopping day at a Woolworth's store which the narrative protagonists were unaware of. The apparently abnormal event, which makes the story newsworthy and provides suspense and expectation, is presented via a series of hyperboles (*heaving, millions, couldn't move, banked up*) and there is a contrast with the (also hyperbolic) *the whole street was deserted*. The narrative shift marker *suddenly* additionally signals an upcoming significant event in the story. The listener does not question the use of the counterfactual assertion that there were millions of people in the Woolworth's shop; rather, surprise is expressed that this should happen on a Sunday (not a typical town-centre shopping day at the time in Great Britain). Some of the hyperboles here are fairly conventional (*heaving, couldn't move, deserted*) but cumulatively they make for a marked and humorous hyperbolic description.

Millions is very hyperbole-prone, with 71 out of 92 occurrences being overstated utterances.

5) [A group of young female friends are discussing a face cream]
<$1> It was really cheap as well considering it's natural and not tested on animals.
<$2> Sounds good. I need some of that.
<$3> Do I? **I'm getting so many millions of crow's feet around my eyes. I think it's the ozone layer cracking up** and it's making my skin get really wrinkled.
<$ others> **[Laugh]**
<$3> It is.
<$2> Think it works for you though?
<$1> No. Probably not, but it makes me feel better.

Humorous self-deprecation in 5) is achieved through speaker 3's combination of hyperboles: *millions of crow's feet* and the causal attribution of her skin problems to the collapse of the ozone layer, perhaps an echoic mention of the oft-repeated public warnings of scientists. While *millions of* may be considered at least semi-institutionalised in its hyperbolic function, the ozone layer reference is more creative (in that of the eight occurrences in the entire corpus, seven are conventional references to the problems of global warming caused by pollutants, etc.). The hyperboles are heard as humorous by the other participants. Speaker 2 then shifts the footing (marked by *though*) back to more serious discussion of the cream.

Billions seems less hyperbole-prone, with most occurrences actually referring to the literal billions of pounds spent by governments on health, defence and so on. However, example 6), one of two examples where overstatement seems the intention involves polysyndeton, which we shall return to below:

6) <$2> There was that article on the news last night about this Galileo probe being sent to Jupiter. And it would send back all the information that it could but it'd only got an hour to do it in cos then the pressure would it would destroy it. **It would be, this cost millions and millions and millions and billions of pounds to do this**. What's the point in it? I fail to see a point personally in any of that.

<$1> Mm.

<$2> I don't know why it's not spent on something that's useful.

Although *billions* here may not be counterfactual in terms of the real cost of space probes, the cumulative effect of the polysyndetic structure creates hyperbole. Why should the speaker reduplicate a numerical expression in this way and expand it on its fourth occurrence to an upscaled number? The most reasonable interpretation is one of a hyperbolic intent. The final item in Table 1, *zillions* is exceptional, in that it only has a figurative-hyperbolic meaning, and no literal reference, and is one of a number of word-forms that have emerged as pragmatically specialised for hyperbole (consider also *gazillions, gi-normous, fantabulous, super-duper* and other colloquial formations).

The singular forms of the numerical expressions are also used hyperbolically, but to a lesser extent. Table 2 (Appendix A) summarises their total and hyperbolic occurrences. *A hundred* and *a thousand* are less likely to be used hyperbolically than their plural forms *hundreds* and *thousands*. Once again *(half) a dozen* seems the most hyperbole-prone, with *a million* also showing a hyperbolic tendency:

7) [Talking about a baby]

<$3> They all love her there.

<$2> And if she's asleep she is asleep. People come up and say 'ah isn't she nice' and we'll turn round and say 'would you like to hold her?' 'Oh, can't, she's asleep.' 'Don't worry she won't wake up.' And you, you pick her up and she doesn't.

<$3> She's zonked.

<$2> **And half a dozen people could have cradled her for, for an hour and a half and she is still asleep**. Because when she sleeps she does, she sleeps.

Half a dozen here is clearly projected as 'a bigger number than you would guess/anticipate', and again emphasises the narrative build-up (*cf.* example 6) of a succession of people cradling the baby, and the 'hour and a half', which in itself is an arbitrarily chosen and probably hyperbolic time expression. Speaker 3 adds to the cumulative picture with the extreme adjective *zonked*.

A thousand does occur hyperbolically, though relatively infrequently:

8) <$1> I live in Nottingham now cos I came here to study at the university. **Been here for about a thousand years**.

<$2> [laughs]

<$1> Em, or it feels like it.

Apart form the obvious counterfactuality (commented on by the speaker himself) once more, laughter by the listener is a key signal of the humorous overstatement being accepted, the 'joint pretense', and the speaker rejoins with a play on the literal meaning. *A million* is used in certain pragmatically specialised hyperboles such as *a million thanks*, and recurring, conventional expressions such as *a million and one* (*reasons, uses,* etc.), as well as in individual, more creative hyperbole, as in 9):

9) [The speaker is recounting an unpleasant travel experience in a European country, and the lack of service in cheap eating places, where they were forced to eat, for economy's sake]

   <$1> I was gonna say. Yeah. <$=> We were pretty sensible and like we were really. I think it was money. We were so sensible with our money as well. We thought "Right get in there. Get something cheap".

   <$2> Yeah.

   <$1> But yeah we were bonkers.

   <$2> But I suppose if we needed something to eat we did [go out and spend money], and we couldn't find it till it was dark and then +

   <$1> Yeah.

   <$2> + you can't really account for the fact that **there's no service there apart from a million drunks.**

   <$1> Look at this. I I don't think it's the same but at first glance I thought it was the same one right and I just killed myself cos I thought "God I've gotta s = show Jenny".

   <$E> laughs <\$E>

   <$2> I wish our photos had come out.

   <$1> Yeah. I'm really gutted about that.

Extract 9) is an informal, narrative setting where the participants are looking at holiday photographs. Around the hyperbole of *a million* we find the extreme adjective *bonkers*. The hyperbole is accepted without comment and is followed by a shift in footing to comments on the photographs again.

Amount/quantity words, in particular words denoting accumulations of things, also feature in hyperboles, as exemplified in Table 3 (Appendix A). Only *piles of* is used to any significant extent non-hyperbolically, to refer to objects placed on top of each other (e.g. clothes, papers); the remaining words are used almost exclusively metaphorically and for overstatement, with the exception of a couple of examples of *loads*, which refer literally to cargo loads. Polysyndeton features once again in extract 26) (Appendix B) in *loads and loads and loads*, and the hyperbole is in a typical evaluative narrative context which has been set up by the speaker (*We had a dead crafty one* and the narrative shift marker *so*); it is accepted by the listener.

10) [Two young women are dressing and making up before going out; they comment on the handbag one of them is using]

   <$1> Titchy little bag isn't it.

   <$2> It's what?

<$1> Titchy little bag.
<$2> Uh?
<$3> Titchy little bag.
<$1> Titchy yeah. **It's got tons of stuff in it though**.
<$2> Oh.
<$3> What you got in there then?
<$1> All sorts [pause] It's got perfume in it, period pain tablets and Tampax and perfume and pens and writing paper and ball of string, Sellotape, scissors [laughs] diary, tissues, purse.

The hyperbole of *tons* (contrasting with the colloquial *titchy*, meaning 'very small') is emphasised by the long list of items, and laughter is, once again, an accompanying feature. *Though* seems to be operating as a footing-shift marker, setting up the hyperbolic contrast (see Biber et al., 1998: 850–851, on linking *though*). The listing of the entire contents of the handbag would, on the face of it, appear to violate the conversational maxim of quantity, but within the hyperbolic frame, this is clearly received as humorous emphasis rather than boring detail. Evaluation via contrast (here between the small bag and its large capacity) seems to be a key context for the occurrence of hyperbole, as we see in other extracts.

11) [Reporting at a business meeting on a complaint from a colleague]
<$1> He was t=talking about the fact that erm, you know, it's fine for us handling the schedules doing our bits on everything, and it's all very fine but he's getting **absolutely bucket-loads** of work through his door every day [laughs] with the amount of proofs that are coming up for him to see.
<$2> Oh you you heard? He'd already spoken to you?
<$1> Yeah.

Example 11) has further intensification of *loads* with *absolutely bucket-*, a colourful hyperbole in the circumstances of paperwork (printer's proofs), which the 'work' actually is.[16] Once again the hyperbole is in a contrastive setting (the huge workload contrasted with the colleagues doing schedules and other bits). We may note the laughter yet again on the part of the speaker, as well as the lack of any challenge to the exaggeration from the listener.

The words *amount* and *number*, modified by intense or extreme adjectives, also occur in hyperbolic utterances. The pattern *adj + amount(s) of* is more frequent in hyperbole than similar structures with *adj + number(s)* (Table 4, Appendix A). In example 12) we have meiosis (*absolute minus amounts of kip*), laughter, *night after night, months*, and the discourse marker *so* (suggesting shift of footing), all clustering to contribute to the hyperbolic force of speaker 2's narrative, which speaker 1 fully cooperates in:

---

[16] Compare also the epigraph of this paper with its hyperbolic use of *truckloads*.

12) [Young woman talking about a rather wild period in her life when she would get
very little sleep (=*kip*)]
    <$2> So I mean, I had like **absolute minus amounts** of kip honestly. And that'd
go on night after night
    <$1> I know.
    <$2> [laughs]
    <$1> And Ken like as well. I mean w=
    <$2> He, he went for months.

Overall, numerical expressions and expressions of accumulation and quantity
seem to generate very rich hyperboles.

3.3. Time expressions

Table 5 (Appendix A) shows a set of time expressions and their occurrences as
hyperboles. *Hours* and *years* show a particular propensity to be used hyperbolically,
more so than the others in the table. All occurrences are high in the 'total' column
relative to the hyperbole column since number is frequently specified in (at least an
approximation of) literal reference.

13) [The speakers are health service workers discussing workloads]
    <$1> What made you unhappy about it was it being pulled in from+
    <$2> I think so. It was just, I, I think it was possibly just the way it was
done, the speed it was done. [<$1> Mm] In **sort of five seconds flat** I
was one minute sort of doing em relief, community, for community
midwife's holidays and the next thing I was on this case load that I
didn't really know that much about.

Here the context is not humorous but rather serious-ironic. Speaker 2 is
making a serious evaluation of working conditions and practices in the
British health service, based on personal experience. Hyperboles do not
necessarily occur in humorous or frivolous contexts, and are a very general
evaluative resource. Important here is the contrast between the (also hyper-
bolic) *one minute* and *the next thing*. Upscaling of reality is a good means
of intensifying contrasting situations, as we have seen in several other
examples.

14) [Talking about what one would do in case of a disaster at a local nuclear power
station]
    <$5> Probably just sit in a shop for about **three** [laughs] **thirty million hours**.
    <$1> Mm.
    <$6> Just hope it's+
    <$?> Mm.
    <$6> +the right shop where they do Jaffa Cakes.
    <$ others> [laughter]

The hyperbole in this case depends on an oblique echoic mention of a lay science notion that contamination from nuclear disasters persists for millions of years, and the jump from *three* to *thirty* adds to the effect. Laughter is again a significant cue, and the take-up of the humour by the other speakers, with speaker 6 making reference to 'Jaffa Cakes' a popular brand of sweet chocolate biscuits, which provides an absurd and frivolous contrast to the supposedly cataclysmic nature of the nuclear disaster.

The issue of polysyndeton was mentioned above in connexion with examples 6) (above) and 26) (Appendix B). Polysyndetic structures are a feature of both numerical and temporal hyperboles, and are very effective in 'stretching' the vertical reference to suggest extremes, as in 15):

15) <$1> Em these two women sat on a park bench have been sat on the same
      park bench **for years and years and years** and they're both real trollops.

The literal reference in such cases could in fact be a plurality of years or hours (the reference to sitting on the bench could be habitual rather than durational. Similarly, in the matching extract 27) in Appendix B, waiting for medical attention for several hours is not impossible in many parts of the world, but the co-ordinated repetition in both cases magnifies the reference to an open-ended extreme and the hyperbole is generated by the syntactic strategy rather than the lexical item per se. This is also the case with the numerical polysyndeton in example 6). With hyperboles containing the expression *n-minutes*, there is an overwhelming collocational preference for *two* and *five*, and many such hyperboles have become somewhat conventionalised (for *two minutes*, see extract 28, Appendix B):

16) [Talking about dressing up for a fancy-dress party]
      <$1> And it was a last minute. I wrapped myself, I bought about five rolls of
          tin foil. Wrapped myself in tin foil. Just like round it round with erm
          sellotape.
      <$2> Right.
      <$1> And it looked good.
      <$2> Yeah.
      <$1> **And I got to the party and erm within five minutes I felt like a Christmas
          turkey.**
      <$2> [laughs]
      <$1> I was just baking and like+
      <$2> [laughs]
      <$1> +I sat there sweating thinking 'I'm gonna die in this+
      <$ others> [laughter]
      <$1> +I'll just have to rip it off.' I thought+
      <$2> Ah yeah.
      <$1> +I thought someone's gonna baste me.

In examples 28) (Appendix B) and 16) here, there are interesting parallelisms in the hyperboles: *two-year-old* and *two minutes* in 28), and *five roles* and *five minutes* in

16), reinforcing the preference for *two* and *five* mentioned above.[17] We also observe the now familiar picture of participant laughter, and in 16) the accumulation of linked hyperboles for narrative effect (*felt like a Christmas turkey, just baking, I'm gonna die, rip it off, someone's gonna baste me*).[18] Example 16), as with so many others we have considered, heavily underscores the benefits of looking at context and interaction, especially listener reaction and/or participation in the hyperbole. The hyperbolic act in 16) is not one simple clause or lexical item, but is an extended frame where conversational participants are jointly implicated (see Clift, 1999). Its success or otherwise depends not just on the single act of the single speaking creative genius, but rather emerges from an interactive pact (cf. the reference to 'joint pretense' and the distinction between overstatement and lying mentioned in Section 2.1 above). Gibbs (2000) aptly sums this up by saying that irony is "as much a state of mind jointly created by speakers and listeners, as it is a special kind of figurative language" (p. 25), a conclusion strongly supported also for hyperbole by the corpus evidence in the present paper.

3.4. Adjectives and adverbs of size, degree and intensity

In this class we sample a range of adjectives denoting large size, plus the adverbs *literally* (see above, Section 2.1), *nearly* and *almost* (Table 6, Appendix A). What is notable about the group in Table 6 is the high degree of hyperbole-proneness of the adjectives, and of *literally*, as opposed to *nearly* and *almost*, which much less often signal hyperbole. A small number of occurrences of *massive* and *enormous* can be seen as non-hyperbolic because of their conventional use in science to describe truly extreme entities (*massive heart attack, massive release [of energy], massive loss of water, enormous haematoma, cells . . . inducing enormous damage*), but even here there is a kind of institutionalised 'scientific hyperbole' that enables reference through extreme but vague descriptors to inconceivably large numbers and quantities. Hyperbolic examples include extract 17) here and extract 29) (Appendix B):

17) <$3> America I'm sure is really different all over isn't it?
  <$1> Yeah.
  <$2> Cos Arizona's like **massive** desert and all the streets are **enormous** and everyone's got their **massive** trucks.
  <$1> Mm

In example 17) *enormous* and *massive* (×2) cluster with *all the streets* and *everyone* (see Pomerantz, 1986) to create a cumulative hyperbole. Notable here is the lexical chaining of *massive–enormous–massive*. This is a good example of extreme case formulations creating a hyperbolic but plausible, not perceived as counterfactual, world.

---

[17] We are grateful to Anne O'Keeffe of Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland, for this observation and for her many other invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[18] It is also interesting to note that the whole turkey episode is an extended simile, underlying the overlapping of tropes as a regular occurrence.

Extract 29 (Appendix B) is more complex: *endless* is used in its typically hyperbolic sense, and the listener (speaker 2) asks if the event was *every night*, from which speaker 1 backtracks a little, downplaying a second possible hyperbole, but then correcting the understanding of what it was that occurred every night (saying goodnight).

Literally deserves special mention. Apart from its non-hyperbolic use (as contrasting with figuratively, e.g. *She takes everything literally*), which accounts for a very small number of occurrences, *literally* seems to function to project as 'believable' utterances which otherwise may be interpreted as either too overstated (example 18) or patently absurd/impossible/counterfactual (example 25):

18) [Speaker recalls a student room that was prison-like]
    <$2> Mm. Well the thing is look how big my room was in the first year in Bedford.
    <$1> Mm.
    <$2> For the south.
    <$1> Mm.
    <$2> Breeze block prison cell. God I hated that move.
    <$1> It was a it was **literally** a +
    <$2> Used to feel like crying just walking through the door.
    <$1> It was **literally** a prison cell wasn't it.
    <$2> Well it was. It had like a number on the door and everything [laughs].
    <$1> Yeah.

18) also contains the discourse marker *the thing is*, suggesting a footing shift, and is a good example of joint construction: it is the listener who offers the hyperbolic *literally a prison cell* and the main narrator who adds the humorous detail of the number on the door.

19) <$1> Ryan'll eat a lot of stuff. Er he likes garlic. He likes garlic cheese +
    <$2> Mm.
    <$1> + he likes garlic itself. Whereas I'm not er I'm not adventurous.
    <$2> Mm.
    <$1> If he has something. He's another one that you can push food on. **Cos he will eat literally anything. He's a dustbin.**
    <$2> [laughs]

Literally anything is reinforced by the metaphoric *dustbin*. *Nearly* (extract 20) and *almost* (extract 30, Appendix B) also occur with extreme case formulations in which the literal interpretation would be absurd or impossible:

20) [A young woman is reminiscing on her schooldays and how she had a strong liking for one of the female teachers]
    <$1> It was, it was my aim just to get her to call me 'love'.
    <$2> [laughs]

<$1> Because she did sometimes cos we were only kids so she'd say, 'All right my love'.

<$2> Oh.

<$1> And I was, I was so desperate for her to call me 'my love' but, and she did once. I **almost** wet my pants [laughs].

3.5. *Reflexive marking of hyperbole*

Barbe (1993, 1995) noted the explicit marking of irony with expressions such as *ironically*, ..., *it is ironic that* ..., etc., and earlier we posed the question whether such marking occurs with hyperbole. There is indeed evidence of explicit marking in the corpus, involving words such as *exaggerate/ion* and *overstate(ment)*. Of 28 examples of the lemma *exaggerate*, 13 refer to the immediate utterance of the speaker or of another speaker. An example of the use of the lemma *overstate* is similarly reflexive, and is reciprocated by the listener (extract 22):

21) [Speakers are chatting about air traffic congestion]

<$3> They go crashing into one another. And er you know there's always something wrong well not always but there's things wrong with planes that shouldn't be wrong.

<$1> Right.

<$3> And er er they they're having a pathway now. They used to all have a flight +

<$1> Mm.

<$3> +er and well just inches away [laughs] from one another aren't they. **Well not inches. I do exaggerate now and then.**

<$1> [laughs]

22) [Speaker is extolling the delights of eating Stilton cheese to accompany port wine]

<$2> Are you not a port man?

<$1> Not really. But I don't really drink the stuff.

<$2> Well that's what I meant by being a port man.

<$1> Mm.

<$2> Well have you ever tried it with stilton and digestive biscuits? Well then you haven't lived. **Well no that's a little bit of an overstatement** but it's good.

<$1> **Overstatements are good. I don't mind overstatements.**

Clearly speakers are aware of the potential reception of their hyperbolic utterances and such marking may be interpreted as forestalling challenges to face.

3.6. *Other miscellaneous expressions*

Sections 3.1–3.3 have dealt with expressions which belong to circumscribed semantic fields and which show tendencies to be used hyperbolically, to a greater or lesser extent. A number of other expressions indirectly related to our semantic

fields also occur in hyperbolic contexts, but we shall only touch upon them in this concluding part of the analytical section. Alongside these, we shall also comment on items from the semantic fields which do not seem hyperbole-prone, or at least for which there is no direct corpus evidence. Other corpora may reveal a slightly different picture.

In terms of numerical expressions, *trillions (of)* does not occur in the corpus, and *scores (of)* only occurs once, in a rather indeterminate utterance. *Centuries* occurs, but not hyperbolically; *aeons* has no occurrences. Intuitively, these numerical and time expressions would seem to be candidates for hyperbole. Despite the attested epigraph to the present paper, *truck-/lorry-loads (of)* does not occur in the corpus, but one occurrence of *buckets (of)* is clearly figurative and hyperbolic. Another potential container or extension metaphor, *oceans (of)* does not occur. On the other hand, *mountains of* (cf. *stacks*, etc., Table 3 above) occurs five times, with four of the occurrences clearly figurative and hyperbolic (see extract 31), Appendix B for an example). The adverb *infinitely* seems hyperbole-prone, with four of eight occurrences occurring in overstated contexts. The overwhelming majority of cases of *(be) everywhere* and of *covered in/with* are clearly hyperbolic, though fairly conventional. Extreme verbs such as *have/throw a fit, (nearly/almost) die (+ ing)* and the scatological *wet oneself, sh— oneself sh—loads (of)* seem greatly prone to hyperbolic use.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have traced the interest in hyperbole that is found in a variety of research traditions, from rhetoric to lexico-grammatical studies, via conversation analysis to the more cognitively and experimentally oriented studies of irony. But what the previous research has lacked is a large-scale, corpus-based study of hyperbole in everyday talk. This paper hopes to redress the balance somewhat and at least in part to fill the lacuna. The benefits of a corpus-based study are manifold. If tropes such as hyperbole and metaphor can only be understood in context, then a large corpus offers many different contexts brought together under one body of data. If certain semantic fields are regularly exploited for hyperbole, then the corpus enables verification of such tendencies, or equally, may reveal gaps in the fields where potential items are not exploited. But most importantly, if hyperbole is viewed interactively (i.e. via the conditions of joint pretense, listener involvement, relevance and appropriateness to context, social acceptability, typical sources of evaluation, etc.), then the corpus provides us with just that evidence of interactivity: key, recurring items such as footing-shift markers, listener acceptance tokens (*yes, yeah, mm*, and so on), laughter, and listeners' own further contributions to the emerging hyperbolic context. The corpus also shows us that hyperboles are not encoded solely in lexico-grammatical items: syntactic and discoursal strategies such as polysyndeton, repetition and clustering of hyperbolic items suggest that hyperboles (and other tropes) need to be examined over turn-boundaries and within the constraints of placement and sequencing that conversation

analysis has always highlighted, albeit with limited data samples. Recurrence and patterning, in terms of placement and sequence, is a powerful methodology which can combine the insightful qualitative categories of conversation- and discourse analysis with the quantitative, automatically retrievable evidence of corpora. Examination of hyperbole in interactive contexts also underlines the expressive and interpersonal meanings foregrounded in its use: intensification, humour and banter, empathy, solidarity, antipathy, informality and intimacy, along with evaluative and persuasive goals, are all recurrent features.

The quantitative corpus findings may be summed up as follows:

- Lexical sets from selected semantic fields denoting number, spatial extent, time and intensity display hyperbolic uses, albeit with differential distribution of items within the sets: for example, within the numerical quantifiers, *dozens of*, *millions of* and *hundreds of* seem particularly hyperbole-prone.
- The numeral quantifiers are more hyperbole-prone in their plural forms than in their singulars: *hundreds of* generates more hyperboles than *a hundred*, and so on.
- Mass quantifiers such as *masses*, *stacks*, *heaps*, *loads* and *tons* are very hyperbole-prone, with the overwhelming majority of their occurrences appearing in hyperbolic contexts.
- Time expressions such as *minutes*, *hours*, *days*, *years* do generate hyperboles, but these represent a smaller proportion of their total occurrences than that of the numerical quantifiers. *Light years* seems particularly hyperbole-prone.
- Extreme adjectives and adverbs referring to spatial extent and intensity are regularly found in hyperbolic contexts. These include *endless*, *gigantic*, *massive*, *enormous*, *huge*, *vast*, *infinitely*, *everywhere*. *Literally* is an interesting case, with almost all of its occurrences framing utterances not intended to be taken as 'literal'.
- Some potentially hyperbolic items do not occur in hyperboles in the corpus. These include *centuries*, *scores*, *aeons*. However, this absence of evidence is not to be taken as evidence of absence, and other corpora may reveal different patterns of use, and absence in any corpus does not exclude the availability of the items for creative hyperbole.
- There is some quantifiable evidence of metalinguistic awareness of hyperbole on the part of speakers (e.g. around half of the occurrences of the lemma *exaggerate* refer to the immediate situation).

The contributions we hope this corpus-based study can make over and above what conversation analysts and psycholinguists have contributed include the following:

- Regularity of occurrence of items: not only the regularity of particular lexical items within particular semantic fields, but the regular occurrence of polysyndeton and of discourse markers indicating footing shifts, powerful evidence that hyperbole occurs within conversational 'frames' which speakers are aware of entering and leaving.

- Recurring contextual features: these have included situations where speakers are drawing contrasts (e.g. contrasting a person with another person, a situation with another situation). Thus not only is there an internal contrast encoded in hyperbole (the upscaled reality contrasted with actual or expected reality) but hyperbole serves repeatedly as a powerful intensifier for external contrast.
- Clustering of affective features: these include laughter, absurd metaphors, and most important of all, evidence of the affective reception of hyperbole by listeners, across many data samples. By using corpora, elicited psycholinguistic data may thus be supported by powerful attestations of receptive behaviour.
- A wide variety of contexts, conversation-types and participant relationships. There is a tendency in the literature on irony and hyperbole to focus on a relatively narrow range of contexts, but our data shows that hyperbole occurs in sarcastic-ironic contexts, in non-ironic narrative and descriptive contexts, in friendly casual conversations and in more serious exchanges of opinion and discussion. A large corpus such as the CANCODE corpus, where data is collected in a wide range of settings, offers a considerably more powerful tool for attesting occasions of hyperbole and other tropes.
- Some light on the question of dead and conventional tropes: the quantitative analyses of some lexical items as shown in the tables in Appendix A suggest that 100 or near 100 per cent of their occurrences are hyperbolic (in the sense of extreme formulation or counterfactuality as opposed to literal). This tendency was revealed in items such as *dozens (of)*, *masses (of)*, *stacks (of)*, *heaps (of)*, *loads (of)*, *tons (of)*, *light years*, *endless*, *gigantic*, *massive*, etc. Such is the almost routine occurrence of these items in contexts of exaggeration that one can say that, at least outside of their technical uses (e.g. to refer to the masses of atoms, loads of cargo, light years in astronomy, and so on), in everyday conversational contexts they have become conventionalised.[19] We would suggest therefore, programmatically, that the degree to which any given item has become (or is becoming) conventional may be reflected in the proportion of its total occurrences that are hyperbolic. Thus *for ages* and *be dying to*, we have already suggested, are so institutionalised that they have lost any sense of vividness or creativity. *Zillions (of)* is, of course, fully institutionalised as it has no function as a proper numeral and only occurs in hyperboles. Other items show tendencies towards institutionalisation and becoming 'dead' or at least conventional: *millions of* and *literally* are potentially in this class. On the other hand, our corpus shows one-off creative hyperboles such as *absolutely bucketloads of work* and *absolutely minus amounts of kip*. The quantitative evidence of corpora can thus be a useful tool in assessing degrees of institutionalisation, from the creative to the conventional or dead.

---

[19] Further evidence of conventional meaning is adduced by the fact that some of these items regularly occur in polysyndetic structures (e.g. *loads and loads and loads, masses and masses*), perhaps an attempt on the part of speakers to re-vitalise what has become conventional.

One issue that cannot be properly resolved here is that of the interplay between literal and figurative meanings that has been the subject of psycholinguistic investigation. However, the presence of laughter in so many examples suggests that hyperbole depends at least to some extent on the listener orienting towards the literal, with the resultant interpretation of literalness as absurd, impossible, comic, etc. In examples 21) and 24) we saw how the references to a Christmas turkey and to a prison cell were the source of humour based on literal interpretations (baking and basting a turkey, a cell with a number on the door), and it is in the extended sequences accessible in naturally occurring language that we should seek further evidence for (at least partially) literal receptions of hyperbole of the kind discussed in the literature on metaphor, idioms, irony, etc. (e.g. Gibbs, 2000).

Another issue worthy of consideration is the extent to which corpus data on hyperbole supports a pretense-theory of hyperbole (or irony in general) such as that which Gibbs (2000) found to be at least partly supported in his data. Pretense theories of irony rest on the conditions of drawing attention to violations of expectations and 'pragmatic insincerity' (Gibbs, 2000: 24). There is limited evidence that can be drawn concerning speakers' 'pragmatic sincerity' from a corpus, but the cumulative effects of footing shifts, extreme formulations, polysyndeton, etc. all point to speakers' intentions to highlight contrasts between expectation and reality, and the frequent contexts of light-heartedness and humour suggest at least that speakers in the main do not expect to be taken literally or even too seriously, and to be heard often as 'echoing' or 'mentioning' extreme and absurd situations.

We conclude with an extended extract from our corpus involving a conversation among students of English literature. They home in on the notion of hyperbole and nicely sum up one of our main points, its evaluative function:

23) <$2> Hyperbole.
   <$1> Hm?
   <$2> No there's another word for it. I'm trying to think of the er English Lit phrase for overstatement. Hyperbole is exaggeration.
   <$1> My sister exaggerates.
   <$2> Your sister exaggerates?
   <$1> Mm.
   <$2> Example?
   <$1> I don't know. Big stuff.
   <$2> I think a lot of people are prone to exaggeration. It comes in handy when you're trying to make a point.
   <$1> And also tell a story.
   <$2> Exactly.

In the long journey from classical rhetoric to the modern corpus of everyday conversation represented in the CANCODE data, the themes of evaluation and persuasion as functions of hyperbole perhaps remain the one common thread. However, a huge amount of work remains to be done in describing the full extent of hyperbole and its resources in everyday talk, and that is no exaggeration.

Appendix A. Tables of results

Table 1
Expressions of number: plural forms (in descending order of hyperbole-proneness)

Item	Total	Hyperbolic	% Hyperbolic (rounded)
Dozens of	13	13	100
Zillions of	1	1	100
Millions of	92	71	77
Hundreds of	116	59	51
Thousands of	147	40	27
Billions of	14	2	14

Table 2
Expressions of number: singular forms (in descending order of hyperbole-proneness)

Item	Total	Hyperbolic	% Hyperbolic (rounded)
(Half) a dozen	63	20	32
A million	79	24	30
A thousand	140	7	5
A hundred	616	17	3
A billion	1	0	0

Table 3
Words referring to large amounts/quantities (in descending order of hyperbole-proneness)

Item	Total	Hyperbolic	% Hyperbolic (rounded)
Masses (of)	14	14	100
Stacks (of)	8	8	100
Heaps (of)	2	2	100
Loads (of)	792	787	99.4
Tons (of)	28	26	93
Piles (of)	16	9	56

Table 4
Adjective modification of *amount(s)* and *number(s)* (in descending order of hyperbole-proneness)

Item	Total	Hyperbolic	% Hyperbolic (rounded)
(Adj) amount(s) of	181	51	28
(Adj) numbers of	429	8	2

Table 5
Time expressions (in descending order of hyperbole-proneness)

Item	Total	Hyperbolic	% Hyperbolic (rounded)
Light years	1	1	100
Hours	970	143	15
Years	3346	309	9
Seconds	324	21	6
Months	1167	64	5
Weeks	1318	40	3
Minutes	1193	19	2
Days	1648	23	1

Table 6
Size, degree and intensity (in descending order of hyperbole-proneness)

Item	Total	Hyperbolic	% Hyperbolic (rounded)
Endless	21	21	100
Gigantic	6	6	100
Massive	275	271	99
Enormous	119	117	98
Huge	382	355	93
Literally	240	218	91
Vast	45	25	60
Nearly	546	50	9
Almost	584	26	4

Appendix B. Supporting examples from CANCODE

24) [Speaker 2 has just drilled a hole in a wall at home]
    <$2> D'you know I reckon one day this wall's gonna fall down cos they're always drilling holes next door and I'm always drilling **hundreds** of holes in this wall. And I'm sure I can hear them playing er whatever instrument it is she plays.
    <$3> Maybe that's how she can hear +
    <$2> I should have taken that few minutes to talk to each other.

25) [During a joke-telling session]
    <$1> Come on Jen you've usually got **thousands** of jokes.
    <$2> Yeah.
    <$1> This er this bloke there's, there's ... [tells joke]

26) [Speaker is recounting a story of a clever ruse to defraud a mail-order company by having goods delivered to an unoccupied apartment]
    <$3> We had a dead crafty one in er in [inaudible]. Young girl, and the people in the flat above were evicted. And she'd, the, the girl had got a

catalogue. So this girl from below nabbed the catalogue used it to order **loads and loads and loads** of stuff and had it delivered to the address above and as soon as it got delivered she nipped up and grabbed it.

<\$2> Yes.

<\$3> And that went on for months.

27) [Speaker is talking about waiting in a doctor's waiting room]

<\$1> You sit there for **hours and hours and hours**.

28) [Gossiping about an over-jealous third party]

<\$1> He is like a two year old. Mind you, then again, you're not much better so I can't +

<\$3> Oh yeah I know. But +

<\$1> You're, you're a +

<\$3> Oh yeah I know. But I don't go to his levels of if you go out on your own **for more than two minutes** get jealous.

<\$2> [laughs] Again here the footing shift is noticeable with the discourse marker *mind you*, and the hyperbole serves to intensify a contrast, as in other examples.

29) <\$1> Mm. And Mother would come in to say goodnight to us er wearing an evening dress you see which we were allowed to button up. I remember it had **endless** tiny little buttons all the way up the back. [laughs]. And we were allowed to button it up before she went down to dinner with Father.

<\$2> Goodness me. And that was +

<\$1> Yeah.

<\$2> + every night? That was routine?

<\$1> Well I don't suppose it was every night. But +

<\$2> Mhm.

<\$1> + oh she came in every night to say goodnight yes.

30) <\$1> So up I went to Newcastle-upon-Tyne in November having had three years in the tropics.

<\$2> Oh dear [laughs]

<\$1> Now one of our maids had stolen my winter clothes in my absence and I hadn't any money to buy them. And I **nearly** died of cold. It was absolutely awful.

<\$2> [laughs]

31) <\$1> Well we were joking actually.

<\$2> Oh well.

<\$1> Saying 're decorating with all the papers Mrs Black gives him to read. [laughs]

<\$2> Oh right.

< $1 > **He has mountains of paper work** +

< $2 > Oh.

< $1 > and I say Oh we're decorating our house with them. [laughs] Yeah. Yeah.

< $2 > No I'm sort of getting round to decorating.

< $1 > You you are really decorating are you?

< $2 > Yeah.

References

Attardo, Salvatore, 2000. Irony as relevant inappropriateness. Journal of Pragmatics 32, 793–826.

Barbe, Katharina, 1993. "Isn't it ironic that...: Explicit irony markers.'. Journal of Pragmatics 20, 579–590.

Barbe, Katharina, 1995. Irony in Context. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

Bhaya, Rukmini, 1985. Telling lies: some literary and other violations of Grice's maxim of quality. Nottingham Linguistic Circular 14, 53–71.

Bhaya, Rukmini, Carter, Ronald, Toolan, Michael, 1988. Clines of metaphoricity, and creative metaphors as situated risk taking. Journal of Literary Semantics 17 (1), 20–40.

Biber, Douglas, Johansson, Stig, Leech, Geoffrey, Conrad, Susan, Finegan, Edward, 1999. Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English. Longman, Harlow.

Brown, Penelope, Levinson, Stephen, 1987. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Capt-Artaud, Marie-Claude, 1995. The legacy of classical rhetorics. In: Formigari, L., Gambarara, D. (Eds.), Historical Roots of Linguistic Theories. Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 31–43.

Clark, Herbert, 1996. Psychology of Language. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Clift, Rebecca, 1999. Irony in conversation. Language in Society 28, 523–553.

Colston, Herbert, Keller, Shauna, 1998. You'll never believe this: irony and hyperbole in expressing surprise. Journal of Psycholinguistic Research 27 (4), 419–513.

Colston, Herbert, O'Brien, Jennifer, 2000a. Contrast and pragmatics in figurative language: anything understatement can do, irony can do better. Journal of Pragmatics 32, 1557–1583.

Colston, Herbert, O'Brien, Jennifer, 2000b. Contrast of kind versus contrast of magnitude: the pragmatic accomplishment of irony and hyperbole. Discourse Processes 30 (2), 179–199.

Dews, Shelly, Winner, Ellen, 1999. Obligatory processing of literal and nonliteral meanings in verbal irony. Journal of Pragmatics 31, 1579–1599.

Drew, Paul, Holt, Elizabeth, 1998. Figures of speech: figurative expressions and the management of topic transition in conversation. Language in Society 27, 495–522.

Fogelin, Robert, 1998. Figuratively Speaking. Yale University Press, New Haven.

Fontanier, Paul, 1968. Les Figures du Discours. Flammarion, Paris.

Gibbs, Raymond, 1994. The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Gibbs, Raymond, 2000. Irony in talk among friends. Metaphor and Symbol 15 (1&2), 5–27.

Gibbs, Raymond, O'Brien, Jennifer, 1991. Psychological aspects of irony understanding. Journal of Pragmatics 16, 523–530.

Giora, Rachel, 1999. On the priority of salient meanings: studies of literal and figurative language. Journal of Pragmatics 31, 919–929.

Goffman, Erving, 1979. Footing. Semiotica 25, 1–29.

Goffman, Erving, 1981. Forms of Talk. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Grice, Herbert, 1975. Logic and conversation. In: Cole, P., Morgan, J. (Eds.), Syntax and Semantics, Volume 9: Pragmatics. Academic Press, New York, pp. 41–58.

Haiman, John, 1998. Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation and the Evolution of Language. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Hansen, Arlen, 1977. Magnificent liars: exaggeration in American humour. In: Chapman, A.J., Foot, H.C., Foss, B.M. (Eds.), It's a Funny Thing, Humour. Pergamon, Oxford, pp. 181–183.

Haverkate, Henk, 1990. A speech-act analysis of irony. Journal of Pragmatics 14, 77–109.

Jones, Dorothy, 1987. "It's no good farting against thunder": resignation and exaggeration in Australian humour. SPAN 25, 59–80.

Kreuz, Roger, Roberts, Richard, 1995. Two cues for verbal irony: hyperbole and the ironic tone of voice. Metaphor and Symbolic Activity 10 (1), 21–31.

Kronfeld, Chana, 1980. Novel and conventional metaphors. A matter of methodology. Poetics Today 2 (1b), 13–24.

Leggitt, John, Gibbs, Raymond, 2000. Emotional reactions to verbal irony. Discourse Processes 29 (1), 1–24.

Loewenberg, Ina, 1982. Labels and hedges: the metalinguistic turn. Language and Style 15 (3), 193–207.

Nogales, Patti, 1999. Metaphorically Speaking. Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford, CA.

Norrick, Neal, 1982. On the semantics of overstatement. In: Detering, K., Schmidt, R.-J., Sucharowski, W. (Eds.), Akten des 16. Linguistischen Kolloquiums Kiel, 1981, Band II: Sprache erkennen und verstehen. Niemeyer, Tübingen, pp. 168–176.

Pexman, Penny, Ferretti, Todd, Katz, Albert, 2000. Discourse factors that influence online reading of metaphor and irony. Discourse Processes 29 (3), 201–222.

Pomerantz, Anita, 1986. Extreme case formulations: a way of legitimizing claims. Human Studies 9, 219–229.

Ravazzoli, Flavia, 1978. I meccanismi linguistici dell'iperbole. In: Ritter Santini, L., Raimondi, E. (Eds.), Retorica e critica letteraria. Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 69–86.

Roberts, Richard, Kreuz, Roger, 1994. Why do people use figurative language? Psychological Science 5, 159–163.

Schenkeveld, Dirk, 1991. Figures and tropes: a border-case between grammar and rhetoric. In: Ueding, G. (Ed.), Rhetorik zwischen den Wissenschaften: Geschichte, System, Praxis als Problem des "Historischen Wörterbuchs der Rhetorik". Niemeyer, Tübingen, pp. 149–157.

Searle, John, 1979. Metaphor. In: Ortony, A. (Ed.), Metaphor and Thought. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 92–123.

Slugoski, Ben, Turnbull, William, 1988. Cruel to be kind and kind to be cruel: sarcasm, banter and social relations. Journal of Language and Social Psychology 7 (2), 101–121.

Smith, John, 1657. The Mysterie of Rhetorique Unvaild. Printed by E. Cotes for George Everzden, etc, London.

Sperber, Dan, Wilson, Deirdre, 1981. Irony and the use-mention distinction. In: Cole, P. (Ed.), Radical Pragmatics. Academic Press, New York, pp. 295–313.

Spitzbardt, Harry, 1963. Overstatement and understatement in British and American English. Philologica Pragensia 6, 277–286.

Stenström, Anna-Brita, Andersen, Gisle, Hasund, Ingrid Kristine, 2002. Trends in Teenage Talk: Corpus Compilation, Analysis and Findings. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

Swartz, Marc, 1976. Hyperbole, politics, and potent specification: the political uses of a figure of speech. In: O'Barr, W., O'Barr, J. (Eds.), Language and Politics. Mouton, The Hague, pp. 101–116.

Tannen, Deborah, 1989. Talking Voices. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Tannen, Deborah (Ed.), 1993. Framing in Discourse. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Tannen, Deborah., Wallat, Cynthia, 1993. Interactive frames and knowledge schemas in interaction: examples from a medical examination/interview. In: Tannen, D. (Ed.), Framing in Discourse. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 57–76.

Toplak, Maggie, Katz, Albert, 2000. On the uses of sarcastic irony. Journal of Pragmatics 32, 1467–1488.

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs, 1985. 'Conventional' and 'dead' metaphors revisited. In: Paprotte, W., Dirven, R. (Eds.), The Ubiquity of Metaphor: Metaphor in Language and Thought. Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 17–56.

Wortham, Stanton, 1996. Mapping participant deictics—a technique for discovering speakers' footing. Journal of Pragmatics 25, 331–348.

Yamanashi, Masa-aki, 1997. Some Issues in the Treatment of Irony and Related Tropes. In: Carston, R., Uchida, S. (Eds.), Relevance Theory: Applications and Implications. Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 271–281.

Michael McCarthy is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics at the School of English Studies, University of Nottingham, Great Britain. He is co-director with Ronald Carter of the 5-million word CANCODE spoken English corpus project and has published books and papers on spoken corpus analysis, English vocabulary and spoken discourse analysis.

Ronald Carter is Professor of Modern English Language at the School of English Studies, University of Nottingham, Great Britain. He is co-director with Michael McCarthy of the 5-million word CANCODE spoken English corpus project and has published books and papers on English vocabulary, language and literature, stylistics and text- and discourse analysis.