Telling Tall Tales

Rick Nouwen

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- Open Competition Large
- 01-01-2027 - 01-01-2032
- 2 PhD students (to be recruited in spring)



Exaggeration & hyperbole in communication

Key focus: develop a precise theory of rhetorical exaggeration

key to understanding how hyperbole is used honestly and dishonestly

Hyperbole: Helpful and Harmless

Fritz is always late.

I've been waiting for ever.

It's freezing in Rick's office.

The rhetorical hyperbole doctrine

"[The owners of Gorilla Coffee] have created a perpetually malicious, hostile, and demeaning work environment that was not only unhealthy, but also [...] unworkable."

Claim: "defamation and emotional injury" resulting in "loss of reputation"

Verdict: "[The statement] does not imply any derogatory facts that could be characterized as either true or false"

Hyperbole: Helpful or Harmful?

> Fritz is always late.

Hyperbole: Helpful or Harmful?

> Juliette is always late.

Hyperbole: Helpful or Harmful?

Juliette is always late.

Juliette is always on time.

Hyperbole: Helpful or Harmful?

Juliette is always late.

Juliette is always on time.

The beadle is always on time.

Hyperbole: Helpful or Harmful?



Source: Jack Taylor/Getty Images



"En we natuurlijk afgelopen maandag in Utrecht zagen dat verkrachters, roofovervallers, levensgevaarlijke mensen, gewoon vrij rondlopen."

Hyperbole: Helpful or Harmful?



Source: Getty images

Hyperbole: Helpful or Harmful?

Municipal elections, March 2026

De afgelopen jaren zijn er nul sociale huurwoningen bijgekomen.

Rotterdam bouwt eindeloos sociale huurwoningen bij.



Source: https://www.vandaagenmorgen.nl/nieuws/12946/

What do we know about hyperbole?

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Not much!

What do we know about hyperbole?



What do we know about hyperbole?

- **Philosophy:** focus on norm-relatedness
  Popa-Wyatt (2014), Walton (2017), Nouwen (2024)
- **Computational linguistics:** focus on lexical triggers
  Pomerantz (1986), Burgers et al. (2016)
- **Cognitive linguistics / psycholinguistics:** focus on connections to metaphor and irony
  Colston & Keller (1998), Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza (2017)

Detecting hyperbole

Manual annotation

- HIP (Burgers et al. 2016)
- slow, needs trained coders
- requires that annotators understand the context
- Noisy: "[Does] the lexical unit [lie] outside of the bandwidth of acceptable values of the ontological referent towards one or the other end of the scale. "

Automatic detection

- HYPO, HYPO-XL Troiano et al. (2018), Zhang & Wan (2022)
- small datasets, out-of-context sentences
- learns lexical extremity
- extremely unreliable

Detecting hyperbole

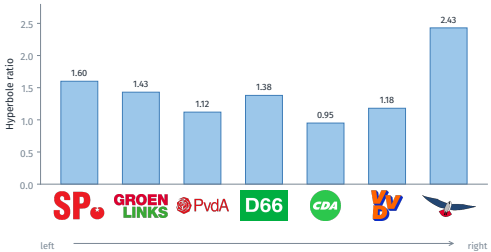
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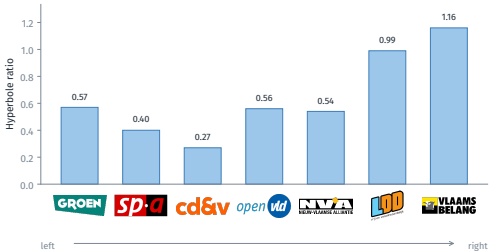
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Hyperbole detection



L. Kalkhoven (2015). Politics, culture & socialization, 6:1/2.



Kalkhoven & de Landsheer (2026). Frontiers in Political Science, 8.

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Theory

a (computational) theory of hyperbole as norm-relative exaggeration

Experiments

perception of exaggeration

Detection

towards a scalable precise and evaluative method for exaggeration detection

Telling Tall Tales

Thanks!

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