Hyperbole as local reinterpretation

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What's hyperbole?

(1) There are (like) a million emails in my inbox.

there are frustratingly many emails in my inbox

Components

- Weakening (objective)
- Affect (subjective)

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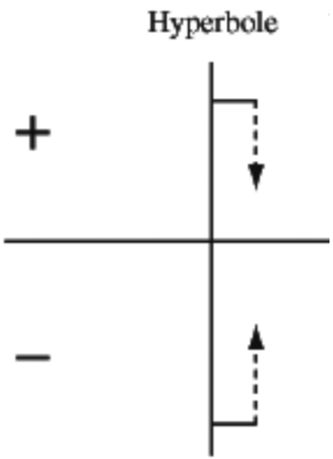
Plan

- Hyperbole, a scalar phenomenon
- Repair theories of hyperbole
- Embedded hyperbole
- Consequences

Hyperbole as a scalar phenomenon

Goodman, The languages of Art, 1966

"In hyperbole [...] an ordered schema is in effect displaced downward. The large olive becomes supercollosal and the small one large"



Fogelin, Figuratively Speaking, 2011

Hyperbole as a scalar phenomenon

Hyperbole is the "weakening" counterpart of scalar implicature.

Feinmann, 2023, ms.

Hyperbole as a scalar phenomenon

Hyperbole is the "weakening" counterpart of scalar implicature.

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(2) Sue is often late.

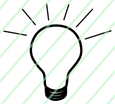
scalar implicature

Sue is often but not always late

hyperbole

(3) Sue is always late.

Hyperbole as a scalar phenomenon



Hyperbole is the "weakening" counterpart of scalar implicature.

Feinmann, 2023, ms.

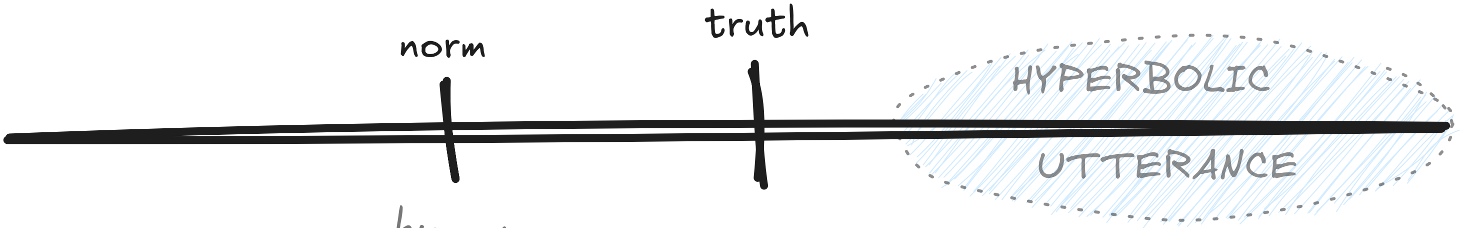
- Affect not accounted for
- Only extremes get weakened

(4) There were many mistakes
(5) The soup is warm
(6) Sue is often late for work

no hyperbole!

Hyperbole as a scalar phenomenon

Walton 2017, Philosophical Studies 174(1); Popa-Wyatt 2010, Producing Figurative Expression; Nouwen 2023/4, Sinn und Bedeutung 28.



hyperbole can only weaken exaggerations that concern a deviation from the norm!

no hyperbole!
(7) Sue is often late

(8) Sue is always late
hyperbole!

Hyperbole Theories

Repair theories

1. The literal meaning is so extreme that it is incredibly likely that the speaker believes this meaning to be false

2. Assuming a cooperative speaker, it is incredibly unlikely that she wants to convey this literal meaning

3. She must intend to convey some other meaning

4. She must have a reason why to convey this other meaning in this roundabout way

Hyperbole Theories

Repair theories

Why does this result in weakening?

1. The literal meaning is so extreme that it is incredibly unlikely that the speaker believes this meaning to be true

Why does it not result in (say) negation?

2. Assuming a cooperative speaker, it is incredibly unlikely that she wants to convey this literal meaning

3. She must intend to convey some other meaning

What exactly accounts for the subjective inference?

4. She must have a reason why to convey this other meaning in this roundabout way

Two QUDs

Kao et al. 2014, Nat. Ac. Sciences 111(33)

(9) Sue is always late

QUD1: How punctual is Sue?

QUD2: does the answer to QUD1 affect the speaker?

P(Sue is d-often late, affect = 1 / 0 | sp. uttered (9))

- Literal meaning has very low prior probability
- Probability of affect is high when prior probability is low

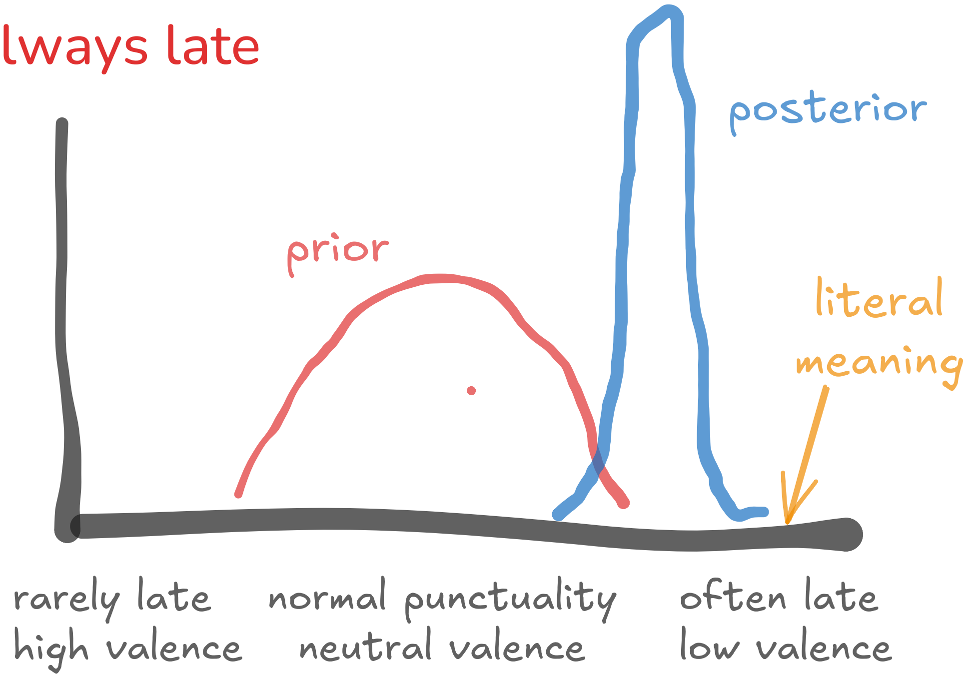
This is why extreme utterances convey affect

Connected scales

Nouwen 2023, SuB 28

(9) Sue is always late

P(Sue is d-often late, this is d' bad | sp. uttered (9))



Hyperbole theory

- Hyperbole concerns both subjective and objective QUDs
- Hyperbole is driven by prior expectations concerning both

Hyperbole is an utterance-level phenomenon

Prediction: hyperbole is not embeddable

hat-tip: Milica Denic!

Embedded hyperbole

negation!

(13) Sue isn't always late

? → Sue isn't often late

(14) Not everyone hates Sue

? → Not many people hate Sue

Embedded hyperbole

Benjamin Spector p.c.

negation!

(15) These shoes aren't a million euros.

these shoes are not expensive

(16) Don't worry - I haven't been waiting for ages.

I haven't been waiting long

Embedded hyperbole

negation!

Benjamin Spector p.c.

(15) These shoes aren't a million euros.

prior probability ~ 1

these shoes are not expensive

(16) Don't worry - I haven't been waiting for ages.

I haven't been waiting long

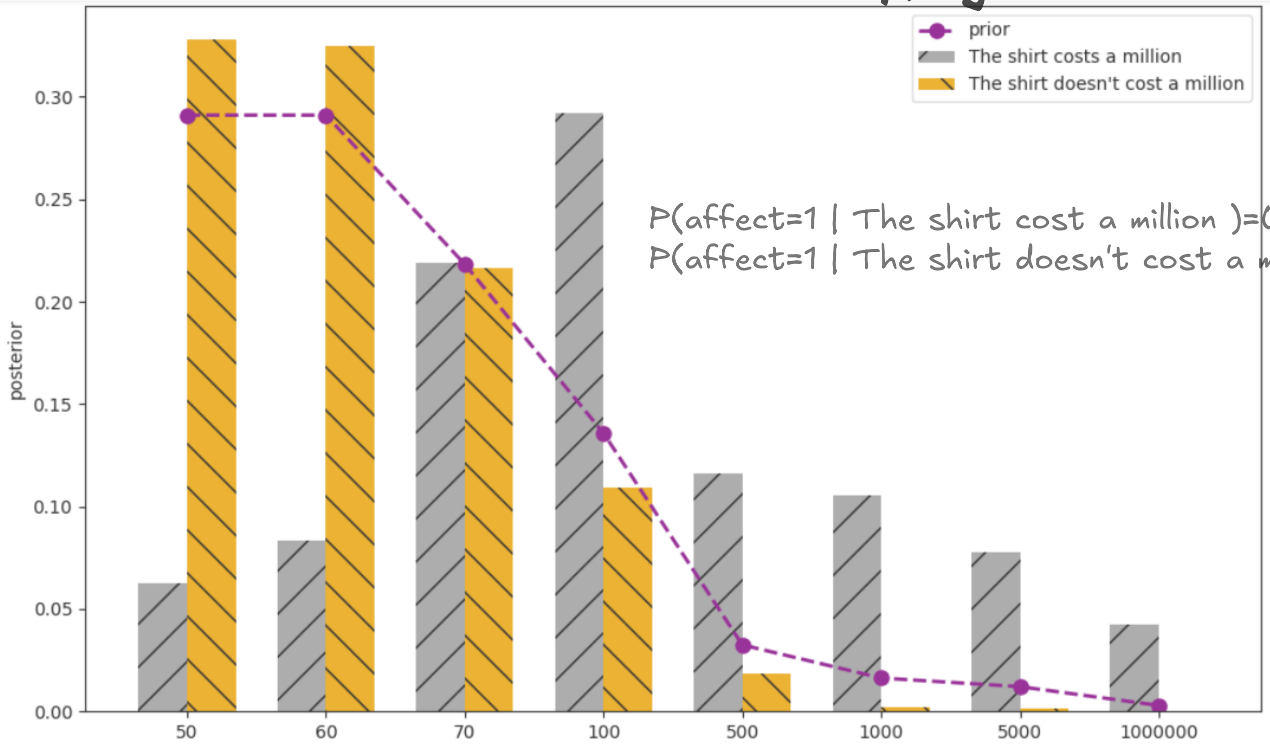
prior probability ~ 1

Repair theories: weakening triggered by trivially true sentence?

Assumption: QUD = ?d. cost of shoes=d

Embedded hyperbole

negation!



P(affect=1 | The shirt cost a million)=0.999
P(affect=1 | The shirt doesn't cost a million)=0.001

Embedded hyperbole

restrictors!

(17) I shout at every e-bike that passes me going 100 km/h

I shout at every e-bike that passes at a very high speed

Literal meaning is trivial!

Embedded hyperbole

restrictors!

(17) I shout at every e-bike that passes me going 100 km/h

I shout at every e-bike that passes at a very high speed

Literal meaning is trivial!

How could a model account for this?

- Trivial meaning, so incentive for repair
- But QUD is unlikely to be ?d. I shout at every e-bike that passes me going d-fast
- Embedded affect: I shout at every e-bike that annoys me (by going super fast)

Embedded hyperbole

restrictors!

(18) Whenever I'm cycling and an e-bike passes me at (like) 100 km/h, I tell myself I should start wearing a helmet.

Paraphrase: Whenever I'm cycling and an e-bike passes at a dangerous speed, I tell myself I should start wearing a helmet.

No scalar QUD?

No subjective meaning component that concerns the whole sentence!

Embedded hyperbole

restrictors!

(17) I shout at every e-bike that passes me going 100 km/h

I shout at every e-bike that passes at a very high speed

Literal meaning is trivial!

(18) I applaud every e-bike that doesn't pass me at 100 km/h

I applaud every passing e-bike not going ridiculously fast

Literal meaning is non-trivial!

(19) I applaud every e-bike that passes me

Embedded hyperbole

(22) Sue wonders whether Sam's new e-bike will have a top speed of (like) 200km/h.

Sue wonders: will Sam's new e-bike have a ridiculous top speed

? The speed that Sue wonders about whether it will be the top speed of Sam's new e-bike is ridiculous

Biting the bullet

Interpretation is *always* rich, probabilistic and context-sensitive

Biting the bullet

Interpretation is *always* rich, probabilistic and context-sensitive

(24) Sue believes that Sam is always late.

Sue's belief is that the figurative meaning of the hyperbolic utterance "Same is always late" is true.

Biting the bullet

Interpretation is *always* rich, probabilistic and relative to prior expectations

(24) Sue believes that Sam is always late.

Sue believes [RSA Sam is always late]

Embedded tropes

(23) Sue is no angel.

(24) No man is an island.

Embedded tropes

(23) Sue: "Sam thinks that Andy is a wolf."

Sam's thought is the meaning of Sue uttering "Andy is a wolf"

Embedded vagueness

Models like Lassiter (2009), Lassiter/Goodman (2017) propose that vagueness is resolved relative to contextual expectations

(24) Sam wonders whether the meeting will be long

Resolution of what it means for a meeting to be long is at the embedded level, not at the matrix level

(25) Everyone in my family is tall.

(Kennedy 1997, UCSC thesis)

Resolution of what it means to be tall is at the level of each individual quantified over, not at the level of the quantification itself

Biting the bullet

(26) I shout at every e-bike that's going 100km/h.

For every bike x:

P(@ | "x is going 100km/h") > T => I shout at x

(27) Everyone in my family is tall.

For every family member x: P(@ | "x is tall") > T

Conclusions

- Hyperbole requires study from a scalar perspective

- Theories of hyperbole have a repair strategy

- But not all cases of hyperbole need repair at the matrix level

- Also, not all cases of hyperbole have matrix hyperbolic meanings

- This may be similar to how metaphor and vagueness can be interpreted locally

- We may need to embrace rich probabilistic local meanings