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The role of hyperbole in conveying emotionality: the case of victim speech

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ABSTRACT

Figurative expressions are commonly used in everyday language as a device for conveying emotion. Hyperbole (e.g. “It took *ages* for him to arrive”) specifically can provide linguistic emphasis; especially when speakers wish to convey emotional evaluations of negative situations. In sexual crime cases, the victim’s *behavioural* emotionality often enhances credibility, however, some research suggests that hyperbole-induced *linguistic* emotionality can be perceived negatively. In this study, we examined whether hyperbole impacts perceived emotionality and assessed the extent of this impact on measures of valence, intensity, and appropriateness. Participants were professionals (police officers) or jury-eligible laypersons who rated testimonies containing either hyperbolic or non-hyperbolic expressions. Results suggested that the use of hyperbole increased the perceived emotional intensity of the testimony, but made testimonies appear less emotionally appropriate than non-hyperbolic counterparts. In addition, regardless of the presence of hyperbole, laypersons judged the scenarios to be more unpleasant, and more emotionally intense compared to professionals. Findings suggest discrepancies between hyperbole usage and discourse goals, versus its perception. That is, hyperbole effectively enhances emotionality, but its role in victim speech may come with more caveats than anticipated, particularly when considering the proposed importance of victim emotionality in establishing credibility.

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Rubik discusses “display rules” governing the expression of emotions which “regulate what and how much a speaker may appropriately express under what circumstances” (Rubik, 2010, p. 161). She suggests that the display of appropriate emotion is heavily rooted in appropriate contextuality, and further, the specific use of hyperbole to depict emotion comes with stringent rules, at least in literary work. Whether the hyperbole is considered “valid” depends broadly on who utters it, for what purpose, whether in poetry or prose, and what their intent is, among other rules specific to fictional literary works.

In the context of victim speech, this principle works alongside other principles such as victim demeanour expectancy¹ and suggests that listeners expect “appropriate” linguistic expression from their speakers based on the context and expected levels of emotionality. The English language is “rife” with figurative expressions for emotions (Fussell & Moss, 1998, p. 114), and the use of figurative language lends itself to the communication, interpretation, comprehension, and perceived intensity of emotional experiences (Reinsch, 1971). Hyperbole lends itself especially to the expression of negative experiences

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and unexpected outcomes (Cano Mora, 2009). In her study of the British National Corpus (BNC) Cano Mora (2009) found that the frequency of hyperbole was highest in everyday conversations that described individuals' negative evaluations such as chaos, evil, pungency, and violence instead of positive evaluations such as magnificence or beauty. Roberts and Kreuz (1994) also found in their empirical study of discourse goal taxonomy for figurative language that hyperbole was more often used to show negative than positive emotion. Thus, the aim of the present study is to investigate the influence of hyperbole on the perception of conveyed emotionality specifically within the context of speech from victims of sexual crime.

Gibbs (2023) argues that because people often comprehend through an embodied simulation process, the use of figurative expressions can help those who are in distress by allowing them to communicate their exact experience – otherwise limited by literal language (Scarry, 1985) and heavily dependent on listener experience. Hyperbole specifically may be so embedded in the description of emotional experiences that a lack of it (see also: Rose et al., 2006) may be jarring to the speaker themselves. Consider the following statement in an essay by Isabel Alonso-Breto (2018, p. 132), about her realisation of, and living with, a cancer diagnosis:

(1) "It was extremely depressing (even if this is such a dull sentence)."

It is essential to note that the sentences preceding and succeeding this are almost entirely figurative. The phrase "extremely depressing" above – while literal – felt so displaced and insufficient even to the speaker, that she chose to reflexively mark (see: McCarthy & Carter, 2004) the sentence – an attempt at reducing reader-backlash and managing expectations through highlighting a display rule violation. While metaphor promotes the creation of ad hoc concepts in addition to the lexically encoded concept of a phrase, it is hyperbole that provides a scale along which intensity may be manipulated (Carston & Wearing, 2015). Rubik (2010) considers that the hyperbole within a conceptual metaphor (Spitzbardt, 1963), along with its innovative structure, may contribute to whether display rule expectations are met.

The impact of figurative language on active listeners (those who are expected to act upon the information – such as victim advocates, lawyers, judges, jurors, etc.) has not been widely considered. Our

previous work suggested that although jury-eligible laypersons viewed the use of hyperbole in a positive light, there was a negative impact of hyperbole in victim statements on various measures of victim credibility in forensic professionals (Desai et al., 2021), and police officers were disinclined towards using hyperbole in hypothetical first-person situations (Desai & Filik, 2022). This is surprising, given that a display of emotionality often increases and supports the notion of a credible victim and is deemed essential in a rape trial (Maier, 2014; Sleath & Bull, 2017).

Our previous work was based on the theory that hyperbole quickly and succinctly conveys negative affect which has proven beneficial for the establishment of victim credibility (Rose et al., 2006). However, the unexpected negative impact on credibility measures (Desai et al., 2021) as rated by forensic professionals warrants explicit examination. There are two possibilities: either hyperbole does *not* effectively increase perceived speaker emotionality, or – as described by Rubik (2010) and Rose et al. (2006) – it exceeds the boundary for appropriate emotionality. Thus, in the current study, we examined more directly the impact of hyperbole on perceived emotionality and emotional appropriateness in the context of sexual crime, to distinguish the two possibilities.

The present study

The current experiment examined the perception of hyperbole in hypothetical testimonies from victims of sexual crime in two populations: law enforcement and jury-eligible laypersons. Specifically, the presence of hyperbole in each testimony was manipulated (i.e. hyperbole vs. no hyperbole) to investigate the impact on measures of perceived emotionality. Perceived emotionality measures were adapted from Bradley and Lang's (1994) Self-Assessment Manikin: valence (whether an emotion is pleasant or unpleasant), arousal (the perceived intensity of feeling, whether pleasant or unpleasant), and appropriateness (whether the displayed emotion is appropriate for the situation). Due to the context of this study being sexual crime, the meaning of the word "arousal" may be misconstrued by participants and hence the term used throughout this study is "intensity". Both measures of valence and intensity are rated from two perspectives – as perceived by the participant themselves, and on behalf of the complainant.

While figurative language has been established as essential to the understanding and communication of

affect (Foolen, 2012; Rubik, 2010), evidence suggests that hyperbole specifically acts as an intensifier of linguistic emotionality (Claridge, 2010; McCarthy & Carter, 2004). Predictions for the present study are guided by this claim, that is, the presence of hyperbole should increase perceived emotionality. Specifically, we predict that in the professional sample, hyperbole presence should increase the perceived intensity, especially when considered from the complainant's perspective; however, the same increase in intensity may not apply to the participants' own perceptions. This is because professionals may have developed a degree of desensitisation due to repeated exposure to trauma (Rudolfsson & Sinani, 2022), but are still likely to comprehend the intensity of emotions for the complainant due to their training and experience (Rudolfsson, 2022).

For the laypersons sample, we predict that hyperbole will increase perceived emotional intensity from both perspectives: those of the participants themselves, and those of the complainants. Unlike in the professional sample, laypersons' relative unfamiliarity with sexual crime may intensify the emotionality of the context. Given the inherently unpleasant nature of the scenarios, we predict a more minimal influence of hyperbole on the valence scale, particularly in the professional sample.

Based on previous findings that hyperbole negatively impacted credibility for forensic professionals but led to more positive responses from laypersons (Desai et al., 2021), we predict that police officers would find hyperbolic scenarios less emotionally appropriate compared to their non-hyperbolic counterparts, but that laypersons may instead perceive hyperbole as being more emotionally appropriate compared to non-hyperbolic counterparts.

Method

Participants

Forty law enforcement officers (25 male, 15 female) aged 23–58 years ($M = 35.13$, $SD = 7.70$), and 36 jury-eligible individuals (13 male, 23 female) aged 18–81 years ($M = 30.45$, $SD = 12.85$) with a native or fluent proficiency in English took part. All professional participants were recruited through Prolific, where the screening restrictions were limited to individuals who listed their current, or previous employment sector as policing and/or law enforcement. For the laypersons, 30 were recruited through advertisements

on Facebook research participation groups and through survey-participation websites such as SurveyCircle and SurveyTandem and were given the option to enter a prize draw to win one of two £20 Amazon vouchers. The remaining six were recruited through Prolific.

Materials and design

The experiment was a 2(hyperbolic vs. non-hyperbolic) \times 2(laypersons vs. professionals) mixed design. Materials were identical to those used in Desai et al. (2021): 16 vignettes, each 250–300 words long, that involved hypothetical complainants providing statements to forensically relevant sources, or in forensically relevant settings such as a police station, or a courtroom. Materials were counterbalanced across two stimulus presentation files, such that each participant saw only one version of each vignette (i.e. eight hyperbolic and eight non-hyperbolic). Participants read the vignettes and answered questions on measures of emotionality (valence, intensity, and appropriateness). The current measures of emotionality were adapted from Bradley and Lang's (1994) Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM) and maintain some differences from the original study in its design. Below is an example scenario with the hyperbolic and control phrases in bold. The first option was seen in the hyperbolic version, and the second in the control version of the scenario:

Complainant H is an 18-year-old female alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.

Complainant H: "I would like to report stalking and cyber harassment. I have been getting these **outrageous/dirty** and offensive text messages from this individual."

P/O: "How many a day do you get? And do you know this individual?"

Complainant H: "No, I have never seen that number before in my life. And I get like, **a million/about 20** a day. **They just keep coming. It's like this person has nothing else to do./I receive them quite frequently. It's like this person has barely anything else to do.**"

P/O: "What is usually the nature of these messages?"

Complainant H: "Well, it varies. It changes **dramatically/'no word'** from images of a penis, to sometimes texts describing sexual acts involving me. I'm **terrified/afraid** it might be someone I know. I've blocked several numbers and I just keep receiving similar texts and messages from different numbers. It's probably just someone with a **shit ton/substantial amount** of

free time, but if they know me, they could be following me; and that's what makes me uncomfortable."

The current materials were entirely verbal/written as opposed to Bradley and Lang's (1994) non-verbal, pictorial assessment. There were five questions after each scenario, rated on a 9-point scale. Both the valence and intensity categories consisted of two questions each, referring to the perspectives of both, the participant themselves, and the perceived perspective of the complainant in the vignette. The valence questions ("According to you, how pleasant or unpleasant is the statement above?"; "Based on their statement, how pleasant or unpleasant do you think the experience was for the complainant?") were each rated with options ranging from Extremely Unpleasant (1) to Extremely Pleasant (9), with a mid-point of Neither Unpleasant nor Unpleasant (5). The intensity questions ("According to you, how intense is the emotion portrayed in the statement above?"; "Based on their statement, how intense do you think were the emotions felt by the complainant?") were also rated on the 9-point scale with options ranging from Not At All Intense (1) to Extremely Intense (9). The final appropriateness question ("To what extent would you say the intensity of emotion expressed in the scenario was appropriate to the circumstances described?") was rated with options ranging from Much Less Than Appropriate (1) to Much More Than Appropriate (9), with a mid-point of Fully Appropriate (5).

Procedure

Participants were first presented with an information sheet detailing the purpose, nature, and contents of the study. This was followed by a consent form and a GDPR statement. If they agreed to both, they proceeded to the demographics questions: gender, age, and occupation. Participants then read the 16 vignettes, which were presented in a random order. After each vignette, they saw a brief explanation of the scales being used in the study detailing the meaning of valence (described to participants as "the extent to which the scenario described above is positive or negative in its emotion") and intensity (described to participants as "the perceived intensity of the scenario from very calming to highly exciting or agitating") prior to asking for ratings on each scale.

After viewing all 16 vignettes, participants were provided with a stress-alleviating task which asked them to engage in selecting their favoured pictures of cute animals. Following this, layperson participants were asked to (optionally) provide their email addresses to enter the prize draw. Both participant groups were finally presented with a debrief form.

Results

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics. Data were analysed using linear mixed-effects models through the "lme4" package (Version 1.1-29; Bates et al., 2022) in R (Version 4.2.0; R Core Package 2022). First, the maximal model was fitted to the data; that is, a model including intercepts and slopes for all fixed effects across participants and items, including interactions and correlations. Condition (hyperbolic vs. non-hyperbolic) and Occupation (laypersons vs. professionals) were fixed factors and were dummy-coded by default. If the maximal model did not converge, the "bobyqa" optimiser was applied. If the model still failed to converge, such that the (isSingular) error-warning persisted, the "summary ()" command in R was used to determine perfect and near-perfect correlations. Then the perfect correlations were progressively eliminated until a converging model was reached. Once a model converged, likelihood ratio tests (LRTs) were performed with an even simpler model to determine the best fit for the data.

The results for fixed effects parameters are reported in **Table 2** – the t values (t), and p values (p). These values were calculated using packages "emmeans" (version 1.7.4-1; Lenth et al., 1980), and "lmerTest" (version 3.1-3; Kuznetsova et al., 2020) and are supported with the best-fit model for each response variable. The simplest models without interactions were better fits for the data and the final model is presented in **Table 2**.

Main effects of condition

The presence of hyperbole significantly increased the intensity of the emotion as felt by participants themselves, and as perceived from the perspective of the complainant. However, hyperbolic scenarios were rated as being significantly less emotionally appropriate than their non-hyperbolic counterparts. There was no effect of Condition on ratings of valence.

Table 1. Means and standard errors for ratings within the law enforcement and laypersons sample (on the response scale).

Measure	Hyperbolic: law enforcement		Hyperbolic: laypersons		Non-hyperbolic: law enforcement		Non-hyperbolic: laypersons		
	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	
Valence	For self	3.50	0.18	2.68	0.18	3.53	0.18	2.72	0.18
	For complainant	2.89	0.19	2.46	0.19	2.99	0.19	2.56	0.19
Intensity	For self	5.64	0.20	5.90	0.20	5.45	0.21	5.71	0.21
	For complainant	6.44	0.20	6.66	0.21	6.16	0.20	6.39	0.21
Appropriateness		5.40	0.13	5.52	0.14	5.20	0.13	5.32	0.14

Table 2. The results of the fixed-effects parameters in the linear mixed-effects models for each response variable.

Measure			(t)	(p)
Valence ^a	For self	Condition	0.49	.62
		Occupation	10.90	<.001
	For complainant	Condition	1.25	.21
		Occupation	5.09	<.001
Intensity ^a	For self	Condition	1.94	.05
		Occupation	2.60	.009
	For complainant	Condition	2.80	.005
		Occupation	2.23	.02
Appropriateness ^a		Condition	2.21	.02
		Occupation	1.26	.21

^aModel: ~ Condition + Occupation + (1 | Participant) + (1 | Item).

Main effects of occupation

There were significant main effects of Occupation on measures of valence and intensity, showing that laypersons rated the scenarios as being more unpleasant and more intense than law enforcement officers, from both their own perspective and that of the complainant. There was no effect of Occupation on ratings of appropriateness.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine whether hyperbole had an impact on three measures of perceived emotionality within victim testimony: valence, intensity, and appropriateness. The results showed the effects of hyperbole on perceived emotional intensity and the appropriateness of the depicted emotion, with scenarios containing hyperbole being rated as more emotionally intense (from both the perspective of the reader and the complainant), but less emotionally appropriate than their non-hyperbolic counterparts. Results also showed significant effects of occupation, with laypersons rating scenarios as more unpleasant and more intense than law enforcement officers.

Effects of hyperbole

Given our previous findings of the negative impact of hyperbole on credibility measures in forensic professionals, in the current study, we aimed to distinguish two potential mechanisms underlying this unexpected result: either hyperbole does *not* effectively increase perceived speaker emotionality, or it somehow exceeds the boundary for appropriate emotionality. The main effect of hyperbole on ratings of perceived emotional intensity effectively rules out

the first of these possibilities, as it suggests that hyperbole does increase perceived speaker emotionality, at least the intensity dimension. This supports the basis of our previous work (Desai et al., 2021; Desai & Filik, 2022), suggesting that hyperbole is a viable option to convey heightened emotionality.

The finding that hyperbole had a negative impact on appropriateness ratings, provides some support for the second possibility that hyperbole exceeds the boundary for appropriate emotionality. This finding is important, as it highlights how the expectations placed on victims of sexual crime are often contradictory. The present results also clarify the unexpected negative impact on credibility ratings in our previous work. Hyperbole may decrease perceived credibility because it heightens emotional intensity to what is perceived to be an inappropriate extent. Rose et al. (2006) layout “regulations” for what is considered “appropriately upset”, for example, men may be expected to be angry and for shorter periods compared to women, who are expected to be ashamed and sad for longer periods. While Rose et al.’s conclusions relate to behaviour, our results indicate that rules of linguistic display also seem stringent and may be bound inextricably to behavioural display rules. The question remains, however, why in a context as serious as sexual crime emotionality may be perceived as inappropriately high.

The presence of hyperbole did not have a significant effect on perceived valence. This may be due to the inherent (extreme) unpleasantness of the scenarios, or that hyperbole has more of an influence on perceived intensity rather than the perception of goodness or badness. This would be an interesting avenue for future research (i.e. using scenarios with a greater range of valence).

Effects of occupation

There were significant main effects of occupation on measures of valence and intensity which suggest that regardless of condition (hyperbolic vs. non-hyperbolic), laypersons found the scenarios to be significantly more unpleasant and emotionally intense than law enforcement participants. The observed group differences may provide further evidence that law enforcement participants were desensitised to emotionality in the current context of sexual crime, due to the relatively high level of their exposure and a need for self-preservation.

The impact of display rules

The discussion of display rules in the present study has so far been in the context of victims and complainants. However, the stringent display rules in place for law enforcement officers (Grandey, 2000; Parkes et al., 2019) must not be disregarded. The need to maintain outwardly professional objectivity and balance implies that police officers often manage their reactions to the constant emotionally distressing stimuli through a type of “acting”: deep, or surface (Grandey, 2000). Categorically, the officers who deal with sexual offences on a regular basis require a high frequency and prolonged duration of acting (Parkes et al., 2019). To prevent burnout associated with the cognitive load of such acting, officers often become desensitised to distressing information as a way of coping. Mills and Kleinman (1988, p. 1022) argue: “Professionals are not simply taught to mask their feelings about clients. Rather, they learn to redefine the client in ways that discourage them from reacting emotionally”.

It might be precisely because of this desensitisation (not despite it) that hyperbole is allowed to perform according to its discourse goals. In our previous research (Desai et al., 2021), hyperbole resulted in a decrease in scores on credibility measures for professional participants; in the current study, hyperbole performed according to its discourse goals (intensifying the difference between expected and actual outcomes along a scale). The key difference between the experiment in Desai et al. (2021) and the current experiment, is the nature of the dependent variables and what they ultimately examine. The inference here is that where the nature of the crime may not inherently evoke an emotional reaction, hyperbole in the statement intensifies testimonial emotionality. However, despite the evocation of emotion, participants from the same population when asked to provide credibility ratings, perceive a negative impact of hyperbole. Hyperbolic scenarios were also viewed as less emotionally appropriate than non-hyperbolic scenarios across both groups in the present study. There is an apparent discrepancy in how hyperbole performs, in that the perceived emotional intensity is increased, while the perceived unpleasantness of the scenario remains unaffected. It is possible that this “mismatch” causes the perception of reduced appropriateness, and consequently, reduced credibility.

At variance with the level of exposure of professional participants, the laypersons sample is a

population which does not typically have familiarity with the everyday proceedings of a rape complaint or trial, and hence the interactions and discourse within this context were not commonplace for those participants (Konradi, 1999). Due to this unfamiliarity, the inherent emotionality of sexual crime perhaps contributed more to the emotionality ratings, than did hyperbole. This is especially visible in the valence ratings where laypersons rated scenarios as more unpleasant and more intense than law enforcement participants. It is possible that while police officers have a set of display rules firmly in place which allow them to determine essential factors about the case such as risk levels and seriousness, laypersons' lack of a framework for sexual crime situations impels them to react to the inherently negative sexual crime aspect as opposed to the statement itself. It is also interesting to note that in first-person hypothetical situations, laypersons preferred to use hyperbolic than non-hyperbolic language (Desai & Filik, 2022), however in the current study, they rated hyperbole as less emotionally appropriate than non-hyperbolic language. This may be further indication that laypersons' positive perceptions of hyperbolic victim statements might be guided more through context than language.

Conclusion

Appropriate emotionality is a nebulous concept, filtered through professional and individual experiences and differences. Hyperbole appears to have no impact on perceived valence in the current experiment. However, participants across both groups seemed to recognise that hyperbole enhances emotional intensity – a factor often rewarded (upon being “the appropriate amount”) in forensic settings. Our previous work (Desai et al., 2021; Desai & Filik, 2022) assumed that sexual crime as a context appropriates hyperbole usage due to its negative valence. Current results support this but suggest hyperbole-heightened emotional intensity is still considered “too much”. Perhaps hyperbole manipulates factors other than emotionality which makes hyperbolic testimonies seem more emotional than appropriate. The results suggest and further solidify that the linguistic expectations of a victim testimony in sexual crime contexts are stringent and specific in that linguistically heightened emotionality does not immediately translate to appropriate emotionality. The present study is also one of very few that empirically

examines the appropriateness of hyperbole in context. The finding that emotion conveyed hyperbolically even in contexts warranting extreme emotionality is viewed as being less appropriate is novel and prompts further enquiry into contexts appropriate for hyperbole. There is also further need for examination into linguistic expectations from victims which have not yet been identified but seem consistent across participant groups. In sum, hyperbole in victim speech performs in line with its functions; namely, communicating affect with intensity. Despite the seriousness of the context, this level of emotionality is still considered more than appropriate. It is possible that hyperbole simply does not belong in a context like sexual crime, however, the exact reason for its inappropriateness is unknown and warrants further inquiry. Our study has implications for psycholinguistics and forensic psychology in that it highlights previously unexplored caveats about emotional appropriateness in forensic settings, the role of hyperbole in non-everyday contexts, and above all, the nuance behind observer expectations from victims who are reacting to, and expressing, their trauma.

Note

1. The expectations of an observer from the victim concerning what comprises “normal and appropriate” reactions to the violence perpetrated against them.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Open Science Framework repository at https://osf.io/rzvix/?view_only=32ca1e99c7764af7b128971bd5f825bc DOI: 10.17605/OSF.IO/RZV.

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