

Kibbitzer #3

Hyperbole in Academic and Research Speech?

By Aaron Ohlrogge and Judy Tsang (January 2004)

The Issue:

Hyperbole is usually defined as exaggeration for the sake of effect. As we know, hyperbole is rare in academic writing, because here, writers are supposed to “carefully negotiate their knowledge claims”. On the other hand, hyperbole is common in conversation, as people are always saying things like “I’m starving” where there is no literal meaning intended. The question then arises, as to whether in academic speech people maintain the careful and cautious tone of academic prose, or whether, in the heat of the spoken moment, they adopt the exaggerations of colloquial speech.

Main findings:

In response to this issue, we undertook a study of hyperbolic speech (i.e. overstatement) in an academic context. We searched the MICASE database for words that we expected to find in various hyperbolic constructions, and established three basic types of hyperbolic speech. These are:

- 1) Overgeneralization: e.g. “Everybody wants to be an engineer”.
- 2) Exaggeration in number: e.g. “You’ve probably had hundreds, thousands, of those error messages”.
- 3) Exaggeration to an extreme extent: e.g. “I’m starving”

Details:

1) First, consider indefinite pronouns: Overgeneralization with certain nonspecific personal pronouns, specifically *everyone*, *everybody*, *no one*, and *nobody*, occurs frequently in MICASE and fairly regularly as hyperboles. The percentages of overgeneralized usages are noted below.

Nobody	49%
No One	34%
Everybody	31%
Everyone	25%

These figures are quite high, and people use these words simply to refer to a large group of people, or a sizable proportion of a certain group, without exceptions.

- everyone loves Professor Cameron
- for example people take off Monday and they'll take off Friday but Wednesday, **everyone** seems to be at work and **everyone's** working on Wednesday
- everybody has condemned Kelvin ever since for that term
- now there might be, some things, in the rap community that like **everybody** would agree with

For example, Professor Cameron may well be an extremely popular instructor, but it’s certainly not the case that literally *everybody loves* him. And similarly with the other examples.

And similarly in the negative:

- **no one** ever wants to talk about Algeria
- **no one** ever thought about the isolation then, of that community right?
- **nobody** does tune-ups anymore, it's too complicated
- **nobody** in my generation worried about that one [the bikini line] very much

2) Next, let us consider exaggeration in number. While expressions such as *hundreds*, *millions*, and *billions*, and similarly *a hundred*, *a million*, and *a billion*, are fairly common in MICASE, they are nearly always used literally; given, no doubt, to the precise nature of most academic, and particularly scientific, work. A few hyperbolic examples, though, do occur.

- let's not overwhelm people with **thousands** of variables
- are Asians like clinical psychologists who've got a **million** theories and you can't surprise 'em

Number	Total Occurrences	# of Hyperbole	% Hyperbole
A hundred	257	3	1.6
Hundreds	63	3	4.7
A thousand	64	3	4.7
Thousands	39	2	5.0
A million	24	3	12.5
Millions	36	1	2.7
A billion	8	0	0.0
Billions	10	0	0.0
A trillion	0	0	0.0
Trillions	0	0	0.0
“gazillion”	2	2	100.0

3) Our third category is exaggeration in describing conditions to an extreme extent. First, in describing periods of time, we found that expressions such as *years*, and *ages* occur fairly frequently in MICASE, but rarely as hyperboles.

Typically, *ages* occurs either in the phrase “Middle Ages”, or with a specified range of the ages of a group of people, such as:

- a mixture of graduate and undergraduate students, and they were all um between the **ages** of twenty and thirty

Likewise, most uses of *years* are simply literal:

- you spend your first two **years** here for the most part . . . exploring your options

On the other hand, some words describing the extreme extend of something are hyperbolic fairly frequently. These words include *forever* and *endless*. *Forever* occurs 40 times in MICASE, and 14 of these (35%) are hyperboles. For example, the two speakers below are discussing how long the smell will remain after a skunk discharges its unpleasant odor.

- Jim: it lasts **forever**
John: yeah, it lasts a long time

Linguists with a basic knowledge of geometry and/or mathematical topography may be interested in the following example as well, in which a group of undergraduates discuss their mathematics homework:

- Jenny: that's good. That's like yeah we don't have to do as much math
- Molly: cuz we're spending **forever** on Moebius.

The literal uses of forever usually have to do with a proposition about the future, such as a “loop” in computer programming, which will theoretically run “forever”.

Non Occurrences:

Additionally, there are several words that we expected to find in hyperbolic constructions, but were sadly mistaken. These include *mountains* (10 occurrences), *heaps* (1 occurrence), and *piles* (4 occurrences). In the case of *mountains*, we attribute this to the academic nature of the corpus, where speakers are primarily concerned with *mountains* as geographic phenomena. In the case of *heaps* and *piles* (as well as *mountains*), it is certainly possible that these words are used at least occasionally as hyperboles in academic speech; however, without more data we cannot safely conclude this.

There are a number of other quantifying words that simply do not occur in the MICASE corpus at all. These we conclude to be quite rare in academic speech. These are primarily the imaginary quantity types of hyperboles, such as *oodles*, *zillions*, and *gazillions*, as well as Briticisms such as *scads* and *yonks*. However, it should be noted that *a (hundred) zillion* occurs once, and *gazillion* occurs twice. Still, out of nearly two million words, these expressions are obviously quite rare. Additionally, we also investigated a number of scatological terms popularized by undergraduates on campus. According to the second author of this study, *shitload*, *assload*, *buttload*, and *crapload* are all large quantities of undesirable work that occasionally face undergraduate students on the U of M campus. However, like *oodles*, these expressions do not occur at all in MICASE. We conclude that this is probably because these terms primarily occur only in the most informal of occasions, which are not represented richly enough in MICASE.

Social Factors:

We then investigated three primary categories of variation classified within MICASE, namely:

1. Gender
2. Speech Event
3. Academic Discipline.

Gender:

We found few distinctive conclusions regarding the use of hyperbole in relation to the gender of speakers in MICASE. In the case of the overgeneralization pronouns, although the corpus contains 44% male speech and 56% female speech, men uttered 60% of the hyperbolic uses of *nobody* and 53% of the total hyperbolic uses of *everybody*. This over-concentration has puzzled us, especially since the percentages of hyperbolic use of *no one* and *everyone* closely match their overall use within the corpus.

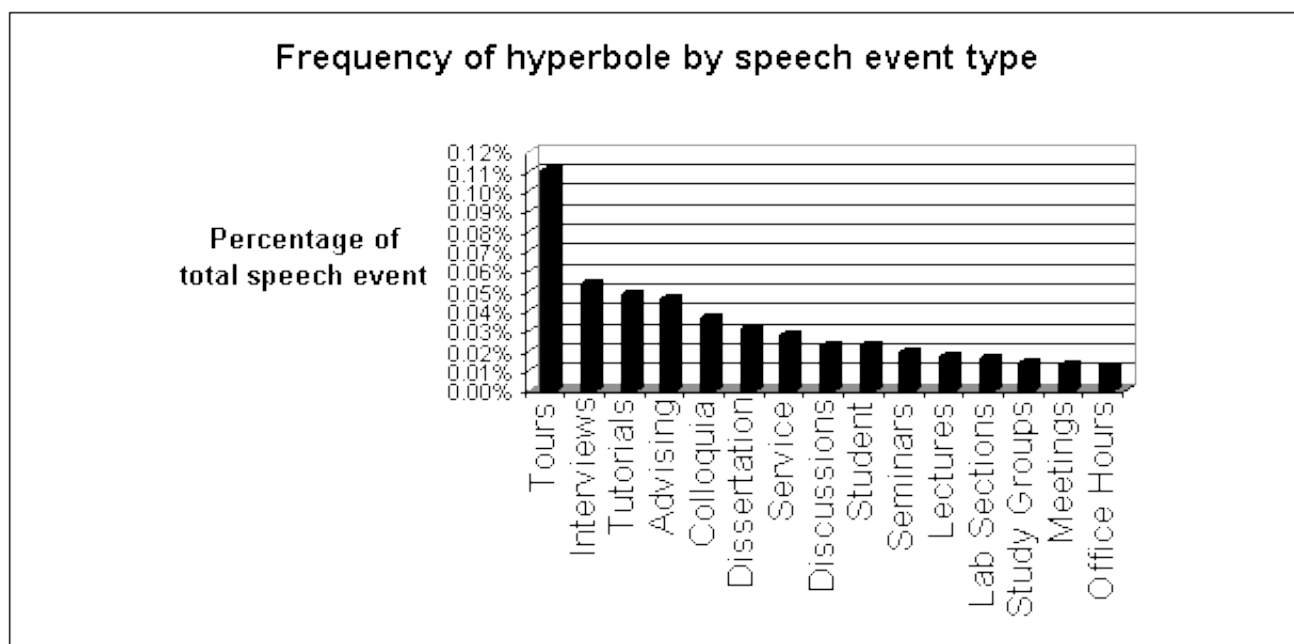
Rather than compare the other hyperbolic words we've investigated individually (e.g. millions,

dying, etc.), we compiled them together, and found that 46 of the hyperbolic occurrences were by women, while 45 were by men, which does reflect the general gender distribution of the corpus.

One other interesting individual point is that *tons* was used more than twice as often by men than by women (20 times to 9 times).

Speech Events:

In examining the use of hyperbole in relation to the many types of speech events represented in MICASE, we have found an unusually high percentage of hyperbole occurring within the Tours subgroup [see chart below]. Certainly, there are a number of different linguistics factors that could account for this, such as the age or student/faculty status of the interlocutors, or something about the typical discourse narrative of tours, we hesitate to draw any specific conclusions, because the various types of speech events are not very well distributed across the corpus, making it impossible to draw valid quantitative claims. For example, while there are only two Tour transcripts, there are more than sixty Lecture transcripts, and more than a dozen Colloquia. It is entirely possible that this finding about Tours is simply a fluke.



Academic Divisions:

Finally, we investigated the use of hyperbole in relation to the four primary academic divisions represented within MICASE: Social Sciences, Humanities, Physical and Engineering Sciences, and Biological and Health Sciences. Overall, we found 122 occurrences of hyperbole in the Social Sciences group, 87 in Humanities, 51 in the Physical and Engineering Sciences, and just 27 in the Biological and Health Sciences. Although it is true that there are slightly more transcripts in the Social and Humanities groups, the overall composition of MICASE is far more even than these numbers suggest. This clearly confirms our initial hypothesis that in most contexts hyperbole would be avoided, given the nature of academic speech. Most speakers do indeed strive to be accurate in their representation of ideas, and not grossly exaggerate their subject matter.

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Further thoughts on this matter? Please contact Judy Tsang (tsangk@umich.edu) and Aaron Ohlrogge