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The use of hyperbole in the argumentation stage

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I investigate what role the stylistic device of hyperbole can play in arguers' strategic maneuvers in the argumentation stage of a discussion. First, I give an analysis of the general effects the use of hyperbole may have in argumentative discourse. Next, I specify how hyperbole may contribute to arguers' dialectical and rhetorical aims in the argumentation stage of a discussion.

KEYWORDS: fallacy, hyperbole, presentational device, strategic manoeuvring

1. INTRODUCTION

Hyperbole is a rhetorical trope by means of which statements are made that are obviously exaggerated and thus untrue or unwarranted.¹ In this paper, this stylistic device will be discussed by making use of the extended version of the pragma-dialectical argumentation theory, in which rhetorical insights are integrated in a dialectical framework (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002, p. 9; van Eemeren, 2010, p. 22). According to this theory, arguers may be taken to be pursuing both dialectical and rhetorical goals in argumentative discourse. Although the rhetorical norm of persuasion is not necessarily in contradiction with the critical ideal of reasonableness, there is a potential tension between attempting to achieve a dialectical as well as a rhetorical aim (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002, p. 135). In order to diminish this tension, arguers are assumed to make use of 'strategic manoeuvring'. Strategic manoeuvring consists of three aspects: making an expedient choice from the topical potential, adapting to the audience, and making use of appropriate presentational devices.² Strategic manoeuvring can 'derail' and become fallacious if a party allows its dialectical aims to be overruled by its rhetorical aims, and violates one or more rules for critical discussion.

In the last couple of years I have explored the possibilities for strategic manoeuvring with various presentational means such as metonymy, rhetorical questions and *praeteritio*.³ In this paper I will investigate what role the stylistic

¹ In classical rhetoric, hyperbole can also be a figure of thought, when it is a means of gradual amplification (Lausberg, 1998, p. 410).

² These aspects are to a large extent comparable with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969) notions of 'choice', 'communion' and 'presence'.

³ See Snoeck Henkemans (2008, 2009a, and 2009b).

device of *hyperbole* can play in arguers' attempts to reconcile their rhetorical with their dialectical aims in the argumentation stage of a discussion. I shall first give an analysis of the general effects hyperbole may have in argumentative discourse. Next, I shall give a specification of the role hyperbole may play in arguer's strategic manoeuvres in the argumentation stage. Finally, I shall shed some light on the question which derailments of strategic manoeuvring may typically occur when hyperbole is used in the argumentation stage of a discussion.

2. CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS OF HYPERBOLE

Quintilian (VIII.6.67) describes hyperbole as a "tasteful exaggeration of the truth" that can go in two directions: one can exaggerate by presenting things as bigger or as smaller than they are. In this paper I will concentrate on the first type of hyperbole, the exaggerated enlargement.

Overstatement can take various forms: the lexico-grammatical repertoire for hyperbole includes numerical expressions, expressions of spatial extent, intensifying and extreme adjectives and adverbs, comparatives and superlatives (Spitzbardt 1963). According to McCarthy and Carter hyperbolic utterances often describe entities and events in the most extreme way possible (2004, p. 157). They contain lexical items such as *completely*, *every time*, and *everyone*.⁴ Claridge (2011, pp. 40-49) gives an overview of realizations of hyperbole. A first distinction that can be made is that between *basic* and *composite* hyperbole. Basic hyperbolic expressions are non-metaphorical, such as (1). Composite hyperboles, such as the expression 'petrified' in example (2) are not just hyperbolic, but metaphorical as well (Claridge, 2011, pp. 40-41):

- (1) It was so cold in the restaurant I was *freezing*.
- (2) When I saw him walking down the street I was *petrified*.

Hyperbolic expressions can be words (as in example 1 and 2), phrases or clauses. Within the categories of phrasal and clausal hyperboles, there are two regularly occurring patterns: comparison, as in example (3), and repetition, as in example (4) (Claridge, 2011, p. 48).⁵

- (3) I avoid beaches *like the plague*.
- (4) He put *loads and loads* of cream on his cake.

⁴ McCarthy and Carter (2004, p. 157) perceive an overlap between what Pomerantz (1986) has termed 'extreme case formulations' and hyperbole, although they do recognize that extreme formulations are not necessarily heard as counterfactual and are often rather conventional.

⁵ Apart from with metaphor, hyperbole may also be combined with other tropes and figures, such as for instance rhetorical questions and irony. An example of a combination of hyperbole and irony could be: "He managed not to spill any egg on his shirt. A heroic feat".

Although hyperbole exaggerates how things are in reality, and thus involves saying something which is strictly speaking untrue, or unwarranted, it is not considered as a form of lying.⁶ According to Clark, hyperbole can be seen as a violation of the maxim of quality which gives rise to conversational implicatures (1996, p. 143). That the literal utterance violates the maxim of quality is a property that hyperbole shares with a figure of speech such as *irony*. There is, however an important difference between the reconstruction of the intended meaning in cases of irony and hyperbole, according to McCarthy and Carter (2004, p. 158). In recovering the intended meaning of an ironic statement, the listener should change the literal assertion into a different *kind* of assertion (usually the opposite of what was literally said). In the case of hyperbole, however, the difference between what is said and what is implicated is

not one of kind, but of degree; the corrective response is to up- or downscale the assertion to accord with reality

McCarthy and Carter give as an example: 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* (2004, p. 158).

Since hyperbole can only be recognized if the listener notes that there is a distinction between what is literally said and what is actually the case, the role of context is crucial in the interpretation of hyperbolic utterances (Claridge, 2011, p. 12). What is an exaggeration in the one case, does not have to be one in the other.

The question is to what exactly a speaker can be held accountable in the case of hyperbole. Fogelin (1988, p. 13) believes that an hyperbolic statement is uttered 'with the intention of having it corrected away from the extreme, but still to something *strong*'.⁷ According to Claridge (2011, p. 20), by using hyperbole, speakers communicate their emotional orientation towards a state of affairs. This is possible, because hyperbolic expressions do not just have a quantitative meaning, but also a qualitative or emotional value:

While hyperbole is one means of intensification in the sense of gradability, [...] it is also intensification in the emotional sense, i.e. emphasis or what Labov (1984) calls 'intensity'. Emphasis as such is not dependent on a degree scale, but generally heightens the force of the proposition and marks the intensity of speaker involvement and commitment. This means that while the speaker is certainly not bound to the literal meaning of his utterance, s/he is committed to the deeper emotional and interactional, thus social, truth of the statement. (Claridge, 2011, p.12)

⁶ Not just factual assertions may be hyperbolic: Claridge (2011, p. 19, 17n) gives examples of evaluative statements (such as: "I love that passport") that can be exaggerated too. In that case, the hyperbole is not counterfactual, but the utterance is less credible, does not seem completely sincere.

⁷ According to Norrick, by using hyperbole the speaker communicates 'that his utterance *seems to him* to literally represent the objective state of affairs, given his emotional involvement' (Norrick, 1982, p. 172).

Claridge adds that one of the characteristics of hyperbole is that it can *at the same time* emphasize something and convey emotions. Although emotions are important in the case of hyperbole, and the trope is therefore often associated with pathos in particular,⁸ Claridge argues that this trope can have an influence on all of the three Aristotelian aspects of persuasion, logos, pathos and ethos:

With respect to *logos*, it can be useful to maximize or hyperbolically inflate some aspects of proofs while downplaying others [...] With respect to *pathos*, hyperbole can make things appear more important, more frightening or more desirable, thus arousing specific attitudes and feelings. [...] Finally, with respect to *ethos*, a constantly exaggerating speaker may appear untrustworthy [...] while one who always minimizes may not be convincing, or boring; the degree of hyperbole may need to be carefully calibrated. (Claridge 2011, p. 217)

In classical rhetoric, hyperbole and other forms of amplification were already seen as techniques that can be used to exaggerate certain facts or value judgements and thereby strengthen the arguer's defence or attack.⁹ Fahnestock and Tonnard describe the function ascribed to such techniques throughout the history of rhetoric as that of making a line of argument "more psychologically salient to the audience and more conceptually important in the overall case" (2011, p. 105).

In a corpus study analysis of the rhetorical functions of hyperbole in ordinary conversations, Cano Mora found that many hyperbolic utterances were used on the one hand to praise someone or to approve of something and on the other to complain, attack and criticize someone or something (2006, p. 205).¹⁰ A similar observation is made by Claridge, who found that particularly in a political context hyperbole is used for such purposes as "emphasising the seriousness of the situation, the urgency of action, criticising the political opponent and praising one's own party or policies" (2011, p. 265).

Claridge (2011, p. 209) mentions another aspect of hyperbole that may be used for persuasive purposes: many hyperbolic expressions are characterized by a certain vagueness. When expressions such as 'age' or 'load' or 'million' are used hyperbolically, they do not refer to an exact amount. This vagueness may, according to her, be to the advantage of the speaker.

3. THE STRATEGIC FUNCTION OF HYPERBOLE IN THE ARGUMENTATION STAGE

From the discussion of the literature on hyperbole it has become clear that hyperbole can function as an emphasizing device and can therefore be used to make information that is to the arguer's advantage seem more salient to the audience. Hyperbole also has an evaluative meaning, which makes it a suitable instrument to

⁸ Hyperbole has been classified as a figure of affect in rhetoric (Lausberg, 1960, p. 299)

⁹ Such a role is given to hyperbole and amplification in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and in Cicero's *De Oratore*.

¹⁰ Cano Mora found that emphasis was by far the most important function of hyperbole, followed by positive and negative evaluation. Other more or less prominent functions were expression of surprise, simplification, interest intensification, contrast of differences and humour (2006, p. 199).

convey and arouse emotions. The combination of the emphasizing and evaluative effect of hyperbole explains why this device is particularly suitable for acts of criticism or praise. Finally, since many hyperbolic expressions possess a certain vagueness, they may be used by speakers as a way of avoiding to commit themselves to a precise specification of quantity or size.

The question I would now like to address is what role *hyperbole*, in view of these characteristics, can play in arguers' strategic manoeuvrings in the argumentation stage of an argumentative discussion. The dialectical aim of the argumentation stage is to advance argumentation for one's own point of view and to criticize the other party's argumentation. The rhetorical aim of this stage is "to make the strongest case and to launch the most effective attack" (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002, p. 139). In order to make a strong case, arguers will attempt to present their arguments in such a way that they seem as strong as possible.

Hyperbole can contribute to this aim by amplifying important aspects of the arguer's argumentation so that they look more forceful. An example is the exaggeration of positive qualities of a product often found in commercial advertisements, such as example (5). If the fact that coffee made of freshly ground coffee beans tastes good could be an argument for ordering a certain brand of coffee beans, then the hyperbolic "nothing tastes better than" can be seen as a stronger argument:¹¹

- (5) *Nothing tastes better than* a lovely cup of coffee made of freshly ground coffee beans. At mycoffebeansshop.nl you will find an excellent selection of coffee beans of high quality [Translation fsh]. (<http://jesite.info/koffie-zoals-u-nooit-eerder-geproefd-hebt/>)

Another way of making a strong case in the argumentation stage is presenting the arguments in such a way that they become more difficult to attack. In particular numerical hyperbolic statements may be used as a kind of proof that is vague and unverifiable (Claridge, 2011, pp. 192-193). The arguer of example (6) - an advertisement for manuals and courses to improve your thinking - cannot be held committed to the literal meaning of "hundreds of thousands", but it is not exactly clear what he can be considered committed to:

- (6) Special techniques exist that you can use to improve your thinking. [...] This kind of thinking, parallel and lateral, has to become a habit. The methods work - however, just like posture, they only work if we stick to them strictly! *Hundreds of thousands of people can confirm this.* (<http://www.council4newthinking.com/>)

Hyperbole can also be used in the argumentation stage to make an attack on the other party's argumentation seem more forceful. In example (7) the British Prime

¹¹ Claridge mentions three types of scales involved in hyperbole, one of which is a scale based on the ranking of argumentative strength: "saying it is freezing is a more convincing argument for putting on a winter coat, scarf and gloves than saying it is cold or cool" (2011, pp. 8-9).

Minister David Cameron reacts to the accusation of the Leader of the Opposition, Edward Miliband, that the government's policies show that Cameron is out of touch with the situation of lower and middle class families, while his policies are favouring the rich. Cameron denies the charge, by claiming that he has cut taxes for the poor, and that under his government the rich pay more taxes than in the past under the opposition. Miliband then attacks Cameron by claiming that nobody believes him anymore and that everyone knows that he only represents the rich:

(7) *The Prime Minister:* What is out of touch is denying the fact that we had a deficit left by the right hon. Gentleman's Government that we had to deal with. That is what we have had to do, but we have been able to do it at the same time as cutting taxes for the poorest in our country, increasing child tax credits, and freezing the council tax to help those families. When it comes to the top rate of tax, let me tell him this: the richest in our country will pay more in tax under every year of this Government than any year of his Government. Those are the facts; he may not like them but he cannot deny them.

Edward Miliband: The problem is that *nobody believes him anymore*. [...] Before he was elected, the Prime Minister said: "Unless you can represent everyone in our country you cannot be a one nation party." That was then; this is now. *Everyone now knows* he cannot be a one nation Prime Minister.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm121219/debtext/121219-0001.htm#12121957001143>

By reacting in this way, Miliband implicitly argues that the "facts" that the Prime Minister is referring to cannot really be seen as undeniable facts, since "nobody believes him anymore". In his attack, Miliband does not really address Cameron's arguments for the opposite standpoint: he does not show that Cameron did not cut taxes for poor families or that it is not true that the rich will pay more taxes under his Government. Instead, Miliband makes it seem as if there is general agreement on the fact that David Cameron is not doing anything for the poor, but is only favouring the rich. To make his attack seem stronger – if only in the eyes of a third party, the voters Miliband represents – Miliband makes use of the hyperbolic expressions "nobody" and "everyone".

When criticizing an opponent's argument, hyperbole can also be used to maximize the opponent's burden of proof, so that a defence against the criticism becomes more difficult. One particular way of doing this is to magnify a missing premiss in the other party's argumentation. That is what Pollywolly seems to do in her reaction to Lizzi in example (8):

(8) *Lizzi:* Heard about Billy Joel's car crash? Slammed his merc into a tree Saturday night, airlifted to hospital and later released. And guess what? He wasn't breathalysed. Must be great to be a millionaire round here... :roll:
Pollywolly: So you think that EVERYONE involved in a car crash should be breathalysed? Why?

(<http://www.british-expats.com/thread-4921.html>)

Lizzi defends the implicit standpoint that millionaire and pop singer Billy Joel should have been breathalysed, since he crashed his car by driving it into a tree. In her attack, Pollywolly makes explicit what she considers to be the missing premise that Lizzi can be held committed to: "Everyone involved in a car crash should be breathalysed." That seems rather an exaggerated premise to ascribe to Lizzi. Firstly, because the word "involved" could be taken to mean that not just the driver, but also the passengers should be breathalysed. Secondly, it may have been the specific circumstances of the crash that are the reason for Lizzi to argue that the driver should have been breathalysed. A more reasonable interpretation of the implicit premise intended by Lizzi would probably be: "Anyone involved as a driver in a car crash in such circumstances should be breathalysed". That there is a more reasonable interpretation is – jokingly – pointed out by one of the other participants on the Web forum, *Pilgrim 007* (example 9):

- (9) *Pilgrim 007*: Hmmm - let's see....single car, no others involved, hit a tree which last time I checked were off to the side of the area reserved for cars (that's the black bit with the yellow lines down the middle for the hard of thinking amongst us). I'd say a breathalyser test would be in order :wink:
(<http://www.british-expats.com/thread-4921.html>)

4. HYPERBOLE AND FALLACIES

Although exaggerating involves saying something which is strictly speaking not true, or not warranted, this fact in itself does not make the use of hyperbole fallacious. In the pragma-dialectical approach, the requirement is only that the arguer should commit himself (if only for the time being) to the assertions that he puts forward and thus accept responsibility for them, not that he should believe those assertions (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 32).¹² Also, as we have seen, hyperbole is a form of indirect language use, which means that the arguer cannot be held committed to the literal speech act. This may, however, make it difficult in some cases to establish to what exactly the arguer can be held committed.

Even though exaggerating in itself is not fallacious, there are a number of uses to which hyperbole might be put which could lead to derailments of strategic manoeuvring and thus to particular fallacies. One example is the fallacy of the straw man, which can be committed when an arguer distorts the other party's standpoint by means of an unwarranted generalization, a technique which generally requires the use of hyperbolic expressions. It is not just the other party's *standpoint* that may be distorted by means of exaggeration, but also, as we have seen in the car crash example (8), an unexpressed *premise* in the other party's argument that may be blown up by the opponent only to make it easier to attack.

¹² Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, pp. 32, 155) explain that requiring the arguer to be responsible for what he has said, at least for the duration of the discussion, instead of sincere, is necessary to allow for cases such as hypothetical reasoning and *reductio ad absurdum*.

Hyperbole can also be used to exaggerate the number of people who agree on some issue, so that an argument can be presented as an undeniable fact or starting point. This can be a strategy to evade the burden of proof. In example (7), the antagonist uses this strategy in his attack of the Prime Minister's arguments. Since he does in fact not refute the Prime Minister's arguments, his attack could also be seen as an example of irrelevant argumentation for his own point of view.

Finally, as is shown by the vague reference to large numbers of people who could confirm the arguer's standpoint in example (6), the use of hyperbole can in some cases be problematic because of its vagueness, which can lead to committing fallacies such as misusing unclarity, or immunizing one's arguments against criticism.

5. CONCLUSION

As I hope to have made clear by presenting a number of examples of the use of hyperbole, this stylistic device can be used for different rhetorical purposes in the argumentation stage of an argumentative discussion. Generally speaking, hyperbole can be used to emphasize the information that contributes most to achieving the arguer's aims in the stage concerned. In the argumentation stage the arguer's arguments can be made to look stronger by means of exaggeration. Also, criticism can be put forward in a more forceful way, either by ascribing more to an arguer than he can be held committed to, or by exaggerating the criticism in such a way that it becomes more difficult for those that are attacked to defend themselves against the criticism.

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