

OVERSTATEMENT & COGNITIVE OPERATIONS¹

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ABSTRACT. *The aim of this paper is to provide further insights into the notion of “overstatement” from a Cognitive Linguistics standpoint and in connection to Relevance Theory (cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1986). In order to do so, after approaching this term according to the recent literature (e.g. Norrick, 2004; Burton, 2003; etc.), we explore the way in which two of the cognitive operations described in Ruiz de Mendoza (2005), i.e. reinforcement or strengthening and mitigation, underlie both the production and understanding of this process. The examples under scrutiny are based upon hyperbolic expressions and extreme case formulations (e.g. This steak is raw, This suitcase weighs a ton, etc.), and have been obtained from Google searches and from specialised journals.*

KEYWORDS: *overstatement, Cognitive Linguistics, Relevance Theory, cognitive operations, strengthening, mitigation.*

RESUMEN. *En este artículo tratamos de profundizar en el estudio sobre la noción de “overstatement” desde la Lingüística Cognitiva y en conexión con la Teoría de la Relevancia (cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Con este propósito in mente, tras acercarnos al término según la literatura reciente (e.g. Norrick, 2004; Burton, 2003; etc.), exploramos cómo dos operaciones descritas en Ruiz de Mendoza (2005), el “refuerzo” y la “mitigación”, subyacen tanto a la producción como a la comprensión de este proceso. Los ejemplos analizados están basados en expresiones hiperbólicas y en “formulaciones de casos extremos” (como This steak is raw, This suitcase weighs a ton, etc.) y se han obtenido a partir de búsquedas en Google y revistas especializadas.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *overstatement, Lingüística Cognitiva, Teoría de la Relevancia, operaciones cognitivas, refuerzo, mitigación.*

1. APPROACHING OVERSTATEMENT

First of all, we should clarify some basic notions on terminology since overstatement is usually referred to as hyperbole in the literature, which results in much confusion. Nevertheless, as it seems to be the norm (c.f. Norrick, 2004; Burton, 2003; etc.), “overstatement” is the superordinate term which encompasses hyperbole and other phenomena related to amplification, excess, and superfluity. Furthermore, we will keep the term “overstatement” to maintain the contrast with the general term “understatement.”

In order to study the cognitive processes that underlie the generation and interpretation of overstatement, i.e. strengthening (or reinforcement) and mitigation respectively, we should draw first on Sperber & Wilson’s (1986) notion of “enrichment” and “loosening” (Sperber & Wilson, 1985/86, 1986) which are crucial within the field of inferential pragmatics. Enrichment operations (which involve the adaptation of a concept to its contextual requirements), like linguistic decoding processes, allow to derive the aforementioned type of pragmatic inference which is known as explicature or “explicitly communicated assumptions” (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña, 2005), whereas loosening, according to Carston (2002), refers to the idea that sometimes a speaker chooses to express an utterance which is a “less-than-literal” (i.e. loose) interpretation of the thought she intends to convey. Nonetheless, these concepts have been developed within the relevance-theoretic context to some extent over the last ten years. One of the most recent refinements appears in Ruiz de Mendoza (2005); Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña (2005); and Ruiz de Mendoza & Santibáñez (2003).

In this paper, we shall further redefine two cognitive operations that were first described by Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña (2005), namely strengthening and mitigation. The contrast between mitigation and strengthening is based upon the scalar nature of the concept to which

either process refers, as opposed to the contrast between loosening and strengthening, which are respectively related to broadening and narrowing. In their account, Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña (2005) seem to imply that mitigation is involved in cases of hyperbole whereas strengthening is related to instances of understatement. However, both strengthening and mitigation operations apply equally to cases of overstatement and understatement but in different ways. To our mind, the fact that Ruiz de Mendoza & Peña linked mitigation to hyperbole and strengthening to understatement respectively may derive from the fact that they have only identified the operations performed by the hearer. However, overstatement is commonly held as a sort of reinforcement, strengthening or exaggeration, and understatement as a kind of mitigation. This can be explained since from a traditional pragmatic view, the perspective adopted par excellence has been the speaker's. The key to solve this problematic issue lies in considering that both of these operations perform a crucial role in both overstatement and understatement, but they vary depending on the speaker and hearer's stance.

More specifically, taking the scalar nature of the concept to which either process refers as the contrast between mitigation and strengthening, we can describe these operations as follows:

- Strengthening: this mental operation can be defined as an increase or augmentation in the scalar magnitude of a linguistic utterance or word. In order to exemplify this, we will resort to the following sentences: first, think of *It will take some time to repair your car*, where the hearer moves from a certain amount of time to a longer stretch of time; second, think of *This suitcase weighs tons*, in which the speaker has intentionally increased the weight of the suitcase going from a certain amount of weight that is too much to be lifted by a single person to the hyperbolic expression "tons."

- Mitigation: we can describe this cognitive process as a decrease or a diminution in the scalar magnitude of a linguistic utterance or word. We can illustrate this point by means of the following examples: first, imagine that someone cuts his knee in a fall but, even though the injury is quite big and bleeds a lot, he refers to it as "it is a simple scratch." The speaker of this utterance has decreased the size and importance of the injury on purpose. Similarly, imagine that it is very hot in summer but someone says "It's a bit hot today;" in the expression, the speaker has mitigated "very hot" into "a bit hot." Mitigation is also the process undergone by the hearer of an exaggeration as he moves, say, from a ton to "a certain amount of weight that is too much for a single person."

In this respect, strengthening and mitigation move along a scalar continuum in which we go either from a lower value to a higher value in the scale (i.e. augmentation), or vice-versa, that is, from a higher value to a lower value (i.e. diminution). We should bear in mind that these operations should not be mistaken for higher-level operations (that operate in more abstract terms) that encompass them, namely overstatement, understatement, and hyperbolic irony. In fact, both strengthening and mitigation combine in different ways to give as a result different higher-level processes. Curiously enough, by means of this interaction between lower-level operations, we can represent concepts that are actually at a lower level by means of referring to the higher-level magnitudes (i.e. overstatement), and the other way round, we can speak about actual higher-level dimensions by means of mentioning lower-level magnitudes (i.e. understatement).

2. OVERSTATEMENT REVISITED

Although many definitions have been given of overstatement, we can basically describe it as the process whereby we can represent (prototypically scalar) concepts that are actually at

a lower level by means of referring to the higher-level magnitudes. A well-known example of overstatement is the expression *This suitcase weighs a ton*, which is based upon a scalar continuum of weight that can be represented as follows:



Figure 1. *Scalar continuum for weight.*

Imagine that we utter that sentence when referring to a suitcase whose real weight is 40 kilos or so. In doing so, both the speaker and the listener understand that the actual weight of the suitcase is lower than what has been expressed; in other words, the imaginary or figurative weight of the suitcase is represented as being higher than it actually is. In order to accomplish this complex mental process, the speaker and the hearer undergo two different cognitive operations, strengthening and mitigation, although in different ways as we shall show below. Besides, contrast also plays a crucial role in the case of both the speaker and the listener as allows them to either create or notice the difference/s between the overstated expression and the real context of situation, expectations or world knowledge.

Nonetheless, strengthening and mitigation are not the only operations that characterise overstatement. On certain occasions, parametrisation has an essential role in fixing the scalar values that would be otherwise undefined to a greater or lesser extent. More specifically, parametrisation allows the speaker to focus on those aspects of the utterance that will guide the hearer’s interpretation by setting a barrier to mitigation. That barrier is placed in the point of the scale that is previous to the one overtly stated in the expression. Let us exemplify this by means of Carston’s example *This steak is raw*. If we stick to our initial definition of overstatement, we will easily observe that it does not work for, say, a scalar continuum in which the different degrees of cookedness are represented (see figure below), as we are representing the concept of “undercooked” by means of the concept “raw,” which is even placed at a lower level in the scale.

In any case, in *This steak is raw* we are dealing with a clear case of overstatement whereby we are strengthening the concept of “undercooked.” In order to solve this apparently complex issue, we should postulate that in order both to construct and interpret this sentence, the speaker and the hearer first follow a process of parametrisation of some of the values of the scale in such a way that they just bring into focus the degrees corresponding to “undercookedness,” leaving aside all the values related to “overcookedness.” Similarly, if we utter the sentence *This steak is burnt* in order to say that it is very much overdone, we are fixing only those values that refer to degrees of “overcookedness.” Hence, we could diagram the whole scale as consisting of two separate subscales:

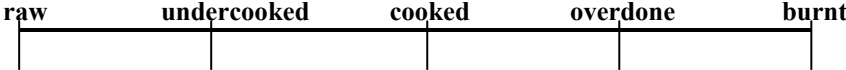


Figure 2. *Scalar continuum for degrees of cookedness*

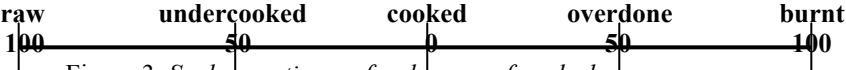


Figure 3. *Scalar continuum for degrees of cookedness.*

We have also observed the existence of a derivation process of additional contextual effects. We can illustrate this point by means of Carston’s example *This steak is raw*, in which “raw” apart from meaning “badly underdone” includes features related to being difficult to eat, disgust, the possibility of contracting illnesses, etc.

After this clarification, overstatement is accomplished by means of strengthening and mitigation operations. We should bear in mind that parametrisation occurs before these two operations. However, strengthening and mitigation apply differently depending on the perspective adopted; i.e. we should distinguish between speaker and hearer-based models of overstatement.

2.1. *A speaker-based model of overstatement*

Speaker-based models of overstatement are subject to strengthening or reinforcement cognitive operations since the speaker moves from a lower to a higher value of the concept represented. This is usually done to generate certain contextual effects that the speaker wants to make salient and noticeable to the eyes of the hearer. And, what is more, in doing so the speaker generates some contrast with the context of situation, our expectations or world knowledge; the listener should recognise the existence of that contrast in order to understand the expression as an overstatement and thus get the full of the contextual effects brought about.

We will resort to the aforementioned example of the heavy suitcase in order to exemplify this point. Imagine that Charles is trying to lift a very heavy suitcase and Frank shows up; in order to get Frank’s attention and help, Charles says “This suitcase weighs a ton.” In so doing, Charles is increasing a certain amount of weight that is too heavy for a single person until he reaches “a ton.” We can illustrate this process as follows:

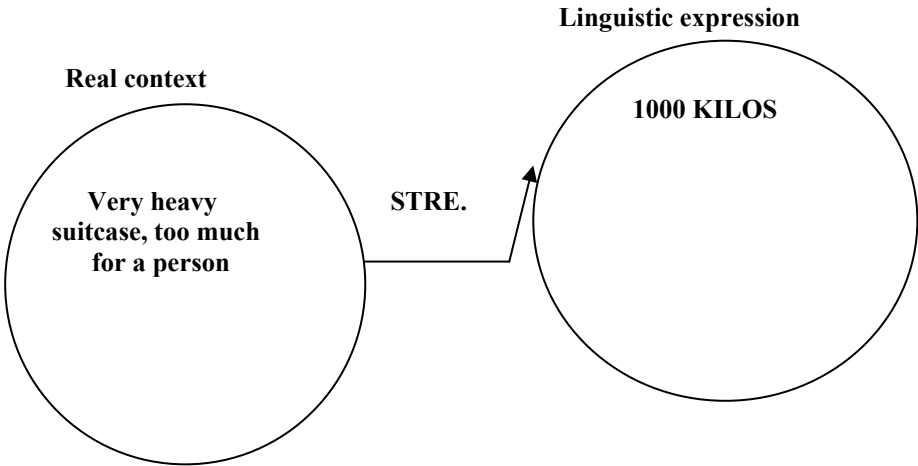


Figure 4. “This suitcase weighs a ton!”

The basics of this mapping generation process can be described as follows. The speaker has the intention of conveying some contextual effects and, in order to make them prominent and thus more noticeable, selects a feature of the surrounding context, world knowledge, or expectations and, by means of the already explained mechanism of strengthening, reinforces it to a higher value, therefore creating some contrast with what the real case is. Both the reinforcement and the contrast operations are captured in the linguistic expression uttered. From the point of view of Cognitive Linguistics, there is a projection between two different conceptual spaces which is mediated by a strengthening operation. The whole process can be reflected as follows.

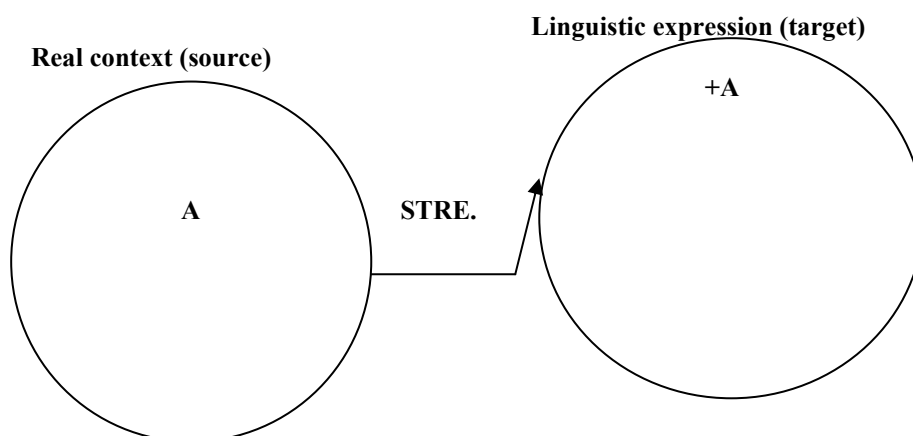


Figure 5. *Speaker-based model of overstatement.*

2.2. A hearer-based model of overstatement

Hearer-based models of overstatement are subject to the opposite operation, i.e. mitigation, since the listener moves from a higher to a lower value of the concept represented. Moreover, for the mitigation operation to take place, the listener should notice the strengthening operation that the speaker has performed in advance. This operation can be recognised on the basis of contrast, since the speaker's reinforced concept stands in some opposition to the real context, our world knowledge or expectations.

Retaking the previous example, on receiving the hyperbolic utterance of the suitcase weighing one thousand kilos, Frank is faced with the contradiction that neither a man nor two can raise a thousand kilos and, hence, he has to solve it. In other words, he cannot interpret Charles' hyperbolic utterance as a literal one since, in that case, he would do nothing at all because of the physical impossibility to raise the suitcase. In order to solve the contradiction, Frank will decrease the weight of the suitcase until a certain amount of weight which is too much for a single person but may be possible for two people. After doing so, he will probably act accordingly helping Charles out. We can represent this process by means of the following diagram,

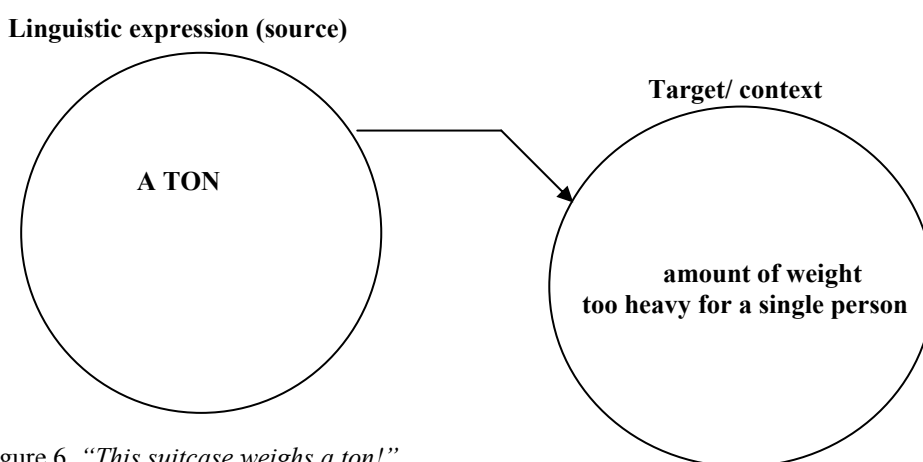


Figure 6. *"This suitcase weighs a ton!"*

The basics of this mapping generation process can be described as follows. The listener receives the utterance containing an overstatement in any of its forms and s/he notices some contrast with reality, his world knowledge, or his expectations. After detecting that contrast and realising the existence of emphasised conceptual structure, the hearer must reduce or mitigate the cognitive scalar content of the linguistic utterance and reach the value that more

or less corresponds to the context of situation, his expectations, or world knowledge. From the perspective of the Cognitive Linguistics paradigm, we can analyse this process as a projection between two different conceptual spaces which is mediated by a mitigation operation. The whole process can be diagrammed as follows,

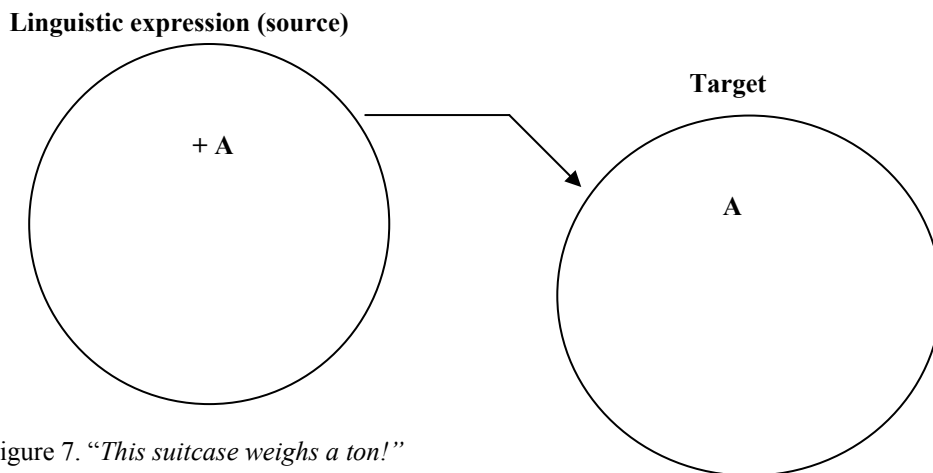


Figure 7. "This suitcase weighs a ton!"

3. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have approached the study of overstatement from a cognitive perspective and in relationship with Relevance Theory (cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1986). In so doing, we have explored the way in which two of the cognitive operations described in Ruiz de Mendoza (2005), i.e. reinforcement or strengthening and mitigation, underlie both the production and understanding of this process.

Besides outlining a new definition of overstatement, we have distinguished between speaker and hearer based models for they perform different conceptual operations. We have additionally identified some other operations such as parametrisation and a derivation process of additional contextual effects.

NOTES

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