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Meiosis, Hyperbole, Irony

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I. Overstatement and Understatement

It is tempting to assume that understatement and overstatement, meiosis and hyperbole, are analogous figures of speech and should be analyzed similarly.¹ Understatement is just “saying less than one means,” it seems, while overstatement is “saying more than one means.”² Most of the dictionaries that I have consulted count “overstatement” and “understatement” as antonyms, and offer mirror image definitions. Raymond Gibbs (2007) takes both tropes to be varieties of irony. So does the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (O’Conner 1965: 407). But understatement and overstatement have hugely different roles in conversation, as we will see. Understatement is indeed akin to

¹ Terminology: I take “meiosis” and “hyperbole” to be synonymous with “understatement” and “overstatement” respectively. I use the latter more transparent, less formal terms in the text.

² “In understatement the expressed meaning is mild, and the intended meaning intense In overstatement, ... the reverse is true.” (O’Conner 1965: 407). Some take under- and overstatement to be saying less or more than one has a right to say, or one could say, or what might have been said, or what is expected, or what one believes to be true. These alternatives are all less helpful for my purposes than the less-/more-than-one-means formulation.

The accounts that I will offer fit many or most generally recognized paradigmatic examples of these figures of speech. I will not be concerned if they conflict with intuitions about other cases. I am proposing a coherent and I hope illuminating partial taxonomy of figures of speech, not attempting to capture the, or any, ordinary notion(s) of understatement and overstatement.

irony, if not a species of it. Overstatement is an entirely different kettle of fish—not, I suggest, comfortably classified as a kind of irony.

My interest, I must emphasize, is in two *figures of speech*—along with a third, (verbal) irony. I put aside the sense in which to “understate” or “overstate” is simply to say less or more than is *true* (whether one is fibbing or just mistaken). The boasting fisherman who exaggerates the size of his catch, claiming to have landed a three foot walleye though it was actually only 28 inches long, is not thereby speaking figuratively. Columbus may well have expressed his underestimate of the circumference of the earth in perfectly literal and straightforward language. These are not the kinds of overstatement and understatement I am interested in. We come closer to understanding understatement and overstatement as figures of speech if we characterize them as saying less than one means or more than one means, less or more than one means to get across to hearers. This will be my starting point. But again, these formulae treat the two tropes analogously, offering no hint of their very different conversational roles.

* * *

I will use mostly mundane, relatively simple examples in examining these figures, so as to keep things from getting too complicated too soon. But before getting started, let’s glance at a selection of more interesting ones. I would expect my account of the mundane cases to be useful in explaining these, but I won’t try to explain them here.

The following are likely to count as overstatements in something like the sense I have in mind (depending, of course, on the context and the speaker’s intentions).

(a) People fight wars over whether to crack eggs on the big or the little end. (Cf. Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*.)

(b) The (proposed) Gravina Island Bridge is a bridge to nowhere.

(c) Indonesia is a small island off the coast of Bali.

(d) Mumbai makes Times Square look like Northfield Minnesota

(e) I am in favor 110%.

Apparent understatements:

(f) “I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas any more!” (Toto, in *The Wizard of Oz*).³

(g) A single nuclear bomb could ruin your whole day.

(h) Gosh, it might even ruin a week, or a month (responding to (g)).⁴

Some understatements are “dead,” as are some metaphors. (I do not take deceased instances of either trope necessarily to be no longer instances of it. [Cf. Walton 1993/2015: pp. 185, 186].) Examples:

(i) Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.

(j) She isn’t getting any younger.

(k) This isn’t the first time that ... [e.g., a politician has lied].

(l) The last I heard, ... [e.g., Abraham Lincoln isn’t a candidate in the 2016 election].

³ If Toto simply meant (f) literally and straightforwardly, if he is reporting no more than a vague impression that he is no longer in Kansas, because things are somewhat different from how they were, the utterance counts as an understatement only in the sense of saying less than is true. It is a figurative understatement if Toto meant to imply something like: “... it is not just that we are in Nebraska or Colorado, or even New York or London! We are really, really, not in Kansas!”

⁴ (g) and (h) are massive understatements of how ruinous a nuclear bomb would be. Understood as a comment on (g), (h) is an understatement of how understated (g) is.

(m) The evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that

Some utterances are both understatements and overstatements, as we shall see. This is probably true of some of the above examples.

II. Saying Less, and More, than one Means

Now for simpler examples.

Looking out my window I see, to my surprise, a dozen or so policemen on the street corner in front of my house. I remark to a companion:

(1) There are a couple of cops out there.

This is an understatement.⁵ Alternatively, I might exaggerate, overstate:

(2) There are hundreds of cops out there.

In neither case do I expect my companion or anyone to understand either that there are just two policemen on the corner or even that there might be just two, or that

⁵ Some Grice influenced theorists will understand (1) to mean, literally, that there are at least a couple of cops on the corner, possibly more. On this view (1) is literally true in the situation I envisage and the speaker means it literally. (Likewise for Toto's "We're not in Kansas anymore.") I count the utterance of (1) a figure of speech nonetheless. The point of the speaker's assertion, in this context, is not to affirm the literal truth of (1) (that there are two or more cops on the corner); she is claiming that there are not just two cops there but lots more. Wayne Davis (2014: §3) observes that when speaking figuratively one generally does not mean what one says, but he cites litotes as an exception. Litotes (e.g. "I am not opposed ..." in place of "I am in favor ...") are usually classified as understatements. (An *at least* reading seems not to be available for "The number of cops is two," or for "A couple" in answer to the question, "How many cops are there?") Many but not all understatements, and some overstatements, are arguably like (1) in these respects.

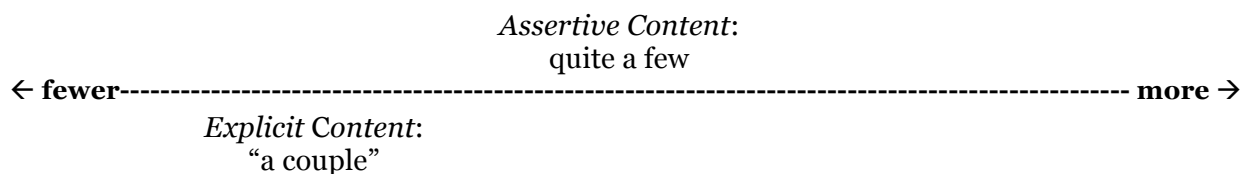
there are (literally) hundreds. What I mean to get across is approximately the same in both cases. Whether I exaggerate or understate, I intend my hearers to understand that the number of cops is something in between—significantly more than two and significantly fewer than two hundred—that there are, let’s say, *quite a few* cops on the corner. Call this the *assertive content* of the utterance—of the utterance of either (1) or (2).

I *say* different things by way of making this assertion: that there are “a couple” cops on the street, in the first instance, and that there are “hundreds” in the second. Let’s understand the *explicit content* of (1) to be that there are two cops on the corner.⁶ The explicit content of (2) is that there are hundreds.

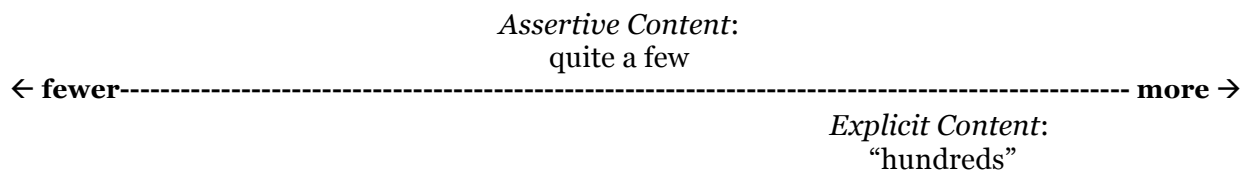
⁶ We can allow some flexibility in the notion of explicit content. A first thought will be that it is what the sentence uttered, understood literally, means in the context. On the Gricean view mentioned above (note 5), the explicit content of (1) would be (1a) *that there are at least a couple of cops on the corner*. That there are no more than a couple is merely a common implicature of utterances of (1), these Griceans will say, not part of its meaning. But even on the Gricean view, we can reasonably count (1b) *that there are a couple of cops there and no more*, as the explicit content of (1), as “what the speaker says.” The implicature (if that is what it is) is a *generalized* one. (Cf. e.g., Levinson 2000; Horn 2004.) It is present in utterances of (1) by default, in the absence of any particular contextual interference. Taken literally, (1) not only means what it does but, absent a special context, carries the implicature that there are no more than two cops on the corner. I take this to justify understanding (1b) as the speaker’s explicit content, in our example. ((1a) would work for our purposes, however, with some modification of the discussion below.) I am following the lead of several linguists here: “A generalized implicature is, in effect, a default inference, one that captures our intuitions about a preferred or normal interpretation.” (Levinson 2000: p.11). “What is said in an utterance is systematically underdetermined by the linguistic content of what is uttered.” (Horn 2004: 19-20). See also Levinson 2000: §3.2.1, “Grice’s Circle: Implicatural Contributions to ‘What Is Said’” and §3.2.6 “Generality Narrowing.” For further discussion see Carston (2002) and Novak and Sperber (2012).

It seems that in understatement generally, as in the case of (1), the explicit content is less than, smaller than, the assertive content.⁷ And in overstatement generally, as in (2), the explicit content is larger than the assertive content. To overstate is to represent, by what one says, a quantity as being larger than one means to assert it to be. Understatement is representing it as smaller.

Understatement: (1) “There are a couple of cops on the corner”



Overstatement: (2) “There are hundreds of cops on the corner”



This simple way of understanding understatement and overstatement is too simple, as we will see in §IV, although the modification it requires respects the intuition that these tropes amount to saying less and more than one means.

⁷ More accurately, the magnitude that figures in the explicit content is less than, smaller than, the magnitude that figures in the assertive content.

III. Surface Differences.

Overstatements and understatements—intuitively paradigmatic instances of each—tend to occur in different conversational circumstances and to function in very different ways.

Understatement is often the figure of choice when the point the speaker means to be making, the assertive content, is obvious, when her addressees know already that it is so even if they need reminding, or can easily discover for themselves that it is. If my companion is with me in front of the window overlooking the cops corner, and either sees the cops herself or can easily do so by looking up from her newspaper, I may remark, “There are a couple of cops there,” pointing out the obvious or inviting her to look for herself. This is like saying “Look!” or “Look at how many cops there are out there!” The understatement functions much as rhetorical questions do, the hearer being expected to supply the answer that the speaker has in mind (Fogelin 2011).

But if my addressee is in the back room or on the telephone from another city, I am likely to pick the overstatement figure to make my point, to say there are hundreds of cops out there, or else just speak literally and straightforwardly: “There are lots of cops out there,” or “... quite a few ...”. Knowing that she can’t see for herself, I intend her to take my word for it that there are quite a few (not, of course, that there are literally hundreds).

This is a difference in how utterances of (1) and (2) typically convince hearers of the assertive content.⁸ In both cases I intend, by saying what I do, to cause my companion to believe that there are quite a few cops on the corner (or confirm what she already

⁸ When (1) is an understatement and (2) an overstatement. In certain circumstances (1) might be an overstatement and (2) an understatement, as we shall see.

knows). In the exaggeration case my utterance, the fact that I said what I did, is probably part of her reason for believing this, her evidence that it is so. She takes my word for it. In the understatement case she has her own reason to believe it or can confirm it easily by glancing out the window. She doesn't need to take my word for it.

The workings of (1) and (2) as I have described them are typical of understatement and overstatement generally. In asserting:

(4) Einstein was rather clever.

I expect my addressee to have independent reason to think that Einstein was, not just reasonably intelligent but positively brilliant, which is the point I probably mean to be making. I am less likely to say:

(5) My little Johnny is rather clever.

meaning to indicate, understatedly, that he is positively brilliant, unless my addressee knows Johnny and knows how incredibly smart he is. (More likely, I would be modestly hoping to convince a hearer just that he is reasonably intelligent.) If Johnny's brilliance is not obvious, I will have to make my point, either straightforwardly by saying just that Johnny is positively brilliant, or by exaggerating:

(6) Johnny is an absolute genius, another Einstein,

hoping that the hearer will take my word for it—that Johnny is brilliant, if not quite an absolute genius.

Irony is often like understatement in this respect. Irene is likely to remark, ironically, "It's a wonderful day for a picnic" when we all see how hard it is raining, or

(7) What a fine friend he is!

when the supposed friend's unfriendly behavior is or has been on display.

Incidentally, we have stumbled on an explanation of the sarcastic bite that is characteristic of irony. By relying on the obviousness of the point she means to be making—that the person referred to is a terrible friend—the ironic speaker of (7) points out that this *is* obvious, or asserts or implies that it is. She declares in effect, not just “He is a terrible friend,” but “It is *obvious* that he is a terrible friend.” If this is not entirely obvious, the speaker's tone of voice and/or the context might show that she nevertheless means (7) ironically; then also she will be declaring in effect (if falsely) “It is obvious that he is a terrible friend.”

Robert Fogelin (2011: 16) observes that understaters, ironists, and also overstaters, all intend to elicit “correcting responses” or “adjustments” from hearers, in thought at least, and intend hearers to recognize this intention. This is most obviously true of understatement and irony. Fogelin is not wrong about overstatement. But the nature of the expected corrections—to understatements and ironies on one hand, and to overstatements on the other—are strikingly different. The intended correction to (1), our paradigm understatement, will be (to paraphrase what Fogelin says about another example) something like, “What do you mean, a couple of cops?; there are dozens out there!” The correction an utterance of (2), our overstatement, calls for is, perhaps, “Well, not *that* many.” The tone of the first is one of rejection.⁹ The correction to (2) is more in the spirit of a friendly amendment (even though (1) is arguably true, and (2) is false, if the speaker's assertive content is true!) (1) *needs* correcting more than (2) does, from the speaker's point of view. There is something wrong with (1), taken literally, the speaker meant it to be wrong, whereas (2) is on the right track. It is more important, for the

⁹ Cf. the discussion in Horn (2004: §3, §5) of “It's not warm, it's hot.”

speaker's purposes, that the addressee of (1) be able to supply the needed correction than that the addressee of (2) is. So when the addressee is not in a position to see what is going on, it is safer for the speaker to utter (2) than (1).

A second way to see that under- and overstatements function differently is to look at natural ways of paraphrasing or glossing them.

We might paraphrase or gloss (2) as:

(8) It is as though, almost as if, there are hundreds of cops. There might as well be hundreds.

Like (2) itself, (8) is an exaggeration of what the speaker means to get across, but it captures the spirit of her claim. (As a report of what the speaker of (2) said, it exaggerates how much of an exaggeration (2) is.) An analogous paraphrase of (1) would be entirely unacceptable:

(9) It is as though, almost as if, there are a couple of cops on the corner. There might as well be two.

If "a couple" and "two" are read as *only* two, (9) suggests something like the opposite of what the understater means to express. If it is read as *two or more* it still fails to make her point.

Another way of putting what the understater means to get across is to declare that what she says is an understatement. If a dense or naïve hearer doesn't see that it is, she might make the understating explicit:

(10) There are a couple of cops there, *and that is an understatement*. (Or, "... to put it mildly", or "... to say the least.")

She might make her point literally (and boringly) by asserting:

(11) To say that there are a couple of cops there would be a massive understatement.”

But the exaggerator probably won't be eager to emphasize that he is exaggerating. Rather than explaining, to a naïve or dense hearer who might take him literally:

(12) There are hundreds of cops there, *and that is an exaggeration.*”

he might *admit* that he is exaggerating:

(13) There are hundreds of cops there, *although* that is an exaggeration.

He surely won't make his point by asserting:

(14) To say that there are hundreds of cops there would be a massive exaggeration.

He might even add emphasis by denying (falsely) that he is exaggerating, exaggerating even more vociferously:

(15) There are hundreds of cops there, and that's no exaggeration.

or even,

(16) There are literally hundreds of cops there.

Explaining these disanalogies requires the promised modification of the suggestion of § II, a modification that is needed anyway.

IV. Salient Contrasts

The simple idea that overstating is saying more than one means and understating is saying less—representing, by what one says, a quantity as being larger, or smaller, than one means to assert it to be—threatens to evaporate when we realize that to understate how large a quantity is, is to overstate, to exaggerate, how small it is, and vice versa. So it would seem, anyway.

If (to use a different example) I assert:

(3) He was hospitalized for a month, and they had to spend *a few dollars* on medical expenses,

am I not understating how expensive the hospitalization was and also overstating how inexpensive it was? What I mean (let's assume) is that the hospitalization cost significantly more than a few dollars (hundreds, thousands, whatever) which is both more expensive and less inexpensive than what I say—that it cost “a few dollars.”¹⁰ Must over- and understatement be relativized to a *direction* on the relevant scale? Is there no such thing as overstatement *simpliciter* or understatement *simpliciter*? There certainly seems to be. In many cases at least, theorists, literary critics, and most of us have little trouble deciding which is which. (I will mention one instance in which I think a theorist got it wrong.) It probably seems strained to regard (1) as an exaggeration of how few cops there are, and positively perverse to call (2) an understatement of how few there are.

There is a principled way of distinguishing between the two figures, of counting an utterance as an overstatement only, or as an understatement only. Whether an utterance is best regarded as understating one quantity or overstating the opposite quantity depends on a feature of the conversational context, on what, in the context, functions as what I shall call the *salient contrast* to the speaker's assertive content.

¹⁰ We will think of (3) mainly as an overstatement if we are used to and expect astronomical medical bills, but have suddenly acquired good health insurance, so the hospitalization cost (only), say, \$500, rather than the expected thousands. The speaker utters (3) by way of pointing out that, surprisingly, the expense was trivial. “We had to spend *a few dollars* for a month's hospitalization—big deal! Well, yes, it was \$500; I exaggerated. No matter!”

Why does it seem much more natural, intuitively, to think of (1) and (2) as under- and overstatements, respectively, of how *many* cops there are, how large their number is, rather than over- and understatement of how *few* there are? Because we are assuming (I assume) a context in which the large number of cops, their abundance, is what is of interest. The speakers mean to emphasize, by exaggeration or by understatement, how large the number of cops is, not how small it is. They do expect their hearers to understand that there are significantly fewer than 200 cops, as well as significantly more than two. But their point, in the kind of context I have in mind, is that there are this many cops, quite a few, *rather than fewer*, rather than one or two. They are not concerned to point out that there are this many *rather than more*, that the number of cops is not in the hundreds. A likely reason for this emphasis—not the only possible one—is the fact that it is a surprise that there are as many cops on the street as there are. Normally there are one or two or none, let's suppose. So what is of interest is that now there are significantly more cops than that.

The *salient contrast* to what the speaker of either (1) or (2) asserts to be the case, in this conversational situation, is a state of affairs in which there are fewer cops than she claims. There being more is a *non-salient* contrast. There has been no thought in this context (let's assume), by the speaker or hearer or anyone, of there being more than quite a few. No one has envisioned this as a possibility, or speculated or fantasized about it, or wondered what it would be like if there were hundreds of cops rather than just quite a few, or what might lead to there being that many. This idea, let's say, is just not in the *conversational air*.

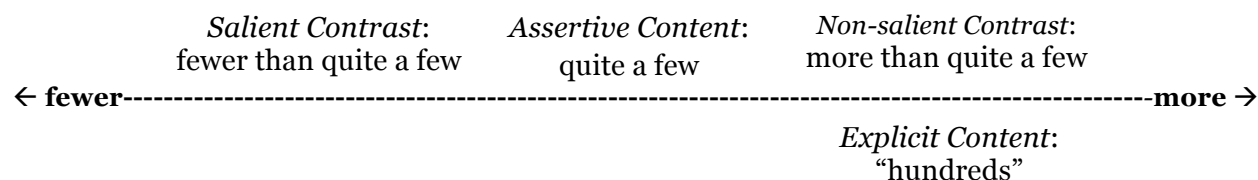
The point is not that the obtaining or non-obtaining of the non-salient contrast is unimportant, that it doesn't matter to the parties to the conversation. If there were hun-

dreds of cops on the street rather than merely a dozen or so, that would be a big deal.

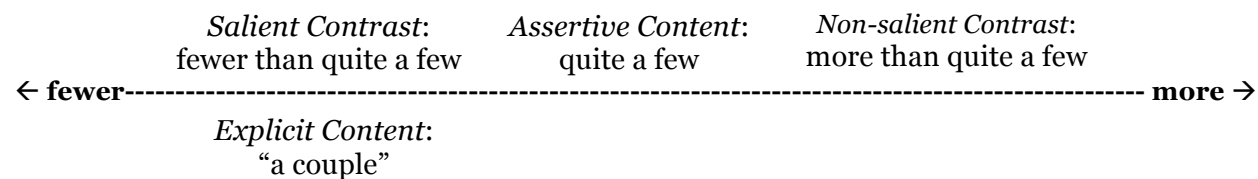
The point is just that this contrast is not a matter of concern in this context, not a focus of interest. There is no need to point out that there are significantly fewer than hundreds.

(2), the overstatement, exaggerates the gap between what the speaker means to indicate and what she especially means to deny, between the assertive content and the salient contrast. (1), the understatement, collapses this gap. The speaker of (2) makes as if to claim that the situation on the street differs even more from the salient contrast than she actually means to claim that it does. The speaker of (1) makes as if to claim that the situation differs little if at all from what she actually means to deny, from the salient contrast.

(2) as an overstatement:



(1) as an understatement:



In general, to decide whether an utterance overstates a quantity or understates its opposite, we need to locate the salient contrast in the context in which the conversation occurs. What counts is whether the explicit content exaggerates, or minimizes, the gap

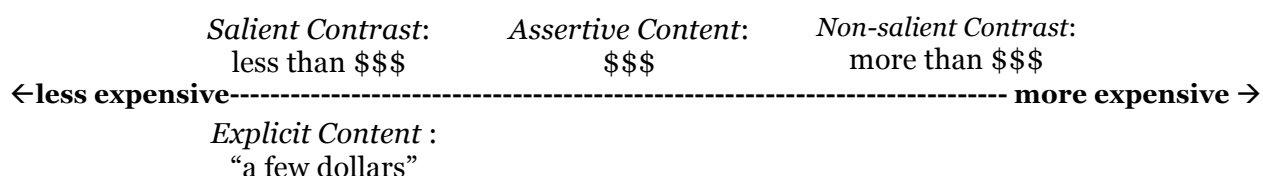
between what the speaker means to get across to the hearer and what she means especially to deny, between the assertive content and the salient contrast.

This can be different in different conversational contexts.¹¹ Recall:

(3) She was hospitalized for a month, and they had to spend a few dollars on medical expenses.

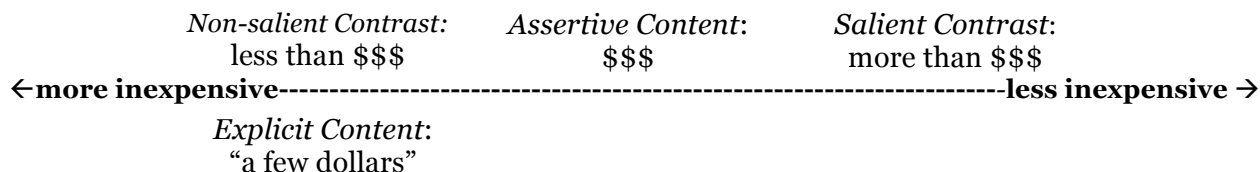
If the speaker's point in uttering (3) is that the hospitalization cost what it did rather than less, the salient contrast is that it cost less; she is understating how expensive it was. If her point is that the hospitalization cost what it did rather than more, the salient contrast is that it cost more; she is overstating how inexpensive it was. Diagrammed, the difference is as follows:

Understatement (of how expensive the hospitalization was)



¹¹ In some cases the words used imply that the salient contrast lies in one direction on the relevant scale or the other, regardless of the context. The salient contrast of “There are few X’s” (taken literally) is probably that there are more than a few; that of “There are a few X’s” is likely to be that there are none. The assertive content of both utterances is probably approximately the same. “There are only a couple of cops ...” apart from its context, indicates that the salient contrast is that there are more than that, although “There are a couple of cops ...” can go either way.

Overstatement (of how inexpensive the hospitalization was)



In understatement, the salient contrast and the explicit content coincide or, as in our examples, the explicit content is within the range of the salient contrast; it entails the salient contrast. Let's say that the understating speaker *voices* the salient contrast; her words express what she specifically means to deny.

We are now able to explain the surface differences noted above. Understatement works better in a context in which the assertive content is obviously true or easily seen to be true, than one in which it is not. If the hearer must rely on the speaker to learn whether it rather than the salient contrast is true, the speaker had better not voice the salient contrast, lest he take her to be endorsing it. But she can usually exaggerate without worry. He will be less likely to think she is endorsing her explicit content when she exaggerates if it is not in the conversational air. And anyway, more significantly, she is not especially concerned that he not do so; that is not an important issue in the context. (Also, of course, the exaggeration may be so extreme that no one would suppose she endorses it, but it needn't be.)

In a situation in which the truth of the assertive content is evident or easily noticed, the hearer is less likely to suppose that the speaker endorses the salient contrast even if she voices it. Voicing it calls attention to the question whether the salient contrast obtains, and encourages the hearer to notice that it doesn't.

Why should understaters welcome identifying their utterances as understatements, and exaggerators hesitate to emphasize that they are exaggerating? Both are keen to deny the salient contrast. Since the understaters' explicit content entails the salient contrast, she will be keen to make sure her utterance isn't taken literally. The exaggerators' explicit content is even farther from the salient contrast than his assertive content is, so the need to avoid the salient contrast doesn't demand rejecting it.

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Raymond Gibbs (2000/2007: 339-340) reports a conversation between two roommates in which they complain, with heavy irony, about guests that a third roommate invited to their apartment. Anne makes the following remarks:

I just love it you know, our housemates. They bring in the most wonderful guests in the world and they can totally relate to us. ... Like today I was feeling all depressed and I came out and I saw the guests and they totally lightened up my mood. I was like the happiest person on earth.

Gibbs characterizes:

(17) They bring in the most wonderful guests in the world and they can totally relate to us.

and

(18) I was like the happiest person on earth.

as "nice examples of hyperbole" (346), which he takes to be a form of irony (339, 340).

The irony is clear. The roommates are actually conveying "their mutual displeasure about the people staying as guests in their apartment" (340). But the remarks are best

understood as understatements, not hyperbole.¹² Anne is not exaggerating how wonderful the guests are. She doesn't mean that they are somewhat wonderful, more than they might be, perhaps—but exaggerates, overstates her point by calling them “the most wonderful guests in the world.” Her point is how awful they are, which she drastically *understates* by describing them as “the most wonderful guests in the world.” She is not focusing on how happy she is with them, expressing this with exaggeration. She is radically understating how unhappy she is.

The salient contrast, in this context, is a state of affairs in which the guests really are wonderful, moderately wonderful anyway, or more so than they might have been, and she is happy enough with them. She is claiming that *rather than* this state of affairs obtaining, the guests are not wonderful and she is not happy. The assertive content is not between the salient contrast and the explicit content; the salient contrast and the explicit content coincide or overlap.

* * *

More needs to be said about salient contrasts. All serious assertions have salient contrasts, I suppose, something speakers mean particularly to rule out. The contradictory of what is asserted often counts as the salient contrast. But the interesting cases are ones in which the salient contrast is more specific than this. Understatements and overstatements are not the only examples. To claim that it is raining may be to claim simply that it is raining *rather than not*; that it is not raining being the salient contrast. But in a certain conversational context the salient contrast of “it is raining” might be just that it is snowing. The speaker's point may be simply that it is raining *rather than snowing*, it

¹² But see p. 00 below.

being taken for granted and uninteresting in the context that it is *precipitating*. Or, if there is no thought of snow, the salient contrast may be just that there is no precipitation at all.

What makes a contrast salient? In the policeman examples, I understood the salient contrasts to be (some approximation of) what is normally or ordinarily the case, what the parties to the conversation are likely to expect. But of course this is not always so. If I assert that things are normal in some respect, the salient contrast will be something else, a less normal or less usual state of affairs. In a context in which hospitalization is always, inevitably, horribly expensive, a speaker who points this out by uttering either (3) or, in exaggeration,

(19) She was hospitalized for a month, and they had to spend millions on medical expenses,

the salient contrast is the unheard of circumstance in which hospitalization is affordable. The speaker asserts that, as expected, this hospitalization cost a lot *rather than* being affordable.

The salient contrast is often something that is “in the conversational air” before the assertion is made (whether or not it is the usual or expected state of affairs), something that has been said, or thought, or discussed, or speculated or fantasized about, which the speaker is responding to. But sometimes the salience of a contrast arises only with the assertion itself. This might well be true of (1), our paradigm understatement. There may have been no thought at all about cops on the corner until the speaker notices an unusual abundance of them and utters (1).

The salient contrast of

(20) There was a tsunami off the coast of Sumatra this morning (uttered on December 26, 2004).

is that there wasn't a tsunami that morning; the speaker asserts that there was, rather than wasn't, a tsunami on the morning she speaks. But that there was no tsunami needn't previously have been in anyone's consciousness or in any sense in the conversational air. The parties to the conversation (except for the speaker) might not even know what a tsunami is. Once the speaker utters (20), however, it is probably clear that she means especially to be denying that a tsunami occurred that morning—clear at least that, whatever tsunamis are, she is denying that there was one.

V. Irony

Irony has an obvious affinity with understatement, given that understaters voice what they especially mean to deny. In irony also, the explicit content entails the salient contrast. I take this to be at least a necessary condition for irony (verbal irony, in declarative sentences). Overstatement, again, is an entirely different kettle of fish. The salient contrast and explicit content of overstatements are separated by the assertive content, so don't overlap. The exaggerating speaker does not voice what she especially means to deny.

This feature of irony fits nicely with what Wilson and Sperber (1992, 2012) call *echoic mention* or *echoic use*, which they take to be partly definitive of irony. Salient contrasts, we noted, are often “in the conversational air” in one way or another before the assertion is made. In voicing the salient contrast a speaker may be “echoing” previous assertions (or thoughts) of it. And if she expects hearers to notice, we can understand her to be “mentioning” or referring to them.

To voice the salient contrast is easily regarded as pretending to assert what one means to deny, making as if to assert it. And at least when there is a recognizable target, the speaker might well use a sarcastic or mocking tone in so pretending, making fun of the idea she is rejecting. Overstating, exaggerating, may be pretending also, pretending to assert a non-salient contrast. But this hardly calls for sarcasm, since what the exaggerator voices is not something she especially means to deny. The fact that the ironist voices the salient contrast helps to explain the tendency of irony to include an expression of an attitude toward those who do or might endorse it, and the likelihood that this attitude will be a negative one, both of which Wilson and Sperber emphasize.

Wilson and Sperber (1992: 60) take a broad view of echoing. “The thought being echoed may not have been expressed in an utterance; it may not be attributable to any specific person, but merely to a type of person, or people in general: it may be merely a cultural aspiration or norm.” Salient contrasts need not be in the conversational air even in any of these ways. As we just noted, the salience of a contrast may arise only with the assertion itself.

Suppose that, on December 26, 2004, someone utters

(21) There was no tsunami this morning!

or

(22) Of course there has never been a tsunami in Indonesia!

meaning to point out the occurrence of the tsunami. Is this irony? Yes, probably, if it is addressed to people observing the damage who realize what happened, or at least people who have heard news of the tsunami. (It isn’t hard to think of reasons a speaker might have for remarking on the tsunami even if her addressees are fully aware of it.) But sup-

pose that this is the first report of the tsunami, meant for people who didn't observe it, haven't yet heard of it, and perhaps don't know what tsunamis are. In this case the thought of there having been one or not will not have been in the air prior to the assertion. There would seem to be nothing to echo, and sarcasm would seem distinctly out of place (though not, I think, impossible). Wilson and Sperber will deny that the assertion is ironic, on the grounds that it isn't echoic (and also, probably, that it does not express a negative attitude toward what is echoed).¹³ Perhaps it is an attempt at irony, a failed attempt?

This scenario is unlikely however we describe it, unlikely for the same reason that the person observing cops on the corner is unlikely to understate when she is speaking on the phone to a friend who can't see for himself. In uttering (21) or (22) one can hardly expect hearers to appreciate one's (attempted?) irony, to realize that what she means is different from, in this case the contradictory of, what she says, if they have no inkling

¹³ We might stretch the notion of echoing further than Wilson and Sperber probably intend to, but at the risk of rendering it vacuous. Even if there was no thought at all about cops on the corner until a speaker notices them and utters (1), it probably was assumed, implicitly, that, as usual, there were fewer than "quite a few" there. Might the speaker be "echoing" this tacit assumption? I don't rule out the possibility of her expressing something like sarcasm concerning it. Even if the people whom the speaker of (21) or (22) is addressing had no inkling of the tsunami and don't know what tsunamis are, they presumably assumed, implicitly, that no significant natural disaster happened that morning. Might the speaker have echoed this assumption? I wouldn't expect Wilson and Sperber to go this far. But I am not sure that there is a non-arbitrary way of drawing the line.

of the tsunami independently of her utterance and can only take her word for it.¹⁴ If she expects to communicate successfully, she probably shouldn't try to be ironic.

How shall we define "irony"? A necessary condition of irony (verbal irony in declarative sentences), I suggested, is that the explicit content of an utterance entail the salient contrast. Those who regard understatement as a species of irony may take this to be sufficient as well. Another option would be to go in Wilson and Sperber's direction and count utterances as ironic only if they are echoic and perhaps also express a negative attitude toward what is echoed. I prefer the former alternative. It gives us a convenient way of marking the large and varied class of cases in which speakers voice the salient contrast, and we will note that voicing the salient contrast can be expected, in many instances, to involve something like echoing (in a suitably broad sense) and a natural opportunity for sarcasm or the expression of a negative attitude. Little hinges on this terminological decision, however, so long as we have a clear picture of the important similarities and differences among the various kinds of utterances in various conversational contexts. And we shouldn't worry overmuch about how well one or another definition lines up with anyone's pre-theoretic, intuitive, conception of "irony."¹⁵ My main present interest in irony concerns its affinity with understatement, and lack thereof with

¹⁴ Addressees might detect from her tone of voice that she means to be ironic, however, even if they don't understand what she is getting at.

¹⁵ "As Gibbs points out, in the course of its history, the term 'irony' has been applied to a very wide range of loosely related phenomena. ... What this diversity clearly shows is that irony is not a natural kind. For Gibbs, this 'poses an important challenge for cognitive science theories of irony'; but why assume that the goal of a cognitive science theory of irony should be to capture the very broad and vague extension of the ordinary language sense of the term?" (Wilson, 2014).

overstatement. We can recognize this without choosing between these definitional strategies.

VI. Degrees and Combinations

Although they are different kettles of fish, overstatement, and understatement or irony, are sometimes combined. Wilson and Sperber (1992: 64) observe that there is “an element of exaggeration” in “many standard examples of verbal irony.” They are right. But this provides no support for those (not Wilson and Sperber¹⁶) who take exaggeration to be a species of irony, and it does not threaten the close connection between irony and understatement.

Exaggerations come in degrees; some overstatements are more so than others. Likewise with understatements. Irene might remark how egregiously expensive the hospitalization was by saying any of the following:

- (a) It was rather expensive
- (b) It cost a few dollars
- (c) It was free

In each case she is understating the cost of the hospitalization, voicing the salient contrast, i.e. saying in effect that the hospitalization was less than enormously expensive, while meaning that it *was* that expensive. But (b) is more understated than (a) is, and (c) even more so.

¹⁶ Wilson (2014) has recently denied that overstatement is a kind of irony, for reasons different from, though not unrelated to mine.

Understatement (of how expensive the hospitalization was)

<i>Salient Contrast:</i> less than enormously expensive		<i>Assertive Content:</i> enormously expensive
← less expensive -----		----- more expensive →
<i>Explicit Content (c):</i> “free”	<i>Explicit Content (b):</i> “a few dollars”	<i>Explicit Content (a):</i> “rather expensive”

We might call (c) an “exaggerated” understatement, but not in a sense that has much to do with my notion of overstatement; it can hardly be seen as saying more than one means. (c) is exaggerated in that it is more understated than other likely understatements. In Gibbs’ example, (17) and (18) are similarly “exaggerated” understatements. They are more understated than, for instance, “They bring in wonderful guests who relate fairly well to us” and “I was reasonably happy” would be.

Irene’s utterance may be an overstatement in my sense, however, though of a different quantity, if it has a recognizable target, perhaps a person, Terry, who doesn’t or didn’t think the hospitalization was very expensive. Irene may be making a point about Terry, pointing out that he is mistaken, as well as a point about the expense of the hospitalization. This is likely to be true if Terry claimed or suggested (seriously) that the hospitalization was “rather expensive” (meaning that it was no more expensive than that) and Irene utters (a), mimicking his words. There is no exaggeration in this case. But Irene might point out Terry’s mistake by uttering (c) rather than (a) if it is evident that she is referring to Terry’s “rather expensive” claim, though without mimicking it.¹⁷ I propose

¹⁷ Irene’s utterance then amounts to an indirect rather than a direct quotation of Terry’s claim, but still, I take it, an “echoing” of his opinion. Cf. Wilson and Sperber (1992), who consider an example (which they attribute to Paola Fanutza) of exaggeration involving irony, from Jane Austin’s *Emma*. Emma echoes opinions expressed by Mr. Knightley, and in doing so caricatures them. I would understand this as an in-

regarding Irene, in this last case, as exaggerating, overstating, how wrong Terry was, how far off his estimate of the hospitalization cost was. Fitting this into my scheme requires refining the notions of assertive content and explicit content, which I will not try to do now. Informally, I propose taking Irene to be *saying* that Terry was *very* wrong about the cost of the hospitalization (the explicit content) while *meaning* that he was wrong but less wrong than that (the assertive content).

Irene understates the cost of the hospitalization and (I suggest) overstates how far off the mark Terry was. It is the understatement, the voicing of the relevant salient contrast, not the overstatement, that constitutes irony. Irene characterizes the cost of the hospitalization ironically, with understatement. Her simultaneous overblown, exaggerated characterization of Terry's error is not ironic.

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stance of ironic understatement, like my last example, as well as exaggerating caricature. Thanks to Victor Durà-Vilà (personal communication) for a similar (hypothetical) example, although he didn't construe it as I would (i.e. as similar to some of my examples).

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