

Why use constructional hyperboles? Exploring the communicative functions of constructional hyperboles in the sitcom *Friends*

¿Por qué usar hipérbolos construccionales? Explorando las funciones comunicativas de las hipérbolos construccionales en la comedia *Friends*

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Abstract: The present study emerges from the need to analyse hyperbole, a highly productive figure of speech, which has received scarce attention in comparison with metaphor and metonymy (Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza, 2017, 2022). Framed within the Lexical Constructional Model, this paper embraces the findings in Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera (2014), Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza (2017, 2022), who are concerned with understanding the cognitive processes involved in the production and interpretation of hyperbole. The aims of the current research are twofold: (i) to advance the existing knowledge on constructional hyperboles, and (ii) to explore the communicative functions of such constructions in the sitcom *Friends*. To examine hyperbolic functions, we followed Cano Mora's (2011: 105-127) classification of communicative functions connected with the production of hyperbole.

Keywords: constructional hyperbole; figurative language; cognitive operations; cognitive linguistics; TV series.

Resumen: El presente estudio surge de la necesidad de analizar la hipérbole, una figura retórica altamente productiva, que ha recibido escasa atención en comparación con la metáfora y la metonimia (Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza, 2017, 2022). Enmarcado dentro del Modelo Léxico Construccional, este artículo recoge los hallazgos de Ruiz de Mendoza y Galera (2014) y Peña y Ruiz de Mendoza (2017, 2022), que se preocupan por comprender los procesos cognitivos involucrados en la producción e interpretación de la hipérbole. Los objetivos de la presente investigación son dos: (i) avanzar en el conocimiento existente sobre las hipérbolos construccionales, y (ii) explorar las funciones comunicativas de tales construcciones en la serie de comedia *Friends*. Para examinar las funciones hiperbólicas, seguimos la clasificación de Cano Mora (2011: 105-127) de funciones comunicativas relacionadas con la producción de hipérbolos. **Palabras clave:** hipérbole construccionale; lenguaje figurado; operaciones cognitivas; lingüística cognitiva; series de televisión.

1. Introduction

The study of figurative language dates back to antiquity and since then figures of speech have often been examined within the framework of literary criticism and stylistics (cf. Arac, 1979; Ruiz Sánchez, 2000; Stanivukovich, 2007). Over the last thirty years, research on figuration has experienced a growing interest not only among rhetoricians or literary critics but also among cognitive scholars and pragmatians. The recent attention that figurative language has received is motivated by a prevailing view that figures of speech lie at the foundation of everyday thought and are powerful communicative and conceptual tools (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1994; Arduini, 2000).

Within cognitive sciences, particularly cognitive linguistics and cognitive psycholinguistics, most work on figurative language has concentrated heavily on master tropes such as metaphor and metonymy, relegating other non-literal forms like hyperbole to an ancillary position (Cano Mora, 2009). However, Kreuz et al. (1996: 91) show that after metaphor, hyperbole was the most common trope in their literary corpus, which makes it worthy of “more notice than it has received to date”. The same study revealed that hyperbole was by far the trope that most often co-occurred with other figures, which seems to explain the scarcity of research focusing exclusively on hyperbole rather than in interaction with other non-literal forms. Psycholinguistic research has also been concerned with understanding the mental processes involved in the comprehension of hyperbole (Gibbs et al., 1993) as well as with investigating its pragmatic functions (Colston & Keller, 1998; Colston & O’Brien, 2000b). Thus, Roberts & Kreuz (1994: 161) identified several discourse goals for hyperbole like “to provoke thought”, “to clarify”, “to emphasize”, “to be humorous”, and “to add interest”. Nevertheless, the inspection of these communicative functions is embedded within the study of other tropes, particularly irony and understatement, with the aim of comparing how hyperbole fulfils the same functions but to different extents.

The present article adopts a cognitive linguistics perspective on hyperbole, which is interested in unravelling the cognitive processes involved in the production and interpretation of hyperbole. This paper is also in line with the tenets of the Lexical Constructional Model (or LCM), proposed by scholars Ruiz de Mendoza & Mairal (2008), as well as Mairal & Ruiz de Mendoza (2009). This model has been chosen for two main reasons, namely the breadth of scope of the LCM as a meaning-construction account of language

and its focus on postulating unifying explanations across different levels of linguistic representation.

Another innovative aspect of our work is that firstly, it considers hyperbole as a trope in its own right, independent of other figures, and secondly, it takes into account the interactional dimension of hyperbole in a domain that has not been explored in relation to this figure of speech, i. e. televisual discourse. Thus, the goal of the current research is to offer a frequency-based exploration of the communicative functions of constructional hyperboles in the comedy sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004). Regarding pragmatic functions, we made use of Cano Mora's (2011) functional repertoire of hyperbole as to this date it is the most comprehensive taxonomy of hyperbolic functions.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of hyperbole by reviewing its treatment in various fields such as rhetoric, psycholinguistics, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics. This section will also explain how hyperbole is accounted for within the framework of the Lexical Constructional Model. Section 3 presents a detailed account of the methodological steps used in our analysis. Section 4 discusses the most relevant constructional hyperboles in our corpus and their communicative functions, whereas section 5 reflects on the findings and summarizes the main ideas.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 *Overview of hyperbole from rhetoric to pragmatics*

Since antiquity hyperbole has been studied within rhetoric and in connection with the art of persuasion. For instance, Aristotle equated metaphor, the paradigm trope, with all forms of figuration, such simile, metonymy, personification, and hyperbole (*Rhetoric* 3: 10-11, *Poetics*: 20-22; quoted in Dascal & Gross, 1999: 122). As rightly pointed out by Gibbs (1994: 76), an intensive focus on metaphor investigation led researchers to neglect other figures of speech like hyperbole. Nonetheless, even Gibbs himself (2000: 12) defined and classified this trope as a form of verbal irony, together with sarcasm, understatement, jocularly, and rhetorical questions. Moreover, the early definitions of hyperbole are related to the Greek or Latin etymology of the term, which concerns the notions of excess and exaggeration. Regarding the persuasive nature of hyperbole, Aristotle (*Rhetoric* I, 2) stated that this figure may be used to influence people's opinions through the arousal of emotions in the audience (*pathos*).

In classical rhetoric, hyperbole was also classified in relation to other tropes, as can be seen from Demetrius' typology, considered one of the first relevant taxonomies of hyperbole (cf. Naschert, 1998). Three main types were distinguished, which will be illustrated with our own examples:

- a) Hyperbole built on a simile highlighting a shared feature between two entities (e. g. *He is as tall as a giraffe*).
- b) Hyperbole relying on gradation, in which a feature serves as the basis of comparison between two entities, one of which is characterized by that property to a higher degree than the other (e. g. *Imagine having a dog bigger than a house!*).
- c) Hyperbole based on incongruity (e. g. *He talked to me until I thought my ears would fall off*).

In a similar vein, Cicero (*Rhetorical Treatises*) proposed a classification of hyperbole comprising five categories, illustrated again with our own examples:

1. Hyperbole depicting implausible scenarios (e. g. *I'm so hungry I could eat a brick*).
2. Hyperbole rooted in similarity (e. g. *The three knocks at the door were like thunder*).
3. Hyperbole based on comparison (e. g. *He has pockets deeper than the ocean*).
4. Hyperbole emphasizing particular traits (e. g. *Her smile was a mile wide*).
5. Metaphor-based hyperbole (e. g. *World trade is a jungle*).

In relation to both taxonomies, Brdar (2004: 374) remarked that (a) and (b), as well as examples from (2) to (5), are characterized by identifiable formal properties, whereas hyperboles triggered by contextual incongruity or impossible scenarios cannot be ascribed any fixed syntactic pattern.

Hyperbole was also addressed in the field of psycholinguistics, in which most attention has been directed at explaining the cognitive processes involved in the identification and comprehension of hyperbole (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; Gibbs & Colston, 2006, 2012). Although psycholinguistic research has also focused on the communicative functions accomplished by hyperbole, these studies are subsumed within analyses of other tropes such as irony and understatement, since the aim was to compare how hyperbole fulfils the same functions but with different degrees of success (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994; Colston & O'Brien, 2000ab).

Within the field of pragmatics, a great emphasis was placed on the key role that context plays in the perception and identification of hyperbole. In connection to this, Kreuz, Kassler & Coppenrath (1998) highlight that our world knowledge is essential in determining whether an utterance is hyperbolic or not. Thus, our knowledge about physical impossibility makes us understand that nobody can *run at lightning speed* or *carry the weight of the world on their shoulders*. Likewise, for Cano Mora (2011: 77) hyperbole can be regarded as a purely pragmatic phenomenon as only the full context helps hearers detect the presence of exaggeration in discourse. Certain pragmaticians like Norrick (2004) view hyperbole as a deviation from Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, thus involving violations of the maxims of quantity, manner, or quality (see also Colston & O'Brien, 2000b). However, most scholars agree that hyperbole is not an act of lying as it is socially acceptable due to a joint acceptance between speakers and hearers of a distortion of reality (Bhaya, 1985; Clark, 1996; Haverkate, 1990).

2.2 *Hyperbole in Cognitive Linguistics*

In this article we embrace a cognitive perspective on hyperbole like the one supported by scholars Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera (2014), Ruiz de Mendoza (2020), and Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza (2017, 2022). These authors understand hyperbole in terms of cognitive operations of strengthening and mitigation, which make use of scalar concepts such as quantity, length, weight, distance, time, quality, etc. These two notions involve either upscaling (overstatement) or downscaling (understatement) the meaning of a gradable concept. To show how this applies to hyperbole, let us take the sentence *I have a hundred and one things to finish today*. In this situation the speaker uses the expression *a hundred and one things* to increase a magnitude, i. e. the quantity of daily tasks he/she must do. As the hearer detects a clash between the utterance and the real state of affairs, he/she is expected to adjust the above-mentioned quantity to real-world proportions through an operation of mitigation (cf. Herrero, 2009).

To capture the underlying cognitive modelling of hyperbole, Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza (2017, 2022) also claim that the meaning impact of this figure of speech results from viewing it as a cross-domain mapping, like metaphor. In other words, a source domain, which is a virtually impossible or highly unrealistic scenario, is mapped onto the target domain representing a re-

al-world situation to the effect that an attitudinal message (feelings of anger, frustration, awe, etc.) is conveyed by the speaker. For example, the hyperbolic sentence *Check-in for the flight took forever* may be uttered in a context where a passenger had to wait for a long time before boarding the plane. The time adverbial *forever* is used by the speaker to express his/her negative evaluation or frustration at the unexpected waiting time. In this manner, exaggeration serves to think about the speaker's strong emotional reaction to an unreasonable delay (the target domain) in terms of an extreme situation in which the speaker never arrives at his/her destination due to an eternal check-in process (the source domain).

Another similar approach that is worth discussing is the one offered by Popa-Wyatt (2020), who combines the proposals made by Walton (2017) and Carston and Wearing (2015) to explain how hyperbole works. According to Popa-Wyatt (2020), hyperbole involves a shift in magnitude intended to increase the salience of a target property F, thus making it more emphatic, and expressing an attitude about it. This property is a gradable concept which can be measured along a relevant scale displaying various key points, as can be seen in figure 1 below. This figure is a schematic representation of how hyperbolic meaning is achieved in the sentence *Kids ask a million questions a day*.

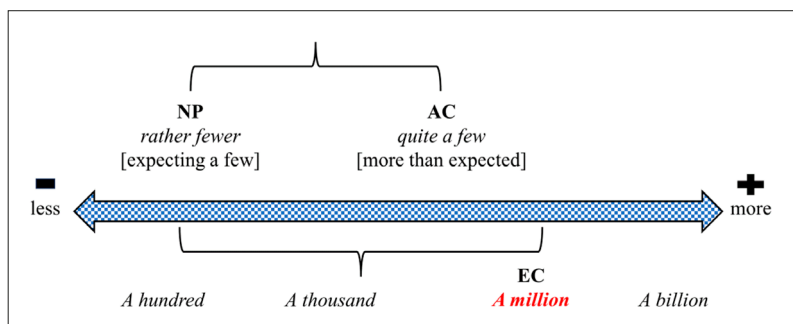


Figure 1. Hyperbole as a scale with various points. Source: Adapted from Popa-Wyatt (2020: 456)

The scale in figure 1 contains three key points, crucial for understanding hyperbole: (i) the *explicit content* (EC), which refers to the content presented (i. e. the literal expression *a million questions a day*); (ii) the *assertive content* (AC), which is what the speaker really intended (i. e. the number of questions kids ask in a day is significantly more than normal but significantly lower than a million), and (iii) the *normative point* (NP), which indicates the range

of expectations that are given prominence by the speaker to convey that they have been either surpassed or thwarted. Another central idea in Popa-Wyatt's (2020) theory is that hyperbole is used to exaggerate the gap between what speakers say (EC) and how they expected things to be (NP). In turn, this increases the gap between how things really are (AC) and how they were expected to be (NP). The difference between the two gaps results in a shift in salience of the target property, which is more than expected but less than what is said to be. Finally, the force of the affect expressed by the speaker seems to correlate with how big or small the gap is between expectations and reality. In this case, the speaker's expectations are considerably surpassed, which correlates with a greater sense of surprise.

2.3 *Hyperbole in the Lexical Constructional Model*

The approach to hyperbole in the present research also aligns with the principles of the Lexical Constructional Model (or LCM), which, unlike other construction grammar approaches, proposes a layered account of language that captures the differences and the relations across levels of linguistic description. Thus, the LCM distinguishes four broad levels of meaning representation (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza & Mairal, 2008; Mairal & Ruiz de Mendoza, 2009; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2013). Each layer is based on a *cognitive model* type¹, following the criteria of genericity and situationality (see Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera, 2020: 285-286):

- Level 1 (predicational or argument-structure) deals with the subsumption of lexical elements into argument-structure constructions. For instance, the integration of the activity verb *laugh* into the caused-motion construction *They laughed him out of the room* is licensed by a high-level²

¹ The notion of cognitive model was borrowed from Lakoff's (1987) concept of idealized cognitive model (or ICM), which refers to any knowledge structure that people use to understand the world in terms of their internal and external experience. An ICM is idealized as it is based on an abstraction of world properties, resulting from the brain's activity (hence, cognitive), and being representational in nature.

² In terms of genericity, Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera (2014, 2020) make a distinction between *primary*, *low-level* and *high-level* cognitive models. Primary cognitive models are grounded in our sensory experience, including image-schemas and basic properties of objects such as weight, height, temperature, etc. Low-level cognitive models cover frame-like configurations such as scenarios like calling a taxi, going to a dentist, etc., and object-related concepts like car,

metaphor according to which emotional impact triggered by laughing is viewed as physical impact (as caused by pushing, for example).

- Level 2 (implicational structure) is concerned with low-level situational cognitive models or scenarios. As regards situationality, Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera (2014: 66-72; 2020: 286) argue that cognitive models can be categorized as either propositional or situational. Propositional cognitive models can designate entities, properties and their relations from a non-situational perspective. An example of a propositional cognitive model can be the non-dynamic relation of ownership between entities in *My neighbour owns a wonderful garden*. Situational cognitive models represent a combination of dynamic propositional cognitive models or events. One such example is the scenario of attending a birthday party which combines a series of low-level propositional cognitive models like characters (e. g. relatives), objects (e. g. presents) and actions (e. g. eating a cake). Implicational constructions capture meaning implications that arise from low-level scenarios. At the same time, some low-level scenarios are attitudinal in that they express the speaker's emotional or attitudinal response to situations and events. Thus, expressions that take the form *What's X Doing Y?* constitute rhetorical questions on low-level situations, which signal the speaker's negative attitude about the situation described in the *Doing Y* part of the construction. The meaning implication of the question *What's your brother doing with my laptop?* is that the hearer's brother has unduly touched the speaker's laptop. Therefore, the speaker perceives the situation to be wrong or odd and thus worthy of enquiry. Within the LCM, hyperboles or hyperbolic constructions are considered implicational constructions that mainly exploit an attitudinal low-level scenario. For example, one of the meaning implications of the construction *X Told You Thousands Of Times Y* (e. g. *I have told you thousands of times to take out the trash*) is that the speaker is irritated by the hearer's undesired behaviour about Y.
- Level 3 (illocutionary structure) addresses illocutionary meaning, stemming from the exploitation of high-level scenarios linked to social conventions. An example of an illocutionary construction is the *I shall + VP* configuration, which encodes a strong statement expressing a high

robin, table, etc. High-level cognitive models are obtained by abstracting away conceptual material shared by low-level cognitive models ('process', 'evidence-conclusion', 'goal', 'result', etc.).

degree of involvement on the part of the speaker to perform the action denoted in the VP. This type of construction can be used to make promises and threats, depending on whether the VP specifies a benefit or a potential harm to the hearer (e. g. *Alright, you shall have the new bicycle you wanted, I promise* vs. *The Big Bad Wolf said “I shall huff and puff and blow your house in”*). While hyperbolic constructions are mostly based on low-level attitudinal scenarios, they can also be used to regulate speaker-hearer behaviour, i. e. as part of a regulatory scenario. Thus, a hyperbolic sentence like *Damn, this bag weighs a ton!* can convey the speaker’s feelings of frustration when trying to lift an excessively heavy suitcase (attitudinal scenario). At the same time, this sentence may also be interpreted as a complaint serving to describe a negative state-of-affairs for the speaker and a request for the hearer to do something about this situation (regulatory scenario³).

- Level 4 (discourse structure) is concerned with discourse relations, with focus on cohesion and coherence phenomena. This level exploits logical, temporal, or conceptual relations between non-situational primary or high-level cognitive models. The sentence *John hugged Susan and she smiled* expresses both a logical relation of cause-effect and temporal precedence (John’s action of hugging Susan causes and precedes her smile).

Regarding hyperbolic constructions, Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza (2017: 57-58) stated that they “allow for a degree of variation intended to modulate the communicative impact of the resulting expression”. The construction *X Has A Brain The Size Of A Y* [typically a brain-shaped or spherical tiny/huge object] may be used to refer to a person’s stupidity or intelligence. When size diminution is involved, the Y slot can be filled by extremely or medium small entities (e. g. *brain the size of a speck/of a walnut*), but never by objects bigger in size than a pea or a walnut (*#brain the size of an orange*). This is accounted for by the fact that the larger the space on the scale between the source and the target elements, the greater the impact of the speaker’s emotional reaction. Such a claim is congruent with Popa-Wyatt’s (2020) explanation that a greater

³ The social convention (a) established in the cost-benefit ICM states that “[if] it is manifest to A that a particular state of affairs is not beneficial to B, and if A has the capacity to change that state of affairs, then A should do so” (see Ruiz de Mendoza & Galera, 2014: 70).

gap between the counterfactual and the factual scenarios makes the target property more noticeable and worthy of attention.

3. Methodological considerations

The main aim of the current research is to advance the existing knowledge on constructional hyperboles by providing a frequency-based exploration of the communicative functions of such constructions in the sitcom *Friends*. As to date there is a single study focusing on the potential of this type of hyperbole in televisual discourse (see Rosca, in press), our intention is to expand the scope of this investigation by analysing 200 constructional hyperboles retrieved from the first four seasons of the American TV series *Friends* (1994-2004). The size of the corpus examined adds up to 339,151 running words. The choice of the sitcom is motivated by the high productivity of constructional hyperbole in comparison with several other successful shows. The TV series follows the eventful lives of a group of six friends who live in New York City: Monica Geller, Ross Geller, Rachel Green, Phoebe Buffay, Joey Tribbiani, and Chandler Bing.

Regarding the criteria for identifying and labelling hyperbole, the present work adheres to the cognitive approach proposed by Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza (2017, 2022), who distinguish between two types of hyperboles, namely constructional and inferential. Due to space limitations, this article is only concerned with the analysis of the first type. Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza's (2022: 191-192) classification of hyperbole is reminiscent of Demetrius' and Cicero's taxonomies described in section 2.1. These ancient orators differentiated between hyperboles built on contextual incongruity or counterfactual scenarios (i. e. inferential) and others based on lexico-grammatical units (i. e. constructional). To illustrate inferential hyperbole, consider the following example from the sitcom: [...] *it's not that your friend is bad, it's that she's so bad, she makes me want to put my finger through my eye into my brain and swirl it around* (S02E06). By means of this cluster of sentences, Terry, one of the secondary characters in the show, tries to express how bad Phoebe is at singing. The hyperbolic impact derives from the improbable combination of actions depicted in each clause, rather than any hyperbolic marker.

In contrast to inferential hyperbole, constructional hyperbole is defined by Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza (2022: 192) as "a highly conventional, cognitively entrenched form-meaning pairing invariably describing a (virtually) impossi-

ble or counterfactual state of affairs based on a disproportionately magnified scalar concept". These researchers proposed a repertoire of linguistic devices that usually trigger constructional hyperboles, some of which were employed in our data searches:

1. Various word classes describing excessively upscaled gradable concepts: verbs (e. g. *starve*), adjectives (e. g. *entire*), and adverbs (e. g. *totally*).
2. Quantification lexicalized through high cardinal numbers (e. g. *thousands*), universal quantifiers (e. g. *all*), units of measurement (e. g. *seconds*), amounts (e. g. *tons*), and pronouns (e. g. *everybody*).
3. Comparatives displaying patterns like 'X IS LIKE Y' (e. g. *Basically, the market today is like a tsunami with after-shocks*), or 'X IS AS/SO ADJECTIVE AS Y' (e. g. *He was as thin as a rake*).
4. Superlatives coming in patterns like 'X IS 'THE' ADJECTIVE_{SUP} NOUN (IN/OF)' (e. g. *His album is the worst in the world*).

As far as the methodology is concerned, the software AntConc was used to carry out automatic searches of hyperbolic markers. Moreover, we read carefully through the transcripts and watched the episodes to consider the whole scene. Since hyperbole is a pragmatic phenomenon, the examination of the full context helped us decide whether an example was hyperbolic or not.

To examine hyperbolic functions, we followed Cano Mora's (2011: 105-127) classification of communicative functions connected with the production of hyperbole. Based on a corpus of naturally occurring conversations extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC), this author identified a total of nine pragmatic functions, organized into two main classes, namely *propositional* and *affective*. The first one deals with the factual information encoded in the proposition, whereas the second one relates to the speaker's attitude and emotional state with respect to the situation depicted in a sentence. The propositional class gathers functions such as simplification or generalization, contrast of differences, and clarification, which are not linked to the expression of affect. The affective class incorporates functions such as evaluation, the expression of surprise or humour, emphasis, interest intensification, and polite de-emphasis.

Simplification reduces the complexity of information by removing the detailed specifications and by making statements easier to process. Making a generalization is the most common type of simplification, e. g. [...] *the value of pensions in the UK is out of line with virtually every other comparable European country [...]* (cf. Cano Mora, 2011: 114-115). Contrast of differences is used to

draw attention to key distinctions between two discrepant terms, situations or objects, e. g. [...] *he was infinitely better educated and more intelligent than those who ran football around him [...]* (cf. Cano Mora, 2011: 119). Hyperbole is also employed to reduce ambiguity by explaining a statement in more detail or by providing examples. Consider the following example A new way of using the English language, when you're word processing is absolutely another world! (Cano Mora, 2011: 123). In this case, the speaker exaggerates a preceding literal utterance in order to clarify their intended meaning.

Most studies argue that hyperbole is eminently an evaluative tool which allows speakers to express their subjective perceptions about themselves, other people, situations, or objects (Mayoral, 1994; Carston & Wearing, 2015; Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza, 2017, 2022). The example *Ketchup and pasta? That's a recipe for disaster!* contains the hyperbolic construction *That is a recipe for X* whose evaluative force is determined by the negative import of the X element (e. g. *disaster, suicide, chaos*). The speaker uses hyperbole to express that he considers the idea of serving ketchup and pasta at a dinner party a bad idea. At the same time, hyperbole adds a playful, humorous tone to the critique. The expression of surprise is conceptually intertwined with the evaluative dimension of hyperbole. Surprise is a common reaction arising from a gap or incongruity between expectations and ensuing events. Take the example *I haven't done Woodrow Wilson before in the past, so, so it was an experiment, and [...] you rose to the occasion excellently* (cf. Cano Mora, 2011: 113). The hyperbolic adverb *excellently* is uttered by a lecturer whose expectations have been surpassed by her students' diligence. Note that the same adverb serves an evaluative purpose, which is praising the students.

A constructional hyperbole may convey emphasis or intensity when it inflates the reality denoted in the proposition while also increasing the force of the utterance. For example, the sentence *I was mortally embarrassed for the rest of my school life by that one thing* (Cano Mora, 2011: 110) provides an overstated description of a given situation. The adverb *mortally* adds emotional weight to the message conveyed by the speaker. Interest intensification can be defined as keeping listeners engaged, drawing their attention and expressing excitement. Hyperbole can be used to signal a shift in discourse topic by making the subject more compelling (e. g. Masseur: *The next one [a new oil] [...] is lavender. Everybody thinks of grandma with lavender. Lavender in the cupboards and lavender everywhere*). Polite de-emphasis helps the speaker soften or downplay a potentially sensitive or negative message to avoid offending the hearer or to

maintain harmony. For instance, a speaker may use minimisers to reduce the implied cost to the hearer, e. g. *I'll be back in a second*.

4. Communicative functions of constructional hyperboles

As previously stated in section 3, our research examined the pragmatic functions of 200 constructional hyperboles culled from the first four seasons of the American sitcom *Friends*. Overall, we identified seven communicative functions out of the nine put forward by Cano Mora (2011). The discourse goal of interest intensification and the expression of surprise were only found to be triggered by inferential hyperboles.

What is more, our findings evince the pragmatic multifunctionality of constructional hyperboles as we encountered four dyads of communicative functions. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the communicative functions shown in absolute and relative frequency. Additionally, it includes information about the three most productive types of constructional hyperboles (CH) associated with each communicative function and the variety of constructional hyperboles for each function. Before exploring each communicative function in turn, let us discuss some relevant patterns that were encountered in our data. One notable finding is that an increased frequency of a communicative function seems to correlate with a higher variety of constructional hyperbole types. In terms of constructional variety, in our data we encountered 19 non-overlapping types of constructional hyperboles. Another important discovery relates to the fact that some constructional hyperboles are more likely than others to perform various communicative functions. For instance, it was found that hyperbolic quantifiers can fulfil all seven pragmatic functions, and they are also associated with the four dyads of functions. This may be accounted for by the fact that quantifiers apply to many kinds of entities (people, objects, time, ideas) which makes them useful in a wide variety of situations.

The second most productive constructional hyperbole in our data was the 'X is/VP like Y' construction, which serves four pragmatic goals: evaluation, contrast of differences, clarification and expression of humour. As a result, it may be assumed that the 'X is/VP like Y' construction is more versatile than for instance, the 'X AND EVERYTHING' construction, which can only have a generalizing function. This may be so because the 'X is/VP like Y' construction has more variable elements (i. e. X, Y, the underspecified linking verb *to be*) than the 'X AND EVERYTHING' construction, which is com-

posed of one variable element (i. e. X) and two fixed elements (i. e. AND, and EVERYTHING). While it is true that, in a less-defined context, the pronoun *everything* leaves room for interpretation, once the X slot in the ‘X AND EVERYTHING’ construction is filled, the scope or boundaries of this pronoun become limited in that they can only refer to entities similar to X.

In what follows we will examine each communicative function in order of their productivity and explain how they are instantiated by different types of constructional hyperboles. Thus, the most recurrent discourse goal of constructional hyperbole is evaluation, with 79 tokens (39.50 %). This function is exemplified by Rachel’s enthusiastic characterization of her recently landed job as assistant buyer at Bloomingdale’s, a major department store, e. g. *I have the best job in the entire world! The most adorable guy came over today, and I got to dress him up all day!* (S04E13). In this context, the structure ‘X IS ‘THE’ ADJECTIVE_{SUP} NOUN (IN/OF)’ is an implicational construction that makes use of an attitudinal low-level scenario: Rachel feels satisfied and grateful for her new job that aligns well with her interests and personality and she is also excited about the specific event that occurred during the day, i. e. dressing up a handsome man.

Another construction that exhibits an evaluative function is the conditional configuration ‘X COULDN’T/WOULDN’T VP [Verb Phrase] IF Y’, e. g. *You know what, he couldn’t hit water if he was standing on a boat* (S01E23). This sentence describes Patrick Ewing, former basketball player for the New York Knicks, as being incompetent.

Functions	Raw frequency	%	Variety of CH types	Types of CH
Evaluation	79	39.50 %	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘X is/VP like Y’ (25 tokens) • ‘X IS ‘THE’ ADJECTIVE_{SUP} NOUN (IN/OF)’ (20 tokens) • Quantification (numerals, amounts, units of measurement) (15 tokens)
Generalization	60	30.00 %	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantification (numerals, amounts, units of measurement, adverbs of time) (36 tokens) • ‘X AND EVERYTHING’ & ‘X AND ALL’ (15 tokens) • Gradable adjectives (<i>entire</i>) (2 tokens)

<i>Functions</i>	<i>Raw frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Variety of CH types</i>	<i>Types of CH</i>
Emphasis	24	12.00 %	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantification (numerals, amounts, adverbs of time) (7 tokens) Gradable adverbs (<i>totally</i>) (4 tokens) The adverb <i>way</i> (<i>she's way out of your league</i>) (2 tokens)
Contrast of differences	9	4.50 %	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantification (numerals, adverbs of time) (4 tokens) 'X is/VP like Y' (2 tokens) 'X IS 'THE' ADJECTIVE_{SUP} NOUN (IN/OF)' (1 token)
Clarification	8	4.00 %	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'X is/VP like Y' (2 tokens) 'SO + ADJECTIVE + that-clause' (1 token) 'X [clause] AS IN Y [clause]' (1 token)
Polite de-emphasis	7	3.50 %	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantification (units of measurement) (7 tokens)
Expression of humour	6	3.00 %	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'X is/VP like Y' (2 tokens) Quantification (numerals) (2 tokens) Gradable adjectives (<i>huge</i>) (1 token)
Generalization + emphasis	3	1.50 %	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantification (numerals, adverbs of time) (3 tokens)
Clarification + evaluation	2	1.00 %	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'SO + ADJECTIVE + that-clause' (1 token) Gradable adverbs (<i>compulsively</i>) (1 token)
Generalization + evaluation	1	0.50 %	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantification (determiner <i>every</i>) (1 token)
Generalization + polite de-emphasis	1	0.50 %	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantification (temporal expression <i>all the time</i>) (1 token)
TOTAL	200	100 %	19	

Table 1. Communicative functions, types and variety of constructional hyperboles

The impossible scenario of someone on a boat, surrounded by water, yet unable to touch it (the source domain) is mapped onto a real-world situation

in which the basketball player performs poorly during games (the target domain). The hyperbolic configuration ‘X COULDN’T/WOULDN’T VP [Verb Phrase] IF Y’ is also an illocutionary construction in that it is used by the speaker to sharply criticize the basketball player’s lack of skill.

In our corpus, evaluation was also found in combination with two other functions, namely clarification and generalization. Extract 1 below illustrates the dyad clarification – evaluation:

(1) Guy: Which bedroom do ya want it in Miss Geller?

Phoebe: Oh, it’s *the compulsively neat one by the window*, okay. (S03E07)

This excerpt shows a conversation between Phoebe and the man who delivers the bed that Monica ordered from a mattress store. Phoebe gives clear instructions about where the bed must be placed while at the same time evaluating Monica’s bedroom by means of the adverb *compulsively*, which hints at Monica’s obsession with cleanliness.

Generalization is the second most common communicative function of constructional hyperboles in our data set (30.00 %). This discourse goal may be accounted for by vagueness or by the principle of linguistic economy in communication (cf. Cano Mora, 2011: 114). In the following extract, generalization is prompted by the time expression *a month*:

(2) Phoebe: I’m sorry, I-I-I-I don’t live here anymore. I-I didn’t know how to tell you, but y’know everybody else knows!

Monica: Everybody knows!

Phoebe: [...] Just listen, Monica, I, do you know, okay, do you know, *I couldn’t sleep for like a month because I got like a dot of ink on one of the sofa cushions* (S03E06).

In this episode, Monica is shocked to find out that Phoebe, her flatmate, has moved out of the apartment more than a week ago, without her knowing. When Monica notices that Phoebe’s bed is no longer in her bedroom, the latter must admit that she has moved out. The meaning implications of the time expression *a month* are twofold: (i) it justifies Phoebe’s cowardly behaviour, driven by her fear of confronting Monica, and (ii) it exaggerates Monica’s personality trait (i. e. her cleanliness) to the point of an obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.

Other constructional hyperboles used to make generalisations are the patterns 'X AND EVERYTHING' or 'X AND ALL', where X can be a clause (e. g. [...] *he's under a lot of pressure, ya know, **starring in a movie and all*** [S02E12]), a noun phrase (e. g. [...] *I'm gonna have **an office with walls and everything***. *I'm gonna have walls!* [S04E09]), or an adjective phrase (e. g. [...] *Richard's **really nice and everything*** [S02E20]). Generalization is a compact means of communication in that it enables a speaker to avoid providing exact information about a particular situation. For instance, when Rachel announced that she got a job as an assistant buyer at Bloomingdale's, she used the hyperbolic construction *an office with walls and everything*. She is not expected to list all the items found in an office (e. g. chairs, desk, IT equipment, filing cabinet, printer, telephone, etc.) as hearers can easily fill in the gaps and most importantly, they must focus on the only detail that is relevant to Rachel, viz. the X element. The repetition of this element in the ensuing sentence (i. e. her office will be equipped with walls) demonstrates its importance: Rachel obtained a job implying greater work privileges.

Generalization may also pair up with three other functions: (i) emphasis; (ii) evaluation; and (iii) polite de-emphasis. Extract 3 below reveals how generalization blends with emphasis in Chandler's italicized answer:

(3) Joey: It just seems so futile, you know? All these women, and nothing. I feel like Superman without my powers, you know? I have the cape, and yet I cannot fly.

Chandler: Well now you understand *how I feel every single day*, ok? The world is my lesbian wedding (S02E11).

In this episode, Joey and Chandler, who attend a lesbian wedding, are complaining about not being able to flirt with any woman at the ceremony. The determiner *every*, which contains the idea of universality, modifies the adjective *single* in the noun phrase *every single day*, while adding emphatic overtones. What for Joey is only an exceptional day, for Chandler it is a recurring experience since he is not very successful with women, in general. By exaggerating Chandler's daily struggle to a universal scale, the quantifying expression *every single day* calls up an attitudinal scenario as it captures his frustration and helplessness in his dating life.

Emphasis is a relatively frequent communicative function in our corpus (12.00 %). By way of illustration, take the sentence *Hey, you have **nothing but talked** about her for the last 48 hours!* (S03E19). Chandler makes use of the

hyperbolic configuration ‘NOTHING BUT X’ to stress that his flatmate Joey has a crush on his co-actor Kate. This construction has two main meaning implications: (i) the hearer has manifested an exclusive focus on an excessive, repetitive kind of behaviour expressed through the combination of the negative pronoun *nothing* and the restrictive preposition *but*; and (ii) the speaker feels frustrated and exasperated with the hearer’s obsessive activity (attitudinal scenario).

Other constructions with emphatic value in our corpus are ‘THE NP (noun phrase) OF A LIFETIME’ (e. g. *This guy is going to get the butt kicking of a lifetime* [S_{03E11}]) and ‘A HELL OF A(N) NP (noun phrase)’ (e. g. *Well, you sure had a hell of a time at the wake!* [S_{03E16}]). The expression *the butt kicking of a lifetime* is uttered by Joey who threatens to give his neighbour his worst beating for having seduced and cheated on Phoebe. The structure are ‘THE NP OF A LIFETIME’ is an implicational construction that carries several connotations: (i) there is a sense of extremity, either positive or negative, depending on the meaning of the NP (in this case, Joey’s neighbour will receive a severe, extremely painful punishment); (ii) the phrase *of a lifetime* also serves to amplify the emotional impact of the event (the beating will be the most intense of its kind that the neighbour will not forget it his entire life); and (iii) Joey uses it as a threat or warning against his neighbour’s despicable behaviour (illocutionary meaning).

The construction *a hell of a time* is produced by Rachel to strongly condemn her boyfriend Ross for having slept with another woman a few hours after their breakup (illocutionary meaning). Ross tries to justify his action by stating that he believed their relationship was dead. In this example, Rachel combines hyperbole with irony in that she emphasizes the clash between Ross’ expected behaviour, e. g. to grieve the loss of their relationship, and his actual conduct, e. g. he celebrated their separation by engaging in sexual intercourse with somebody else. Similarly to ‘THE NP OF A LIFETIME’, the construction ‘A HELL OF A(N) NP’ also expresses that something is extreme or intense, whether in a positive or a negative way. The NP *time* which refers to an experience is intensified by the term *hell*. The context helps us disambiguate the meaning implication of this construction, namely that Ross displayed an inappropriate behaviour at a traditionally solemn event.

There are four types of communicative functions that show a roughly equal productivity in our data, namely contrast of differences, clarification, polite de-emphasis, and the expression of humour. According to Colston & O’Brien (2000b), and Cano Mora (2011), hyperbole involves a contrast of magnitude

between expected and ensuing events or between two distant poles that vary along some relevant dimension. In dialogue (4) below, the hyperbolic adverb *incredibly* in Ross' intervention belongs to the semantic field of impact or singularity and expresses the notion of notability and astonishment:

(4) Chandler: Actually, this is for Kathy's birthday. It's an early edition of her favourite book. [...]

Phoebe: Yeah, and what a great way to say, "I secretly love you, roommate's girlfriend!"

Chandler: It doesn't say that. Does it?

Ross: How do you think it's gonna look when *you get her something incredibly meaningful and expensive and her boyfriend Joey gives her an orange?* (S04E06)

This scene depicts a conversation between Chandler and his friends Phoebe and Ross, who try to dissuade him from outshining Joey, who bought a modest birthday gift for his girlfriend Kathy. As Chandler is secretly in love with Kathy, he went to extreme trouble to get her a special edition of her favourite book. In this context, the adverb *incredibly* is intended to heighten the discrepancy between Chandler and Joey to the maximum, even to the point of antagonism.

The function of clarification is exemplified in Ross' cluster of sentences *Y'know now he is going to prep her, y'know prep her, as in what you do when you surgically remove the boyfriend!* (S03E11). In this episode, a stranger named Mark gets Rachel an interview at Bloomingdale's and offers to coach her through it. A sceptical Ross tries to explain to his sister Monica that Mark is only interested in having sex with his girlfriend Rachel. The construction 'X [clause] AS IN Y [clause]' aims to dispel Monica's doubts as to how Ross sees and feels about the situation. The three main components of this construction convey different meaning implications: (i) the content of the X element may be ambiguous and as such it needs further elaboration; (ii) the conjunction 'as in' announces that the speaker is about to provide a specific interpretation of the X element; and (iii) the Y element reframes X by offering an explicit explanation (in this case, the Y element contains a hyperbolic, absurd scenario).

Additionally, our analysis reveals that the same construction can be used to perform three different communicative functions. For the sake of discussion, let us focus on the temporal construction *all the time*, which occurs in (5a) and (5b):

- (5) a. Ross: It's okay if he bumps his head, *kids bump their heads all the time*, y'know, it was your first time babysitting, I figured you did the best you could (S03E08).
- b. Monica: Oh, *I wish there was a job where I could wear this all the time* (S04E20).

Ross' intervention in (5a) is produced in a conversation with Rachel, who has spent the entire day babysitting Ben together with Monica. Upon returning from work, Ross discovers that his son has a lump and immediately assumes that Rachel bumped his head. The clause *kids bump their heads all the time* fulfils two discourse goals: it is a generalization intended to mitigate a potential confrontation with his girlfriend (polite de-emphasis). By implying that head bumping is a highly frequent event for children, Ross tries to reassure Rachel, thus lessening her guilt about the unpleasant situation (illocutionary meaning).

Monica's reply in (5b) is set in a scene in which all three girls (viz. Rachel, Monica, and Phoebe) are at home, sitting on a sofa, wearing wedding dresses, eating popcorn, drinking beer, and watching TV. In this episode, all of them experience the wedding fever in the midst of Ross' engagement with Emily. Monica's desire to always wear a wedding dress at work combined with the trivialized visual context contribute to create a hilarious moment and thus perform the function of expressing humour.

5. Conclusions

The present article attempts to fill the gaps related to the examination of hyperbole, a ubiquitous figure of speech, which has mostly been studied in interaction with other tropes like metaphor or irony. Our work is intended to be an improvement on existing studies of hyperbole for two main reasons: (i) it takes into consideration the interactional dimension of this figure by looking at constructional hyperboles in a domain that has remained unexplored with respect to hyperbole, namely televisual discourse; and (ii) it provides a frequency-based discussion of the communicative functions of hyperbole.

To be more specific, for this study 200 constructional hyperboles were extracted from the first four seasons of the American TV series *Friends* using two methods: (i) by carrying out automatic searches of hyperbolic markers with the aid of the software AntConc; and (ii) by watching the episodes and

combing through the transcripts to either discard non-hyperbolic examples or add new instances of constructional hyperboles.

In total, we encountered seven individual communicative functions and four dyads of functions, which points to the pragmatic multifunctionality of constructional hyperboles. Previous studies by Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2017, 2022), and McCarthy and Carter (2004) highlighted that hyperboles are creative acts used for evaluative or affective purposes. Moreover, Popa-Wyatt (2020) suggested that apart from eliciting powerful emotions, hyperboles may have an emphatic flavour, helping to increase the salience of the target property. Our work has strived to show that constructional hyperboles may display more than just evaluative and emphatic functions. Even though evaluation is still the predominant function, six additional communicative goals were identified: generalization, emphasis, contrast of differences, clarification, polite de-emphasis, and the expression of humour. Regarding the pragmatic multifunctionality of constructional hyperboles, the discourse goal of generalization was found to occur most often in combination with other functions like emphasis, evaluation, or polite de-emphasis.

The analytical results presented in this article align with the view on hyperbole held by proponents and supporters of the Lexical Constructional Model according to which hyperbolic configurations are mainly (level 2) implicational constructions which trigger attitudinal scenarios and, in some cases, they are also endowed with illocutionary meanings (level 3).

Our findings might also indicate that a higher frequency of a communicative function seems to be associated with a greater variety of constructional forms. This is the case of evaluation, generalization, and emphasis, which display a wider range of forms than functions like clarification or polite de-emphasis, for instance. Regarding constructional variety, in our data set we identified 19 non-overlapping types of constructional hyperboles.

Furthermore, it was found that some constructional hyperboles are more likely than others to accomplish various communicative functions (e. g. quantifiers). For instance, the temporal construction *all the time* was shown to perform three functions: generalization, polite de-emphasis and the expression of humour. This may be motivated by the fact that quantifiers, a highly productive device in everyday conversations, simplify informal communication which is less concerned with exactness and more focused on conveying emotions.

Lastly, the affective functions of constructional hyperboles (58 %) seem to be more productive than the propositional ones (38.5 %), which indicates

that hyperbole is mainly an affective trope used to express a speaker's attitude towards the situation depicted in his/her utterance.

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