

Abstract of thesis entitled

Exaggeration and Extreme Language: A Pragmatic Study

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With exaggeration so common in everyday conversation, it is surprising how little research has been carried out to better understand why it is used, the many forms it takes and how it is interpreted by the hearer. When people talk about having “a million things to do” or being “so hungry that they could eat a horse”, they are inflating the truth as well as expressing themselves non-literally. Exaggeration is interesting to linguistics because of the relative frequency it occurs, the reasons for its use, and why such non-literal utterances are produced and so easily understood. The factors and influences on the use of exaggeration are relatively complex and many of the more established pragmatic theories take a somewhat singular view of the phenomenon. The aim of this present study is to investigate and identify the motivational forces behind exaggeration in conversation and attempts to give a more complete explanation of the phenomenon.

With data collected from various sources (e.g. casual conversations, personal narratives, language corpora, noted observations, etc.), across two languages (English and Cantonese), and a critical application of current pragmatic theories, this study aims to give a more in-depth account of exaggeration and extreme language by examining three major aspects, TRUTH, ECONOMY and INTEREST. By flouting the TRUTH maxim in exaggeration, under the Gricean framework of conversational implicature, a divergence between the speaker’s intention and sentence meaning is evident. TRUTH is not only a definitional factor but also a motivational one with exaggeration being so obvious and ostentatious in nature. Linguistic ECONOMY is also



believed to be evident in cases when exaggeration tends to minimize what needs to be said, or makes use of figurative or formulaic phrases, perhaps reducing cognitive processing effort. Likewise, INTEREST is, in part, another motivational factor when exaggeration is used to attract and maintain the attention of the hearer. Exaggeration assures the INTEREST of the hearer during conversation.

It is suggested that these motivational factors have an influence on the use of exaggeration and extreme language, and their individual contribution to the production and interpretation of exaggeration varies from situation to situation.

(349 words)

