

# ① Background

Exaggeration, or hyperbole, is a deliberate overstatement of some quantity (e.g., “The line was a million miles long”).

Kreuz, Kassler, and Coppentrath (1998) examined the semantic and pragmatic effects of differing degrees of exaggeration. The results did not reveal a systematic effect for degree of exaggeration.

Colston and Keller (1998) found that ease of determining that a speaker is surprised increases as degree of exaggeration increases.

## ② The Present Research

One problem with the Kreuz et al. study is that the discourse goals varied in their stimulus materials.

It may be the case that the effect of exaggeration is dependent on a clearly defined discourse goal, such as “to be humorous” (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994).

Colston and Keller’s findings suggest that a specific discourse goal can affect how exaggeration is perceived.

We predicted that higher levels of exaggeration would clarify the discourse goal of humor.

## ③ Experiment 1 Method

Thirty subjects read 21 experimental scenarios in which the final statement was potentially humorous (see example on panels 4 and 5).

The subjects rated the final statement on a 6-point Likert scale to indicate how likely the speaker was trying to be funny.

The final statement contained a reference to some quantity that was either not exaggerated, somewhat exaggerated, or highly exaggerated.

## ④ Example Scenario

After weeks of begging, Marcia finally drags her boyfriend Kenny to see the movie *Titanic*.

On their way to the cinema, Kenny says “Can’t you see *Titanic* by yourself—there’s a new Schwarzenegger movie playing.”

“No way,” replies Marcia—“you promised you’d see this movie with me and I’m holding you to it.”

Throughout the film, Marcia sits enthralled as the love story unfolds while Kenny fidgets and groans.

On their way out from the film, Marcia says “Didn’t you think that was the best movie ever?”

## ⑤ Example Scenario Continued

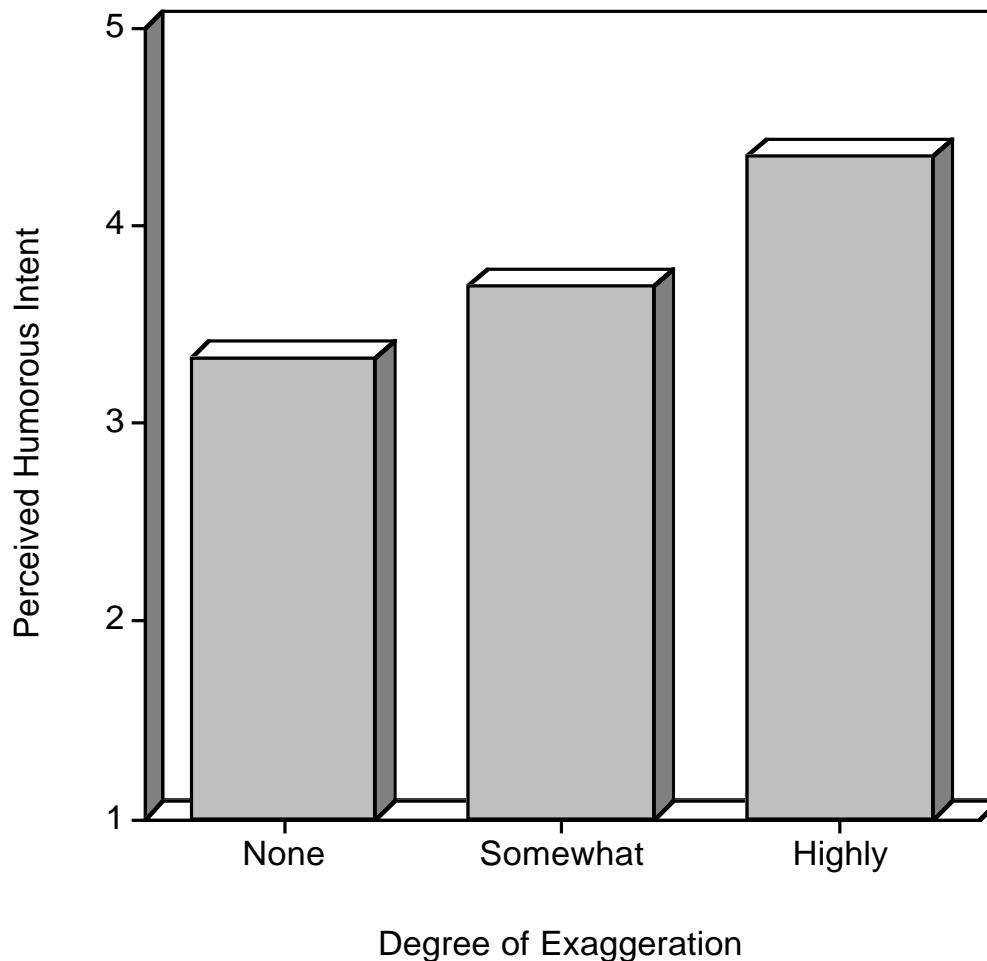
“Hardly,” Kenny replies—“after \_\_\_\_\_ hours I was rooting for the iceberg.”

**Not exaggerated:** 2 1/2 hours  
(i.e., the literal value)

**Somewhat exaggerated:** 5 hours  
(i.e., the highest possible exaggerated value)

**Highly exaggerated:** 1000 hours  
(i.e., an impossible and very extreme value)

## ⑥ Experiment 1 Results



As exaggeration increases, the perceived likelihood that the final speaker is intending to be humorous increases,  $F(2, 58) = 10.08, p < .001$ . *Highly* exaggerated was significantly greater than both *somewhat* and *none*. *Somewhat* and *none* did not differ.

## ⑦ Experiment 2 Method

This experiment investigated the role of prototypicality in addition to degree.

Non-prototypical numbers were created by multiplying the original numbers by .91.

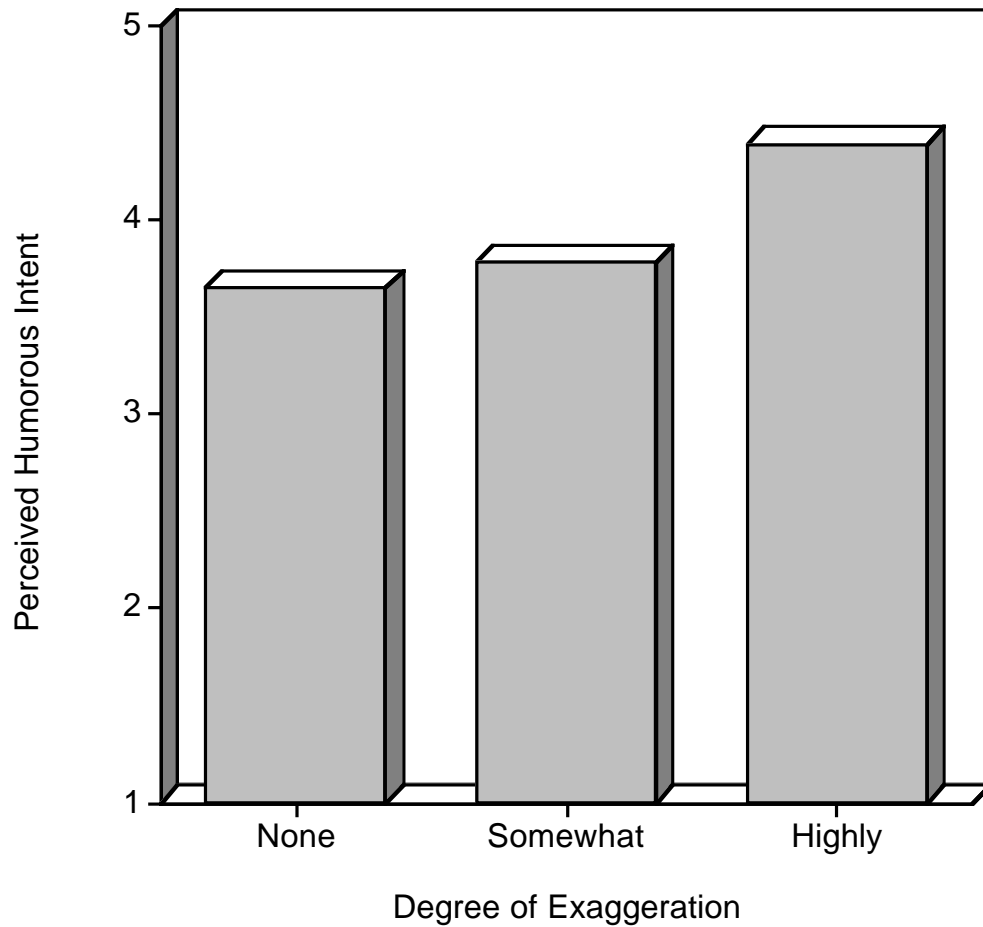
For the example scenario on panels 4 and 5, the values would be:

**Not exaggerated:** 2 hours, 17 minutes

**Somewhat exaggerated:** 4 hours, 33 minutes

**Highly exaggerated:** 910 hours

## ⑧ Experiment 2 Results



The pattern for level of exaggeration was the same as in Experiment 1,  $F(2, 58) = 9.30, p < .001$ .

However, neither the main effect for prototypicality nor the interaction were significant.



## ⑨ Conclusions

Highly exaggerated statements more clearly convey the discourse goal of humor than less extreme exaggeration.

However, Experiment 2 showed that prototypicality did not affect perceived humorous intent.

The difference between *highly* and *somewhat* exaggerated statements was greater than the difference between *somewhat* and *non-exaggerated* statements. This finding is inconsistent with that of Colston and Keller (1998).

## ⑩ References

Colston, H. L., & Keller, S. B. (1998). You'll never believe this: Irony and hyperbole in expressing surprise. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 27, 499-513.

Kreuz, R. J., Kassler, M. A., & Coppenrath, L. (1998). The use of exaggeration in discourse: Cognitive and social facets. In S. R. Fussell and R. J. Kreuz (Eds.), *Social and cognitive approaches to interpersonal communication* (pp. 91-111). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Roberts, R. M., & Kreuz, R. J. (1994). Why do people use figurative language? *Psychological Science*, 5, 159-163.